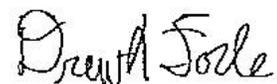


I've always been a person that follows my gut. When Robert McDuffie came and spoke to the Atlanta Symphony Youth Orchestra about his Labor Day Festival at Mercer University, I had a good *feeling*. When I arrived on campus and worked with the faculty over the long weekend, I couldn't help but *feel* like this was the place I needed to be. And when I finally chose to commit to attending the Robert McDuffie Center for Strings over the Eastman School of Music, I *felt* like I had made a great decision. Luckily for me, my feelings and expectations were exceeded beyond my wildest dreams.

When I arrived at Mercer to begin my studies, I didn't know what to expect. My worldview of what it meant to be a polished classical player was beyond limited; I simply didn't know what I didn't know. The faculty quickly showed me exactly what it meant to be a world-class musician, not through words, but by example. Furthermore, they seemed to see something in me that I couldn't yet see, for they nominated me to perform alongside the St. Lawrence String Quartet when they came to play the Mendelssohn Octet. There I was, a freshman straight out of high school, performing with one of THE best chamber ensembles on Planet Earth. I entered as a boy with no experience, and left a man capable of understanding what it takes to succeed in this musical world.

Above all else, I owe my sense of musical entrepreneurship to this school. Their philosophy is that the 21st century musician, on top of being a world-class performer, should also have the tools to create their own opportunities. They assert that a musician must be able to handle the business side of music as well—so they can live a life doing what they love. There are many young musicians whose parents fear for the financial solvency of their musical children. The Center is the only conservatory in this country that directly addresses these concerns and fully models its core curriculum to give music students conservatory-level training along with business literacy, concert programming, community engagement, and public speaking.

I wasn't treated like a student at this school; I was treated more like family. My teachers and mentors were completely invested in my hopes and dreams. They were strict and firm, but they also showed me levels of compassion that I'd never received from musical teachers. I made a lot of mistakes, and I had a lot of missteps. However, the faculty was always there to build me back up to try again. They laid out the expectations that professional musicians have of one another and held me to that same standard. After four years of careful nurturing and training, I was accepted into the Masters Degree Program at The Juilliard School! I doubt that I would have been able to achieve such a feat without the personalized, concentrated attention that I received at The Center. Personally, I think The Center was made for someone like me; someone who started playing late, someone who comes from a low-income, single-parent family, someone who wanted a conservatory education, but was consistently told that they weren't cut out for this profession. I owe my career to Robert McDuffie and his school, and I will be forever grateful for his decision to take a chance on a random violist from Peachtree City, Georgia.



Drew Alexander Forde
Class of 2014