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Music professor reflects on childhood in Caracas, Venezuela

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Pedro Aponte first picked up a flute in the El Sistema Children's Orchestra when he was 12 years old.

Courtesy of Pedro Aponte

As Pedro Aponte, associate professor of musicology, enthusiastically lectures to his 8 a.m. music history class, he smiles and constantly moves his hands, pacing back and forth. Today, he's teaching his class about famous American composers.

While trying to explain the different musical styles of two composers, he walks over to the large piano in the front of the room and plays the two different kinds of melodies for his students. He finishes and gets back up to continue his lecture, once again pacing across the large room in the music building.

He's a long way from the slums he grew up in.



Aponte was born in a rough neighborhood on the west side of Caracas, Venezuela. The oldest of three kids, he grew up in what he said was a poor family.

"I don't come from a family of people with education," Aponte said. "My dad dropped out of high school, and my mom didn't even make it to high school."

Aponte said his neighborhood was dangerous and full of crime, something he had to deal with every day growing up. In 2018, USA Today ranked Caracas as the second most dangerous city in the world with a homicide rate of 111.2 per 100,000 people.

"Going home, you have to grapple with safety and be home early, and you never know when you're going to be robbed," Aponte said. "My parents did have a vision. They knew that the key to moving up was education, and they were very strict about our education."

He said his parents' influence helped him stay focused on education while many of his peers didn't, especially once he got to high school. Aponte said there was a high dropout rate. His graduating class consisted of only 40 or 50 people of the over 200 hundred that he entered high school with.

"That kind of qualifies me as an oddity, being able to make it through high school," Aponte said.

But his parents weren't the only factor in his life that helped Aponte make it through school. At around 12 years old, he picked up a flute for the first time.

"I was involved in music, and this is something that largely contributed to me sticking on a path that was favorable to me in the end," Aponte said.

He played the flute in the El Sistema Children's Orchestra, a program created in 1973 to help keep poor children off the streets.

"Had I been born in a middle class family, I probably wouldn't have gotten involved with music," Aponte said.

The El Sistema program consists of different orchestras for a variety of skill levels, and as children in the program improve, they move up. While Aponte moved through the levels of El Sistema throughout high school, he had no intention of pursuing a career in music. Instead, he wanted to become an engineer.

Despite his family's financial struggles, Aponte was able to study engineering, but he decided it wasn't for him.

"It wasn't rewarding enough," Aponte said, which prompted him to drop out and move back home.

Back in Caracas, Aponte returned to El Sistema and pursued music, focusing on flute performance. In addition to returning to El Sistema, Aponte was accepted to the Instituto Universitario de Estudios Musicales, a music-only university in Caracas that was largely staffed with people from El Sistema.

By his second year at the music school, Aponte was hired to teach at one of the lower-level schools in El Sistema, which he said was a major turning point for his future. He also auditioned and made it to the second tier orchestra, where he received a salary. Aponte said it was at that point that his parents began to realize he could make a living in music. After he graduated from college in 1995, Aponte had the opportunity to join one of the city's professional orchestras, but he had other plans.

"Even though I had the option of staying and making a decent living, there was a part of me that wanted to get more education, so that's when I came to the States," Aponte said.

While he wanted to go to graduate school in the U.S., he still didn't have the money. This issue was resolved by the place Aponte would one day call home. That same year, Aponte enrolled at JMU on a full ride.

"I came to JMU and did a master's in flute performance, but that wasn't the end of it," Aponte said. "So I left in '97 to continue my education."

In 1997, Aponte attended the University of Pittsburgh and, this time, he chose to pursue the research angle of music. He graduated with a doctorate in historical musicology.

A student in Aponte's 8 a.m. class raises her hand to answer a question about American composer Aaron Copland. When Aponte calls on her and she answers correctly, his face lights up with a big smile.

At JMU, Aponte helps students in more ways than one. In addition to teaching, he's also an adviser for the general music minor.

"Every day, I deal with students that remind me of myself in that they're not music majors, but they've been taking music their whole lives," Aponte said. "So they're here, and they may be engineering majors as I was, and they still pursue musical studies."

Eric Ruple is the interim director of the school of music at JMU. In his time as interim director, Ruple has made note of Aponte's excellent reputation in the music department.

"He is extremely friendly, helpful, intelligent guy. He is very much a team player; he works well with everybody," Ruple said. "I've never heard a bad word about him from colleagues. He is definitely a very popular person to work with and to be around."

Aponte said he has a natural desire to help people — not just his students.

"My dad is always helping at the soup kitchen in our church," Amanda Aponte, Pedro's daughter, said. "He's always putting others' needs first."

Today, Pedro, his wife and their four children live on their family farm outside of Harrisonburg, the place they've called home since 2002. Growing up, Pedro's grandfather owned a small farm where he provided fresh food for his family, something Pedro decided he wanted to replicate for his own children.

"Sustainable agriculture is something I have always been fascinated by because it reminds me of my family," Pedro said.

The farm is six acres, and the Aponte family uses every inch. The fields — where they grow broccoli, onions and lettuce among other produce — are carefully planned out, and many are home to plants covered by black plastic tarps for the winter.

“The first year we expanded, we grew more food than we had anticipated — so much so that we gave a lot of food away,” Pedro said. “So, the second year, someone asked, ‘If you’re growing so much food, and I like what you’re doing, would you consider selling us some?’ So, we did that.”

All of a sudden, the Apontes had a new business on their hands and a way to help their community. The next year, the word spread, so the Apontes started a program called The Community Supported Agriculture Program, a sort of farmshare. Pedro said they grew food for 40 families in the past year.

Looking back, Pedro said he couldn’t have gotten this far without music, and he isn’t the only one with a passion for it — the Apontes are a musical family. Pedro’s wife, Maria Aponte, is a music professor at Eastern Menonite University. Pedro met Maria in El Sistema when the two were children.

“We’ve known each other for as long as I have been involved with music,” Pedro said.

Over the years, the two became close friends and eventually wound up playing in the same orchestra. They later began dating and married before leaving Venezuela together to go to grad school in the U.S.

Pedro said that the Apontes created a musical environment for their children. Amanda is a freshman music major at JMU, and she’s following in her parents’ footsteps.

“I started playing the violin when I was two, and that was kind of the beginning of it all, and ever since then, I’ve just been involved in everything music,” Amanda said.

Pedro’s journey to JMU was an unconventional one, but thanks to his passion for music and the values he learned in El Sistema, his children are growing up in a much better place than he did. Pedro said he’s grateful to be where he is today.

“He has taken advantage of his opportunity in an incredible way, and he’s brought that sense of gratitude to every thing he’s done here,” Ruple said. “He’s an incredible colleague and teacher.”

Pedro’s hard work and dedication paid off, and thanks to his passion for music and teaching, his children are growing up in a much safer place than he did.

“We don’t realize how privileged we are,” Pedro said. “You have no idea. You don’t have to worry about how you’re gonna get home at night because it’s safe, but that’s not how it was where I grew up.”

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