MAGAZINE

MAESTRO

AUGUST '25
VOL. 9



Damien Aribert
"Even when people disappoint you, music never does."

Diego Andres Montes
Percussionist uniting Latin rhythmic roots with refined classical artistry.

Kaiden Surti
"Create music that makes you feel like you."

Youngin Lee
Soprano and versatile performer, bringing depth and sincerity to every role.

Noam Avidor Fuchs
Clarinetist on a journey of constant learning and artistic growth.

Michelle Kwong
"What I love most about performing is that special moment on stage when everything disappears – it's just me, the music, and the audience."

"The goal is not to become like our teachers, but to become more fully ourselves through what we take from each of them."

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LAETITIA MENDLER

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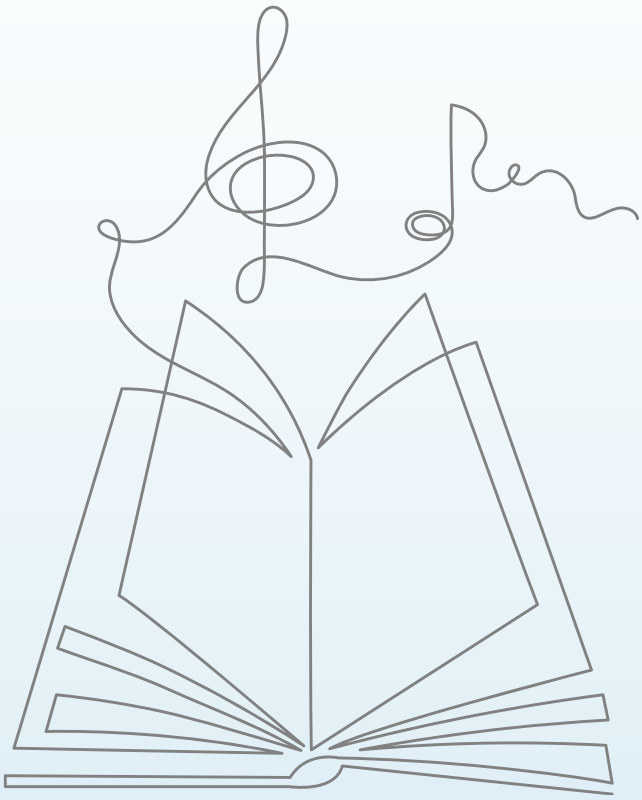


DAMIEN

The competition you won is called the Fenix Award – a symbol of renewal and rising again. Does that idea resonate with you personally or artistically?

Yes, completely! And what a story it is.

I suffer from two genetic diseases and have gone through difficult periods in my life. I've never lacked the essentials, but I had a rather unique childhood. Because of these conditions, I can't perform just anywhere, at any time. Being a sensitive person, I had to learn to toughen up. People in general – and the music world in particular – haven't always been kind to me. That's probably why I've never quite fit the "musician mold."

When I was 16, already knowing I wanted to become a professional guitarist, I entered a competition to challenge myself and grow. I should have made it to the final, but I was met with an injustice: one jury member gave me a deliberately low score simply because I was the only candidate who wasn't their student. That experience deeply hurt and traumatized me. It strengthened my rebellious side.

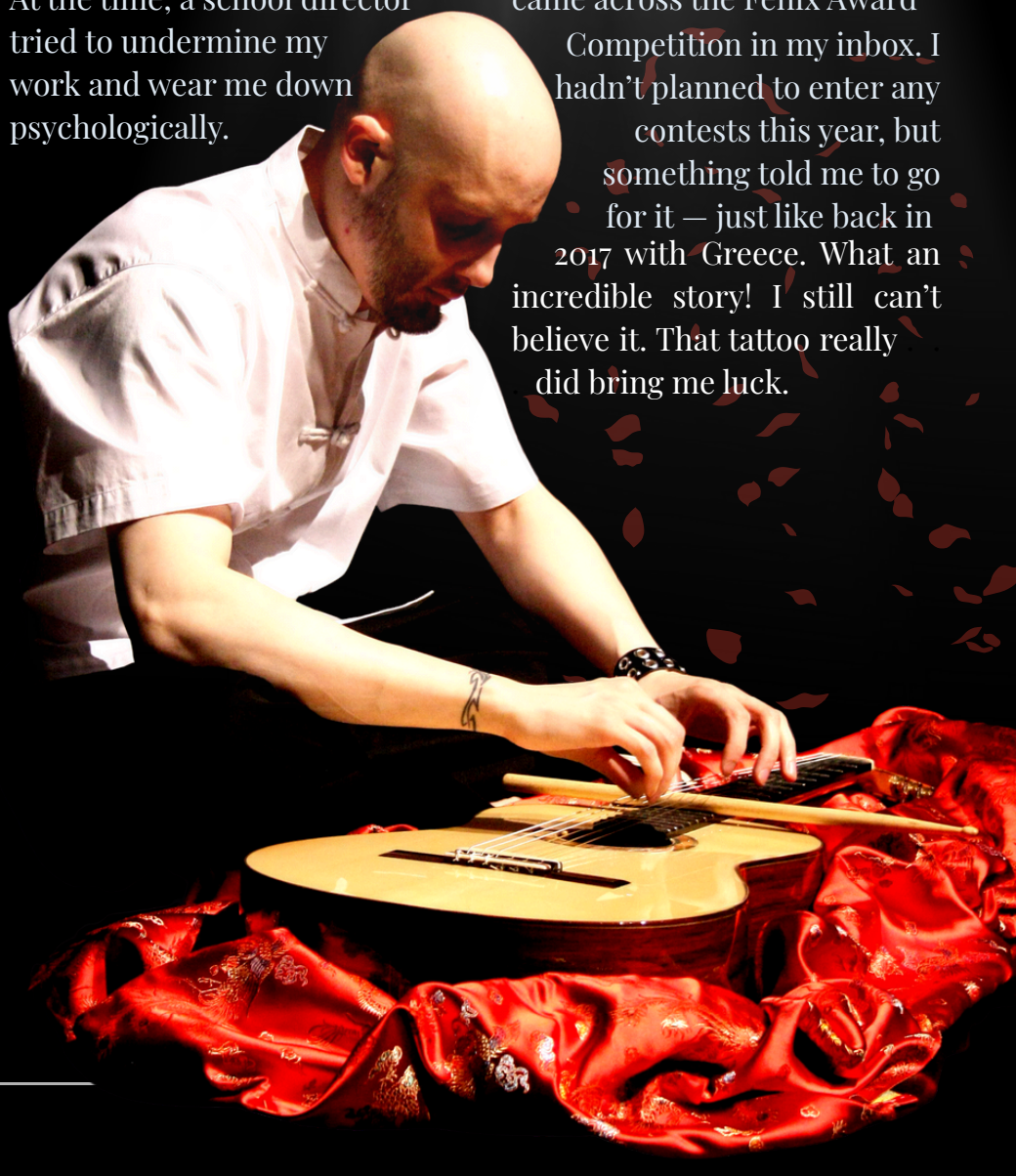
But over time, I came to understand something: even when people disappoint you, music never does.

For 20 years, I didn't want to hear about competitions...

until Greece (International Art Academy founded by Yorgos Foudoulis), which had discovered me in the American magazine "Classical guitar" in 2017, invited me to take part in their "Kithara" composition competition that same year. From then on, things changed: I won the competition, received a 1st Prize for my global work, and was elected "Artist of the year 2017".

