

Student Profile



Photo by Kevin Monko.

Beverly Shin Balancing Music with Medical School

If asked what piece of music they'd want to stream while stranded on a desert island, few 30-somethings would name a string quartet by Beethoven. But the legendary composer's five-movement "Opus 132" is Beverly Shin's top choice, hands down.

"When you listen to it, you realize Beethoven saw something the rest of the world couldn't see," Shin says. "It's cosmically beautiful."

Shin, a third-year SKMC student, discovered her love of classical music — and particularly of the violin — at age 2 and a half, as she sat mesmerized by her

older brother Michael while he practiced at their family's home in Chicago.

"I didn't care when he practiced piano, but when he played his violin, I just had to be near him," she remembers. She begged her mother — a classically trained opera singer — to buy her lessons; Michael's teacher hesitated to accept such a young student but became convinced of the toddler's capabilities after a single half-hour trial.

Violin consumed Shin as she grew. Weekly lessons turned into entire summers spent at intensive music festivals; practice sessions that lasted four hours

a day; and performances with orchestras and chamber groups across the country. As a teenager, she was already earning an income through her talent.

"Music is like sports in that to really 'do it,' you have to start early. You build your career while you're still a student," she says.

As an adult, Shin immersed herself in music both educationally and professionally. She pursued master's degrees in violin performance and Suzuki Pedagogy (a system for teaching young children to play the violin) at the Cleveland Institute of Music and a doctorate in

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violin performance at the New England Conservatory in Boston, where she performed with many chamber groups and also developed a passion for community outreach. Her final year in Boston, she became one of the first musicians to receive an Albert Schweitzer Fellowship. Primarily students from health disciplines, Schweitzer Fellows partner with community organizations to implement year-long service projects that improve the wellness of underserved populations. Shin’s project involved using storytelling as a part of healing; she also created interactive music programs in elementary schools throughout the city.

“The experience got me interested in the balance of being a healer and an artist and exploring how those roles can work together,” she says. “Most of the other fellows were medical students, nurses, occupational therapists — they were addressing healthcare disparities in really creative and inspiring ways. This community work was a sort of seed for my interest in medicine.”

Shin’s service work continued after she moved to Philadelphia, where she got a position in education and outreach with the Philadelphia Orchestra and also began teaching violin and chamber music at Penn. She performed with the Philadelphia Chamber Orchestra and traveled frequently to play with groups in Boston as well as other cities, most often New York and Memphis, Tenn.

Life was a juggling act of teaching jobs and performances, and constant travel began to take its toll. Repetitive stress injuries in her shoulder and back recurred, causing severe discomfort. Freelancing as a musician meant being on the road so much that she sometimes didn’t bother to unpack and re-pack her suitcase between trips. She didn’t feel like she truly lived in Philly. She didn’t feel like she truly lived anywhere.

“I got itchy and started looking for a next step, but medicine was pretty far

down the list because I figured that ship had sailed. I thought medicine was like music — that you come out of the womb headed in that direction,” says Shin, whose assumptions were challenged by one of her students, a flute player who was also an allergist. The woman told Shin she had started out as a school teacher and didn’t go to medical school until age 30. She invited Shin to shadow her at work and explained the concept of post-baccalaureate programs, an option Shin had never considered.

Shin began shadowing additional physicians in her personal network and engaged in volunteer activities at local hospitals. An opportunity on a nursing unit at Pennsylvania Hospital enthralled her; she loved arriving at 6 a.m. to take breakfast to patients and getting to know them and their families. She also relished the collegiality of the healthcare team.

“Freelancing allowed me to play music with a lot of different groups, which was wonderful but very different from building a team that works together over time. I wanted that teamwork in my professional life and knew medicine would provide it. I thought, OK ... I have to do this,” she recalls.

Since she was already teaching at Penn several nights a week, she registered for some math classes and realized she enjoyed them. Before she knew it, she was applying to Bryn Mawr College’s post-baccalaureate premedical program — a dense one-year whirlwind of general chemistry, organic chemistry, physics and biology capped off by the MCAT. Coursework was so demanding that she stopped playing her violin altogether, although she picked it back up after completing the program.

A year later, she arrived at Jefferson.

“After getting here, I realized there is a way to do both music and medicine,” she says. “Med school is challenging, but as long as I knew when exams and breaks were planned, I could accept offers

to perform.” Her rigorous academic schedule caused her to become more efficient at studying and practicing alike; having every minute of her day accounted for forced her to stay focused and disciplined. During her second year, she even found time to combine her passions by collaborating with Brooke Worster, MD, medical director of Jefferson’s Palliative Care Service, to establish a partnership through which students from the Curtis Institute of Music come to play for Jefferson patients (palliative care is one of the specialties that appeals most to Shin; she is also interested in family and community medicine and psychiatry).

Throughout her first two years at SKMC, Shin was able to practice almost every day, even if only for 20 minutes. “Taking time to play is a win-win situation; it keeps my brain if I’m burning out from studying. It’s a rare occasion that stepping back and doing something totally different with my body doesn’t benefit me substantially. I refresh, I re-set,” she says.

As her third year at SKMC progresses, she has had to adjust her system of anticipating academic requirements ahead of time in order to commit to performances. Clinical rotations mean she may not know her schedule far enough in advance to accept freelance violin work.

“I will continue to play when I can, even if it has to be on a more casual basis,” she says. “There are days I can’t actually believe I have the opportunity to train to serve patients while still squeezing in performances here and there. Although my life has shifted toward medicine, I will always be a musician. How music and medicine will dance with each other down the road is an ever-evolving story.”

— Karen L. Brooks