

I Have Arthritis, but Arthritis Does Not Have Me: A Journey of Musical Achievement

By Ariel Kwan, ARCT, BSc

I grew up with the sounds of my older sister practicing the piano and violin and, to this day, our grand piano still bears the scars of the many objects I threw at it, both during tantrums and when conducting the orchestral accompaniment to the next concerto. At age 4, I began music lessons and flourished under the tutelage of wonderful teachers. I was cast in Toronto Canstage's production of *Amadeus* at the age of 10, opening the play with a Mozart piano sonata. In 2003 and 2004, I was invited as a presenter for Zoomer Media's ideacity Conferences. By the age of 12, I had completed The Royal Conservatory of Music's Grade 10 exams in both piano and violin, and was actively competing in competitions across Canada.

The summer prior to entering high school found me preparing for my Associate of The Royal Conservatory (ARCT) Performer diplomas. I spent grueling three-hour practice sessions on each instrument daily, which culminated in marks of 92 and 94 in piano and violin, respectively. During this time, the joints in my hands had become swollen and painful but I dismissed the symptoms as secondary to overuse. I was also landing double-jumps in figure skating, so when my knees and hips became affected, I again attributed the symptoms to repetitive joint stress.

However, when my symptoms persisted in high school despite a reduction in practicing, I knew there was something else going on. At age 14, I was diagnosed with juvenile idiopathic arthritis (JIA). Progression in my hands not only affected my ability to play instruments, but also began interfering with my capacity to write.



An article on my experiences and achievements as a musician, and how coping with JIA has influenced my trajectory and career aspirations.

My competitive music days were over; however, under the care of Dr. Carter Thorne and with the use of multi-modal therapeutics, I was able to face adversity and continue exploring my passion for music as a violinist with the Toronto Symphony Youth Orchestra. I also toured with the prestigious National Youth Orchestra of Canada for three summers until age 18, spending my final year as concertmaster. Due to unpredictable flare-ups, however, a professional music career was impractical.

I chose to pursue Health Sciences in university, a decision influenced by my diagnosis of JIA. However, I was also determined to keep music in my life. In 2013, I graduated with a BSc

(Major in Medical Sciences) from Western University where I also studied violin performance. I am presently a 2017 candidate for a PharmD degree at the University of Toronto. I continue my passion for violin performance as a member of the Hart House Orchestra, as well as an occasional substitute for the Cathedral Bluffs Symphony Orchestra.

As I reflect back on that teenager who was devastated with the diagnosis of JIA, I realize that arthritis does not have me. I have arthritis. With passion, dedication, determination, and a hint of stubbornness, I have triumphed despite its barriers. I thank my family for their support and the multidisciplinary team which has provided exceptional care. My dream of music performance is still a reality.

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