



Artist As Leader: Vijay Gupta

A child-prodigy violinist, Vijay Gupta had performed in top international venues by the time he reached his teens; he started college at the age of 13, finishing with a pre-med bachelor's; and by 19 he was playing in the first violins section of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, having already earned an MFA from the Yale School of Music. Yet he gradually realized that mere excellence did not suffice. He wanted his art to be of service to the community around him.

He set his sights on one specific community just down the street from the Philharmonic, namely Los Angeles' Skid Row. In 2011 Vijay created Street Symphony, which since its founding has brought hundreds of world-class musical experiences to Los Angeles County communities affected by homelessness and incarceration.

In 2018 the MacArthur foundation recognized Vijay's work as an artist and social justice advocate by awarding him one of their Fellowships, commonly called the "genius grant."

In this conversation with Corey Madden, Vijay discusses how he grew from dreaming of attaining a position as a leading concertmaster to becoming the artistic director of a radically inclusive and collaborative nonprofit that does not merely do outreach to communities in need but engages with them in transformative ways.

Corey Madden: Can you give us a sense of how your background and training might have led you to where you are today?

Vijay Gupta: Sure. I started playing the violin in Mid-Hudson Valley, NY, when I was four years old. I started in the tradition called the Suzuki School. I was a Suzuki kid, and the Suzuki tradition actually starts musicians very, very young, trains them by ear and in group practice and then has them start performing quite young. I think I started performing when I was five or six years old. When I was seven, I auditioned for the Juilliard Pre-College in Lincoln Center. And I started performing and touring as a solo violinist with orchestras when I was eight years old. I played my international debut with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra under Zubin Mehta when I was 11.

A lot of my life is informed by the fact that I grew up in the household of immigrants. My parents emigrated in the 1970s from Bengal. So much of my life was also about making my parents have purpose and validity in their lives. And a lot of my childhood was incredibly exciting, touring across the country, but a lot of it wasn't a childhood. And so when I was 13, I started going to college. It wasn't entirely my choice. But when I did go to college, growing up in the Indian household I grew up in, I was expected to study science, and so my undergraduate degree is actually in biology pre-med. I worked in a couple of neuroscience labs studying Parkinson's disease and spinal cord regeneration.

But at the same time, my heart was aching for music. I mean, when I was at Juilliard, my life was filled with music in the form of chamber music and orchestra and chorus and composing and conducting. I lived and breathed this music and the connection to my peers and colleagues, who really became a surrogate family for me.

I attended the Yale School of Music for two years, getting a master's degree in music there. Then afterwards I really didn't know what I was going to do in my life. Of course my parents wanted me to do an MBA and become a hospital administrator or something to have a solid, steady, responsible job. But I ended up taking an audition for the L.A. Philharmonic, and it was just to see what that experience would be like. When I was a violinist, I had studied with the great concertmaster Glenn Dicterow; he was the former concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic. And I always just wanted to see what that experience was like. It was daunting and terrifying, but at the end of it I was offered a position in the first violins of the L.A. Philharmonic.

Corey: Wow!

Vijay: I was 19, and it was my first job and my first audition and my first time being sort of challenged to not only be a consummate professional musician but the whole person, the whole artist. And it was really my colleagues in the orchestra who led me to understand that I was more than just somebody else's definition of an artistic product, that if I really wanted to be the musician that the orchestra and my colleagues and I personally deserved, I had to dig deep and do the work to understand what my individual voice really was.

We are going to be the leaders we deserve in the world around us — in this world so filled with discord and pain — if we really understand who we are, if we understand what moves us, if we understand where our boundaries are, but also if we understand that we can have a wellspring of creative and empathic human generosity that does not deplete us at the same time. That to me is the definition of leadership.

