

Young Artist Project: Humans of Classical Guitar

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With an increase in need for not only a more tight-knit community for the classical guitar, but also a destination for guitarists to share their stories and journey to the guitar, I started “Humans of Classical Guitar” to give guitarists the platform to share their voices.

My project is a multimedia website that encompasses written articles and embedded videos about guitarists around the world that educate and inspire musicians and classical guitar lovers alike. I hand pick the guitarists, focusing on both professional guitarists as well as intermediate players, as I want to demonstrate to the audience that every player despite their experience and level deserves to have their story be told and heard. This will inspire and motivate guitarists to continue performing and perfecting their craft even on an online format for many years to come.

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Expanding classical guitar to Vietnam and beyond



Something shifted for the six-year-old guitarist as the final notes of the Carulli Etude faded out on the playground and the applause echoed through the air. As she waited for her cousin to finish auditioning for a music conservatory in Vietnam, **Thu Le** knew for certain that this was her calling.

“The next thing I knew, I looked up and saw students and parents starting to gather up and watch me play,” Le said. “I realized that I love to perform and I love this feeling, just being surrounded by people who appreciate what I’m doing. I knew I wanted this.”

The next thing you knew, Le entered the very same music conservatory at seven years old. Her introduction to music was unique, having started learning with her father, a painter, at around four years old, and having her first public performance at age five in Vietnam.

“Because it was natural to hear the sound of guitar in the house, it was like a normal routine, and you didn't feel the pressure. But now that I start to teach, I realize discipline is very important and very strong,” Le said. “If I would change anything, I wouldn't. My father was a very strict teacher, but at the same time very understanding, and more of a friend to me. The fact that he had me as the only child, you get it all - the good and bad. I had a very special relationship with my father, who was my teacher but also a friend. I could talk to him about anything, especially about art. [He was] the most important and inspirational aspect of my career and for my life.”

After graduation, Le began teaching guitar at Yamaha at 16 years old, focusing on exam preparation for the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) and Trinity. Upon moving to India two years later, she began teaching beginners and younger kids who have not yet been introduced to Western music.

“Because there was no university for Western music, I started to teach beginners in India and realized this was a challenge, especially because children in India did not know anything about classical and Western music,” Le said. “That was a new challenge for me to be really patient and get them inspired. I had to change my way of teaching and not be super strict. That gave me a lot of great experience, because it's another situation to teach not-so-great students compared to already-great students.”

Recently, Le pioneered a teaching [workshop series](#) around the piece “Romance d'Amour” (Anonymous) for Vietnamese guitar players, when one of her Canadian YouTube subscribers reached out and asked her to teach her and her friends the piece. Next month, Le will expand this series to communities and nationalities elsewhere.

“It's a very iconic piece for the classical guitar and it's a piece that we all love and wish to play,” Le said. “It was just a fun talk at the beginning, but I realized that music is music for everyone. It's so famous and it would be beautiful to share it, even with beginners. I am using the time I can right now to travel to do more things for society, not just for myself. It's an important gesture to do for society, and for communities living overseas. I'm happy to do smaller projects that are meaningful.”

Le's Vietnamese background and culture heavily influences her musical career as a classical guitarist, having grown up during the difficult period for Vietnam in the 1980s. Le strives to include Vietnamese music and Bahraini music, where she resides now, in her every concert.

“What I like is to bring a little bit of my culture into my performances. I appreciate the culture and tradition of Vietnamese music, and in other countries as well. While playing popular pieces by famous composers is important, it's important to include culture as well,” Le said. “I believe that

when doing art, not only music, the most important thing is personality and creativity. It's not only about technique, it's about bringing out your personality. It's like you have to put your signature on it - it could be something big or something small."

Though her concerts and performances have been canceled for almost two years now due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Le keeps busy by engaging with the online music community, keeping in touch with her audience, teaching online workshops, and collaborating with other artists.

