Blind teenage violinist Julia LaGrand uses ‘From the Top’ to celebrate young disabled musicians

The new Musicians with Disabilities Initiative, which LaGrand created with ‘From the Top,’ gives the show’s platform to disabled and neurodivergent young musicians

By A.Z. Madonna Globe Staff, Updated March 23, 2023, 3:41 p.m.
Two years ago, violinist Julia LaGrand recorded a segment for “From the Top,” the Boston-based, National Public Radio-distributed program that spotlights accomplished young classically trained musicians.

These segments follow a predictable format; the featured artist performs a short piece and then chats with the host. Listeners of Show 395 therefore heard LaGrand’s rendition of an excerpt from Eugene Ysaïe’s Violin Sonata No. 2 before she spoke with host Peter Dugan about her musical experiences, her passion for Braille competitions, and the bond she shares with her seeing eye dog. LaGrand, who lives in Grand Rapids, Mich., has been blind all her life. As far as anyone at “From the Top” knew, she said, she was the first blind musician to ever be featured on the show.

Now LaGrand has returned to “From the Top” as a performer, content adviser, and cohost alongside Dugan for a special episode featuring several young disabled and neurodivergent musicians as well as a guest appearance by celebrated violinist Itzhak Perlman, who has used mobility aids to walk since surviving polio at age 4.

The episode, which airs nationwide this week, is one of several facets in the show’s Musicians with Disabilities Special Initiative, which grew out of an idea that LaGrand proposed to “From the Top” after talking with Dugan on the show.
“We talked a ton about my disability, which was great, but I realized that my interview barely scratched the surface of my experience,” said LaGrand, 18, who is currently taking a gap year and deciding between two Boston-area colleges to attend in the fall.

Because the format of the “From the Top” segments allowed for “showing and telling,” she said, she thought it could have room for more disabled musicians to show off their music and tell their stories.

Dugan was on board with the idea, which dovetailed nicely with the evolving mission of the show. “We’ve been leaning more and more into the idea of being youth-driven, even youth-led — giving space for young people to tell their stories the way they want to tell them,” said Dugan, who took over as the show’s regular host in early 2020.

“From the Top,” which began recording shows in 1999 with pianist Christopher O’Riley hosting, has long been a platform for young musicians — many of them aspiring professionals — to give a public solo or chamber performance in front of supportive listeners. Typically taped in front of live audiences, the show placed equal emphasis in celebrating its featured performers’ individual personalities and aspirations as well as their musical prowess.

Dugan only got to record a few live shows before the pandemic curtailed taping, but the program “didn’t miss a single episode,” he said. “We went right into our blanket fort era; we shipped this massive crate of gear around the country and coached kids through setting up studios in their homes.” (Often, setting up these studios involved hanging blankets on the walls for sound insulation.)

Dugan was disappointed at first to lose the live shows, but he soon discovered one upside of conducting the show remotely. “I realized the potential of real human connection that you can have when a conversation feels a little more private and a little more free, versus
in front of an audience,” he said. Kids were sharing more vulnerable and personal stories about their experiences with music, stories they may not have felt comfortable sharing in front of a crowd.

“From the Top” has since resumed a few live events, but there are no plans to resume taping episodes in public. “It’s very important to me personally that there’s a safe space for musicians,” said Dugan, who himself appeared on the show in 2007 at age 18. “This industry can be so cutthroat and demanding. We talk about stuff like burnout, and imposter syndrome, and how to get through tough times.”

The “complexity and nuance” of disability is often overlooked in the media at large, said LaGrand. Though she’s seen a rise in representation of disability in her lifetime, she often feels the stories are one-sided or focus on a single facet of being disabled, when “disability is a part of humanity in a deep and complicated way,” she said. “One of the reasons I’m so grateful to ‘From the Top’, and excited about this project, is that they have dived into learning about and representing that complexity.”

The upcoming show will feature several performers with varied experiences of disability and neurodivergence, including pianist Grace Novacheck, 16, a disability advocate who uses TikTok to share her experiences living with the rare genetic disorder Escobar Syndrome; double bassist Joshua Thrush, 15, who turned to music when spina bifida made sports difficult; and composer and cellist Adam Mandela Walden, 26, who is autistic and has difficulty speaking but sees music as a way of communicating and connecting with the world.

LaGrand also interviewed Perlman for the show, which she described as a “really surreal experience.” She had known about Perlman as a violinist from an early age, she said, but didn’t learn he was disabled until she read a passage about his disability advocacy while practicing for a Braille-reading competition. “Being an example of someone who’s disabled and having an incredible career, not only as a musician but also an advocate:
That mix was really empowering for me to realize,” she said. “Because I’ve never seen him play — seen a video or anything like that!”

In addition to the performance special, the Musicians with Disabilities Initiative also includes a virtual panel about music and disability and an online networking event for young disabled and neurodivergent musicians. All the musicians who applied to be on the episode were also invited to submit videos for “From the Top”’s “Daily Joy” series, and these have been spotlighted on the organization’s website throughout the month of March.

The overarching goal, said LaGrand, is to encourage better and more nuanced dialogues about disability. When non-disabled people lead the conversation, she said, things tend to either lean toward a “pity mind-set” or the message that “disabled people should be able to do everything their non-disabled peers” can do. But she thinks the conversations are shifting, for the better.

Disability is “just part of being human,” she said. “Everyone is going to experience some form of bodily imperfection in their life. That’s just how the world works.”

FROM THE TOP CELEBRATING MUSICIANS WITH DISABILITIES / SHOW 428

Available March 27 on fromthetop.org and major podcast platforms. Check local stations for radio broadcast times.

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