And so when I think about my leadership approach now, it really is about a mixture of throwing somebody in the deep end the way that I was but also giving them the time to be in that deep well, giving them the time to figure out and nourish themselves with their own most authentic voice. We are going to be the leaders we deserve in the world around us — in this world so filled with discord and pain — if we really understand who we are, if we understand what moves us, if we understand where our boundaries are, but also if we understand that we can have a wellspring of creative and empathic human generosity that does not deplete us at the same time. That to me is the definition of leadership.

Corey: I'd love for you to talk just a little bit more about your creative practice. How do you use it now in leadership opportunities?

Vijay: One thing that came up in my talk last night was how I find the similarity between artists and scientists is in the fact that we really relish making controlled failures. And the truth is that we might set an expectation or a hypothesis about something, and then we'll spend our time in our lab or practice room kind of trying to get to that ideal. And that ideal, in a healthy sense, is one that we've set for ourselves around being authentically present. I think it's artificial to say that we're going to hit a certain kind of standard or a stopwatch mark the way that an athlete would. And yet what we do is incredibly athletic in the sense that we apply ourselves with tremendous discipline towards a specific set of ideals and practices. And so the way that I think about my own creative practice now is with tremendous diversity and with tremendous depth.

And so I see my artistic and human practice being as much about the time I take to journal and read and take care of my body and eat right, but also to spend my time practicing scales and Bach and the violin concertos that I love, even if I'm not going to perform them. I think that what artists have to offer the world is the depth of our practice and how deeply evolutionary and revolutionary that practice is. We are constantly committed to humbling ourselves.

As a business leader who runs a non-profit organization, I have to say that the practice of learning how to talk to a funder, learning how to write a budget, learning how to show

up and be a speaker is informed by how I practice the violin. I made a point last night to say that how on earth could we not approach a meeting with a funder without being prepared the same way we want to be prepared for a chamber music or orchestral rehearsal? If you know how to practice an orchestral excerpt and play it among colleagues, you know how to talk to a funder. The lessons there are translatable.

Coming back to the idea of controlled failures, if we have a practice that is self-compassionate, where we forgive ourselves for making mistakes but we continue to stay present, we will learn. I have made dozens of mistakes this week alone in my organization, and it's Wednesday! [He laughs.] And at the same time, if I'm open to feedback, if I understand what feels right and what's intuitive and what actually fits energetically where I want to go, then I'm learning something.

Corey: That's such a powerful, powerful thing to talk about. I think that we talk a lot about practice as something that animates the idea of being an artist, that work for us is also joy is also learning and that so many other fields don't actually really focus on that quite the same way. They either make it more commodified ... it's not so intrinsic, it's not giving value to the person at the same time that it's giving value to others. I think that this is one of the things that we really are trying to unearth about why it is that artists might have something really to share around the ideas of leadership and thinking about how practice can make a difference.

Vijay: Well, if I could speak to that point very briefly, I think that's about vulnerability. I mean there's so much in our artistic practice that is commodified. And I think we're quick to commodify things because we're afraid to actually go as deep as we possibly can. We're afraid to sit in the "I don't know," right? And yet when we look at publications like Jim Collins' "Good to Great and the Social Sectors," we're looking at artists as being the leaders of not only human connection but also great business practice, because we're able to sit with questions as opposed to answers. We're able to value process over product, but that takes us trusting each other. And that takes us actually being able to say, "You know what? Even though we're changing the paradigm of you 'delivering' on this artistic product, I trust who you are as a person and my connection to you, my relationship with you, that we're going to create something together."

Corey: I'd love for you to talk about this moment when you were beginning to think about Street Symphony, as you consciously began to think, "Well, I've been at the Los Angeles Philharmonic as a player, and I've obviously been a leader within that setting." Because you were leading yourself; you were having to make sure that you were achieving at a very high level. But as you began to think about engaging with others, to think about your vision of what you could do with your skills, what was calling to you?

