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BARRY ECKHAUS

Violinist Charles Yang, left, cohosting *From the Top* with Peter Dugan, middle, in Boulder, Colorado

Over the Toppers

Serious young musicians have found support at *From the Top* for 25 years

By David Templeton

“**F**rom the Top, as a kid, totally molded me,” acknowledges violinist Charles Yang, a busy New York musician who counts his 2002 appearance on the popular NPR radio program, when he was 13, as a truly formative experience. “*From the Top* shaped my ideas, and it molded my ideals,” he says. “It taught me what being a musician really means.”

Now celebrating its 25th year, *From the Top* is more than just a radio show. Launched by Gerald Slavet and Jennifer Hurley-Wales,

the independent nonprofit organization actively showcases and aids in the development of young classical musicians through a spectrum of arts education programs, scholarships, live events, and, most visibly, its radio and television broadcasts.

Each radio program showcases a young player, who is interviewed about their relationship to music before performing a piece to which they have a strong connection. When Yang was selected to appear on the show, he recorded his portion in his hometown of Aus-

tin, Texas. Over the next several years, as he gained experience and began playing around the country, he was invited back three more times as a featured performer, recording shows in Boston, Monterey, and Cincinnati.

Yang notes that he developed several important relationships over that time. “A lot of the people I was introduced to in the beginning,” he says, “a lot of the people in the *From the Top* organization, are still close to me. After your episode has aired, they don’t forget about you. You join a family.”

Even after graduating from college, Yang was invited back on occasion in the role of guest artist, once as a member of Time for Three, the classical trio he still plays with today. In 2020, he returned again, this time as a cohost of the show—alongside the primary host, pianist and fellow *From the Top* alum Peter Dugan—a role Yang has since continued to fill from time to time.

It's clear that the relationship he's built with the organization transcends mere performance, self-promotion, or education. It really has shaped his view of the world and himself within it. "As a kid born in Texas, it really wasn't cool to do classical music," Yang points out. "But when I did my first *From the Top* show, my friends actually all listened. They were really excited about it. It was just the best thing. I felt like a star athlete. That feeling always stuck with me. I've always been grateful to *From the Top* for keeping me grounded, not just as a musician but as a person. It not only taught me how to interact professionally with other musicians. It taught me how to be a good person."

Having started out with *From the Top* as a student musician, interviewed by others about his music, Yang admits the full-circle feeling is incredibly rewarding as he now gets to do the interviewing as a cohost. "It's so much fun," he says. "First of all, it's fun to banter with Peter. We've actually played so many concerts together as a duo, and to be able to cohost a radio show together—a show we've both been on as kids, talking to these incredible young players sharing their stories—it's such a surreal feeling. It's just a beautiful thing. It's like 'the circle of life' fused with 'paying it forward,' in a way that is deeply and intrinsically musical. Because, of course, part of being a musician is about sharing what you know with others. It's about preserving the art form you love by handing it over to the next generation."

"I first found out about *From the Top* from friends at music school who'd been a part of the show themselves, and I immediately started listening to it a lot on the radio," recalls violinist Gabriela Salvador Riera, currently a student at Oberlin College and Conservatory in Ohio. She was featured on the show in March 2024. "A lot of times, when I listened to *From the Top* before being on it myself, I was thinking, 'Wow!

These musicians have a better hold on what their passions are and what they want to give to the world. That's what I want to be able to contribute.' As a young player, I just loved music, but I hadn't thought about what I wanted to be contributing. The show got me thinking about it."

In addition to landing a spot on the show, Riera was awarded a \$10,000 Jack Kent Cooke scholarship, which helped her pay for lessons and travel for college auditions. "I would not have been able to audition at Oberlin without that scholarship," she says. "I'm incredibly grateful for all of it."

"It's so exciting for me to be able to spend time with them because I want them all to rule the world someday."

—Megan Swan, *From the Top* director of production and programming

Riera recorded her portion of the show at a radio station at Temple University in Philadelphia. "Until then, I'd never been in a real recording session, with professional equipment and people in the booth who knew what they were doing," she says. "It was a super great experience. Through the whole process—including through the workshops I took as part of that process—I learned how to speak to my own identity and how it informs my artistry."