Fifteen years ago, I almost lost my life in a fire. More recently, I experienced two burnouts in a row – caused not only by working too passionately, but also due to a highly toxic work environment. At the time, a school director tried to undermine my work and wear me down psychologically.

That period was incredibly difficult, but it was also when I won several awards and distinctions. As someone who struggles with self-doubt, those recognitions meant a great deal. They helped me find my footing again and grow stronger mentally. Since I've always had a bit of a rock and metal spirit, I decided to mark this rebirth with a tattoo sleeve of a phoenix rising from the flames – a powerful symbol for me. It was completed in several sessions throughout 2024. Just a few days after the final touches, I came across the Fenix Award Competition in my inbox. I hadn't planned to enter any contests this year, but something told me to go for it — just like back in 2017 with Greece. What an incredible story! I still can't believe it. That tattoo really did bring me luck.



Even my tattoo artist was amazed when I told him the whole tale. Being finalist was already a magnificent victory for me, given the very large number of candidates, most of them very bright and very young. I had absolutely no expectations. The classical guitar is not considered a noble instrument in the classical music world in general. So to win a competition like the Fenix Award Competition against over 200 contenders has a very pleasant flavour. The old man is still around!

Your program combined works by Barrios, Dyens, De Falla, and your own *Welcome to Tabiasland*. What connects these pieces in your mind?

I love the pieces, especially “Un Sueño en la Floresta” written by Barrios, which I would have loved to compose.
These 4 pieces are very virtuoso but at the same time very different from each other. I'm very eclectic, and I don't want my audience to get bored, including myself. If I want to be convincing, I have to enjoy myself and be totally immersed in the repertoire. I'd get bored quickly if I had to play an entire program in one specific style. Diversity feeds my inspiration too. I love the lyrical side of Barrios' “Un Sueño en la floresta”. What poetry! The title is very evocative (“a dream in the forest”).
The classical guitar is not a powerful instrument, and very quickly the sound dies out after playing one note. The tremolo technique, so particular and highly appreciated by classical guitarists, allows maximum lyricism to be achieved, as the intensity of the sound can be modulated as desired. The technique is also visually appealing.
As for “Danza del molinero”, I like the sunny side of Spain. I drew inspiration from the late, great Paco de Lucia, and added a more flamenco color to the piece.
Roland Dyens is one of the great innovators of the 21st century. I can't imagine a solo concert without playing at least one of his compositions. I love the tribal atmosphere of this Saudade n°3 and the Afro-Brazilian rhythms that make it up. For me, rhythm is the life of music, and this piece Agives us the impression of being in the heart of the Amazon rainforest, as if we were returning to our roots. As for "Welcome to Tabiasland", Dyens' style inspired me in part because of the introduction, which is both mysterious and a little contemporary in style, but also because of the daring to simply explore and express oneself. There are oriental and Spanish colors at times, but overall rock and groove, all played with a new technique on classical guitar that I developed and which was inspired by the bassists. They use a lot of slap, which consists in whipping the strings to get a very dynamic, percussive sound. I took it a step further by adding drum-like percussion effects. The combination of the two led me to call this playing technique "Percuslap".

> *“As long as the will and the pleasure are there, that's the main thing. There's no such thing as perfect.”*

What inspired you to write Welcome to Tabiasland, and what kind of world do you imagine when you perform it?

This piece is quite a story! I really enjoy telling it when I play it in concert.
It goes back about fifteen years, when my friends Christian and Danièle had just moved to a fairly isolated area in the Ardèche. They had invited me to eat at their place for the occasion, and had given me all the (very numerous) instructions on how to get to their house by telephone. Except that, like an idiot - there were so many - I forgot one of the directions! I got lost and ended up in a muddy barnyard where I almost got stuck! I wanted to call Christian and Danièle, but just like in the movies: no signal! I set off again to find an area where there was one. When I finally found one and tried to call them... the line was busy! I repeated the operation dozens of times, to no avail. And to be honest, as time went by, I was a little bit stressed. Then, suddenly, my phone finally started ringing! When I didn't show up, my friends got worried and called me. Just then, they realized they'd hung up the phone on the wrong person! As a result, we were sitting down to dinner in the middle of the afternoon!
Their neighborhood was called "Tabias". I found the name very funny, hence the title "Welcome to Tabiasland", a real epic journey to reach an... imaginary place!
My friends Christian and Danièle are very open-minded, and have very eclectic tastes. This composition is a blend of many musical influences: contemporary, rock, groove, flamenco, oriental music etc.... The inspiration came a few months after the special day, and it was obvious to me that they should be the dedicatees.

As both a composer and performer, how do you find the balance between technical innovation and emotional expression?

It's a kind of yin and yang. Of course, you need a minimum of technique to be able to express yourself freely, but you don't need to have a high level to already have ideas and be creative!

My students regularly prove it to me! Some ideas are better than others, but that doesn't matter! *As long as the will and the pleasure are there, that's the main thing. There's no such thing as perfect.* In fact, the biggest hits in music in general are often very simple, catchy, easy-to-remember tunes. Musicians, performers and/or composers often use music to showcase their technique, but this is a serious mistake! Technique is, and must be, at the service of music. It doesn't matter what level is required, what counts once again is pleasure. As far as I'm concerned, in my programs I like to vary not only styles, but also technical levels. It's interesting to challenge yourself, but it's also important to give your fingers and ears a rest.



The more eclectic you are, the less bored you'll get and the more fun you'll have. In any case, this approach suits me.

You've developed your own guitar technique, *Percuslap*. What led you to explore this path, and how has it expanded your musical vocabulary?

I've always been fascinated by bass players. Contrary to popular belief, the bass is an instrument that can be extremely virtuosic. Victor Wooten, Marcus Miller, and Flea from Red Hot Chili Peppers, to name a few, are among my favorite bassists. But there are many others who fascinate me just as much!



Generally speaking, what attracts me most in music is rhythm. I love the percussive sounds of slapping in particular.
As a high school student, I was very impressed by this technique, and I absolutely wanted to use it. I have thin and fragile fingers; unfortunately, they tire quickly on a bass guitar, and my nails get damaged very quickly because the strings are thick. Playing slap on a classical guitar isn't easy at all, and it doesn't sound quite the same; you're more limited, especially due to the narrower spacing between the strings. In addition to being an imitation instrument, "the classical guitar is a small orchestra," as Berlioz said.
So I went in that direction: to slap like bass players, but thinking like a classical guitarist and playing all the voices simultaneously.
I also greatly admire metal drummers, which is a style of music I really enjoy, and whose rhythms also inspire me a lot. So I gave it breadth by whipping a note from another string at the same time at the beginning of each measure, for example, to create an accompanying pedal note. By getting closer to the bridge, you can get a sound that is closer to the kick drum sound. But something was still missing, and for a long time I didn't know what. There was a kind of void on the "drums" side.
That's when I finally realized I needed a sound that mimicked the "snare drum." But it's hard to achieve when you're already playing all the other voices. I had the idea of adding this effect with my ring finger hitting the guitar's soundboard while performing a Bartok pizz. with the thumb instead of the slap on this snare drum effect. Understanding it intellectually was one thing, but being able to reproduce it was another one. It took me years to develop and master this technique properly. And for that, I asked my wonderful luthier Renaud Galabert to add a golpeador (adhesive protection plate) to each of my signature guitars to protect them from fingernail scratches, like on flamenco guitars.

