

## **A Step Into the Western World**

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When I first started in the DLSZ Strings, I never would have known that I would be part of the prestigious competing group that just won a Gold award in MusicFest Canada: The Nationals last May 14, 2025.

Over the past few weeks, preparing for Canada, the group bonded over stories and shared jokes, sent each other reassurance and encouragement, and lamented over the difficult passages of Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings: Tema Russo*, complying with a rigid rehearsal schedule. We were not sure then, questioning ourselves and how the judges would think. Contrastingly, I felt the opposite. I abided in my own faith and the always working hands of God. For He is the only one who makes the impossible possible.

And so, the group soon met at the airport, feeling mixed emotions and having bid their farewells to their families and friends left behind in the Philippines. We were moved to the line reserved especially for us, labeled with a welcome from EVA Airlines.

We boarded the plane and had a four (4) hour layover to burn in the unbelievably sleek and beautiful airport of Taiwan. We ventured across the walkalators, window-shopped the highly priced Sanrio store, and I discovered this amazing peanut butter custard wheel pie from Mazu Village that was not too sweet and was freshly baked. And apparently, I mentioned it probably seven times in the week that followed. The airport also hosted themed boarding gates and waiting rooms, from Pokémon to a tranquil forest, as well as popular jewelry and clothing brands. But Taiwan is not the highlight of this story: we soon boarded the aircraft bound for Toronto.

The fourteen-hour flight was not eventful as the week ahead, but the plane touched down safely. Toronto Lester B. Pearson airport was vast, featuring sprawling hallways, tall windows looking down on shops and restaurants, and a smooth immigration system with the help of online kiosks. We retrieved our luggage safely and all boarded our new coach for the week, joined by our tour guide, Dan and our driver Jayson, who drove us to our hotel: Homewood Suites by Hilton Toronto-Markham. Now, the group that was in the bus was not complete. We were missing some of our seniors from Grades 10, 11, and 12, who flew early. Mr. Pol Sumera, Strings Director, also went on an earlier flight. So imagine our surprise when we were greeted by all of these individuals, literally bowing and laughing out in the eight (8) degrees cold of Toronto!

### **Preparing for the Competition**

On our second day, most of us were jet-lagged, as the time in Manila is 12 hours earlier than Toronto's. However, we were able to enjoy the unique American breakfast buffet the hotel offered and hopped on the bus again to York University: a spacious and expansive campus for aspiring musicians and participants in Canada's MusicFest 2025. The surroundings were beautiful, fields of green and blooming flowers all around, which can be found everywhere in Canada, even in the cities. After our lunch in York University's own mall, York Lanes, we were escorted into our rehearsal room for our afternoon practice. The others had brought their own instruments, and I rented from the university. We ended our second day

with a swift jazz dinner on campus, care of students at the university, and we were even joined by other competitors from all over Canada and the world!

### **Competition Day: Bringing home the Gold**

We woke to the competition day with elation and a little bit of anxiety. The bus drove up winding highways to downtown Toronto, a collection of tall skyscrapers, buildings, and famous shops and restaurants. It also hosts the famous CN Tower and the Scotiabank Arena. We divided ourselves into small groups, first visiting an underground food court that holds a unique array of cuisine and dishes from Indian to Canadian. One of the stores also sold poutine, a Canadian classic – fries with gravy and cheese curds. Unexpectedly, most of our table received heaping servings from each restaurant we ordered, feeling too full afterward. Luckily, we enjoyed the Toronto Symphony Orchestra's performance entitled *La Vida Loca* at Roy Thomson Hall, experiencing the vibrancy and culture of Latin music whilst engaging with the guest singers in their catchy tunes.

