



MUSIC

GOALS SHOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE

What I learned from seven weeks at a boot camp for musicians

By Tai Caputo

The clock strikes 10 p.m. and the girl in the room next door is still practicing Wieniawski. The cabin walls are so thin that I can hear every note. This is her last of seven intense hours today of violin practice.

This summer, I took a hiatus from life on the eternal hamster wheel. Far away from my pursuit of a well-rounded skill set at City High, and my desire to be good—or at least proficient—at seven subjects, I was reminded that in each domain exists a depthless challenge, the possibility for profound growth and knowledge and skill, beyond test scores and grades and what is assigned in a class with a structure that will always be finite.

Starting in late June, I spent seven weeks at Meadowmount School of Music, an intensive camp for string players in the Adirondack Mountains of Upstate New York. Located near a town so small that the coffee shop only opens for four hours per week, this summer camp is unique in its focus on solo string repertoire and development. Students are required to practice individually for five hours every day.

Meadowmount's campus is comprised of primitive cabins scattered around a winding dirt road in the middle of the woods. I could not walk down this road at any time of the day without hearing music emanate from the cabins. The camp is proud to state that it has not seen fundamental structural changes since its founding in 1944. I had no air conditioning in my cabin and my showers turned off after approximately five minutes. Following camp policies designed to promote

an environment of total focus and concentration, I did not use electronic devices for most of the day.

This stringent "summer break" gave me the opportunity to engage in an activity in a way that is impossible to do during the school year. Violin is a skill that requires tens of thousands of hours of dedicated practice in order for the musician to reach a high level. In my seven weeks at Meadowmount, I worked, breathed, and dreamed violin—and as a result, I improved profoundly.

In the classroom, the best possible grade is 100%. This means that in school, the possibility for growth and improvement is finite, and so is the mindset with regards to growth. A student who earns 95% in a class only has 5% more that they could improve, even if the topic taught in the class has infinite possibilities. School academics only manage to scratch the surface of what could be learned in a field.

By contrast, in the world of violin, no one—and I mean no one—ever reaches 100%. Even professional soloists, of which there are very few, work day after day to improve their technique, their artistry, and their ability to listen to themselves and change what they want to improve. The nature of classroom learning limits students to thinking only about what they must do to earn good grades, instead of considering what they could do to be the best they could possibly be in a domain. Why should I be satisfied with earning "good grades," when I could choose my own individual challenges?

The point of putting sincere, consistent effort into a skill, year after year, is not to achieve a final goal, but to engage in an eternal pursuit. I will never be as good a violinist as I want to be, and that is the point. To quote one of my most inspiring teachers, "I will die long before I reach my goal."

