



CHRISTIAN ALLIANCE  
INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL  
宣道國際學校

# Maestros

## A passion for music and music education

In a series of insightful interviews to be published over the next few weeks, we sit with accomplished musicians heading the CAIS Specialized Orchestral Training Program and ask them to take us to the beginning of their musical journeys, what inspired them, how they nurtured their passion and talent for music, their professional careers and what led them to teach music to others.



**Violin / Viola**  
**YU SUN**

He grew up in China and ended up performing with the world renowned Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in Germany in his twenties. His name is Yu Sun, the former Principal Violist of the HK Philharmonic Orchestra. You may read more about his accomplishments through the following link:

[http://www.hkphil.org/eng/aboutus/our\\_players/our\\_players\\_details.jsp?id=1542](http://www.hkphil.org/eng/aboutus/our_players/our_players_details.jsp?id=1542)

In this first of a two part interview, we look at his career trajectory spanning the years from learning the violin in China to landing a spot on the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. We hope you enjoy reading it

Vinod Khiatani (VK)

Yu Sun (YS)

**VK:** Could you share with our readers a little bit about yourself.

**YS:** I started learning music very early at the age of 4. My grandmother sang in the choir and she also taught singing privately. She asked me if I would be interested in picking up an instrument just for fun and I picked the violin.

**VK:** Any particular reason why the violin instead of other instruments say the piano?

**YS:** There was a little bit of a music culture in our family. My uncle played the violin as an amateur and from a very early age, I heard him practicing and I was fascinated by the instrument. We did have an upright piano at home but I did not play the piano until I was about 15 years old. Looking back though, I think it is a pity I did not start playing the piano earlier as it is helpful when one learns different instruments later on. I studied with quite good instructors but I was not studying it (violin) professionally. It was more like an extra-curricular activity. After 10 years, my teacher asked me if I would like to study it professionally because I was quite good at it but not top tier. I agreed with her and did the audition for the school but due to limited space and lots of violin players, I shifted to the viola instead even though my preference was the violin. After studying in the conservatory, I graduated and faced two choices. Do I continue and study the instrument abroad or I look for a job in China. I decided to go overseas and went to Spain. I studied chamber music (string quartet) for 1 year. I think chamber music was foundational for me to understanding how to work with others as a team. That one year was very important in my professional development. After that I went to Germany.

**VK:** Thank you. That is quite a concise introduction. You have covered roughly 20+ years. I am curious though. You mentioned that your teacher asked you whether you wanted to study the music at the conservatory after 10 years. That is a long time. Take us back to the first year when you began learning the instrument. How was the instructor?

**YS:** The beginning, the first year, for most kids who pick the string instrument, they do not make a nice sound. It is quite different from the piano where you tap on a key and the sound is nice. But for string instruments, it requires some patience. I think that the first instructor/teacher is even more important than the big professors in my later life. A good teacher in the very beginning is very, very important. How you hold the violin, what is the right posture, how you put the bow and how you make a good sound from the beginning, that is very important. I had a very good teacher. She was very good for beginners. She could not only explain from the instrument but she could explain things in detail and tell you what is right or not right. In most cases, she would encourage me to think actively/positively. The interaction is very important. I think my study was quite smooth.

**VK:** Did you ever think about giving up after say 3-4 years and move on to other things?



**YS:** I actually never thought of giving up even though I did have some difficulty. But I am not a person who gives up easily. I guess it is my personality trait. My parents also were not typical. They did not force me to practice.

**VK:** You mentioned that after the conservatory, you had to decide whether to go professional or look at other career options. Did you have any pressure from your parents to put aside music and work towards a “real” career?

