



Featured Alumnus: John Littlejohn
Delta, British Columbia, Canada
Violinist/Educator

Blue Lake affiliation: Camper, 1992-1993; IYSO, 1994-1997; International String Orchestra (soloist and staff), 2003; Faculty, 2005

Major: Violin

A dizzying variety of styles and genres exist in the current musical scene. In popular music, the lines between rock, soul, country and western, jazz, and the many other sub-genres often blur and new styles are born, seemingly every week. Classical music, too, is reflecting this trend, as a new generation of musicians and composers with a variety of musical influences reaches maturity.

John Littlejohn—a Michigan native from the Lansing and Midland areas now living in Vancouver, British Columbia—is making a career out of just such a melding of styles. A violinist and composer, John’s music blends classical, hip-hop, Middle-Eastern, jazz, gospel, and Latin influences into a style he calls “Blaze.” He has adopted the hip-hop moniker “A.d.i.d.a.m.,” which stands for “All day I dream about music.” While continuing a career as an orchestral and solo violinist in the classical genre, he is also a member of Infinitus, a string trio, and Psalm Fresh, a quintet. Both groups play in the blended style that Littlejohn has mastered. In addition, he is active as an arts educator and recently founded the Thrive City String Academy, a summer music program for inner-city students.

Although John did not begin his study of violin until the sixth grade, he was conscious of music from an early age, saying that he “would hum constantly and make up songs to the rhythm created by the bumps in the road as [my] mother drove around the city.” He first came to Blue Lake as a camper after three years of study and later participated in the International Exchange Program as a student and a staff member.

After receiving his Bachelor’s Degree at the University of Michigan, John enrolled at the Peabody Conservatory, where he eventually received both a Master’s Degree and a Graduate Performance Diploma in violin. John’s career plan began to be formed in his undergraduate years, when he met brothers Anthony (viola) and Alex (cello) Cheung. The three musicians formed their string trio, Infinitus, and later became the string component of Psalm Fresh. At Peabody, in addition to his studies, he taught violin to at-risk children, which would plant the seed for his work with the Thrive City String Academy.

Littlejohn’s interest in musical outreach activities was furthered by his three-year tenure in Young Eight, a group founded at the North Carolina School of the Arts by Quinton Morris. The members, African-American string players recruited from top conservatories across the United States, provide classical chamber music experiences to audiences that might not otherwise be exposed to them. The ensemble was in residence at Blue Lake during the 2005 season.

John’s current performing and teaching activities find him almost constantly on the go. As a member of both Infinitus and Psalm Fresh, Littlejohn enjoys the fact that the

groups' missions are ones of outreach and their music carries a message of hope and inspiration. Infinitus plays nearly 100 concerts a year in nursing homes, prisons, schools, and hospitals. Psalm Fresh adds a DJ calling himself "SaulPaul" and a drummer called "TDG" to Littlejohn and the Cheung brothers. Both groups have brought their positive, high-energy performances to enthusiastic audiences in both Canada and the United States.

As a person strongly called to share his love of music with others, John Littlejohn pursued the creation of the Thrive City String Academy with particular passion. Keenly aware that there are a multitude of children with underprivileged backgrounds similar to his, John wished to provide a summer program for these children that would allow them to grow as musicians and individuals, free of charge. With his experience as a Blue Lake camper providing additional inspiration (as can be seen below), Littlejohn began to raise money and search for a location for the camp. Friends such as Alex and Anthony Cheung served as faculty for the program. Towson University in Maryland provided facilities for the Academy and Littlejohn worked with public school music teachers to select the participants. All the hard work paid off: the first Thrive City String Academy welcomed 30 students from June 22-26, 2009. As far as Littlejohn is concerned, the experience succeeded beyond all expectations and planning has already begun for the 2010 program.

The Academy was featured in early August 2009 on NPR's *All Things Considered*. The story as broadcast can be heard here:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=111536682>

Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp provided many memorable experiences for John Littlejohn. On his website, he has described one of his most unforgettable concert experiences of any kind as follows:

"I've had some crazy musical experiences, but the first one that comes to mind is a concert in 1995 with the Blue Lake International Youth Symphony in a small German village. The audience was extremely enthusiastic, but was comprised of *eight* people, one of whom had a heart attack after the second movement of the symphony and was carried out on a stretcher by paramedics during the third movement. I'll never forget the sound of sirens as the remaining seven audience members tried to revive the victim."

In an interview conducted by e-mail, John "A.d.i.d.a.m." Littlejohn speaks about Blue Lake's influence on his career, the various types of music that he assimilates, and his activities as a performing musician and teacher.

You were involved with Blue Lake programs for many years. What was it like when you set foot on camp for the first time in 1992?

The first time I attended BLFAC was the summer after 9th grade (3rd session). The best way to describe it is "life changing." It was my first time going away to a summer camp, I had never been in an orchestra of that size, and I had never been surrounded by a large number of kids my age who also loved music. My first summer I ended up being the concertmaster of the high-school orchestra and I had *no idea* what to do. I

had a big “J” cut in the back of my hair and a violin case that didn't close, so I had to carry it under my arms at all times. Talk about culture shock! Thank God for supportive counselors and faculty members who helped me make a quick transition.

What is your impression of the training you received at Blue Lake? Did your years as a camper and participant in the International Exchange Program help to determine your career path? If so, how?

I liked the balanced approach of the BLFAC curriculum. Having technique classes, chamber music, and orchestra helped introduce me to more sides of classical music. My years at Blue Lake definitely had a role in choosing music as a career. It was the first time I was around kids my age who, for the most part, took music seriously but also had a variety of other interests. It encouraged me to work harder during the school year and to focus more on music. I quit the football team and all other athletics while in high-school as a result [of becoming more serious about music].