You've received awards and commissions across Europe and even composed an official anthem for World Guitar Day. What inspires your creative direction?

Anything can inspire me! A place, people, a situation, a picture... music itself too, of course! I am not a mercenary composer, and sometimes it can take a while to get inspired. At other times, however, there can be a real avalanche of ideas! Since you mention "Fly me to Volos", official anthem of World Guitar Day, this is how it happened: with everything Greece has given me, it was obvious to me that one day I would be able to express my gratitude, but in a way other than just thanks. The Volos World Guitar Orchestra, under the direction of Yorgos Foudoulis, honored me by playing my bossa nova "Nin-nin" several times after winning the Kithara composition competition in 2017 (a competition founded by Yorgos Foudoulis), and through which I was discovered. At that time, I already had in the back of my mind to write a piece for this guitar orchestra, but no real musical idea. The years passed, I thought about it regularly but nothing came. I didn't want to force myself, I told myself that it would come when the time was right. And then exactly 3 years ago, on July 5, 2022, 3 days before a big concert, it came suddenly!
I was in the bathroom, thinking about my Greek friends who had brought me into the spotlight. I dropped everything and rushed to my computer. My soul flew away in thought to Volos, hence the title "Fly me to Volos". It was a great surprise, Yorgos liked it so much that he decided that this piece should become the official and permanent anthem of World Guitar Day. This took on another dimension, it was subsequently played in the four corners of the world, and I was then asked by the association "Les Amis de François De Fossa" (Friends of François De Fossa) to write an anthem dedicated to the memory of François De Fossa, guitarist, composer and officer in the King Army nicknamed „Haydn of the guitar". He fell into oblivion and was rediscovered about forty years ago. The association that aims to promote his memory discovered me through "Fly me to Volos", and commissioned me to write an anthem dedicated to his memory on the occasion of his 250th anniversary this year in 2025. Musician and soldier, it's not commonplace! Very quickly I started with the idea of the march (many anthems are built on marching rhythms), and then the world really needs peace, especially at this time. This is how "Marche pour la Paix" (March for Peace) was born. I am very honored and eternally grateful for everything that happens to me. I could never have imagined that all these beautiful things would happen to me one day.

> "Anything can inspire me! A place, people, a situation, a picture... music itself too, of course!

Diego Andres Montes



How did you first get started with percussion, and what made you fall in love with it?

I originally wanted to be a painter when I was six years old, but I was not accepted into the art classes because they thought I was too young to start in the classroom. Since the music school was right next to the art building, my mom pretty much insisted that I try the orchestra instead since my brother was already there as well.

I started learning solfège, and little by little I fell in love with percussion I guess because of my teacher "Manuel Linares" system and teaching. It fascinated me how rhythm connected to the body, and how reading music helped me develop physical control and coordination (Basically I was having fun). Soon enough, I was tapping rhythms everywhere: on music stands, chairs, anything I could find around my daily life.

Funny enough, the drum set is no longer my favorite instrument; my focus today is more classical. But I'm incredibly grateful that my mom opened the door and my mind to music at such a young age. It's become my entire life.

You played both Kraft's timpani concerto and Tchik by Martynciow — what do you enjoy most about these pieces?

Playing Kraft's timpani concerto had been a dream of mine since I was 11 years old. I always wanted to perform it, but I knew I needed to go through a learning process for years to develop the skills it demands. The piece requires an incredible huge amount of focus and footwork on the pedals just to play it decently. And, that's exactly what I enjoy most about it, "the intense challenge," especially in terms of coordination and concentration. I know this is a concerto I'll keep playing throughout my entire life, and I'm truly happy that people enjoy listening to it as much as I enjoy performing it.

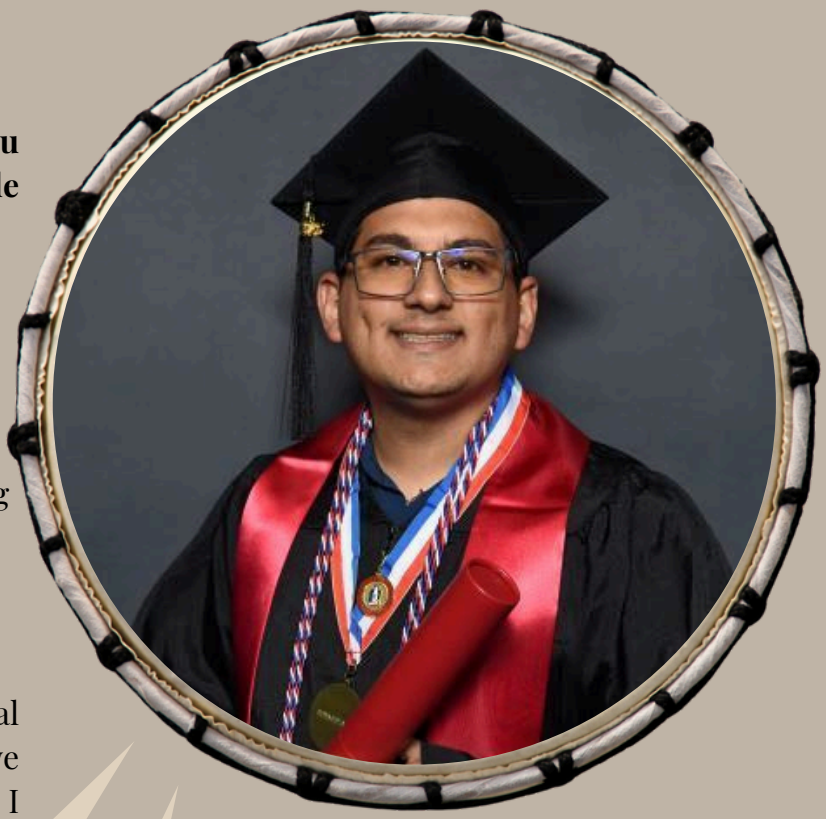
As for Tchik, believe it or not, it reminds me of home. There are so many rhythms and techniques inspired by Latin music throughout the piece. It's incredibly demanding and full of musical motifs that require a high level of control. It pushes the limits of what the snare drum can do. It can be lyrical, joyful, even painful. You get to play with extremes: loud and soft, aggressive and delicate. What I love most is the background and structure of the piece, when you analyze it deeply, you realize how rich and expressive it is. I also really enjoy the contrast in dynamics and musical character that the piece offers. It's a journey every time I play it. Also, I met Nicolas Martynciow in the Epsival in France and I even have a pair of sticks of his, and this makes playing this piece even more special.

Percussion is incredibly diverse. How do you shape your own identity within such a wide instrumental world?

To me, Percussion is the combination of classical musical depth and the mental intensity required by today's contemporary repertoire. My identity is still evolving, being from Latin America, I naturally carry a strong rhythmic foundation, but my training in the U.S. has pushed me to be much more technical and reflective in how I approach music from an academic standpoint.
At the same time, my international experiences with important conductors have helped me grow musically on multiple levels. I now find myself in a position where I have enough tools to invent, experiment, develop, and create new possibilities, and I believe that this process has transformed me entirely as an artist.
"Percussion is still a world to be explored" and I truly believe we're just at the beginning of a new era where percussion will rise to an even more prominent place in the music world.