**YS:** I actually did not face any pressure from my parents. My mother supported me a lot and encouraged me to continue studying music. I think it was while I was in the conservatory that I enjoyed music even more. The environment was very good. To be honest, when you are a student, you do not think that far ahead. I didn't think that far ahead. I just wanted to make my playing better and back then, the Shanghai conservatory started inviting foreign musicians to teach master classes and they actually opened my mind a lot. They spoke about background, culture and other kinds of arts. I didn't know any of that and it raised my interest to go to Europe because that was the origin of classical music. Finances were also a consideration. My parents were not so well to do but studying in Spain and Germany were fully funded by the state. In Germany, there were many outstanding instructors. During my first year of study, I was asked by my professor to submit my application for audition with the Berlin Orchestra. I didn't think my chances were great but I submitted and I was selected. That was my first orchestra experience. I am grateful that I was exposed to some of the world most renowned musicians and conductors. It was an unforgettable experience.

**VK:** Thank you for sharing your professional development as a musician. When did the desire to teach the instrument begin?

**YS:** In my very first lesson in Berlin, I played for my teacher and she said to me “you will be a very good professor in the future”. I didn't say a word to her in this regards but she arrived at this conclusion on her own. When I taught mass classes at the Shanghai Conservatory, I realized that my teacher was right. I learn things fast and explain them well. When I see my student making progress, there is a satisfaction I sense that is even better than the satisfaction I get from my performance. When I was playing with the European Orchestra, some students would ask me to instruct them on the fine points of playing. Later on, I was invited to actively participate in the Asian Youth Orchestra based in Hong Kong. The AYO is in its 28th year and I became the viola teacher





for about 3 years (3 seasons). Every summer, musicians from all over Asia come for a 1 month intensive training followed by a performance tour. Last year was the World Tour visiting America, Berlin, Vienna etc and this year was the China Tour visiting cities in Mainland China, Philippines, Japan and of course Hong Kong. It was a very good experience in how to work with young emerging musicians.

**VK:** Is there a particular age group that you find yourself particularly effective with or that you connect better?

**YS:** I think working with different age groups requires different approaches. I enjoy working with young kids a lot because they are like blank paper. If the kid has interest in making music, then we can develop much faster. I do also enjoy working with semi-professional musicians. But you are right; I adapt my methods with different learners.

**VK:** What do you look for in a student say between the ages of 6-11?

**YS:** I think it is too early to look for long term commitment from students whether they want to play for life as a career choice. But having said that, the first thing I want them is for them to like what they are doing. I want them to (without any compulsion) to pick up the instrument to play. The second thing I am looking for is that they are beginning to build their taste in art and culture. So even if they do not play the instrument when they go up, they would have developed their taste in artistic culture.

**VK:** You mean cultivate the aesthetic sense in them?

**YS:** Exactly.

**VK:** How can parents help in fostering the interest of music in their child?

**YS:** Before they start playing any instrument, I would encourage them to listen to others play the instrument. Hearing and seeing are better avenues for learning than telling them, so I advise parents to take their children to live concerts, or play some good classical music CDs at home. Classical music has a very rich heritage and exposing them to the music facilitates their emotional development at an early age.

**VK:** Is there an ideal age to begin or it doesn't really matter?

**YS:** In my view, I think age matters. If you start at say 15 or 16, the skill development is slower. I think at a younger age, the muscle memory and brain development are given more time to develop. I think the ideal age range would be between 4-10 years. Of course everyone can ultimately learn to make sound, but it just depends what kind of sound.

**VK:** Have you noticed any transferable skills that you developed while learning to play the instrument to other aspects of your day to day living.

**YS:** When I played in Chamber music and later in Orchestras, I learned some valuable skills. I learned how to put my ego aside and think subjectively from the other participants 'perspective. Everyone has a perspective but if I only insist on my perspective, I will not develop further. I think another valuable skill was to develop the habit of listening to others to facilitate positive dialog. Those are the skills that have enriched other areas of my life outside music.

**VK:** Thank you so much for sharing with us your journey. I look forward to seeing how our students learn under your guidance.

**YS:** Thank you for the opportunity.