

Sounds From the Street

Benjamin Gates on Busking, Part 2 of 2

Transcribed by William Aitken

Benjamin Gates (Guest): It's just a beautiful sound. The thing I love about playing the cello is the resonance between actually holding the instrument and actually playing the instrument.

[I Need a Dollar by Aloe Blacc starts playing]

BG: The smallest vibrations... If it's off at that moment, I can fix it by simply moving my finger or switching to a different position.

[Song continues to play]

Adam Kampe (Host) This is Sounds from the Street, where we get to meet the men and women who define Street Sense, D.C.'s non-profit media center, dedicated to creating economic opportunities for people experiencing homelessness. I'm your host Adam Kampe. In the last episode, Benjamin Gates told us about his successful experience busking and how he has parlayed that into other gigs in town, but it wasn't always smooth sailing. A few years back, he had to leave collage in Virginia, after a little controversy over founding a string quartet that went against school policy and ended a long term personal relationship. Suddenly, he found himself back in D.C, at a crossroads. Without income from his quartet or his education, he applied to a community college and looked for a job.

[A wistful horn plays]

BG: You know, my mother is very supportive. I remember that all of this was happening, and we're sitting in a Red Robin. We're sitting in a Red Robin, across from each other, and I'm telling her that I'm going to put music down for six whole months, like I'm not going to do music because of the way everything had ended at this last point in my life. So, I got the job at Red Robin. I ended moving up from the kitchen all the way to the point where they were ready to train me for a management position. When a few months had past, I realized that music was something that I couldn't continue to live without. It's something that's been in my life since the very beginning.

AK: And today, we're going back to the very beginning, to hear about his roots in the D.C youth orchestra, where, in fact, he discovered the cello, and, eventually, the illustrious Duke Ellington school for the arts. Can you just talk about the moment where you first wanted to be a musician? Can you take us back to that day?

BG: Yeah, again, credit goes to mom, because I was spending my-

AK: Mom's going to be so happy hearin' this.

BG: She is! She is! (laughs) But, I was spending my Saturdays watching cartoon, Batman, Superman the animated series, and everything else. I guess she got tired of it, because one day she calls me in her room and she's like, "Well, what do you want to do? Do you want to do sports? Do you want to do music?" And, it just so happens that, at the time, I ended up leaning towards music. I, honestly, didn't have an answer to the question. It was just left or right, and I decided to go left or so... And, what she did afterwards, is she took me to an organization known as D.C Youth Orchestra, which had a petting zoo, and the petting zoo basically let kids come in and try out the different instruments to see if they want to learn on it or play it, and then they register you for the Fall season of the class. So, I had went through the petting zoo, and the instrument that I really wanted to play were drums. I really wanted to be a drummer. She really didn't like the idea of me sitting in the house all day, banging on some snare drums, and, I guess, making all of this loud ruckus. So, the next instrument was the cello, and at that time, in D.C Youth Orchestra's history, where I was going through the petting zoo, the rule was that the cello was the *only* instrument that could sit down in the orchestra and play. I now know, being older, they meant for the classes. Everyone else, I believe, they had standing up, playing the violin or whatever the case was. You could only sit down and play the cello. So, I played the cello. I liked the cello, and I liked being able to sit with the cello. So, my reason for going with the cello was because I could sit and play the cello, and I would have to stand and play the cello.

AK: So, because you're lazy, you chose the cello.

BG: (laughs) Yeah, pretty much... That's how it went.

AK: It's also a gorgeous, gorgeous instrument.

BG: Yes, yes...

AK: And, of course, the sound is-

BG: The sound is amazing! (both laugh) It has a beautiful, beautiful, very soulful sound. It's amazing.

(Benjamin Gates's cello plays)

AK: And, speaking of that sound... Let's pretend that you're speaking to someone else, but someone from another planet, another dimension, another time, maybe someone who can't even hear. How would you describe the sound of the cello?

