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A bridge between tradition and modernity

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Vedran Brankovic

Your program included Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and even a virtuosic etude — which piece was your favorite to play?

I like French Baroque, and the composer from that era I enjoy the most is Jean-Philippe Rameau. I find Rameau's music very original, fresh, and contemporary. Basically, I prefer Romanticism the most because I enjoy it the most and can best express my understanding of such compositions. The classical pieces and virtuosic etudes I can't compare to Baroque and Romanticism because they are different, but they also share many similarities.

What do you love most about playing the piano?

I love learning new compositions, performing at public concerts, but what I like the most is that while I play, I can showcase the beauty of a composition and express my emotions. Creating beautiful and high-quality music on the piano for me is not just a profession but also a way of life.

> *"Creating beautiful and high-quality music on the piano for me is not just a profession but also a way of life.*



Do you enjoy learning fast, technical works like Volodos–Moszkowski, or more lyrical ones like Rachmaninov's Elegy?

It's a challenge for me to learn technically difficult compositions like etudes, but I always choose those which are both difficult and melodically beautiful. Lyrical compositions are more beautiful to me, and I enjoy playing them more. They look like books to me since each music phrase I regard as a sentence through which the deepest emotions can be expressed and a message can be conveyed to someone.



How did you feel during your first solo concert? Was it exciting, scary, or both?

The solo concert was one of the best, but also one of the most exciting projects so far for me. I chose eleven compositions which I had played during the last two years. It wasn't easy. With all the other school obligations, I had only one month for final preparation of the program. I was eagerly waiting to perform it and enjoyed practicing the compositions. When I was about to enter the hall, I was on the verge of tears from the excitement, but when I sat at the piano, I calmed down and everything went great.

Do you have a favorite composer — someone whose music you always love to play?

I enjoy playing works by many composers, but Chopin is my favorite because I can best express my emotions through his music. In my opinion, his compositions are full of life and nature. Playing Chopin is a true challenge because you need to deeply understand each piece and what he wanted to convey in it.

What is your practice routine like? Do you play every day?

I practice every day, sometimes for two hours, and sometimes for six hours. It all depends on how much time I have due to school duties. I start a daily practice with the most difficult compositions and sections. When I get tired with practicing difficult pieces, I switch to scales or Hannon exercises.

If you could perform anywhere in the world, where would it be — and what would you play?

There are many places where it's nice to perform, but I would most like to play at Carnegie Hall. Some of the best pianists have played there, so I would love to do the same. I would perform various compositions, but I would most like to play: Bach's Chaconne in D minor arranged for piano by Ferruccio Busoni, Alkan's etudes, and Chopin's 1st piano concerto.

Pin-Hao Liao



What first drew you to the viola — and what has kept you inspired over the years?

I was drawn to the viola because of its warm, rich sound — it felt more personal than any other instrument. Over time, I've stayed inspired because there's always something new to explore. Whether I'm playing solo, with a group, or in an orchestra, the viola always plays a special role, and that keeps it exciting for me.

You performed Bergsma's Fantastic Variations on a Theme from Tristan – what spoke to you about this piece?

I loved how the piece takes a theme and gives it a fresh, creative twist. It's dramatic, colorful, and full of surprises. It let me really express different characters and moods — and I enjoyed the freedom it gave me to be playful while still being emotional and challenging.

How do you approach the balance between solo work, chamber music, and orchestral performance?

To me, they're all connected. Solo playing helps me find my voice, chamber music teaches me how to listen and communicate, and orchestra is about teamwork and being part of something bigger. I try to bring what I learn in one area into the others — they all support each other.

From Aspen to Verbier to Juilliard – how have these international experiences shaped your playing?

Each place taught me something different. At Aspen, I got a strong foundation in both solo and orchestral playing. At Verbier, I learned the importance of teamwork and making music with amazing musicians from all over the world. And Juilliard pushed me to grow and really figure out who I am as a musician. All these experiences helped shape how I play and how I connect with music.

What was it like to win your concerto competition and perform Bartók with orchestra?

It was an amazing experience. Bartók's concerto is tough, but it's also very emotional and meaningful. Preparing it really challenged me, and performing it with an orchestra felt powerful. Winning the competition was exciting, but the performance itself was the most special part.

You've just won the Assistant Principal Viola position with the Charlotte Symphony — what excites you most about this new role?

