

It Takes a Village and a Violin

By Linda Fiore for Boyer College of Music and Dance

Violinist Do Xuan Thang and I are sipping coffee on Temple University's main campus in Philadelphia talking about his journey from the Hanoi Conservatory to North Broad Street. While students are engrossed in a book or texting friends as they enjoy their lattes, Thang shows me how he uses an internet camera to sit in on his daughter's violin lesson, taking place in a music studio 8,000 miles away. His face beams when Nhi, who is eight, looks into the camera and waves hello with her miniature bow.

Thang's relationship with Temple's Boyer College of Music and Dance came about through a conversation with the director of the Hanoi Conservatory, who mentioned an opportunity to travel to the U.S. as an exchange student.

Thang, who teaches at the Conservatory, then met with Katherine Chu, a Boyer alumna who advises and administrates the "Wes Benson Scholarship for Vietnamese Students of Classical Music," to find suitable oversees music programs for gifted students.

"We are honored to be the only university in the United States currently partnering with the Wes Benson Scholarship," said Dr. Robert Stroker, Dean of Boyer College. "Thang's commendable accomplishments, both as musician and scholar, set an example of the level of exemplary international students coming to study at the Boyer College."

Wesley E. Benson, Jr., spent much of his professional career as a writer and public relations director in Japan. A business relationship with Moët Hennessy and a lifelong love of classical music prompted him to create the Hennessy Concert Series in 1996, with a mission to bring recognized western classical musicians to Vietnam. This initiative resulted in performances by, amongst others, Seiji Ozawa, Anne-Sophie Mutter, Lang Lang and Lambert Orkis, Professor of Piano at Boyer.

Upon his death in 2001, Benson had created a scholarship program for gifted Vietnamese students to study classical music overseas. Recognizing that the caliber of Boyer's program would be a good fit for Thang, who sailed through the audition and application process, Katherine Chu put him in touch with Dr. Philip Alperson, Director of Temple's Center for Vietnamese Philosophy, Culture and Society, who became, as Thang says, "his mentor." With additional support from Dean Stroker, Dr. Edward Flanagan, Associate Dean and the Office of International Services, Thang enrolled in graduate courses for the spring 2007 semester, set up house on campus and began studying violin, rehearsing with the Temple Symphony Orchestra and volunteering for Temple Music Prep's early childhood music classes.



Professor Helen Kwalwasser and Boyer exchange student, Do Xuan Thang

For someone who mastered English on his own while living in Vietnam, Thang came to the U.S. with an impressive agenda to visit the major cultural centers of Philadelphia, New York and Washington. Each weekend he would charter a trip north or south, embracing the role of tourist and visiting Ellis Island, the Statue of Liberty, Lincoln Center, the Smithsonian and, standing in line to tour the White House. To Thang, these historic venues define America, along of course with McDonald's, cheesesteaks and local Vietnamese cuisine, for which he gave four stars.

I sat in on one of Thang's lessons with Professor Helen Kwalwasser, whom he warmly refers to as *bà giáo*, or "woman master teacher." He listens intently to her suggestions and told me how she, along with the Orchestra's director Luis Biava, taught him different bowing, fingering and vibrato techniques. "American rehearsals are different," he said. "They're hard work, but I had fun too, which was something new for me." He will take the lessons learned from his "master teacher" to his students back home.

"My life has always been about music," Thang told me. His father is an engineer who plays "guitare" and his mother, a doctor, is a singer. When he was young, his father gave him two choices: study to be a violinist or an engineer. Thang chose the violin and his future was cemented. His wife Lan, whom he met as a student, is concertmistress with the Vietnam National Symphony Orchestra. His three-year old son, Long, has just started lessons.

The selection process to bring a new student to Boyer in the fall of 2007 via the Benson Scholarship is complete. Coming full circle, Mr. Nguyen Hoang Nam will study piano with Professor Harvey Wedeen, the former teacher of Katherine Chu who helps to make this very exchange program possible

As he prepares for the 26-hour journey back home, Thang makes a few more notes of things he wants to share with Nam before he travels to Philadelphia in September. Indeed, it "took a village" of departments and individuals at Temple and Boyer College to provide Thang this experience, for which he is sincerely grateful. "I've made many friends," he said. "Everyone's been so friendly, warm and helpful."

What better testament to the City of Brotherly Love.