

Photo by Suzi Issa



Yeh performed with 100 musicians from around the world, using the language of music to connect.



Yeh traveled to Australia for a week of music and performing at the Sydney Opera House

Violinist Travis Yeh was selected from musicians around the world to perform in the YouTube Symphony Orchestra

# From Sugar Land to Sydney

## Austin High School Violinist Performs with the YouTube Symphony Orchestra at the Sydney Opera House

Written by Matt Brady

To say Travis Yeh is a typical 15-year-old boy is a little bit of an understatement. The Stephen F. Austin High School student had the dream of a lifetime come true last March when he embarked on an all-expenses paid trip to Sydney, Australia, to do what many classical musicians in the world can only dream of: play a sold-out concert at the prestigious Sydney Opera House.

A violinist, Yeh auditioned for and was selected to play in the second-ever YouTube Symphony Orchestra (YTSO). The event puts a modern twist on classical music by using YouTube videos to discover talented young musicians from all over the globe. Yeh and the other selected musicians traveled to Sydney for a week of music culminating in a grand finale concert streamed online through YouTube.

### A Universal Language

YTSO 2011 was an event that could have been a tad gimmicky, but instead succeeded in meaningfully exploring one of humanity's most uplifting traits – the ability to transcend all barriers through the universal language of music. That phenomenon was tested time and time again in Sydney, as 101 musicians from 33 different countries had merely five days to prepare for the grand finale.

Even for musicians talented enough to pass a rigorous, global audition process, five days was a scant amount of time to become comfortable playing with one another, especially when language presented something of a barrier. But Yeh says that the group gelled almost immediately. "Music really is the unifying language, and it was commented on a lot by impressed people there," says Yeh. "They would ask, 'How does Michael Tilson Thomas, your conductor, communicate to people who don't speak English very well?' And I'm not entirely sure myself. There's just something about music that even when you don't speak English, you know what he's talking about."

### Musical Idols

Yeh's time in Australia ran the gamut of unique life experiences, from touring famous landmarks like the Sydney Harbour Bridge, to playing a spellbinding concert to a packed Sydney Opera House under the direction of Michael Tilson Thomas, the famed musical director of the San Francisco Symphony. But for Yeh, the hallmark experience was playing right next to so many other talented musicians.

"It was a really great experience for me, and it helped me just really know how to play," he says. "In one of the pieces, I luckily got placed second chair, so I got to play alongside these mentors. That was a really great experience, just to be able to sit stand partners with somebody that plays with Yo-Yo Ma on a regular basis and somebody that's such an amazing violinist, Colin Jacobsen."

### Overcoming Fear

One of the most remarkable things about Yeh's journey is that it almost didn't happen. In a moment of self-doubt, Yeh decided last November that he wasn't going to submit an audition video. "I downloaded the music and practiced it a bit," he says. "While I was practicing, I would watch other people who already submitted their videos early. That was really intimidating, because there are a lot of good violinists out there."

With only a day to spare before YouTube stopped taking submissions, Yeh informed friends and family that he wouldn't be auditioning. They persuaded him to reconsider. On the day that submissions were due, Yeh and his mother set up a video camera and spent the entire day recording his audition, shipping it off just in the nick of time. Of course, those around him never doubted he could make the cut.

"He really gets what music's about," shares Carolyn Vandiver, orchestra director at Austin High School. "The purpose of music is to bring joy. A lot of kids can do technique and drill, but they don't have the

emotion in the playing that he does. His head is not buried in the music. Constantly, you see him visually moving around. You can see it. He's hearing the whole thing."

### Sharing His Artistic Gifts

When Yeh speaks of his own philosophy of playing, it's not far off from what fans like Vandiver say about him. To Yeh, great violin playing doesn't only come from practice and technical skill. "I feel at the core of it, it's about making music," he says. "And I guess naturally, some people are more expressive than others or more used to expressing themselves than others. So I think even though I can't necessarily do the same things as my peers can sometimes do technically, it's your own individual musicality that sets you apart."

Locally, Yeh has channeled his passion for communicating through music into a program he created called MUSICO. Through this project, Yeh and an informal crew of like-minded friends gather to play mini-concerts for nursing home residents in the Fort Bend area. "What we do is usually play about a 40-minute program composed of small ensembles or solos," Yeh explains. "And then the last 20 minutes we spend just talking to them and getting to know the people we just played for. I feel like music is something that should be shared. You're not making it for yourself; you're doing it for your listeners." To learn more about joining the musical volunteer group, email [musicogroup@gmail.com](mailto:musicogroup@gmail.com).

Through YTSO 2011 and MUSICO, Yeh has earned the right to say he's done more than just play an instrument, also succeeding in making music a shared and edifying experience. From nursing home residents and high school concerts to well over a million YouTube viewers for the YTSO 2011 grand finale concert, Yeh has shared his passion for music with listeners all over the world. SLM

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