From Venezuela to the U.S., how has your international background influenced your artistic perspective?

As I mentioned earlier, I come from a place with very strong rhythmic roots and intense life experiences, shaped by the challenges Venezuela has faced. Growing up in that environment, I learned to be resilient and to constantly reinvent myself in many different ways and that shaped me deeply, both as a musician and as a human being.
Moving to the U.S. completely shifted my perspective. It gave me a more academic and structured understanding of music. My



technical and intellectual growth accelerated, and I developed a deeper awareness of how and why I do the things I have been doing — not just doing them, which was more the case back home. In Venezuela, I had the passion and the instinct, but in the U.S., I started to gain the tools to understand, clean and articulate my process.
Then, through my experiences in Europe and other parts of the world, I learned something even more valuable: how to destroy, rebuild, and reinvent my approach, to explore the "how" from every possible angle. That international contrast gave me a broader and more mature vision, and I believe it's what truly allowed me to evolve as an artist with a global mindset today.

You're also active as a teacher, producer, and composer. How do these roles inform your work as a performer?

These different roles such as teaching, producing, and composing are incredibly important to me because they allow me to see a bigger picture of what I do. Working behind the scenes, whether it's editing, organizing, or teaching, has given me a deep respect for every

I see it as part of my mission to leave a legacy through music

part of the musical process. Teaching, in particular, has helped me develop empathy for my colleagues and students. It's made me more aware of how we grow day by day, and how valuable it is to guide others through that journey.

Composing and producing have also shaped me as a performer. They've helped me understand and analyze what composers are trying to communicate musically, and how to bring that vision to life whether it is on stage or when leading a group of students. I believe that just as others have impacted my life in meaningful ways, I have the responsibility to give back, to contribute something of my own.

As a composer and educator, I see it as part of my mission to leave a legacy through music, one that goes beyond performance. I truly believe that the impact we make through teaching and composing can be even greater than we realize. As composition never dies and teaching will always exist.



What was it like performing under Sir Simon Rattle and Gustavo Dudamel at such a young age? Did those moments shape your path?

I was so young when I performed with Sir Simon Rattle Mahler 1 and Cuban Overture. I didn't fully realize the magnitude of what was happening. I was just 12 years old, playing timpani with an orchestra of over 300 musicians at the Salzburg Festival. Now, looking back, it was a tremendous experience!!

I'll never forget one rehearsal where he stopped and said to me, "You're one of the youngest and most professional timpanists I've ever seen. Just play about 3% louder in this section." I was shocked, but I wanted to do my job perfectly so I played louder. He stopped again and said, "That's the right dynamic. It's impressive how you balance your sound with a 300 player orchestra." I didn't have words then, and I still don't fully have them now. He was incredibly kind and supportive, and the memory has stayed with me forever.

With Gustavo Dudamel, my experiences have been more frequent and professional. I played with the Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra, so I worked with him in a different, more serious context. Even so, I

"I'm excited to keep growing.

was deeply honored when he personally recognized my work and invited me to perform with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra in Barcelona (my favorite city) for a 360-degree video project that remains well-known today for Caixa Bank.
Dudamel is an extraordinary musician, but more importantly, he's a deeply kind and
humble human being. He always remembers me and my family, and I truly believe that the greatness of maestros like Rattle and Dudamel goes far beyond their musical talent. Their humanity is what makes them unforgettable, and I'm incredibly grateful to have crossed paths with both of them.

What are your artistic goals in the next few years — new works, recordings, collaborations?

Right now, one of my main artistic and personal goals is to find a bit more stability in one place. So, I'm actively preparing for professional auditions and applying for positions, whether in the U.S., Europe, or anywhere in the world where I can build a life full of music, stability and peace that can allow me to go to my country and collaborate musically as well.

In addition to that, I'll continue performing professionally with the LaGrange Symphony Orchestra and teaching at the Youth Orchestra of Greater Columbus (YOGC). I also have several exciting projects currently in development, some I can't announce just yet. However, I'm very happy to be able to share a bit about what's ahead and the journey I'm on. Artistically, I'm continuing to develop my repertoire and I'm excited to keep growing. Over the next two years, I'll be pursuing my Artist Diploma at Columbus State University, which has been an incredible environment for refining my playing and expanding my musical vision. In Fall 2025, I'll be performing the Kraft timpani concerto as a soloist with the CSU Wind Ensemble under the direction of Dr. Jamie Nix which is a huge personal honor and milestone.



Kaiden Surti

Your piece is called Yaatra – The Journey. What kind of journey were you imagining when you wrote it?

Yaatra - The Journey is a cinematic piece for symphony orchestra. The beginning was inspired by a vision of the sun rising over sand dunes. Over a D Major drone created by the strings, the desert sand is depicted by the tinkling of the harp and violin col lengo (a stroke in which the wood part of the bow hits the strings). The first theme of Yaatra, played by the French Horn, soars above the atmosphere followed by the response of birds (a countermelody played by the flute). This conversational dialogue between instruments is like the planning of a great expedition—the prologue. Yaatra then continues to depict the ups and downs of life. It does not necessarily depict a specific journey but rather one that carries weight and notability. Whether it's a literal journey across the desert or the journey of our lives, I wrote Yaatra to encompass it all.

You started composing with voice memos at age 9 — how has your process changed since then?

It's so fun to look back to when I first started writing music. I would be in my parents bedroom on the floor with an old Macbook from my dad's college days playing around with voice memos and garageband, trying to layer the violin on top of tabla on top of MIDI instruments. I began with producing pop and R&B music while adding



an Indian flare with the tabla. However when I began playing in orchestras–both outside and in school, I fell in love with the cinematic orchestral world of music. I started to write my first pieces for Chamber Ensembles and Orchestras while continuing to incorporate tabla into western classical music. As I continue to develop my skills, I utilize Logic Pro and Musescore as they are key components in my musical journey. I have the privilege of living with my family near lots of nature which helps me to stay inspired. Sometimes, I will ride my bike down to the redwood forest near our house just to compose in the midst of mother nature's beauty. From Day 1, I always loved collaborating with other artists. More recently, I have done some session work collaborating with R&B artists by recording violin on their tracks and recording tabla on an underground rapper's album. As I continue to develop my skills as a musician, I love to expose myself to different types of music hoping to learn things that can be applied anywhere in music.

How does your experience with tabla and Indian music influence the way you think about orchestration and rhythm?

My journey with tabla and Hindustani classical music is a key component to my artistic voice. Hindustani classical music is a whole different story compared to Western music–including everything from the relationship between Guru and Shishya (teacher and student) and audience engagement to its improvisatory nature and polyrhythmic cycles. One element in Hindustani classical music that is prominent in Yaatra - The Journey is heard when a lush D Major drone created by the strings is ornamented by an arpeggiated harp, col legno on the violin, and ambient textures. These Hindustani-inspired elements all contribute to the piece's unique sound. Hindustani music encompasses a lot of improvisation and raga (scale) based melodies. In my piece for piano trio and tabla titled Whispers of Huntington Lake, the cello improvises over a rhythmic beat played by the piano, violin, and tabla. When I approach orchestrating harmonies, I always remember an Indian instrument called the tanpura. The tanpura is known for creating a colorful drone-like backdrop for instruments to play over, either floating across or elegantly penetrating through. Hindustani classical is a beautiful yet powerful style of music that influences the way I play music, and how I live as a person.