Vijay: So much of this is murky and nuanced and has so many levels of shade to it because there was not a clear point where I said, "OK, I'm now going to be a leader," or, "I'm now going to be an artist." I feel that those two things are deeply concurrent in me. However, there was a very real *calling* to me in the work of Street Symphony and

showing up to play in a county jail or a Skid Row shelter and feeling more connected to my audiences and to my own humanity through music than I often did in the concert hall alone.

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I quote one of my great teachers, Liz Lerman, who says that it's about actually hiking this horizontal between being an elite artist and being an artist in community. It's not one or the other. Really the artist's job is to be a bridge between these two spaces and to be the balancing point, even socially to be able to be a cultural translator and creator in those spaces.

I will say that for a long time my dream was to be a concertmaster of an orchestra. And there were so many skills in that metaphor of being a concertmaster where it wasn't At least my leadership style as a player is not to demonstrate leadership by saying, "You've got to go with me," but rather to kind of turn myself towards the orchestra and the conductor and be a conduit and say, "OK, I'm here for you. I'm going to catch you wherever you are. I'm going to play exactly with you." The invitation to play together is the leadership.

And so in crafting Street Symphony there was a microcosm of that same collaborative spirit, maybe not on the orchestral scale but on the chamber music scale, where now when we have meetings, everybody's voice is welcome at the table from our team — including people impacted by homelessness and incarceration, who are invited as important kind of cultural curators but also people who keep us honest to our work, and professional musicians, and emerging artists, and our staff, and our board and our advisors. It's to say that I am conducting something. I am leading something. But my job isn't only to say I'm the expert in the room; it's to say I'm going to listen the loudest.

One of our colleagues in Skid Row says, "Listen louder than you sing." Listening is an act of intense love to be able to share with a team of people who are so often told what to do.

Corey: What do you think we need to communicate to younger artists, to artists in the community who maybe never have received formal training but who are community-based artists? We have a number of people we work with whom we try to support moving forward in their own careers, even at mid-life, to step up and lead, to take that courageous step and become more engaged.

Vijay: One thing I've been thinking a lot about is how we need the arts now more than ever as a public health intervention, as a mental health intervention and as a form of

internal disarmament, where we can only consider laying boundaries against each other — not boundaries, but laying walls, an armor, against each other — if we have in some way shut out a really important and vulnerable part of ourselves. I think that we ostracize and criminalize the most fragile and vulnerable among us in our society because we have a lot of internal shame and have created walls within ourselves.

And so to the artists who are listening, the first and foremost thing is to say you are enough, that you are not alone and that we need you. And we need you now more than ever to imagine a world that doesn't exist. We need your imaginative spirit in the realm of business and policy and budget-writing and law-writing. And yet we also need you to go make breathtaking pieces of incredible beauty.

We need beauty in our world right now. We need beauty as justice right now. And that beautiful justice requires you to go make your work. And the truth is that, yes, training will never be enough. I will train myself and humble myself for the rest of my life because I will never be as good as my instrument. I will never “conquer the violin.” I will always be humbled. And so if we stay in this place of humble curiosity, we're able to co-create something that I believe has a tremendous, transcendent, powerful, and transformative impact on the world around us.

In there somewhere is some advice, but it's to say that as you lead yourself, you will lead the world around you. Perhaps it's trite to quote Gandhi, but I feel like this quote is so right: You can be the change you want to see in the world around you. And in fact that is the only way to change; we must lead ourselves. Then when we hope to change the world around us, it is one person at a time. It is one handshake, one authentic relationship, one faltering, stumbling, rumbling, vulnerable conversation at a time in which we're able to craft a better world around us. And if that is a conversation with your family, with your church, with your community, with the people who you play baseball with, that is enough. But go make something beautiful.

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I'd also say to artists, “Protect your solitude. Really protect your solitude. You get to have your deep well. You do not have to justify your boundaries with busyness.” I wish someone had told me that earlier, that it was going to be totally OK if I decided to take some time for myself and simply sleep and really write in my journal and be by myself, that that wasn't being a social deviant, that I didn't have to deliver all the time.

