

Dinuk Wijeratne

[Start of recorded material]

Dinuk: My name is Dinuk Wijeratne. I'm originally from Sri Lanka. And I arrived in Canada in 2004.

On Life before Canada

Dinuk: I was born in Sri Lanka, and when I was three, my family moved to Dubai in the Middle East. Growing up in Dubai was very interesting. It made me a bit of a nomad in that in Dubai, you can't get citizenship and it's a very transient life. [01:00:37:01] It's interesting growing up in a place where you know you can't really put down roots. But you still enjoy the multiculturalism. And that definitely stayed with me.

After Dubai, as an undergrad, I went to the UK. And the next phase of my life I spent about five years there. I really absorbed the cultural life of England because as an artist, that was very important to me. [01:01:04:03] And after that, for my graduate studies, I ended up going to New York in the U.S. And of course New York is such a unique place. Again, being an artist, it's so diverse and eclectic, that certainly stayed with me. I eventually came to Canada to live and work.

Adaptation

Dinuk: Adapting to Halifax has been very interesting because when I came here, I was very much a New Yorker. [01:01:33:16] I was walking on the streets in a very rude way, cutting people up and wondering why people would smile at me for no reason. And these things sort of bothered me. And the pace of life was of course immediately different. It was much slower and that was very difficult to get used to. Over time, I would say I've definitely become a Haligonian, so everything has changed. [01:01:56:18]

I love the pace of life. I love the warmth of the people. I've certainly adapted to this lifestyle. And it seems like the right place for me at this point in my life.

I've never had any problems in Halifax. I suppose my situation was unique because as soon as I left school in New York, I already had a job here. I ended up working as a conductor with the symphony. Even though the pace of Halifax as a city was much slower than New York, the pace of my work schedule increased tenfold. [01:02:32:08] And I was very much in the limelight as a conductor and someone with, you know, an important place in the musical community. And that sort of threw me in at the deep end. Everyone was very, very supportive and always very welcoming.

Defining identity

Dinuk: I feel very diverse and very eclectic. That word nomadic keeps coming up in my mind because I feel like I'm still sort of unravelling from all of the different migrations that I've had. [01:03:01:08] And that certainly reflects through my music because that's how I choose to express myself. I'm still finding my way cultural identity-wise. And I have to say I'm quite comfortable with the idea of constantly being in flux. I like that. And Canada's definitely a place where you can enjoy that.

I would say I'm definitely on the way to feeling Canadian. That of course depends on what your own personal definition of being Canadian is. I'm on the way to being Canadian inasmuch as being Canadian is synonymous with this idea of multiculturalism.

[01:03:32:18] As an artist, I feel equidistant from all of these cultural influences that I've accumulated over the years. Finally I'm in a place where I can explore that and people can view it with the right kind of objectivity and the right kind of openness. And because of Canada's incredible immigration policy, people feel very welcome and I think they feel very at ease to express this sort of personal identity.

[01:04:03:02] There is always this kind of warmth and openness and a cultural curiosity from everyone around you.

At this point in time, I'm not yet a Canadian citizen, but I know I want to be. And I know it's sometime soon. And I'm personally waiting for the right time because I'm still unwinding from a lot of these different cultural influences.

Accepting change

Dinuk: [01:04:29:22] When I compare my immigration stories to those of some of my friends who've had very hard times acclimatizing to places, I have to admit that I've been very fortunate that those transitions haven't been very rough. Conversely, I think what's interesting from a challenge perspective is - and this is hard in music too - is having to accept this idea of change and being comfortable with it.

[01:05:00:00] So growing up in these different places sort of gives you an idea that the foundation is always sort of gently shifting underneath your feet. And certainly that shapes you as an artist and it's something that certainly comes in handy when you're an artist because becoming comfortable with the idea of change is actually not comfortable for us as human beings. That I think has been very influential and is constantly the challenge because of course the more attached you get to certain places, the more you try to sort of hold onto things. [01:05:35:07] It's this idea of being comfortable with things being constantly in flux.

That's not to say that we don't want to put down roots. And I certainly want to put down roots in Canada. But certainly as an artist, if you can be comfortable with this idea of always exploring what's next, it's only beneficial.

[End of recorded material]

Based in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Dinuk Wijeratne is internationally active as a composer, conductor and pianist. His award-winning collaborations have included string quartets and orchestras, Tabla players and DJs.