You've written pieces that blend multiple cultures and genres. Do you see that as your artistic identity — or something you're still discovering?

One week you can find me writing an R&B/Hip Hop/Indian fusion song while another week, I'll be deeply immersed in orchestrating lush textures for a string section. I feel that writing for completely opposite genres allows me to learn things I wouldn't have been able to learn by staying in one bubble. While I do write music strictly within the guidelines of certain genres, it is always interesting to see what rules can be broken and how far they can be bent. One of my arrangements called 300 is a medley of music spanning 300 years. It includes music by composers such as Vivaldi, and Hans Zimmer to modern artists like Dr. Dre, Nirvana, Ed Sheeran, and many more. Blending multiple cultures and genres is becoming a key element in my artistic identity as I keep discovering ways for more connection and collaboration.

What was it like hearing your music performed live for the first time?

I remember when I was 13 years old, it was a Saturday morning and I was getting ready to go to orchestra rehearsal with the Prelude Chamber Strings. However, this rehearsal

would be different because we would be rehearsing my piece Turning Winter for our concert. I will always remember walking into the rehearsal room and hearing snippets of melodies I had crafted by myself at home for months. The first downbeat of that day was so exciting. The music suddenly had so much energy in it and felt as if it was alive. This was also the first time in which I had shared my music to a large audience in a hall. The response from the audience was so inspiring and made me more motivated to write music that makes people feel something. Hearing other musicians play Turning Winter was such a surreal experience–from the rehearsals to the concert.

Do you imagine visuals or stories when you compose — or is it more about the sound and emotion?

Every composition I write starts out differently. Some pieces I will literally sit down at the piano and meditatively improvise—sometimes for an hour—until I find something that piques my interest. Other times, I'll be in the middle of everyday activities and I'll hear a piece of music in my head. I'll immediately take out my phone and hum the idea adding it to my 200+ archive of voice memos. That way, I can revisit the idea later and get back to business. Most of the time, an idea starts with the musical aspect. I try to write something that can sound good without a backstory. Then, I begin to think about emotion and how to convey that with the instruments. However, when I am scoring music to film and television, I will first talk with the director about what emotions they want to convey in a specific scene. Then, I will use my musical knowledge to convey those emotions in a musical way. Every project is so different which is something I love about the world of music.

What would you say to other young composers who are just getting started?

Keep composing and have fun with it! The more you compose, the more you will learn. For me, I struggle with (and yes still to this day) trying to create a piece for the perfect audience. Follow your heart and let the audience find you. Create music that makes you feel like you. Having an organization system that works for you is something that I found really helpful to me. I have a whole calendar of deadlines, concerts, rehearsals, etc. To me, it is very important to see how everything lines up so I can manage my time with maximum efficiency. Finally, be a good person with a good heart. As musicians, it's our job to inspire others and help them discover things about themselves. Being a good person can help you relate with others and see where they are coming from. And most of all, remember why you do music in the first place.





Laetitia Mendler

You started learning piano independently before beginning formal studies. How did that shape your relationship with the instrument?

Looking back, I am sure my late but self-driven start was quite formative. Before I knew anything about "correct" fingering, posture, or technique - or how to analyse a phrase - I knew what it felt like to fall in love with a sound or a piece of music.
That's not only how, but why I started playing - and why I still do. It was a need and became something deeply personal, like someone's own language, an extension of my inner self.
Of course, formal studies are essential - Music demands and requires discipline and structure. But even as I began taking lessons, I maintained my own way of practicing, searching and exploring. Often, I would come to my teacher saying, "I want to learn this piece." They'd astonished smile or shake their head, telling me it was far too difficult for my level. But by then, it was too late - I'd already fallen in love with it. I would start learning it on my own, not talking anymore about it and once I could play it, I'd bring it to the lesson. Then, surprised, they'd say, "Well, I see - you can play it," and work with me to refine it. That kind of story repeated itself multiple times.

I've often felt slowed down by other people's expectations of what might be possible. But maybe that taught me to develop a stronger inner conviction. I had to be really sure, deep inside, that I truly wanted something. Whether it was learning a particular piece or becoming a pianist at all.
Sometimes I chose goals that exceeded my current abilities. But that's exactly how growth and development happens I think. The gap between where you are and what you aim for can be bridged in the time between decision and action. You can either set goals based on what you're already capable of - or first set goals based on what you truly want, and then figure out how to get there. That second approach enables a much greater transformation. I tend to think that nearly anything is possible if you genuinely want it. If you do, you're willing to give everything to reach it. Of course, the cost can be high - so the real question is: Do you really want it? (Something different might be of higher value) If the answer is still yes, the price is not too high it is worth to give.
Technique comes with time, practice, and understanding - and I continue to work on it. But that personal independent way of searching and learning out of love has probably stayed with me. The piano - in performance and in its repertoire - is for me a kind of mirror... It doesn't always show what you want to see, but it always and necessarily reflects something honest and personal.

> A musicians repertoire in its current form, I guess is always a kind of personal signature.

Your competition program is both expressive and technically demanding - how did you go about selecting the repertoire?

My first impulse is to turn the question around: the pieces chose me. They demanded my attention and gradually became indispensable - I couldn't resist them. However, there are different kinds of love I feel for the pieces I choose. For some works there is this irresistible attraction - an overwhelming emotional pull striking me like one falling in love at first sight. Other pieces spark more of a curiosity - an urge to explore something new and unfamiliar, often stylistically different from what I've played before. Then I am drawn to it out of fascination, not just emotional connection. And then there is another selectional reason. To explain this I need to mention that playing and practicing romantic repertoire (which I like so much!) - those in many cases melancholic or even sad, at least quite heavy pieces - is finally also very emotionally exhausting.
I sometimes find myself needing balance - not through rest, but through a different kind of musical nourishment. Once, after weeks of immersing myself, among others in Liszt's so meaningful "Funérailles", speaking intensely about death and the "after", I felt an intense desire for something lighter, faster, more cerebral. I would call it kind of "hunger of the brain". I wanted something that would stimulate my memory, the logical and clear intellect, demand agility and focus, but not overwhelm me emotionally. So I longed for a piece outside of the Romantic world. With Kapustin's "Finale" I found a kind of antidote - technically challenging, rhythmically exhilarating, and intellectually refreshing, giving me the freedom to simply enjoy playing, to feed the brain without burdening the heart. The repertoire selection was made by instinct as well as by reflection.
A musicians repertoire in its current form, I guess is always a kind of personal signature.



From Bach's Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue to Kapustin's Finale, your program spans centuries. How do you approach interpreting such different musical languages?

