

VOICE BOX

## The Few. The Proud. The Pianist.

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November 2015

This article is part of a [special section](#) on Juilliard's military ties.

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The military commercials were effective. At least they were for my roommate Ritchie Zah, Juilliard master's violinist-turned-Aspen police officer and one of my closest friends. The scenes from our Juilliard days are still vivid in my memory: whenever a military ad aired on TV, Ritchie would immediately spring to his feet with a crisp salute, peppering the soundscape with any number of his war cries: "Strength and honor," "Be all you can be," and of course, "The few. The proud. The Marines." The TV cuts to a scene of soldiers doing tactical training in the field, fighter jets soaring overhead, and the great American flag waving in the breeze.

Although I certainly shared some of Ritchie's idolization of the military, and every bit of his patriotism, at the time I was not even slightly considering it as a career path. And yet, as all musicians do, I had begun to taste the bitter distillation of dreams into reality: my doctoral stipend was to expire in a mere six months, and I needed a job. On a dreary February morning I noticed an unassuming and rather unalluring notice on the Career Services wall and applied for a position in "The President's Own" U.S. Marine Band.

After researching the position, I became convinced that the job was for me, but I still had to win the audition, which was especially challenging due to an unfortunate coincidence: the preliminary and final rounds were on same two days as the two comprehensive written exams for my doctorate. In two different cities. And the two entities involved are among the most rigorous on the planet, the Marine Corps and Juilliard. Thankfully the Marines were able to offer some flexibility in their audition times. The crucible began Monday at 10am with a three-hour written exam followed by Amtrak at 2, and just after 5, a solo classical and jazz audition. I was back on the train again at 10pm, followed by pretty much the same exact schedule on Tuesday, plus the additional stress of having to finish a four-hour written exam in three hours and then get down to Penn Station. And once I arrived, many short jazz and classical performances, prepared and sight-read, with members of the band. Even the train conductors knew me by the end of those two hellish days, but somehow it all worked out: I passed my exams and was offered the job.

The Marines don't require members of the "President's Own" to attend basic training (as my brother-in-law said, "What would you do in boot camp? Play scales while being shot at?") And while accepting a position with an average weekly workload of "between 1 and potentially 65 hours" felt risky, I followed Ritchie's advice that I'd be a flipping idiot not to take it. Two years later, I can say that it was one of the best decisions of my life. I've had the opportunity to perform many concertos with the chamber orchestra—it's not just a band—countless chamber music concerts of composers ranging from Brahms to Messiaen, and frequent jazz performances in the White House, where I've met Meryl Streep and Beyoncé, seen my childhood hero Bill Nye the Science Guy, and played piano with Stevie Wonder.

However, my most memorable encounter occurred in the private residence of the White House. I was asked to play some Christmas carols for a small gathering and, with military punctuality, arrived awkwardly early. So much so that I had the chance to talk with President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama, who were not only gracious but also curious as to my background—how I started piano, what my parents do, how many siblings I have, and, of course, where I received my musical education. After we chatted and when the guests were about to arrive, I started playing. I think they enjoyed the music: during one particularly involved solo in “Santa Claus Is Comin’ to Town,” the president looked up from an hors d’oeuvre, caught my eye and loudly announced, “This pianist is jammin’! I guess that’s what they learn at Juilliard!”

Indeed that is what we learn at Juilliard. As in most military institutions, at Juilliard, an intense reverence for professionalism and tradition only better shapes young souls appealing for instruction and formation. People often assume Juilliard students could never cope with the rigors of military life, but I beg to disagree: Nothing could prepare one better than pervasive pressure to perform at a level of utter perfection, interminable personal and professional criticism, and the resultant ability to flourish in an environment where failure is simply not an option. Without my school’s defining intensity, I would not be where I am today. I salute you, Juilliard!

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