So much of success — even the success that I've been awarded in my life, which I've so gratefully received — is somebody else's definition of my best self, right? And the truth is that that will always pale in comparison to what I hold as my most authentic definition of my own success. And I'm still trying to figure out what on earth that is. It's

also to say, protect your solitude, go to your practice, but also don't take other people too seriously, especially the ones who are telling you you're doing a good job.

Corey: I wonder if we could conclude this interview with you offering a piece of advice that you wish you'd received earlier in your career.

Vijay: I would say that — being so accelerated in my life, being the person who wore the mantle of being the prodigy, of being the genius — I wish I had been given the opportunity to slow down earlier in my life. Now slowing down for me, sometimes in my darker moments, is linked to stagnation or failure, that I'm not delivering or that if I'm not the yes man, then I'm somehow denouncing the rocky and tumultuous path I took in order to get here. And there is a tremendous amount of privilege in being able to say, "Oh, well, now I have time to slow down, because I won a freaking MacArthur grant."

I am now trying to fill places of deep connection in my life, where I had kind of glazed over that in the past. And sometimes that's to write really vulnerable emails to a friend when you're hurting and say, "Hey, I'm hurt right now. It would be easy to sweep this under the rug, but I care about you, and I want to write this email. And this sucks for me." There is a beauty in slowing down and being present and a deep sense of self-trust and self-worth.

The other thing I wish I had been told earlier is to take care of my body, not only to work out but to watch what I put in. To protect myself and to protect my thoughts in terms of what I consume. And so I've actually taken some time off of social media and some time off of receiving my phone notifications. And the only reason it buzzes is because my fiancée is writing to me. That's it. So, to have my boundaries even with the black screen we all carry around with ourselves.

Corey: That's great. Thank you so much for your time.

Vijay: Thank you for having me.

Epilogue

It is in exploring the truest parts of ourselves that we emerge as better artists, humans and leaders. Amazing ideas we can take from our interview with Vijay Gupta include:

- **Play in the deep end of the pool.** The leaders who are willing to equally take chances and explore their own "stuff" will become the best version of themselves.
- **Leadership is part art, science and athletics.** Set a goal, experiment, strive forward with "tremendous discipline," make mistakes, and continually seek a superlative outcome.

- **Practice and be prepared.** Approach leadership responsibilities the same way an artist prepares for a performance: work towards perfection and expect to be humbled by failure.
- **Trust the process.** It is OK not to know the answers. Own the not knowing; and trust that you and your colleague, partners or team can figure it out together.
- **Invite play.** The duality of sharing and listening, of teaching and learning, of openness and direction garners a more impactful result.
- **Engage your best self.** Making an impact in whatever you do includes taking care of yourself, taking space from distraction and leaning in with your full self.



Vijay Gupta

VIOLINIST AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCATE

Vijay Gupta is a violinist and social justice advocate. An esteemed performer, communicator, educator and citizen-artist, Gupta is a leading advocate for the role of the arts and music to heal, inspire, provoke change, and foster social connection. Gupta is the founder and Artistic Director of Street Symphony, a non-profit organization providing musical engagement, dialogue and teaching artistry for homeless and incarcerated communities in Los Angeles. Vijay Gupta is a 2018 John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellow. A passionate and dedicated educator, Gupta serves on the faculty of the Colburn School and the Longy School of Music. Gupta also serves on the board of directors of the DC-based national arts advocacy organization Americans for the Arts, as well as Los Angeles's beloved 24th Street Theatre. Vijay Gupta made his solo debut with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Zubin Mehta at age 11 and has been an acclaimed international performer since the age of 8. Gupta joined the Los Angeles Philharmonic at age 19 and served as member of the first violin section through 2018. He has appeared as a guest concertmaster with the

Los Angeles Opera and the Philharmonia Orchestra of London, and is an active recitalist, soloist and chamber musician. Gupta also speaks and advocates nationally on the intersection of music, health, and social justice issues.