

Interview with Amanda Forsyth
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National Arts Centre
FOURTH STAGE

1. Please introduce yourself and say where you're from.

My name is Amanda Forsyth. I was born in Cape Town South Africa. My family immigrated to Canada when I was two years old

2. Please tell us your position with NACO and explain what it entails.

I'm the principal cellist of the National Arts Centre Orchestra. This position entails organizing everything to do with the cello section and working with all of the other principles of the string section. They include the concertmaster, the principal second violin, the principal viola and the principal bass.

3. You started playing at a very young age. Why did you start playing the cello?

When my family immigrated to Canada, we moved to Edmonton where they had just begun the Suzuki school of strings. Before this time, the Suzuki school was only for violins but, the year I began, they decided to start a cello program. I was one of the first cello students in the Suzuki school. At that time I played on a viola because I was [three years old and] not big enough to hold a little cello.

4. When did you realize that you wanted to become a professional musician?

Music was always a part of my family. My father was a composer and my mother was a dancer. Because I had grown up with music and had a very strong talent for it, it was almost as though the cello chose me. I did give it up for a few years as a teenager, but I missed it so much that I came back to it and I guess that was when I really decided that it was time to get serious.

5. What is the most challenging thing about playing the cello?

The most challenging thing about playing the cello is carrying it around and buying tickets for it on the airplane. It's such a big instrument and mine is so valuable that I can never put it underneath the airplane. My cello is an old Italian instrument made in 1699. This makes it really expensive. It's not like having a flute, which you can ride your bike to work with.

They say the sound of the cello is as close to the human voice as you can get, which is something I like about it. It has such a big range, all the way from a low C to a very high note and the sound goes all the way through your body. I enjoy the feeling of the sound of the cello. For a violinist the violin presses up against his chin so the vibrations go through their head, but we get it through our whole body; through our chest cavity.

6. When you were a student, did you ever find it hard to get yourself motivated to practice?

I wasn't very motivated to practice earlier on because things came very easily to me. This isn't very good because I guess I didn't work as hard as I maybe should have but, of course practicing is a challenge and you have to decide if its important enough to you to work hard.

Once you're a professional you have obligations and there is not a parent telling you to practice. The sheer fact that you are performing with millions of people watching means that you can't ever fall below your own "level". It'd be best to always go up a level in life, but this sometimes doesn't happen. But to fall below it, even a little, is very distressing to ones soul.

I always have to make myself practice, but you have breaks and there are different ways of practicing. You can practice all in a big clump of four hours, which can be exhausting, and it can be bad practice. I tell my students that to practice well for 20 minutes is much better than just clocking your time and practicing for four hours and not getting much done.

7. Do you find that you are still learning things about playing the cello or have you already soaked it all in?

I'm always learning as a cellist and that comes from working with other players, and also soaking up things that go on in life: soaking up emotions that I experience and that I can express through music and my instrument. Being able to do this comes into play later when you get older and notice that it's the emotional things that are inspiring you. Certainly one can always learn more on the instrument. I always speak with cellists from around the world. We discuss fingering and bowing and sound production and all the things that we do from day to day. I also suggest listening to another players, whether they are singers, pianists or other string players; they are always inspiring. You must never stop learning.

8. What advise have you got for a beginner musician learning to play the cello?

I think it's important when you're learning an instrument to listen to that instrument being played by the great masters. It's fun sometimes to play along with a CD. I still do that from time to time if I'm getting bored. In playing along with a CD, you feel like you're a part of something and you understand what a piece should really sound like. I know that there are interesting records called Music Minus One. In these recordings, the whole orchestra will play the piece without the main tune and you can play along with the record. I've never done it before but it sounds neat.

It's all right if you don't practice a lot but try to maintain your interest and pickup your instrument everyday. In this way your progress will come much quicker.

9. What do you enjoy the most about your chosen career path?

I think this is the best career in the world because we're working with other people, performing and bringing joy to people who know music, to people who don't know music and to children who are completely affected. Animals are even

affected by music. This career is a wonderful way to share your emotions and feelings with your colleagues as well as with audiences. The gratitude you feel from an audience, and when audiences tell you what it meant to them when they heard you play, is very special and we don't get that very often. For the audience members to come and talk to us is really what we love because it makes us feel like we're worthwhile and that we gave them something and therefore that we got something back from them as well.

It's a wonderful career. There's wonderful travel and we're playing for all different kinds of audiences around the world. We get to see all these sorts of things that one maybe sort of couldn't if you were an accountant or something.