

Livonia Grad, Playing with Yo Yo Ma, Wins Grammy Award

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Sitting in the audience at the Staples Center in Los Angeles Sunday afternoon, Shane Shanahan didn't immediately realize he had just become a two-time Grammy winner.

"I was expecting them to read the name of the ensemble, 'Yo Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble,' but they read the name of the album, 'Sing Me Home.' That's not what I was listening for," said Shanahan, a 1991 graduate of Livonia Central School. "So, when I first heard it, I was like 'Oh, we didn't win,' but then everybody sitting around me started cheering (and) I was like 'oh wait.'"

Though he's hesitant to mention it because of his limited involvement, Shanahan's first Grammy came in 2010 when he played for three tracks on Yo Yo Ma's solo Christmas album, "Songs of Joy and Peace," which was named Best Classical Crossover Album.

His win Sunday came in the Best World Music Album category.

"I'm a little bit reluctant to (claim) that one but this one for sure," said Shanahan of "Sing Me Home." "It's the ensemble with Yo Yo, and I played on almost all of it and have one of my arrangements of a tune from Mali on there as well."

Shanahan and his fellow ensemble members were also nominated, though didn't win, in the Best Music Film category for the documentary "The Music of Strangers," which follows the group and examines its impact and how its array of members functions together.

Making the band

Shanahan first met Yo Yo Ma, widely recognized as the world's best cellist, in 2000 at the Tanglewood Music Festival in Massachusetts.

He soon became a member of Ma's Silk Road Ensemble, which draws its name from the ancient trade route that stretched from China to Europe.

"It's basically using that as a metaphor for cultural exchange," said Shanahan. "The first thing we did was put together a group of musicians and composers from Silk Road regions along with some western musicians. The idea was to combine those cultures from the Silk Road along with western music."

A classically-trained percussionist with degrees from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester and the Hartt School in Connecticut, Shanahan developed a taste for different kinds of percussion from around the world shortly after earning his masters.

"I still play some of the classical percussion with this group (but) I play a lot of middle-eastern percussion, which is mostly hand drumming," said Shanahan. "I think it's really that mixed background that made me appropriate for this group – we do a lot of that kind of cross cultural stuff."

For “Sing Me Home,” the intent was to have each song relate, in some way, to the concept of home. With a group as eclectic as the Silk Road Ensemble however, there was some leeway in exactly how each piece tied into that underlying theme

“Whether it’s a home of one of the ensemble members or home as the United States, which is a place where many cultures meet, or specific things to the culture of that from which members of the ensemble come from... it all has this sort of feeling of home,” he explained.

The piece Shanahan arranged, titled Ichichila, draws its inspiration from a tune that originated with the nomadic Taureg people of Mali, in Sub-Saharan Africa who are known for dying fabrics with indigo.

“A lot of African cultures – they use music to help make work more tolerable (and) this tune is kind of built around the rhythm of the dying process,” Shanahan explained. “So, plunging big sticks into vats with the fabrics on it creates this rhythm and that’s what the tune is built around.”

But the song, perhaps surprisingly given its source material, isn’t overly percussive.

That’s because Shanahan incorporated rhythmic elements only insofar as they enhanced the piece’s overarching lyricism.

“When I’m writing for the full ensemble, I tend to focus more on the melodic aspects of things and then put the percussion into what I think will serve the melody,” said Shanahan. “It has a more kind of chill, relaxed vibe to it and the percussion kind of helps with that.”

‘Always drawn to music’

Shanahan’s love affair with music began early.

One year, when he was in kindergarten or pre-school, he asked his parents for a drum for Christmas. Perhaps hedging their bets, his parents bought drumsticks and a drum pad instead.

“It seemed like that was the best way to get started,” said Shanahan’s father, Carl, with a laugh. “That was how it started a long, long time ago.”

Shanahan himself remembers running around his parents’ home in Conesus to the sounds of “Beep Beep,” a novelty song by 1950s trio The Playmates.

“(The song) was about driving and getting faster and faster and faster and I would just run around the living room in circles and as the song got faster, I’d run around faster and faster and faster and get dizzy and fall down at the end,” he recalled. “So somehow, I was always connected to music, and drums in particular always drew me in, I think, because of the dancelike quality that rhythm has - it always makes you want to move.”

When he reached the fourth grade and it was time to pick an instrument, Shanahan wanted to play the drums, “but there were too many drummers already,” so he settled for the trumpet.

He continued with the trumpet for the next several years, even being selected to New York State School Music Association’s All-State band as a sophomore.

But the love of rhythm and drums was always there, lurking in the back of his mind.

“So, I started taking lessons privately outside of school,” said Shanahan. “From the moment I started doing that, I fell in love with it.”

He'd practice for two hours every day after school before his mom got home and more on the weekends.

When his first private drum teacher told his parents he didn't have anything left to teach him, Shanahan sought out other teachers.

"I just really fell in love with it from the moment I started," he said.

In high school, Shanahan eventually made the switch from trumpet to percussion.

"He did it all," said Bob Leader, Shanahan's high school band teacher at Livonia. "He was just so far intellectually more than I ever was, so I just let him go. He's by far the best percussionist our school has ever had."

Regardless of a piece's difficulty or complexity, it didn't take long before Shanahan had mastered it, said Leader.

"His interpretation of stuff was beyond his years. He was like an adult, only in high school," Leader said. "I'd hear him play something and go 'Oh gee, I didn't think of that,' you know? He was just the perfect storm – the talent, the smarts, the ambition and the physical gifts."

Looking forward

While Shanahan's Silk Road Ensemble commitments keep him "fairly busy," you wouldn't really know it.

In 2016, he finished up a year as the artist in residence at the Hartt School, his alma mater, and he's currently teaching a course at Harvard called Performing Musical Difference.

"It's about cross cultural collaboration in the arts," said Shanahan. "That's one of the things I'm really enjoying at the beginning of this year."

Next month he's going to Italy to work at Reggio Emilia, a school in Italy that "has a lot of innovative ways of incorporating the arts into education."

"Those are a couple of things," said Shanahan. "Just keeping busy."