I'm really excited to be part of a great viola section and to take on more responsibility in the group. I look forward to working closely with my colleagues. I'm also excited to connect with the Charlotte community and be part of the city's musical life.

Looking ahead, what artistic goals do you hope to pursue in the next few years?

I'd love to keep learning new music, and keep performing chamber music. I'm also interested in working with composers and trying new projects. In the future, I hope to start teaching and mentoring younger players — sharing what I've learned while continuing to grow myself.



Odora Trio

How did the three of you first come together as a trio?

We met as a group while studying in the same year at the Royal Academy of Music in London. It was one of those rare situations where rehearsal felt less like work and more like uncovering something collectively. What bound us from the start was a shared sense of curiosity. We found ourselves constantly challenging each other, discovering new repertoire, and pushing boundaries in rehearsal - not for the sake of perfection, but for deeper musical understanding and expression.

What makes chamber music so special to you as performers?

Chamber music is very special to us as it combines the best of both worlds: the personal expression of a soloist and the rich collaboration of an ensemble. As performers, it invite us into a space where listening becomes just as important as playing, a 'conversation' between players. In chamber music, every voice matters equally. No one is ever just accompanying as we are all constantly responding, shaping, and guiding the music together. Over time as a trio, we've developed a kind of shared language; the more we play together, the more we understand each other not just musically, but emotionally and it's one of the most rewarding parts of what we do.

How did you select the Ravel and Saint Saëns trios for this competition?

We chose the Ravel and Saint-Saëns trios because together, they offer such a rich and contrasting portrait of French chamber music whilst challenging us in different ways. The Ravel Trio is a work we've loved from the very beginning. It's so exquisitely crafted where every detail of colour, texture, and rhythm is vital. There's an emotional vastness in that piece: the delicacy of the first movement, the asymmetrical dance of the second, the haunting Passacaglia, and that final burst of transcendence. We feel like we discover new things in it every time we play it. The Saint-Saëns, on the other hand, is more classical in structure, but so full of character and flair. It's virtuosic and elegant, often playful, but also deeply lyrical. It allows us to explore a lighter, more transparent sound while still demanding tight ensemble playing and clarity.



Your debut CD Evergreen highlights British and contemporary female composers - why was this important to you?

With *Evergreen*, we wanted to create a debut recording that not only reflected our artistic voice, but also said something meaningful about the musical landscape we believe in. Championing British and contemporary female composers felt essential as a conscious step toward balance and visibility in a repertoire that has long overlooked so many important voices. Working with living composers was also incredibly inspiring. Having that direct dialogue where we were able to ask questions, understand the intentions deepened our approach and made the process feel very alive. Ultimately, it was a project rooted in curiosity, respect and the belief that the repertoire we share should reflect the richness of musical voices past and present.

What's your process like when preparing new repertoire as a group?

Our process of preparing new repertoire always starts with curiosity. Often, it begins with one of us bringing a piece to the group either something we've heard, studied, or just felt drawn to and from there we all dive in individually. We each like to spend time with the score on our own first, listening to different recordings, studying the structure, and getting a feel for the composer's language. When we come together for the first rehearsal, we usually start by playing through the piece as a whole, just to get a sense of the architecture and flow. Those first readings are really valuable as a way to see where our instincts align and where we might hear things differently. From there, we start shaping the piece together, talking about character, pacing, and colour. We don't always agree right away, and that's a good thing meaning that we're each bringing strong ideas to the table. Our rehearsals are very collaborative, and there's a lot of listening - not just to each other's playing, but to the intentions behind the playing.



What have been some of your most memorable concert experiences so far?

We've been fortunate to have quite a few memorable concert and competition experiences, but a few stand out for different reasons. One that we often think back to was a performance in a small church in the countryside which was part of a local festival that had been running for decades. The setting was intimate, the audience warm and incredibly attentive, and something about the acoustic brought out a kind of vulnerability in our playing. We performed Brahms's 1st Piano Trio that evening, and by the final movement, the atmosphere in the room was completely still. It reminded us how powerful live music can be, even in the most modest of spaces. In the end, the most memorable concerts are always the ones where we feel a real exchange with the audience, where something unspoken is shared.

What are your hopes and plans for the trio in the next few seasons?

