

COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

GREAT AUDEINCES HELP TO MAKE GREAT ORCHESTRAS. SOME COME FROM NEARBY COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES.

BY STEFENE RUSSELL



Sergio Dominguez

I've been playing piano since fourth grade," says Sergio Dominguez. "I began playing the organ around seventh grade. Oh! And between that, I played as part of my high school band, where I played percussion. Because I knew how to read music, I was able to play mallet instruments. Not just the drums, but bells, xylophone, steel drums. I've also been in multiple choirs and a capella groups throughout my life..."

Despite all that, it turns out that he's majoring in Psychology, International Studies, and French at Saint Louis University. "It's funny," he says, when first asked if he studies music. "A lot of people ask me this! I guess I do have quite the background. And I feel that's really influenced my love for classical music."

He and his boyfriend, Joseph Eckelkamp—who is a music major, studying piano performance and music theory at the University of Missouri–St. Louis—attend concerts at Powell Hall pretty much every Friday night. Dominguez, who came to St. Louis by way of Chicago by way of Tlaxcala, Mexico, says the first classical concert he experienced at Powell featured Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*.

"I actually hadn't ever seen a live orchestra performing," he says. "All I'd ever done is listen to countless recordings. So I thought, 'You know what? I'm gonna do it!' So I decided to go with some friends. We did the whole student rush ticket thing, and dressed up. I immediately felt a connection to the Symphony. I was in awe of what I was hearing."

The "student rush ticket thing" is actually the Campus Coordinator program. Sponsored by the St. Louis Symphony, students are given the opportunity to work as entrepreneurs, i.e. campus coordinators, selling \$10 tickets to their classmates. It has been proven that once students hear the St. Louis Symphony live at Powell, they keep coming back, just like Dominguez.

Although the SLU triple-major also loves minimalist electronic music (which he'll sometimes use as a background soundtrack for high-energy tasks), Dominguez fell in love with classical music as a kid, and it's the core of his musical life



Hilah Kohen

still. “It was Beethoven’s Eighth Symphony,” he says, when asked what piece he first really connected with. “I remember hearing it on a PBS kids’ show, and thinking, wow, this is amazing—it’s so beautiful. But I never found out what the title of the piece was. I’d listen for it every time I was watching TV or listening to music anywhere, because I didn’t know how to find the title of the piece—back then, there was no

Shazam or Soundcloud. I couldn’t just look it up on my phone.”

When he began studying piano, his teacher lent him classical music albums. It turns out, one of the first collections he chose was Beethoven—and it included the Symphony No. 8. “To this day,” he says, “I get goose bumps upon hearing it.” And that’s just the recorded version—last season, he and Eckelkamp had the opportunity to hear the St. Louis Symphony perform it live.

“I am at a loss of words to describe the experience,” he says. “It was to the point that I was sitting in my seat, and I was shaking. I was crying. I was breathless. And after the concert I sat in my seat for about half an hour, and I told my boyfriend, ‘You know, right now I just can’t stand up—don’t talk to me right now. I’m going to sit here and process this.’” Principal Trumpet Karin Bliznik even came by to make sure they were OK—and soon realized it was just the sublime power of Beethoven at work.

It was also Beethoven that got Hilah Kohen, a sophomore at Washington University, hooked on classical music as a kid.

“My parents moved to the U.S. from Israel shortly after I was born,” she explains, “and they brought over a bunch of CDs that were either Israeli songs, or

“I IMMEDIATELY FELT A CONNECTION TO THE SYMPHONY.
I WAS IN AWE OF WHAT I WAS HEARING.”

—SERGIO DOMINGUEZ

classical music. So that’s what I grew up with. The summer after sixth grade, I had just gotten a little iPod shuffle as a gift, and I had put all the CDs we had around the house on it—I didn’t really have a preference in music, but for some reason I really got hooked on Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony. I remember going to and from summer camp and just listening to it on repeat on the bus... just over and over and over again.”

Kohen has some experience with live classical music; her dad plays the cello, she began playing violin in fourth grade, and she’d attended the symphony a handful of times in her hometown of Iowa City, Iowa. But she, too, was completely delighted and astonished by her first experience at Powell.

“I could not believe that kind of experience, that kind of institution, was available to us so easily,” she says. “Wash. U. gives us access to the Metro, so you can get there that way, and the student tickets are accessible. But when I got there,

I could hardly believe it. The building, of course, is amazing. I remember that Erin Schreiber was playing *The Lark Ascending*, and I love that piece. I remember just being awestruck by the fact that this was something I could go to whenever I'm available."

Though she listens to some contemporary pop (she cites Lake Street Drive as a favorite), she says her Pandora account is mostly "just a listing of different composers." She's studying Chemistry and Comparative Literature with a focus on Russian, so it's no surprise she loves Alexander Borodin and Modest Mussorgsky. "Bach is another one, particularly as a violinist, I don't know what I'd do without his stuff," she says. "And I really, really like Clara Schumann's music."

Her freshman year, she attended nearly every concert (this year, she's gotten a little more busy with school, but still attends on a regular basis). She says she typically goes with a group of friends, who have fun dressing up and making a night of it. "We meet at the cafeteria at 6 p.m., then head over to the Metro and go to Powell," she says. She invited the Russian Club last year to a program with an all-Russian theme. And last September, she was tickled to be able to hear David Robertson conduct Strauss's *Don Quixote* right when she was studying it in school. But she says there doesn't need to be a connection, a theme, or a reason to go, other than to go—she also cites Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 and Stravinsky's *The Firebird* as big standouts from her last season.

"It's just such a unique experience," she says. "It can't really feel ordinary."

Stefene Russell is St. Louis Magazine's
Culture Editor.