You were a member of the International Youth Symphony Orchestra from 1994-1997. You also toured with the International String Orchestra as violin soloist and staff member during the 2003 tour. How did it compare to touring with the IYSO for four years?

I had a blast with the IYSO in 2003! I participated for the entire tour. It was also a *lot* of work. It was a year where BLFAC was experimenting with touring with a string group instead of a full orchestra. With that said, there were two counselors and one conductor, Tony Porter [long-time member of Blue Lake's faculty and Board of Trustees], three adults total for the entire orchestra. That meant that I was concertmaster, soloist, male cabin counselor, chaperone, equipment manager, and had to sing baritone [in the choir] for Schubert's *Mass in G*. It was very different from the previous years, when I was a student. In a way, I grew up in the IYSO, so it was like coming full circle. While I learned musicianship during my younger years, I grew as a soloist, instructor, and counselor during the 2003 tour. Since then, I've carried all of those great lessons with me.

As a funny side-note, the hardest part about returning to BLFAC was the cabins. It's something that no one can prepare you for, and being away for six or seven years, I had forgotten how rough they were! That *definitely* took some getting used to.

In 2005, you returned to Blue Lake as a member of the Young Eight. You have said that “[the] thunderous applause of the students . . . completely energized us!” When did you join the group and when did you leave? How did the 2005 visit to Blue Lake come about? Did you do a master class or any other outreach activities while you were here?

I was in the Young Eight from 2004-2006. Our time at BLFAC came about from a conversation I had with Fritz Stansell, who is like a musical father to me. When I



John Littlejohn (second from left) and the members of Young Eight at Blodgett Recital Hall in 2005.

first joined the group and saw what we did, I knew we'd be a great fit at BLFAC. I'm not sure if the Y8 was ready for Blue Lake or if Blue Lake was ready for the Y8, but everything worked out better than any of us would have hoped.

While we were there, we were full faculty (teaching technique and sectionals), played in the festival orchestra, and gave a recital.

Jazz and hip-hop elements are featured in your music along with a strong classical component. Was blending those types of music a natural extension of your interest in them? How would your music have been different if you had not pursued your classical training with the same rigor? Does classical training make your chops better for all types of music?

I grew up listening to soul, hip-hop, and gospel music and started rapping in the 8th grade, so it was only a matter of time before they found their way into my classical playing.

If I hadn't spent eight years in school (BM, MM, GPD degrees) studying classical violin, the music I make wouldn't be anything like it is. I would be very basic. Having classical chops is a blessing because it allows me to explore different genres of music without being limited by a lack of technique. It also allows me to have a classical/hip-hop career simultaneously. I love classical music and am purposely avoiding being placed in box. I probably give as many classical performances as hip-hop, jazz, and Christian concerts.

The members of Infinitus and Psalm Fresh come from a wide geographic area. How did you all come together?

Anthony, Alex and I (Infinitus) all went to school together at the University of Michigan and quickly became best friends. We were even roommates for a while. After I left the Young Eight in 2006, I began playing with Infinitus, which was then a string quartet, as a fill-in on their tours until they found permanent violinists. It was complicated because I was living in Texas at the time and Infinitus operates out of Vancouver, British Columbia. While living in Texas I did a lot of performing as A.d.i.d.a.m. and met some great hip-hop artists, SaulPaul and TDG, and we started doing a lot of concerts together.

In the summer of 2007 my family and I moved to Vancouver and I began playing with Infinitus full-time. About a year later we joined forces with SaulPaul and TDG and Psalm Fresh was created. We usually tour Canada as Infinitus and the States as Psalm Fresh but we also do joint tours which work out really well.

What motivated you to start the Thrive City String Academy?

Actually, Blue Lake was a strong motivation to start TCSA. Being able escape a sometimes negative environment by attending summer music camps kept me out of a lot of trouble as a teen. It also gave me a chance to focus on music without the distractions of everyday life, which played a large role in my being able to become a professional violinist. While I attended the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, I taught violin in an inner-city school on the west side. During my four years there, I saw some of the students grow socially and academically by studying violin. Some of my students were dealing with abusive, drug-addicted parents and I would often see the toll that it took

on them in a short amount of time. Often, most of the great work we were accomplishing during lessons was completely undone when they went home.

The inspiration for TCSA was to find a way to give these students an excellent summer music camp experience for free. This was our first year and I couldn't have asked for more. The students were great and improved dramatically. We had an awesome faculty who poured out all they had on the students and we were all blessed by it. Fundraising is the challenge. We need more help there.

With your solo performing and compositional projects, Thrive City Productions, Infinitus, and Psalm Fresh activities, to say nothing of being a husband and father, how do you find a balance that works for you? What kind of a support system do you have? What do you like to do when you have a little time to kick back?

Balance, that's a hard trick. It's not easy, but I just try to keep in mind what's most important to me: God and my family. They come first. With my professional life, we all work together and try our best to delegate responsibilities so that no one is overburdened. Honestly, I'm not really sure how I made it through this past year and accomplished so much, but I'm thankful that I did.

When I have a moment to chill I get so excited that I don't know what to do. Sometimes I like to just do nothing or sit and watch TV. I love movies, especially good independent films and dark comedy. I also like to cook and eat, which is a good combination, but, as a result, I have to spend some time jogging. At the end of the day, I'm very easily entertained, so even while working, I'm usually having a good time.