The first steps, I believe, are love and respect - love, in the sense of emotional connection and respect in the sense of developing intellectual understanding. That means not only technical preparation, but also historical awareness. I try to understand the composer's world: reading about their life helps, as listening to other works they wrote.
In concerns of the concrete approach in the learning process - I've recently been working more intentionally on strengthening my mental practice - finding ways to absorb the music beyond simply working it out with my fingers at the keyboard. More and more, I begin learning a piece first in my imagination and conscious mind. I read through the full score, train myself to internally construct the sound, and eventually aim to hear the music completely in my mind's ear.
By doing so, I learn the piece by heart before confronting the technical challenges of fingering and articulation at the piano. And by doing so, I begin developing a personal idea of how I want the piece to sound. And finally, by doing so, I enjoy the incredible gift we are given: the ability to listen to and carry music within us - without instruments, beyond technical limitations, and free from the fear of mistakes or wrong notes.



Is there a composer you feel especially connected to at the moment - emotionally or artistically?

Emotionally - for me it's definitely Rachmaninoff. It is his music that corresponds most to my character, speaking most directly and intuitively to my feelings - both the loud, heavy and passionate ones, as well as the calm, reflecting and suffering ones.
When I listen to him or play his works, I often feel swept away by the emotions that arise or are awakened - that it becomes difficult for me to stay calm, because every fibre of me is being caught up and carried off in the current of these musical movements. His music is transparent and emotionally direct, but at the same time, through his very rational nature, it remains guarded, reserved, even secretive; powerful and inexpressible in words - then again gentle, delicate, tender, ultimately unresolved and unredeemed. There is something profoundly human in his music I find: the fragility of joy, the echo of something already lost, the raw force of inner feeling. Performing his works demands both restraint and vulnerability - a combination I find deeply compelling and human.

But beyond this immediate, apparent affinity, I've increasingly found myself drawn to Liszt. His music has great depth, but it's never sentimental or romanticised. On the contrary, even in works
often dismissed as mere showpieces of pianistic virtuosity, there's always a deeper intention - something he wanted to express or confront. In my understanding, Liszt, in his original compositions, never simply wrote music to sound beautiful or to let the audience comfortably enjoy it. Unlike Chopin, whose music touches deeply yet still leaves reality unchanged, Liszt wanted to challenge reality. He wanted his music to provoke thought, to unsettle, to say the truth, not just offering something pleasing.
I'm convinced his compositions aren't superficial; saying so wouldn't do justice to who he was. From his letters, we know he often felt misunderstood by his audiences as complaining about the immediate applause and euphoria. While he may have enjoyed his popularity on some level, he also realised that the true content of his serious music didn't reach the listeners on a deeper level. A moment of silence would be the more



appropriate response to Liszt's compositions in many cases, having played something deep or transcendently.
His pieces are never "objective" but in the most
extreme sense, tied to his inner life - his battles, thoughts, and emotional states at the time of writing. Playing Liszt seems to me like entering a dialogue with someone of immense depth - with a challenging, complex and so great, even if often conflicted, personality. That's why there's so much to find in his music. Working on his music becomes a process of personal growth and transformation.
I feel a deep bond with him and with his music. Rachmaninoff is music I love intuitively, Liszt is more of a task I want to fulfil.

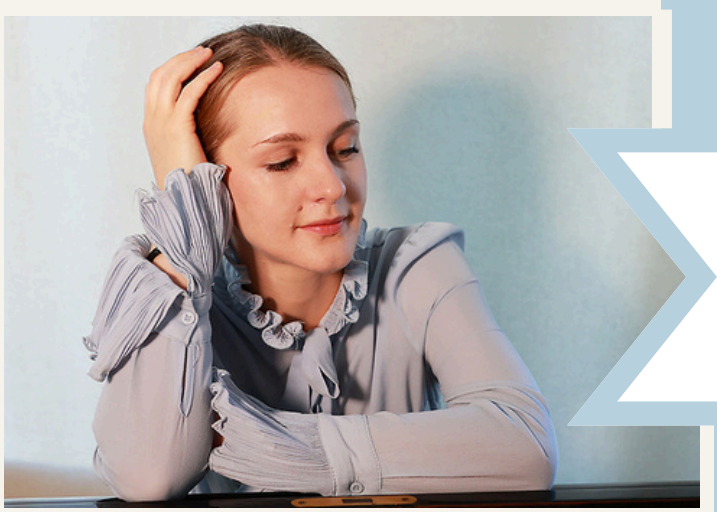
> "As musicians we are always moving forward - not toward a clearly defined destination, but toward an inner vision that guides us, even if it remains partly undefined.

How has studying with different teachers, including in masterclasses abroad, helped shape your musical identity?

Ultimately, we as musicians have to stand on our own, knowing what we do in our play and why. In the end, it's my personal relationship with and play on the piano. That's why I've decided to take everything I'm told and receive as something to use constructively. So I greatly value input from several teachers as thinking that even the most comprehensive guidance from one person can't replace the broader perspective gained from hearing many voices and being surrounded by a wide community of musicians.
Every teacher I've worked with has helped me improving. The more feedback I receive - especially when opinions diverge and contradict each other - the more I'm challenged to reflect on my own artistic opinion: on interpretation, on method, and on the personal path I choose to follow. Doing masterclasses means being exposed to different musical traditions, pedagogical styles, and aesthetic values. It leads to growth in any case: You gain when teachers focus on completely different aspects, and you also learn when several highlight the same issue (- then at the latest it becomes undeniable and you begin to address it seriously..). You grow being in a setting where you have to show your best - musically, interpretively, technically - in a very short time which creates an intensity that can lead to deeper growth than weeks of regular lessons. I think of those masterclasses as a compressed, but highly effective, way to absorb knowledge and refine one's artistry. Finally we mustn't forget that the goal is not to become like our teachers, but to become more fully ourselves through what we take from each of them. In that sense, I see my musical identity not as something fixed, but as something that is constantly evolving - shaped by dialogue, listening, experience, and focused work: work on the music, on my goals, and on myself. As musicians we are always moving forward - not toward a clearly defined destination, but toward an inner vision that guides us, even if it remains partly undefined

What does it mean to you to be a recipient of the Yehudi Menuhin Live Music Now scholarship?

Yehudi Menuhin believed deeply in the power and worth of live music. To be part of that legacy touches the very core of why I play. Music must be shared to "live". Especially in our time, where so much music is technically



produced, digitally processed, and instantly available everywhere, I see the unique value of live performance in the risk of being forgotten. Yet it is precisely in live music where something irreplaceable happens. There's a certain tension and vulnerability in a real performance - the artist on stage, filled with excitement, trying to communicate something personal, emotional, maybe even existential. The audience, present in the same space, becomes part of that shared moment. Emotions pass from performer to listener, and the other way round, move and mix between everyone in the room. That mutual presence creates something that no recording can capture. A recording may preserve the structure - the tempo, articulation, even a sense of atmosphere - but not the living essence behind it. I am convinced that what truly moves us in live music lies in that fragile, uncovered human immediacy: in the unrepeatable moment of shared expression.
I currently had a beautiful experience in one of the last Live Music Now concerts I gave in a children's home.
After I had finished playing Mendelssohn's etude in B flat minor - (the ears and tastes of these adolescents and children are much more used to charged pop songs than classical concert pieces) a young boy carefully raised his hand to catch my attention. When I invited him to speak, he asked his question, the voice fragile yet full of expression and childlike honesty:



"Do you also know that feeling when a piece of music moves you so deeply that you can't help but cry?"
The other children fell silent, the residential care workers, first in astonishment about that unexpected sudden question of their young little lively inhabitant, looked at me then with rapt attention. All eyes were fixed on me, waiting for my response. Un unrepeatable moment of shared feelings on both sides. For the rest of the concert the children's attention was even more focused.
Moments like these remain with me not only as treasured memories, but as quiet confirmations - of the path I walk as a musician, and of the shared emotions that make it meaningful. In that sense, this scholarship reinforces why I chose this path in the first place: to communicate, to reach and to serve.