Looking ahead, we're really excited about deepening and expanding what we do as a trio. One of our biggest hopes is to continue exploring repertoire that challenges and inspires us, whether that's through competitions, commissioning new works, diving into lesser-known pieces or revisiting the great masterpieces with fresh eyes. We're also looking forward to bringing our music to new audiences, both in the UK and further afield. Since the release of *Evergreen*, we're very interested in working closely with living composers again as there's something incredibly energising about being part of music that's still being shaped. More than anything, we hope to keep growing together, not just technically but artistically. Chamber music is a long conversation, and we're excited to see where it takes us.



Anna Alekseeva-Messner



What do you enjoy more — solo recital, chamber music, or concerto performances? Or do they offer different kinds of expression?

Each of these spheres means a lot to me. I suppose, solo performing is the most inspiring activity for me. On the one hand it gives absolute interpretative freedom. On the other hand, I feel that it is only me who is in charge of any musical decisions and artistic results. This is a greater responsibility but it also brings a greater satisfaction when the performance is successful. Performing as a soloist with an orchestra is always inspirational as well. Collaboration with talented and wise conductors is a fortunate opportunity giving a lot of artistic experience. Chamber ensemble is another essential part of my life. I believe that the field of chamber music is vast, not to say infinite and truly full of masterpieces, from Beethoven's sonatas to Schostakowitch's chamber opuses. A great deal of my musical dreams are tightly connected with chamber works which I would be happy to perform one day.

Do you remember the moment you knew the piano would be your path?

I'm afraid I was too young and careless to remember a consciously precise moment. My mother is a pianist and all her family members were musicians as well. That's why I heard and watched my mother practising every single day. I suppose music had become a part of my life even before I was born. My parents never insisted on me studying music. However, one cold rainy day at the age of five I just felt as if I had no idea how to entertain myself. So the easiest decision was to come into mom's room and say «Mum, will you teach me to play the piano? »... Several months later I entered musical school, and everything developed from there. Maybe, I simply lacked the imagination to think of another speciality or hobby which would be more gripping. But, all in all, music seemed to be my cup of tea.



You've worked with many different orchestras and conductors. How do you prepare mentally for such collaborations?

In my view, there are three key skills required for the collaboration. Firstly, it is your ability to convince your partner of your musical ideas. It is the soloist's duty to work out the conception of a concert to a great extent so as to make all the artistic decisions understandable and persuasive. Of course, this includes scrupulous knowledge of composer's indications, in particular, those which refer to the tempos. Secondly, the ability to listen to your partner is crucial. Actually, the performer has both to listen to and to hear the orchestral texture even in spite of showing initiative and leadership. The third vital aspect is working out communicative skills. Being sensible, flexible and diplomatic enough allows you to search musical decisions together with a conductor and eventually reach an understanding. Unless you are able to find compromises, it is totally impossible to reach any artistic results.

You were the youngest participant at the *Musiques Interdites* festival in France. How did that early experience shape you?

Firstly, it certainly broadened my horizons. The festival was dedicated to music of composers of the 20-th century whose music had been prohibited several decades ago. For me it was a new and valuable experience of performing contemporary music. Actually, I learnt several pieces by Prokofiev as well as by Sofia Gubaidulina specially for taking part in this event. Secondly, it was my first performance which wasn't connected with my studying at school. It was a great inspiration for me. It gave me the taste of concert life and performing abroad for a wide audience. Therefore, the experience motivated me to continue practising.

What artistic goals are guiding you now — new repertoire, recordings, or perhaps something beyond the concert stage?

Actually, this month I graduated from the Moscow Conservatory and currently I am doing my entrance exams for the post-graduate programme. As soon as this phase is over, I hope to spend a few days recharging my batteries and then... plunge into a new piano programme, make the planning for the next study and concert season and just start getting ready for future recitals and events.

As a student of the Moscow Conservatory, what has influenced you most in your musical development there?

To begin with, it is a great honour as well as absolute happiness to be a pupil of my piano professors Elena Kuznetsova, Sergey Kuznetsov and Vasily Zabolotny who are my idols and whose performances feature perfect command of numberless sound nuances and timbres, intellectual interpretation and exceptional emotional depth. They were always caring, generous, loving and sincere with me and taught me to treat music in the same way. In addition, the Moscow Conservatory gathers a great number of talented students. It gives a wonderful and beneficial opportunity to get acquainted and study together with young pianists who have already built successful careers. It is definitely a place of active creative communication, sharing musical ideas and experience. Also, studying here means existing in conditions of high and sometimes fierce competition due to the advanced average level of fellow students. This serves as a strong additional stimulation to practise and fight tooth and nail so as to keep highly competitive. Above all, the Conservatory provides students with a variety of lectures which give a fundamental theoretical basis enabling them to analyse the music, which is currently studied, with its harmonic languages and styles and get as close as possible to understanding the philosophic meaning and psychological depths, which composers have integrated into the musical scores.