BG: The sound of a cello, for me, it's just a beautiful sound. The one thing that I love about playing the cello is the resonance that it gives between actually holding the instrument and actually playing the instrument. What I mean is, you know, when you're holding an acoustic cello, and it's sitting against your sternum, and you're playing, you can feel all the vibrations coming from the instrument against you. I feel like that's, essentially, making me a part of the instrument. It's a very intimate relationship, because, where there's a problem with sound, if it doesn't sound too good, I can put my ear against the peg, and I can hear everything from within. The smallest vibrations, if it's off at that moment, I can fix it by simply moving my finger or switching to a different position. The cello, I would say, is a very great experience, because it requires you to be very loose and fluid with the instrument. It's not an instrument you can be tense with, and there's a lot of things with the cello that you can't keep tense. You can't keep your wrist tense. You can't keep your arm tense. You can't keep your fingers tense. A part of the

training, not so much of the cello training, but more a part of orchestral training, is breathing while playing. So, when you have a group of notes coming up, when you need to be on the beat, you breath while coming down with the beat, so that you're in sync. Just to be able to do that, while having the motions that I do, while playing the cello or that any cellist has, while playing the cello... Those motions... It's very free, and it's very expressive. The cello definitely has a figure, and it all depends on who you are when you look at the cello. If you look at the cello, and you see something smooth going on with it, then you might be thinking of a glass of wine walking into a room with Berry White playing.
(laughs)

[smooth lounge music plays]

BG: So, there's one explanations, from one perspective, but on the other side, if you're looking at it... It's this instrument that has this figure that's anybody can just pick up and play, but it's hard to say that it's just the way the light hits it. It's the way the wood shines. It's hard to explain. That's what I love about the instrument. It's so free. It has a wonderful sound. It resonates beautifully with the user of the instrument. You have to be fluent in the relationship that you start to gain with this instrument. I feel like there are a few relationships, maybe one or two for me. The different relationships that I've had with my cello is one where I give it it's respect, where I understand what it is, where I understand what it does, where I understand the impact that it has had on my life. When I pick that instrument up, it's having the understanding that I'm just kind of a catalyst, but everything comes from within this instrument, right here. For me, just preforming, I've had amazing moments within playing the cello, very humbling moments, and then , on the other perspective, there's the side of understanding the that I'm the person who picks up the bow, that I'm the person who put his fingers upon this instrument.

[Cello softly plays]

BG: I feel one with this instrument. So, when I put this cello down or when I close my eyes, or I'm listening to my own work or imagining something, I'm not seeing a different entity outside of myself, because the cello and I are essentially the same thing.

AK: And when you're preforming, do you see anything? Do you have images or pictures in your mind?

BG: It varies.

AK: I imagine that it depends on you're feeling, the day, your mood, the weather, etc. A lot of people, when the play, at least in jazz, and I guess this translates to classical as well, pianists seem to close their eyes.

[A piano plays]

BG: I'll tell you this. I don't know. I guess, light, that's what I see. I just see a lot of different light. I don't really see anything else. I don't see the audience. I don't really know the stage that I'm on. Getting ready to go on stage, or to perform in front of an audience, it's a different scenario, because I'm seeing all these different people in front of me. It's a nerve-racking experience just to get up here, but when it comes to the playing, it's almost as if everything just fades out.

AK: So, back to the D.C Youth Orchestra and then the Duke Ellington School of the arts, clearly arts education played an enormous role in your musical development. Reflecting back from where you are now, with this amazing skill, why does arts education matter, not just matters to you, but matters in general?

