

Aurora tenor's timbre to hit the heights at New York's Carnegie Hall



By Brock Weir

As a multifaceted musician, John Willoughby likes the intimacy of small ensembles.

The Aurora vocalist and musician, who is a dab hand on the tuba and the baritone sax in Aurora High School's concert and jazz bands, respectively, admits he doesn't "connect well" with big orchestras.

"A big ensemble has too much professionalism in a certain way," he muses. "It is too organized. In a smaller group you have more liberty to share your ideas and to grow closer to the people you are working with."

Auditioning via video for a place in the 2015 High School Honours Performance Series, the Grade 12 student had to rely on himself and himself alone to secure a place in the program. Evidently that was enough as his voice secured him a place in the prestigious choral program, which will see him hit the stage at the famed Carnegie Hall in February.

Having studied music since the tender age of two, however, there were many people who helped him along the way before he prepared his audition tape.

This love of music has its foundations in his father enrolling him in a music appreciation program as a toddler and, from there, music teachers stoked that interest into a passion.

By the time he came to Aurora High School, he found new outlets to express this passion.

"I just wanted to be a part of our school's music groups and figure out how I could take part and participate," he says. "When I first heard about the school's a capella group, I was really excited because it was a student-led group and the thought that maybe someday I could lead it was huge for me."

"When I went in, it was a really tight-knit group, but it was just a men's group at that point and they were all super close. We would all joke around with each other, but we all had the same love of music. That inspired me to go more into making music a bigger part of my life, and eventually it led me to lead the group."

Without any backup music to rely upon, singers in an a capella group rely on listening to one another to get a feel on how the music moves. You have to work together and bounce things off one another while still singing. As he prepares for his Carnegie Hall debut, he is working together with his music teachers who have been particularly influential on him, bouncing ideas back and forth, and working on getting a handle on six very different pieces he needs to have under his belt before he heads to the Big Apple.

"I was really proud I made it and a bit surprised because there are a lot of people who applied," says John. "I was just amazed they liked my voice well enough. It is a professional group, so they demand a certain amount of perfection. I was just hoping I was close enough to make it through."

As he looks ahead to the trip, he says he is most looking forward to meeting the program's director and seeing how he approaches not only the music, but the choir itself. Every director is different with their own approach, he explains, with different ideas on how to speak to the choristers, their interpretation of the music, and the "motions" they use to direct the group.

It is in this direction where John's true passions lie.

It is now that time of year when Grade 12 students across Aurora have that challenging task of choosing what they want to do once their high school life has come to a close. John has a very clear idea, narrowing his options down to three Ontario universities - with the University of Western Ontario having a slight edge, in his book - with a dream to follow in the footsteps of these directors.

"I would like to get a doctorate degree in music and be a professor, so I could teach other people, other people who have a love for music the same as mine, and I would have the opportunity to direct a lot of groups. Music is different for everybody. For me to tell everybody how I think it should be played and how I believe that it would best accentuate their talents and abilities, and would be best for the group, is huge for me. I think being able to share what I know about music with other people and share my experiences with them to help them become better musicians is interesting.

"Through music, I learn a lot of new things. In music, you are almost always working with somebody else, and that is a lot of fun. I work alongside people who teach me a lot about music, but also life. It is an integral part of who I am."