

For violist, Andrew Shin (Henrico, '18), his musical achievements in high school have been many. As a freshman, he earned first chair in Central Regional Orchestra, an auditioned honors ensemble for 6th-9th graders, as a sophomore, he earned first chair in Senior Regional Orchestra, a more competitive auditioned ensemble for 9-12th graders, and as a junior, he earned 9th chair in All State orchestra, an achievement he considered to be the most meaningful musical experience of his life. But it was something the All State guest conductor said that propelled Andrew even further. "Make the best of this moment because in reality, this is the farthest that most of you will go in terms of an honors ensemble."

"I didn't like that," Andrew remembers. "I didn't want it to stop there."

So he decided it was worth the practice to audition for the All National Honor Ensemble Symphony Orchestra, an elite group of high school musicians selected from their respective Regional and All State Orchestras from across the nation. They would assemble for rehearsals and a performance at an event in Orlando, Florida in November. Although he considered it a long shot, Andrew submitted his audition recording. A couple months passed before he got the results. He was at a camp with friends when he received a text from his mom. It was a screenshot of the email offering congratulations on his acceptance.

"It was just the most amazing feeling."

In qualifying for the All National Honor Ensemble Symphony Orchestra, Andrew Shin became the first student from Maggie Walker and the first violist from the state of Virginia to ever participate.

Then came the seating audition. It was the hardest he had ever seen; a physically taxing technical run with difficult rhythms. He practiced with his private teacher and sent it in, again not expecting much, just excited about the opportunity to play more amazing works with a high calibre orchestra, even if he ended up seated at the back of the section.

"They don't tell you what seat you got beforehand. They have little name tags you have to look very closely at to see your name," Andrew explained. He arrived to the first rehearsal of the event and started looking for his name at the back of the section, going row by row, and growing more nervous the closer he got to the front. "The closer you are to the conductor, obviously, the better she can see you not do well." Out of curiosity he skipped forward to the first stand. The little name tag shocked him. He had earned first chair.

"My throat closed up. I wanted to throw up."

He immediately called his parents at the hotel.

"I want to go home. I don't want to do this. I can't do this. I don't deserve this," he pleaded. They encouraged him to just do his best and explained the pressure would be helpful for him. Resigned to the reality that driving fourteen hours home simply wasn't an option, he returned to his seat.

"The first rehearsal was just honestly a nightmare."

Despite the first two pieces going relatively well, he found himself struggling on the less practiced *Candide* by Leonard Bernstein.

"I missed my solo completely. I just missed my entrance-didn't do it."

To make matters worse, a group of violists seated around him had performed the same work a week before, so they had it down by comparison. He left the first rehearsal feeling utterly depressed.

Luckily, the magical atmosphere of Disney and some fast friendships with fellow musicians in the orchestra helped him recover. He spent the rest of the day with his new friends going around Epcot Center, joking and having fun. By the time he got back to his hotel room that night, he felt calm and a different reality had sunk in. "This is a good thing that has happened to me right now. This is a really good thing that I've achieved."

He stopped being nervous and his confidence grew throughout the remaining rehearsals and performance. He got all the technical passages the music demanded, including the solo. "I think the pressure of being in the position that I was and being surrounded by people who were just as passionate about the music as I was-it really motivated me to try harder." Mastering the physical mechanics of his parts liberated him to play with greater expression and feel emotions more intensely on stage as he performed. "That last performance, I think it was kind of sad for everyone at the end because, you know, this amazing experience is over, we all have to go back home to do all this make up work. It just doesn't get better than having that experience."

The full story of Andrew's unprecedented journey to All Nationals doesn't end here. It would be incomplete without rewinding to visit the pitfalls of success, the upside of failure, and the psychology behind the auditions along the way.

For many students, the game of auditioned honor ensembles is high stakes, high risk, high reward, high anxiety. The seating positioned earned in one ensemble often rewards eligibility to audition for the next level ensemble. Competition is fierce and chair positions are often separated by single point margins. There are no do-overs of the snapshot an audition captures and the slightest screw up could mean having to wait another long year to redeem yourself.

Andrew's first chair showing at SRO his sophomore year was a success that, in hindsight, he admits brought a false sense of security about his skill level that killed his drive to improve. So much so, that when he auditioned for All State later that year, he missed qualifying. He would have to wait until his junior year to have the opportunity to audition again. It caused him to reflect that maybe he wasn't as good as he thought and he questioned what he could do differently. Then he had a revelation.

"It's all about self improvement-all about the music instead of focusing on that win." The motivation for his practice up to that point had been misdirected towards strictly competing for a chair position. It was a pivotal realization that drove him to practice much more that summer. Hours upon hours, in fact, to the point his fingers bled. His ensuing success as a junior qualifying for All State and then as a senior this year at All Nationals were both owing to his newfound inspiration.

Today, Andrew is a mature musician who has grown to understand the true value of musical achievement. He no longer measures success by chair positions and he knows the only competition in music will always be against himself to see how expressively he can play his instrument - for the sake of the music itself.