Looking ahead, what kind of musical projects or repertoire would you love to explore next?

One concrete next step is Liszt's "Dance of the Dead" which I intend to study. Moreover I'm eager to continue exploring 20th-century repertoire, such as works by Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Stravinsky, Ligeti, Messiaen and Chatchaturjan.
In terms of long-term projects, reviving the tradition of salon or living room concerts is something I aim for – to bring classical music to more people
people while preserving an intimate atmosphere.
Thematic recitals exploring connections between composers or specific compositions are also part of this vision, as are lecture-recitals designed to
offer listeners a greater awareness of the works.

At the heart of it all lies the ongoing deepening of my relationship with the instrument — understanding more precisely how inner sound imagination translates into physical gesture and, ultimately, into real sound.
What I want most above these aims is to share the treasure, depth, and beauty of classical music with as many people as possible.

"I'm *eager* to continue exploring 20th-century repertoire



Michelle Kwong

Never stop chasing your dreams – they're waiting for you.



1. You sing, act, and dance -- which came first, and what do you love most about performing?

Singing definitely came first! I've always been obsessed with using my voice to create something beautiful and new. Ever since I was little, I've been fascinated by how my voice can paint pictures and how my acting and dance can tell stories. What I love most about performing is that special moment on stage when everything disappears – it's just me, the music, and the audience. It feels like I'm stepping into a story and inviting everyone to dream along with me.

2. You chose two beautiful songs for this competition: Castle on a Cloud and Part of Your World. What do these songs mean to you?

Both songs are incredibly close to my heart. They speak of dreams, of wishing for something more – something better. Castle on a Cloud is soft and tender, like a quiet dream you hold close, and Part of Your World is full of wonder and curiosity. To me, they both carry hope – and when I sing them, I hope that everyone listening feels that same light. I always say, "Part of YOUR World can lead you to your Castle on a Cloud." Never stop chasing your dreams – they're waiting for you.

3. How do you prepare for such big performances -- do you have any pre-show rituals or habits?

I'm really dedicated to protecting my voice – it's like my most precious instrument. Before a show, I stay away from sweets, spicy food, and anything crunchy. I drink lots of water and eat clean, because my voice is like my instrument – and I feel a big responsibility to treat it well. I want to give my very best, for the orchestra, for the audience, and for the story I'm telling.

4. You've performed in Rome, Vienna, New York and all over Hong Kong -- do you have a favorite stage or moment so far?

I honestly love performing anywhere that has beautiful acoustics – even a small hall can feel magical. But singing at Carnegie Hall in New York was unforgettable. Singing on that stage literally felt like a dream come true. Every note I sang seemed to shimmer in the air – it was like the music had wings. Walking through the streets of Manhattan afterward and watching a Broadway show felt like stepping right into a dream - that's incomparable to watching musical movies.
And singing sacred arias in the cathedrals of Rome and Vienna... that was truly special. In the holy spaces, it felt like my voice could carry a prayer. I felt like I was offering a gift – not just to the audience, but to the Lord indeed.

5. What's it like to sing with full orchestras at such a young age?

My first time was honestly terrifying but in the most amazing way! I have to really listen, not just to myself but to every professional musician around me. But when everything blends together – the instruments, my voice, my emotion – It becomes this incredible wave of music that lifts me up, and I find myself standing there, singing with pure joy. It's one of the most powerful feelings I've ever experienced - like being part of something so much bigger than yourself.



6. You're playing Jasmine in Aladdin this year -- what do you enjoy most about becoming a character on stage?

I love stepping into someone else's world and telling their story. Jasmine is especially fun to play because she's brave, confident, and knows her worth. Through her, I get to express courage and strength in a way that inspires not just the audience, but me too. Every time I rehearse, I learn something new about who she is – and maybe even about myself.

What is your biggest dream for the future -- Broadway, opera, movies... or all of them?

Honestly, why not all of them? My future is definitely open and going to be in music, I want to explore everything music has to offer – Broadway, film, opera, and maybe even composing one day as I have started learning. Wherever music takes me, I'll follow it with all my heart. I'm working harder than ever for whatever it takes to make my mark on this musical journey!



"EVERY TIME I REHEARSE, I LEARN SOMETHING NEW ABOUT WHO SHE (JASMINE) IS – AND MAYBE EVEN ABOUT MYSELF.



Noam Avidor Fuchs

What do you enjoy most about playing the clarinet?

I think one of the things I enjoy most about making music and performing in general, as well as playing the clarinet, is the feeling of being a mere messenger between the composer and the audience through your instrument and being able to express yourself in the music you play. There is an amazing harmony between staying true to the composer and giving a part of yourself in each piece you perform.

How did you choose the rossini and stamitz works for the competition?

I chose the Rossini and Stamitz works for the competition because they bring two different aspects of playing - the Rossini Introduction, Theme and Variations is more of the technical side, with many passages that can be sometimes challenging, it is definitely a showpiece. The Johann Stamitz concerto is more musically focused, with the challenge of it being the execution of an early classical period piece in a musical and interesting interpretation.

What has been the most inspiring musical experience for you so far?

Courses such as Musica Mundi and The Young Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, the courses where you meet musicians of your age but from different cultural and musical backgrounds and study and grow with them are the most inspiring. These courses also offer great teachers who bring different points of view about playing and it makes you want to become a better musician and to study and explore your instrument, your own playing style and technique from different aspects. A similar experience that I'm looking forward to having very soon is playing the Brahms Clarinet Quintet in the Keshet Eilon summer course in Spain this summer. I'm sure I will learn a lot about chamber music and playing with professional and experienced musicians who will boost my motivation through this work by Brahms which is really a masterpiece for a clarinet quintet.



You've played with several orchestras - what do you like most about performing with large ensembles?

There are many things I enjoy when playing with large ensembles such as orchestras, as well as smaller chamber groups. Playing in an ensemble is being a small part of something bigger, which is a feeling that, for me, is inspiring. The experience of playing in chamber groups and in orchestras lets you know many interesting and inspiring musicians that you can become good friends with and may meet them in the future in other projects. A lot of the people I meet in projects such as these inspire me to become a better version of myself as a musician. In addition, I think getting a small solo as a part of an orchestral piece is as fun and exciting as playing a solo piece.



What was it like studying abroad at Musica Mundi in Belgium?

Participating in a course like Musica Mundi was something that I was looking forward to. It was the first time I played in a course abroad and the first time meeting musicians from all over the world. The Musica Mundi course is mainly a chamber course, with each student playing in several chamber groups over the two weeks of the course. For me those two weeks were very inspiring. I met musicians who brought different perspectives about music, and gained a lot of knowledge and experience in playing in chamber groups. Of course it was very intense, with hours of playing each day, but I learned a lot and got very inspired from working with the outstanding musicians who come there every summer.

What are your goals for the next few years, musically or personally?

