

When I was going through the process of applying to a college, there were many things that went through my mind, things like fear, apprehension, excitement, confusion, determination, stress, and many others. As a musician (and a violist to top it off) I was feeling all of these things multiplied by forty. Having lived in a small, beautiful and comfortable city on the West Coast of Canada my entire life, I always knew I wanted to go on an adventure with my music, but as the saying goes, "easier said than done". When I finally decided to make the little town that rhymes with "bacon" in the south of Georgia my journey's beginning, I didn't realize until I got there that that was the most amazing decision I could have ever made. Now having graduated and started a Master's degree at the New England Conservatory of Music, when looking back at my adventure at the Robert McDuffie Center for Strings there are three words that come to mind that sum up what the Center means to me: Passion, Opportunity, and Pride.

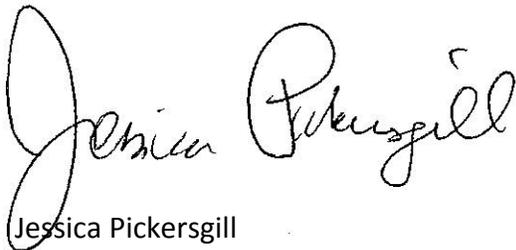
The passion for music at this school is unrivaled. The second I received my student ID, I was engulfed in the organized chaos that is the Center and its drive in wanting to give me the best musical education possible, and that included more than I could have ever expected. To start, the faculty at this school are some of the best pedagogues and musicians in the world. Many of the teachers that worked with us regularly are at the high points in their careers, but they commuted from all over the world to Macon, GA every week to give invaluable lessons, coachings and master-classes. I remember at the end of my freshman year, we were all gathered in the choir room to have a meeting with our founder, Robert McDuffie, and were told that he had an announcement to make. It was then that he told us that we were getting a new viola teacher on staff, and his name was Lawrence Dutton. I remember all of our jaws dropping to the floor, especially myself and my fellow violists. I had admired the Emerson String Quartet for years, and had wanted to work with them for so long, and to hear that I was to have the violist be my private teacher was more than a dream come true. The thing that makes this even more astonishing is that this kind of moment was not an incredibly rare one. We were told that Hans Jensen was coming to teach us, that we were going to work with the St. Lawrence String Quartet, with John Patitucci, with James Ehnes, with Robert Spano and many more. We were always having to be ready to work with the best of the best at all times of the year, and it is hard to keep track of all of the incredibly people I got to meet and perform with. That is a thought that I still can't get over.

During those four years at the Center, on top of having the best tutelage possible and a well-rounded academic and musical curriculum, the amount of opportunities that were given to me is something that I don't think I could have found anywhere else. I ended up playing in hundreds of concerts ranging from student solo recitals, chamber music concerts and MCS Ensemble performances to performing in fundraisers, performing with faculty in the Fabian Concert Series, working with amazing visiting artists and performing in festivals and concert halls all over the world from New York City to Rome, Italy. In 2011, I was asked to play the Dvorak Piano Quintet in A Major with Robert McDuffie, Amy Schwartz-Moretti, Julie Albers and Elizabeth Pridgen, and that was to this day, one of the best experiences in my musical career. I learned so much from that

performance, including how to work with professionals at a professional level, what goes into an effective rehearsal and what kinds of musical decisions I have the ability to make. Being able to work and make music with the some of the masters in the music world is something I will cherish for the rest of my life. What was so unique about this experience, besides the fact that it was so much fun, was that I was not the only one who was able to experience it. Every student that I studied alongside had an opportunity to play in an environment like that, which only raised the level of musicality around me, and I believe that was a huge part in what made me the musician I am now. I was surrounded by the highest level of musicians both in the faculty and the student body.

Having the small number of students and the resulting unfailing attention from my teachers was a very strong factor in my growth as a musician, as well as my growth as an individual. There was a strong emphasis on being your own musician and feeling a sense of pride in who you are as a unique player. Before I came to the Center, I was very shy, had very little self-esteem in my playing, and didn't really know what kind of player I was. It didn't take long after I started there that all of that changed. I was never forced to play a certain way, I was only pushed to live up the potential they told me I had and to play to the best of my ability in my own individual way, and the confidence that I was given is something that still stays with me. I could not hide and drift along while I was studying at the Center. I always felt like I was in the spotlight, but I was never alone and I was always supported, and that is a rare thing to experience and one that I will never forget.

My time at the Center was the most enriching and beautiful time of my life so far, and the connections, friends, and musical pride that I have taken away are the things that will stay with me for the rest of my life. I was given the freedom to be passionate in all aspects of the music world, I was given so many rare and amazing opportunities and experiences, and I was given the confidence to have pride in what I can do as a musician. I could not be more proud to say that I went to the Robert McDuffie Center for Strings.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jessica Pickersgill". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J".

Jessica Pickersgill
Class of 2014