"I was very sad having to have my concerts get canceled, especially the ones in Saudi Arabia and Thailand. However, I'm always busy with things to do and have never been bored since COVID," Le said. "There are both positives and negatives. I don't enjoy online concerts, but I'm happy we can still do pre-recorded ones."

The online format allowed Le to begin a YouTube series on her channel titled "Thu Talks Topic" in which she asks her viewers questions, and replies to everyone in one video. Though she's able to share her opinions on certain topics, she finds it difficult to invest too much time into YouTube.

"While there are those who may not agree 100% with my opinions on their questions, I realize I don't need to please everyone. I wanted to share these very useful topics from my own humble experience," Le said.

Like most, her biggest wish is to play live on stage. In hopes that the pandemic will improve next year, Le is looking forward to her performance in May 2022 at the South Bay Guitar Society in San Jose, California.

"When I perform classical music, the feeling I get is like climbing up a mountain. It's not just about it being fun, but it's the satisfaction," Le said. "For now, all we can do is sit and hope. We must hold on stronger with each other."

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Raising the bar for Singapore's classical guitar community



There's a saying that classical guitar has the potential to suffer from being a lonely, solo instrument.

But being somewhat of a lone wolf forced classical guitarist **Kevin Loh** to have a plan to change that -- not only for himself, but for the classical guitar community in his hometown Singapore.

"It really did force me to have a more entrepreneurial mindset from the get-go," Loh said. "From pre-college, the only string instruments at school were all bowed instruments -- I was the odd one out. It has hit me quite a bit and it can be a bit lonely socially, but performing is another thing. One way I have to embrace it is by doing chamber music and collaborating with as many people as possible."

One of his proudest moments of his guitar career was playing "Concierto de Aranjuez, a guitar concerto by Joaquín Rodrigo with the Singapore Symphony in 2015. In a way, it marked Loh's departure to the UK, where he started pursuing his university degree in October 2021.

"This was one of the most meaningful performances for me in recent years, after I completed my military service," Loh said. "A lot of the repertoire classical guitarists play is around solo playing, and we often lose touch with chamber music and utilize our musical ear. Whenever I have the opportunity to do so, I take advantage of it. It engages a different set of skills, which you can get away with not using when playing solo music."

When Loh does play [solo repertoire](#), he particularly loves playing French classical guitarist and composer Roland Dyens' jazz arrangements. But his top three composers Manuel Ponce, Johann Sebastian Bach and Giulio Regondi hold a special place in his heart.

"I love a balance between a piece that's difficult and satisfying to play. It needs a good, striking balance of both," Loh said. "For me, it's really hard to learn something really quickly and cram it all in -- it's better if you let something settle. Quality practice is consistent practice, even if it's every day for only a little bit of time."

Having his dad as his first teacher as a little kid, playing music became a family bonding activity with the family. Loh performed in various charity concerts within his community, which luckily caught the attention of Yehudi Menuhin, an American-born violinist and conductor. Menuhin invited Loh to audition for the Yehudi Menuhin School in the UK, where he attended until the age of 19. Now pursuing his undergraduate musicology degree at the University of Cambridge at age 21, the rest is history.

"One of the things that plays a huge difference between a student-teacher and a parent-son dynamic is that you see your parents all the time, whereas you only see your teacher once a week. In hindsight, I really appreciate my dad pushing me and encouraging my daily practice, because it does take that motivation at a young age, when you don't really know what you want. Having him instill that sense of inner discipline was very useful," Loh said. "Now at university, I'm mind blown by those around me, and I feed off of everyone around me. I would've never thought it would be possible to play in masterclasses with John Williams -- it's actually really cool to learn with masters like him."

While the music education in Singapore still has a long way to go and guitar is nowhere near as developed as it is in the United States, Loh hopes to raise awareness to the instrument and its music by hosting guitar workshops, concerts and masterclasses at local schools.