The workshops are a major part of *From the Top*, one piece of the organization's MediaLab program. "It teaches us about the things that are valuable in music that aren't necessarily included in standard lessons,"

Riera says. "They help you identify your priorities and figure out what you want to be messaging to the world through your music. It's one thing to love music, but it's another to have a purpose for that music, to know what it is and how to talk about it. I learned so much about how to do that from my experience with *From the Top*."

Gavin Hardy, a double bassist now studying at Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, appeared on *From the Top* in October 2024. His experience was similarly formative. "I first heard about *From the Top* on Instagram," he says. "I applied for the Jack Kent Cooke Scholarship, and did the MediaLab Fellowship application as well. I used the money for college auditions and to buy some travel gear for my bass. Doing the show wasn't really my main goal, but I learned a lot through it."

Hardy attributes a Raisin Bran TV commercial he watched when he was four as the inciting incident for his love of music. "There was a guy at a piano," he says, "and I saw very clearly how people's moods were uplifted by the music he was playing. It inspired me to start with music." Beginning with the piano, Hardy went on to try out various stringed instruments before finally settling on the double bass when he was 12.

After he was selected for the *From the Top* program, his first preshow workshop session focused on using digital audio workspaces, demonstrating how a studio functions and describing the journeys of professional musicians. "I learned a lot about how audio recording really works, getting to know other musicians and making connections," he says. "It was an all-around great experience."

The radio portion was recorded at Ovation Sound, a studio in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where Hardy grew up. "Everyone in the program is great," he says. "They are easy to communicate with, and they work with you so well. They model how to work with other people and really inspire you to want to be the best you can be."

"Gabriela and Gavin are both amazing musicians and incredible people," says Megan Swan, *From the Top*'s director of production operations and programming. "They are not unique, I suppose, when you think of them alongside other 'Over the Toppers,' because all these young people are extraordinary. But they are



COURTESY OF FROM THE TOP

Gabriela Salvador Riera recording in Philadelphia

clearly future leaders and change makers. It's so exciting for me to be able to spend time with them because I want them all to rule the world someday. They are so smart and so compassionate and just really special."

Asked about how *From the Top* finds and selects its musicians, Swan says that most candidates self-apply, usually after learning of the program through a music educator or another musician. "Word of mouth is huge for us," she says. "We recruit by reaching out to program directors, music teachers, art schools, music schools, counselors, people who can help us get the word out to the young people they know who'd be interested. And of course, we reach out to our alums, saying, 'Please spread the word. If you had fun, tell your friends to apply, too, because we really want to grow this community.'"

According to Swan, *From the Top* functions as a network, a platform, and an amplifier for young artists to come in, experiment, grow, and learn together about what it is to be a citizen artist. "That's the term we use a lot: *citizen artist*," she says. "Someone who knows how to connect and

engage with audiences, who can connect and engage with communities, who has the skills to connect their artistry to bigger societal issues and the world."

The Medialab workshops are a hands-on way to teach those skills. "Everything that we're doing is about their growth. And then the show itself is a megaphone through which their stories are told. We work hard to make sure those stories are represented authentically. Our hope is that the audience connects this musician, this person, this well-rounded human, with the music that they're hearing."

Swan agrees with Yang's description of *From the Top* as a family, adding that it's an intentional piece of what makes the whole program work. "I often say, 'You're gonna get sick of us, because you're going to hear from us a lot,'" she says. "And they do. We do stay in touch and continue to find ways to support them as they move out into the world. We've been doing this for 25 years. It's a big part of what *From the Top* is. We want to give them everything they need to keep telling their story."

Over the course of the last quarter century, the show has evolved in many ways, and Yang hopes it continues to evolve. "I sure hope it lasts and lasts," he says. "*From the Top* has gone through so many changes, so many shifts in technology. It started out as a radio show, and then became a podcast too. We started out recording in studios and then during Covid moved to Zoom. I do believe it has the ability to keep reinventing itself."

But to Yang, it's not really about keeping the show alive, in whatever broadcast form it takes. "It's about keeping the next generation of talented, dedicated young musicians going, to champion them and give them the support they deserve," he says. "Because what would the world be without that talent and creativity and invention?"

"So, to mark the 25th anniversary," Yang continues, "let me just say, 'Congratulations, *From the Top*.' I'm so glad I went through this program. I'm so glad I'm part of the family, and I can't wait to meet all the newest family members—so we can bring more young people in and keep this amazing classical music scene alive forever." ■