I have many goals for the next few years. As a clarinetist, I want to become the best version of myself, working on finding my own way of expression, my own sound and perfecting my technique and skills. I want to learn as much as I can on my own and play the clarinet. As a musician, I want to broaden my horizons, learning different aspects of music that interests me, such as conducting. I want to continue meeting people, learning from each musician I get to know and play with and gain as much experience and knowledge about music.

Do you have a favourite clarinetist or musician who inspires you?

A clarinetist who inspires me in a lot of aspects is Martin Fröst. I admire him as a Clarinetist and also as a musician. I really love his enthusiasm and playing, and reaching a level so high like he does is a goal for me. His abilities and skills on the Clarinet are truly inspiring for me and his own unique approach to different styles of music and playing makes him stand out from the rest in my opinion.

> "I want to learn as much as I can on my own and play the clarinet.

Youngin Lee

You've performed across Europe in opera, oratorio, and recital. How do you stay connected to your voice across such diverse settings?

Although I perform on many different stages, one thing never changes: the fact that I am myself. In fact, trying too hard to match the vocal style or mood of a particular genre can make it easy to lose your center. That's why I always try to anchor myself as an artist first and foremost.
My constant question is: "How can I make this genre my own as Youngin Lee?" Without a clear sense of self, music can't be re-created through my voice. To stay cntered, I prioritize maintaining a healthy body and mind. Eating well, sleeping enough, feeling the changing seasons while walking, and keeping a consistent practice routine — all these everyday habits ultimately connect to the music.



Your competition repertoire included Rachmaninoff, Massenet, and Adamo. What draws you to these composers and roles?

Everyone experiences hardship and despair in life. In those moments, it's easy to fall into self-blame or pessimism, thinking, "This is really the end." But Rachmaninoff's song *Spring Waters* portrays the exact moment when the frozen winter melts and spring begins. Through this piece, I wanted to convey the message that there is always hope, even in darkness.
When singing Charlotte from Massenet's *Werther*, I came to realize just how many emotions exist within me. Love, sacrifice, regret, longing — this role revealed how complexly these feelings are intertwined within myself.
Adamo's *Little Women* is a modern opera composed in 2008. Since it's a work of our time and not from the distant past, it allowed me to express what I felt in the moment, which I found very compelling. Playing Jo, I could reflect on the journey of a woman evolving from a young girl into a mature adult — it mirrored aspects of my own life.

What has been your most transformative role so far — one that changed you as a singer or artist?

Portraying “the child” in Ravel’s L’enfant et les sortilèges was one of the most artistically transformative experiences I’ve had. The opera unfolds through the protagonist’s imagination and inner world, and for nearly 50 minutes, the child never leaves the stage. While the role doesn’t require extreme vocal virtuosity, it demands intense focus, seamless interaction with other characters, and deeply nuanced inner acting. Only then can the audience project themselves onto the child and follow their emotional journey.

What gave me the most insight was the director’s interpretation of the child not as a mischievous brat, but as a growing soul. Though the child is tormented by past wounds, they gain courage through the support and kindness of others and eventually confront and overcome their own darkness.

As rehearsals went on, I found myself gradually facing the “child” within me and learning to extend a hand to her. With each scene, I experienced emotional release and inner growth. That stage became more than just a performance; it was a pathway to healing and renewal — a moment that touched the deepest parts of my life and helped me move forward.

You’ve studied in both Korea and Europe — how has this multicultural training shaped your musical identity?

My training in Korea focused on disciplined, foundational work. I gained a solid grounding in rhythm, was exposed to a wide variety of musical genres, learned about the pronunciation and cultures of several European languages, and developed skills in score interpretation. These experiences gave me a strong base and helped clarify what I needed to delve into further during my studies abroad.

I chose to study in Germany because it’s the birthplace of Lied — where poetry and music unite — and the home of Mozart’s operatic masterpieces, which form the bedrock of the genre. In Europe, through stage work and diverse projects, I was able to discover my strengths and grow from a student into an artist on stage.

Now, whenever I perform in Europe — regardless of genre — I am always conscious that I represent Korea as a Korean singer. Perhaps because of that, my cultural identity feels even more prominent, and I’ve had more opportunities to introduce and perform Korean art songs, poetry, and stories to European audiences. I hope to continue sharing the beauty of Korea with the world through music.



What did your experience with the Vienna State Opera Chorus Academy bring to your understanding of ensemble and stagecraft?

The Vienna State Opera Chorus Academy taught me the essence of singing together. Having always performed as a soloist, being part of a chorus was a new and valuable experience. It helped me understand the balance between solo and ensemble singing and appreciate the strengths of each.
Standing onstage as a chorus member and listening to world-renowned singers felt like watching a performance from the best VIP seat



> I LEARNED THAT EVERY PERFORMANCE IS A COLLECTIVE CREATION. ART GAINS POWER AND BECOMES EVEN MORE BEAUTIFUL WHEN SHARED.

— I was constantly learning just by being there. Being part of an ensemble gave me strength. I realized that stagecraft isn't just about solo voices but also about how all elements — lighting, acting, music, movement — work together organically. It taught me to think about how I can collaborate and harmonize within the whole.
That experience became a great asset when I later returned to solo work. I learned that every performance is a collective creation. Art gains power and becomes even more beautiful when shared. That belief was firmly rooted in me through this experience.

How do you approach balancing vocal technique with storytelling, especially in emotionally intense works like *Little Women*?
For me, before technique or emotional expression, the most important step is savoring the text. I read the libretto multiple times — almost like telling a story to children — experimenting with the length of vowels, the strength of consonants, and trying to visualize each word. This practice helps me understand the character's narrative, what they see, feel, and express, and leads naturally to a deeper connection with the role.
I always remind myself that these words are being spoken for the very first time within the opera. The character is feeling something new,

reacting spontaneously and sincerely in the moment. To convey that freshness and honesty, I try to approach the text anew with each performance.
When I do this, vocal technique follows naturally. In fact, the ability to shift emotions clearly — like pressing a remote control button — is itself a form of high-level technique. I often feel onstage that technique and emotion aren't separate, but rather in a dynamic push-and-pull relationship, supporting and enhancing each other.

What dreams or goals are guiding your next artistic chapter?

In April 2024, I became a mother. Experiencing the transformation from a young woman into a mother brought profound and essential change to my life. It wasn't just a new role, but a moment of awakening to what true happiness and love really mean.
I've discovered new emotional textures that I had never known before, and naturally, these experiences have flowed into my music. As my life deepens, so too does the emotional and narrative depth of the songs I sing. I now hope that every performance will go beyond interpretation and reach the audience with sincerity distilled from my lived experiences.
Another wish that has blossomed in me is that future generations — including my child — can experience the beauty of life through music. I want music to be something that isn't reserved for a special few, but something everyone can be moved by and enjoy. I hope to use my voice to help create that kind of world.
To me, my voice is not just sound. It is an expression of my inner self, my identity as an artist, and a tool for conveying love. I hope this voice can help make the world a little warmer and more beautiful. That's why I sing with a prayerful heart, always conscious of the One who gave me this voice — the One who knows me better than I know myself. And I truly hope that my voice can bring light and comfort into someone's life.

"ANOTHER WISH THAT HAS BLOSSOMED IN ME IS THAT FUTURE GENERATIONS CAN EXPERIENCE THE BEAUTY OF LIFE THROUGH MUSIC.



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