"It doesn't even have to be me, I just hope to raise more awareness to classical guitar because there is room for development," Loh said. "The road is tougher in Singapore, but it's just a matter of how you look at it: 'Glass half empty versus glass half full.' It doesn't mean there's no opportunities at all -- you can also see it as a lot of room for development and growth. So much can be done in Singapore, so I'm really lucky to be studying in the UK at Cambridge."

Looking ahead, Loh is enjoying playing live music in person again at Cambridge, and will be set on his mission to raise the bar of classical guitar back home in Singapore.

"The way I see it is that music is a social endeavor. There's so much potential to raise the bar. Guitar playing and guitar teaching, it's all a way to connect with other people," Loh said. "Classical guitar is poised in this position to create a community of people that can begin to appreciate music in general. This way, we can cultivate the next generation of audiences as well. If we level that playing field, there will be an increase in demand for workshops, series, maybe even a festival down the line. Who knows what can happen?"

Furthering music education through an inspiring non-profit



Once COVID-19 put the world on pause, many musicians and performing artists were at a loss for how to continue on with their musical career and passion.

For classical guitarist **Hannah Murphy**, she was motivated to use her social media presence for good. Murphy started [Ex-Aequo](#), a non-profit organization dedicated to community building and education in the classical guitar community. Just two weeks after the lockdown in 2020, Ex-Aequo ran its first ever online guitar festival.

“When the pandemic started in 2020, and all the competitions were canceled, everyone was really bummed about it. Because we are in a unique position, and we have a lot of following, a unique following at that, we really wanted to use our social media presence to do things for the classical guitar community,” Murphy said.

What made the Ex-Aequo competition stand out from the rest was having top four equal grand prizes, with no first prize like how many traditional competitions rank their finalists.

“It’s so hard to judge the top four in a competition, because it’s very opinionated. So, we hosted a winners concert, in which all four of [the finalists] got to perform virtually,” Murphy said.

On top of that, another project Murphy spearheaded was [“Changing the Canon.”](#) which aimed to increase representation of Black composers in the classical guitar repertoire. The project started

with commissioning nine Black American composers to write solo guitar repertoire for Ex-Aequo members.

“Especially with the increase in the Black Lives Matter protests in the country, we wanted to do something in our own community,” Murphy said. “We wanted to commission some fantastic Black composers, like Thomas Flippin, and to have these performers work with the composers themselves. We know the classical guitar community would love to play music by a Black composer.”

Though Murphy had already had her own social media presence before the pandemic, now that she had more time, she shifted more into YouTube and livestream concerts, as well as recorded her first album with Phil Goldenberg from home after purchasing higher quality microphones.

“It’s always fun and rewarding playing with another person, and the more I do it, the more confident I get,” Murphy said. “Every time, it gets even better.”

Along with performing and recording, Murphy also teaches students classical guitar using the Suzuki method, but also throws in other styles like rock and bluegrass on top of music theory to keep her students engaged.

“Teaching gives somebody something that they can do - they don’t need to become professional musicians. It gives them some kind of confidence to play with other students,” Murphy said. “I don’t want to push them too hard, but I do realize a lot of people have more fun with it when they’re good at it.”

Having started the guitar at age 10 because her uncle played guitar, she saw herself becoming a classroom teacher. However, after teaching chorus in a classroom setting, her passion for performing and playing the guitar intensified, which ultimately sparked her goal to become a performing artist.

“I have wanted to be on stage since high school. I knew classical guitar didn’t include improvisation, which is nerve wracking, so I continued to ask myself, ‘How can I perform in a way that I’m not freaked out?’” Murphy said. “It really helped me as a person, developed my confidence, and is something I’m always looking forward to.”

Looking ahead, Murphy aspires to not only continue teaching and recording guitar, but also expand Ex-Aequo to help spread the classical guitar community’s music and talent.

“I want to continue doing really fun ideas like the last two projects that no one else is doing. I want to help the community, but also those who don’t know much about classical guitar,” Murphy said.

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