

Orchestras at Auckland Grammar School – William Zhang

Throughout my five years at Auckland Grammar School (2005 – 2009), I played in the school's Symphony Orchestra, starting out as a 3rd former in the Third Violin section, and finishing as a 7th former in the First Violin section. I also played violin in the Grammar Virtuosi during my final two years at AGS. Overall, I found the Symphony Orchestra and Grammar Virtuosi to be a very positive experience, and one that I'll remember for a long time.

I'll start off by warning that my five years of music at AGS were not without a lot of effort and a few difficulties along the way. I found that a strong commitment is definitely required to be part of a group like the Symphony Orchestra and Grammar Virtuosi. Getting to school at 8am sharp (or "7:55am" in Dr Wu's concept of time) every Wednesday and Friday morning at first proved to be a challenge, but I got used to it by my 4th form year as my mind started adjusting to the early mornings. (By the way, I've just discovered that my university lectures also begin at 8am, so it's nice to be used to the early starts already).

The creation of an advanced string ensemble Grammar Virtuosi group in my 6th form year saw the addition of Monday morning, Wednesday lunchtime and Wednesday afternoon rehearsals as well. Last year, all that added up to just over 4 hours of rehearsal time per week – a decent amount, but manageable nonetheless. Personally, I don't think the time commitment is too much of a challenge, unless you're seriously overloaded already. I managed fine myself, even with a lot of school work and other activities going on, especially in my 7th form year.

All that time and effort throughout the years was fully worth it though. I found it incredibly enjoyable to appreciate the final result of all our hard work being expressed through each performance we gave as an orchestra. My favourite part of each Symphony Orchestra and Grammar Virtuosi year was the annual KBB Music competition. Four out of my five years at Auckland Grammar School had seen the Symphony Orchestra performing in the KBB Gala Concert of this competition, which features the top orchestras of the Auckland region – a definite highlight of the school music year. Usually, this is also the orchestra's final full set performance of the year, so by this time I love how everything* fits together so well – hearing it all happen around me and being a part of it myself.

Also, I especially enjoyed our performances in the AGS main hall, whether it was for ANZAC Day, a school assembly or the end-of-year Prizegiving ceremony. I really liked the rich reverberation of the school's hall large space – the sound created was something really different to anything I'd heard before, and being on stage in the midst of the orchestra created quite literally a 'surround-sound' experience.

Rehearsals were often an interesting experience, thanks to our director, Dr Wu, who has himself confessed to being a little "eccentric" at times (yes, I do have written proof of that). The most cringe-worthy moment of 2009 was definitely when he attempted (stress on attempted) to make the Grammar Virtuosi "sing" the piece we were rehearsing, because we just couldn't get the timing right. Please note: the Grammar Virtuosi can NOT sing in tune. But no, that doesn't deter the ever persistent Dr Wu, who insists on repeating the drill a number of times. Ouch.

Of the pieces we performed as an orchestra, my personal favourites were the loud and energetic ones. I think it fits with an all-boys school like Auckland Grammar School better as well. It seems that Dr Wu likes to mix things up with slow pieces as well though, and as a result I think there's something in the orchestra for most people.

So if you're thinking of joining an orchestral group at Auckland Grammar School like the Symphony Orchestra, go for it! I would definitely recommend it, but obviously, talk to other people as well. On the whole, I'd describe the experience as a lot of fun (for the most part), but with a few challenges thrown in for good measure.

William Zhang

Dux, 2009

* 99.9 percent