BG: D.C Youth Orchestra was the first thing that got me into doing music and everything else, and after getting into to music and playing with D.C Youth Orchestra, while still being a child, that's when my mother started looking into school that had good music programs, so that I could continue to learn throughout the week, because the orchestra was a Saturday only program. It was only on the weekend. So, I ended up getting the chance to go to Johnny Howard and Davis Elementary school and Tommy Johnson Middle school. These are all places that I went into to be part of their music program. So, these were public schools, and these were public schools in Prince Gorge's County. When it came to these environments, it was great to be able to learn and to have a week to work on my craft. By the time I got back to D.C Youth Orchestra, whatever they had assigned for homework... It was like coming in and still have everything up and ready to play. So, that was really nice. But, more so, when it comes to education and arts, what I start to learn and appreciate as I get older, is that it's mostly about the culture. Getting into music, I got to learn a lot about different music histories, and through learning about music history, you to learn about different points in the world. What the music in the school system allowed me to do is that it continued to allow me to train this art, which had started off as an extracurricular activity at the D.C Youth Orchestra. I'm not calling them an extracurricular activity, given how I was taking it at the time. So, to be able to have that in school and to be able to have an art block where I can focus on something... It doesn't feel like so much of a jolt, I would say, when you start to look at these different colleges and programs or even different career paths that you can take. You know, you don't have to worry about not being trained up until that point, because you've been trained for your entire life. I won't get into how there are different claims. I'll put it like that. There are different claims that it helps them better towards educations or better towards math or anything like that, but I will speak from personal experience. I have gotten better at math. I have gotten better at breaking my numbers down, (laughs) which, in turn, has helped my bills, not only that, but in terms of different environments, that being in music while being in the school system put me in as a child. It allowed me to... I remember that I got the chance to meet mayor Fenty, when he was still in office, and things of that nature. It put me into different environments that required that I step out of this childlike mentality and allow myself to be able to stand in a room with these people and to be able to hold a conversation with them at such a young age. So, even if you look at it from that end, it goes into social skills and things of that nature. So, music can lead into a lot of different avenues.

[Trance-like electronica plays]

BG: What my goal is for next year... I'm still going to go out and busk. It's just something that I love doing. If I can set up enough shows on a consistent basis, for myself, then the next phase is going to start becoming to manage and get shows for other musicians in Washington D.C, because I have had people ask, with busking and things like this, "How are you making busking work?", or, "How do you get this event?", and I say this everywhere that I get a chance to talk, but I had a mother, who decided that, even though she had her own things that were going on with her life, with her job, with her situation, she was going to take the time to help me out via helping me connect with people, helping manage the

group, making sure that, when we accept these gigs, that we make sure that we're coming into it. We know what we're going to be. We know what we're going to do. We have a mission. That's how we like to have our gigs. When we come in, we like to have a list of goals. We like to make sure that we can accommodate anyone in the environment, and we just want to make sure that everyone feels good, before we leave. She has been so phenomenal. I can't stress that enough. I love my mother. (laughs) You know, I can't stress that enough. She has been a very powerful influence on everything that I'm trying to build right now, and she's even been supportive of my busking. There's been times that she has met people, who I have met out through busking. She's been out there with me and has had the pleasure of meeting them as well. So, I would say this, through busking, I have gotten a lot of amazing opportunities and, a lot of those opportunities were not just for pay. Those were opportunities to get to meet people that if I remained in a certain place, I may have never gotten the chance to be humble enough to allow myself to meet these people today. So, that, within itself, is a blessing.

[Trance-like Electronica fades out]

AK: That was part two of a conversation with cellist, Benjamin Gates.

[Trance-like Electronica climaxes]

AK: Next time, we've got a Veteran's Day special, with artist, raconteur, and veteran, Robert Williams. you, right now. Note, he may be wearing a horse mask, seriously. To hear more Sounds from the Street, check out <https://streetsense.org/audio> or find us on Soundcloud or the fantastic podcast app Stitcher. Soon, you'll be able to find us on iTunes. Please keep the conversation going on Facebook and Twitter @streetsensedc .

Sounds from the Street theme song "I need a dollar. How to make it in America." Is performed by Aloe Blacc in the album "Good things", used courtesy of Stones Throw Records. The song was composed by Aloe Blacc, Leon Michels, and Nick Movshon, and Jeff Dynamite. Used by permission of Songs of Cobalt Music Publishing, EMI Blackwood Music Inc/Sony ATV. Excerpt of, "Raindrops on Ice", and other chello instrumentals, by Benjamin Gates. The following songs used curacy of creative commons, found on FMU's free music archive. Excerpt of, "Suede", "Curious", "Mangata", and "Triumph", composed and performed by Jon Luc Hefferman from the album, "Production Music". Used curtacy of Needledrop company.