

From Beijing to the stately pines: Winter Wu helps international students find their place at Arts Academy

Now a junior at IAA, Wu has found friendship and learned life-changing lessons at his school.



Coming to Interlochen Arts Academy for freshman year was the adventure of a lifetime for Winter Wu, who flew in over 6,400 miles from Beijing, China. Now a junior, Wu is a violin performance major. He's found friendships that have given him new perspectives on music and instructors who have given him new perspectives on life. And he's helping other international students find a home at Interlochen, too.

New friends—and a favorite instructor

Up until Interlochen, Wu says he didn't spend much time with his peers. As it turned out, the friendships he found at Interlochen ended up becoming very meaningful to him, and being a vital link to connecting more deeply with music.

"Music is all about the things we experience in life, and the feelings we have based on those interactions. But back then, I didn't have a lot of these experiences, and I think that contributed to me not having a lot of thoughts about music," he says. "At Interlochen, I found a group of friends who would hang out a lot and just chat about everything, and it really helped me in my interpretation of music."

Now, he relishes the chance to spend time with other young musicians, and even students in other majors.

“I’ve always been quite close with my studio and other people from the music department especially, and also other people from other classes,” he says. “The people that I’ve been in touch with are very friendly, open, and supportive of different cultures. We all learn about each other a lot, and that really helps.”

He’s enjoyed that the focus at Interlochen is on collaboration, not competition.

“Interlochen is a very supportive community. If you find the right group of friends, the point is not to compete or to be the best one, but rather for everyone to grow.”

At Interlochen, Wu also found an artistic mentor—an instructor who shaped the way he approached practice, performance, and everything in between.

“Mr. [\[Ara\] Sarkissian](#) is just an absolutely incredible teacher,” Wu says. “I would not hesitate to say that he is probably the most respectable person I’ve ever met, and not just because of his artistic intelligence. He not only teaches how to play the instrument, but he also teaches you how to be a better person, how to deal with the conflicts and difficulties you face in life.”

Giving back to other international students

Looking back on his freshman year, Wu remembers that another Interlochen student and her family helped him get through orientation weekend smoothly.

“A trombonist named Rebecca and her family offered to help,” says Wu. “They took me around campus to different places and answered my questions. That really helped me to navigate the campus and get to places where I needed to be.”

Since then, Wu has challenged himself to share that same help with others. For two years in a row, he’s served as an international liaison to incoming Arts Academy students.

“I start getting in touch with new international students in the middle of summer break. I answer their questions and talk to them about some of the things that they need to know when they come here,” he says. Wu answers questions about what the teaching system is like and even what placement tests students will need to take.

He’s excited for them to experience the growth and development he’s found at Interlochen, no matter what country they call home. And he’s especially excited to chase his own dreams.

“My biggest hope is to pursue a career in music, because music is deeply special to me. I believe music has the power to unite people together, regardless of their background. It’s a very powerful thing.”

Interlochen Arts Academy welcomes many international students to campus each year. [Learn more about how you’ll be supported as an international student.](#)