Before leaving at intermission to allot enough time for travel back to York University, we danced with the crowd for the orchestra's rendition of *Macarena*, firing up our energy for the dreaded adjudication ahead. With not-so-ready hearts, we soon arrived at the competition's location, having a quick warm-up before being ushered behind the stage, looking at a television that showed the current performance onstage. Emotions were high; I could not imagine how I would have gotten this far with only two (2) full years in DLSZ Strings, one (1) being in grade school. I probably prayed a thousand times that week. None of us knew what to expect of the audience, what to think of the judges. Although Sir Pol told us before going onstage, "I believe in you guys." For me, that was enough to step out in the surprisingly comforting atmosphere of the university's theater and play. From a performer's perspective, I hardly felt any tension and knew the group was trying not to laugh when the host mispronounced DLSZ. We began with *Perseus*, then *Variations of Filipino Folk Tune: Ahay Tuburan* and finally the dreaded *Serenade for Strings: Tema Russo*.

A calm workshop with the smiling adjudicators filled with compliments for the group soon followed, ending with DLSZ Strings bagging not just one (1), but three (3) awards! First, a rare (their words, not mine) Excellence award, secondly, a Merit award for our concert master, Gael Ilano (DLSZ 2026), and of course, a Gold award that comes with a plaque.

### **Exploring the Beauty of Canada**

Although fun, our itinerary was still full for the next three (3) days. We explored De La Salle College Oaklands' expansive grounds where the students had no haircut policy and drove cars, watching a football game, then performing seven (7) songs at their theatre, even receiving a standing ovation at the end of *A Million Dreams*, which made a comeback from Himig Lasalyano 2024. Afterward, we took our dinner and played at Dave and Buster's, Canada's Timezone. I sped through the racing games while the others gambled for toy ducks.

Our fourth day was entirely in Niagara Falls. We rode on the Whirlpool Aero Car, watching the rushing waves of the falls beneath us, immersed in nature through the White Water Walk, a series of boardwalks that offer photo-worthy views of the river, encapsulated by the gorge and trees. To top it off, we put on our rain ponchos and went down 40 feet behind the Falls, looking out on a balcony, mist spraying our

bodies from the splashing waves and roaring falls. And then we had dinner at Shoeless Joe's, where our table spent an hour laughing so much our cheeks were sore and forgetting about our own food.

And sadly, Canada came to an end in downtown Toronto. It was a well-deserved late morning for everyone, but the group was incomplete without our recently graduated seniors and associate concert master. We dwelled on their impact on the group in their many years in strings, took their personalities to heart as we went up the CN Tower and viewed Toronto from above, not to mention Ripley's Aquarium with themed rooms showcasing schools of fish, shivers of sharks and squadrons of manta rays. We appreciated Canada's national sport, hockey, through their Hockey Hall of Fame, and ended the day shopping at Vaughan Mills before our extremely early flight at 1:00 A.M. Although we were tired, we still made the most of it at Taoyuan Airport, taking another visit to the Sanrio store.

### **Making the Impossible Possible: A Miracle**

But that was not enough to complete the end of the story: It was the weekend before the trip, together with some of our teachers, our Canadian visa had not been approved yet, and we applied since March. As our last attempt, we drove to the Canadian Embassy, fogged from the early hours of the morning, and struggled with my own patience as we simply waited in the waiting room. With no expectations, my mom was already losing faith and took this desperate measure, because we did not know then what our fate was. But I kept strong, and was instantly blown away by the sight of this woman approaching us in the room wearing my favorite color since I was a kid, orange, casually opening our passports to each of their visa pages. It was impossible, but yes, we had our Canadian visa, three (3) days before our flight. But through this experience, I learned the impact of Matthew 7:7: *"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you."* It was a testimony of faith, it was God's hand working.

But of course, my visa and my joining the competition would not be possible without my parents. They generously gave their time to arrange the visa misconception and provided funds for Canada, just to get me across the world. They turned into full-time Strings supporters. The work that my parents did simply cannot be described into words.

To this day, I also want to honor and thank our teachers, Mr. Leopoldo Sumera Jr., Ms. Joanna Camille De Leon, Ms. Shelly Isaga, and Mr. Richard Calubayan—for believing in our talents and continuously guiding us from start to finish. To our parents and the DLSZ Administrators, Mr. Daryl Galicia, Music Unit Head, and Ms. Adrienne Zaballero, Humanities Chair, thank you for your unwavering support and dedication in making this dream a reality.

Animo La Salle!