**Redefining Music Education for the 21st Century**

*Addison Teng, founder of the Fulton Music Society, is determined to adapt music education to match a rapidly changing landscape.*

Addison Teng, a concert violinist and founder of the Fulton Music Society, began playing music at age seven but only committed to it at 16—an age many in the industry consider too late. Teng challenged that notion. “I don’t think it’s necessary,” he says. “With discipline, work ethic, and support, a lot of things are possible.”

Teng’s own experience with a holistic approach to music education has shaped his work as founder of the Fulton Music Society. His mission is to redefine what it means to teach, learn, and make music in the 21st century.

Through the Fulton Music Society, Addison urges students to look beyond traditional paths by blending musical excellence with modern skills like business education, adaptability, and cultural awareness.

**Fulton Music Society: A holistic approach to music education**

Fulton Summer Music Academy represents the society’s flagship program. It runs for four weeks every summer in July, and students from all over the world can apply. Limited to only a few dozen students, the program offers ample performance opportunities, biweekly lessons, orchestra, chamber music, and classroom sessions from top experts—including workshops on instrument repair and master classes with world-renowned musicians.

“This is a holistic experience,” says Addison. “A key part of that is journaling, where at the end of each day students get up and talk about how they felt about their practicing that day. It’s therapeutic to hear that your peers are going through the same struggles that you are, and students get to work on their own public speaking skills.”

From that summer academy, Addison and his team select the students who would benefit most from an overseas experience and take them on tour with the Fulton In Residence program. “They get master classes from local professionals, and sometimes they perform with an orchestra, so they understand what a soloist lifestyle is. And most importantly, they have an irreplaceable cultural experience of connecting with others around the world through music.”

Through Fulton Music Society, Addison takes a nontraditional, holistic approach to music education. “At Fulton, we want to give students as many tools as possible to invest in themselves and their futures,” says Addison. “So we talk about the business aspects that aren’t often a part of traditional music education—like how to manage gigs, how to navigate contracts, and how to market yourself. I’m not a CPA, but in my pedagogy classes especially, we talk about taxes.”

One reason Addison started Fulton Music Society was his belief that mainstream music education is simply not doing as much as it could to support students. “We’re trying to be more well-rounded and comprehensive.” He describes discipline and detail as being essential to the process—but also notes that it goes beyond that, in communicating the very essence of music and what the students put into it.

“Do you know what joy is, and what sadness is, and how they can be put into this box?” he said, holding up his violin. “I think it’s fascinating that who you are as a person is reflected in music, and what you are doing in music is reflected also in your life.” Teaching, to Addison, is more about process—it’s also about what he can do as a teacher to unlock each student’s potential, how they can sound, and how they interact with other people. “A lot of the things we do in music are reflected in life,” he says.

**Preparing students with more options**

Career paths have dramatically changed across all fields over the past 50 years, and this holds true for musical careers just as much. “Fifty years ago you went to school, got out of school, worked hard, and got a job,” reflects Addison. “Whether in orchestra or in a teaching position, the dream was to get a tenured position and stay there for 40 or 50 years. That’s no longer the case.”

Addison is guiding his students toward a new economy that holds many more opportunities. “It’s not as linear as before,” he says. “Our education system is currently stuck on one path.”

Addison talks frankly with his students about careers—what’s possible, and what’s more difficult to achieve. His career advice starts with organization. “I tell them not to be too rigid about their futures, especially when they want to go into music. Most jobs are not traditional paths anymore, and I encourage them to explore and value other things you can do to bring joy to the world besides just performing or teaching lessons.”

Examples abound in other related areas, such as music therapy, or moving out of the collegiate teaching environment and providing basic music education in schools. “I want them to be open to all possibilities out there—not just the ones they were raised to think equal success.”

Addison also notes that not all music students end up in a dedicated music career, but music can still be a big part of one’s life—even if they become lawyers, doctors, or embark on any other career. “There are a lot of lawyers who still play music, a lot of doctors who still play music, a lot of finance people that play music.” The discipline and attention to detail that are hallmarks of music education represent a major advantage to students who pursue non-musical careers in business, technology, or other fields, according to Addison.

“We focus so much on the minute aspects of instrument playing: exactly how fast or slow does our bow move, exactly where do we place the pitch, how does what we hear right under our ear translate to what the audience will hear in front of us. When you have that discipline and precision, you tend to have better results—and that goes for everything.”

**Innovation during the pandemic: The birth of a virtual academy**

Before the pandemic, and before the creation of the Fulton Music Academy, Addison recalls his work at institutions that had traditionally been less flexible. “Then the pandemic hit and everything got shut down.” He was working at a summer international music festival in California, and in the face of those shutdowns, he asked the question that was on everyone’s mind: “What’s the plan?” The answer was—“we have no plan.”

Not satisfied with a lack of strategy and insisting that simply abandoning the festival was not an option, “Zoom came to mind. There are breakout rooms where we could see everyone. I thought, ‘I can do a festival.’” His students had been excited about their annual trip with him to California, where they would have intensive learning for three weeks. The pandemic denied that possibility, but the students said to him, “We want to do something this summer.” As would be expected from young people, they didn’t want to just stay home all summer.

He was never fazed by those who said he couldn’t do it, and his response was ingenious. “I told them, you may have to sit at home, but we can still do some learning.” Within 12 weeks, he put together an online program, pitched his plan to a local nonprofit, and got it approved. “Everything worked, and we had an online festival.”

**An international experience**

Through Fulton In Residence, students also get a true international and multicultural experience. Also departing from the mainstream, Addison says that performances aren’t always traditional. “My motto is, give me four walls, a ceiling, and a floor, and I can make that a concert hall.”

To Addison, a concert doesn’t have to be in a formal concert hall, and he relays that sentiment to his students. “Real to me means that someone is attending, listening to you—actively or passively. We’re trying to break down barriers, both with our students on Fulton In Residence tours and with our professional ensemble, the Fulton Chamber Players. Most other musicians are still playing only in concert halls, but I’m redefining what a music space is. We’ve played at the National Concert Halls in Taiwan and cultural centers in Mexico, but at the same time, when we travel we make sure that we give back to the community—like performing at an orphanage in Korea or a brewery lawn with Newport Classical in Rhode Island. With lessons too on these tours, we give the local students master classes and also give opportunities for our students to play for them. There’s always a balance.”

Addison Teng isn’t just redefining music education—he’s reshaping how musicians navigate the modern world. By blending tradition with innovation, he is ensuring that students are prepared not just to play, but to thrive.