"Music seemed to be my cup of tea.



AREN TOPLAGHALTSYAN

When did you start playing the cello, and what do you love most about it?



I started playing the cello when I was 6 years old. At the beginning, I played simply because I had to, it was something I was expected to do. But as time passed and I began to grow as a young artist, something unexpected happened. One day, I seriously thought about quitting the cello. I don't even remember exactly why, it just felt hard, like I was stuck. But the strange part is that the moment I imagined life without the cello, it felt like everything stopped around me. Like a silence inside. That's when I understood that music, and especially the cello, had already become a part of who I am. It's not something I do. It's something I live.
Since then, playing the cello has felt natural, like breathing. It lets me save energy while creating something meaningful. It brings joy, calm, and sometimes even answers. And maybe one day, it will also let me make a living by doing what I love most.



What do you enjoy most about recording and sharing your music?

Recording has become like a second teacher to me. Since no one in my family is a musician, my father and I started recording every cello lesson from the very beginning. It wasn't just to hear how I played, but also to listen again to my teacher's advice, more attentively and often more clearly than during the actual lesson. This helped me understand things better, spot mistakes, shape my interpretation, and improve faster.
Recordings also open doors. Thanks to them, musicians can now participate in competitions that used to be impossible to access due to distance or travel limitations.
And something I really enjoy is how sharing my recordings online reaches people who never used to listen to classical music. Some friends who had no interest before suddenly become curious and sometimes even grow to love classical music, without even meaning to, just from watching a short clip.

> ...the moment I imagined life without the cello, it felt like everything stopped around me.

How do you feel when you're on stage—nervous, excited, or something else?

The first time I walked on stage, I felt calm,I just wanted to play. Later, I started getting nervous before performances. Then, after third grade, I asked myself: "If I can play well at home, why should I be nervous on stage?" Since then, I don't get nervous or overly excited anymore. I just stay calm and focused, like I'm in my own world with the cello.

Why did you choose *Allegro appassionato* by Saint-Saëns for your performance?

My teacher, Anjela Sargsyan, is a very professional classical musician who carefully selects pieces that fit my level and personality. She guides me through the best works of the cello repertoire, always considering what will help me grow technically and emotionally.
Allegro appassionato is a piece that connects with me in many ways. Technically, it challenges me and helps me improve. Emotionally, it expresses a wide range of feelings, sometimes calm and gentle, other times passionate and intense, which matches how I often feel when I play.
Since this piece was already prepared and performance-ready, we decided to send it to the competition.

What was your most memorable performance, and why?
My most unforgettable performance was in Pärnu, Estonia, where I played with an orchestra. Musicians came from many different countries, and I was the youngest player there. The funny part was that I sat right next to the oldest member of the orchestra, he was 42, and I was only 11! It was an amazing experience to play alongside so many talented professionals.

Have any of your teachers or mentors inspired you in a special way?

Yes, my first cello teacher, Armine Avetisyan, inspired me in a very special and magical way. She was an older lady, serious about work but also very fun. She had a way of making me want to play the cello without even realizing it. When I played well, she would give me candies as a reward. One time, she gave me a whole pack of my favorite candies, I was so excited! But more than the sweets, it was her belief in me and the way she taught that made me fall in love with playing.

What are your musical dreams for the future?
I have three big dreams. First, I want to study at the best music institutions in the world and travel as much as possible to learn from different cultures and experiences. Second, I dream of owning and playing one of the legendary Stradivarius cellos. Just imagining its sound in my hands is inspiring. And finally, I hope to become one of the most inspiring cellists of my time, someone whose music can touch hearts and bring people closer to each other.

Ramon Civit Mas



Your research focuses on early 20th-century European music and jazz. What discoveries have shaped your thinking most?

My research period spans from the end of the American Civil War to the years leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War. A significant part of this research focuses on rhythm—specifically additive rhythms, syncopation, and their development in jazz. The syncopations employed by J. S. Bach, for instance, serves a very different musical purpose than the additive Afro-American syncopations. This kind of rhythmic grouping, which is also found in other musical cultures, forms the basis of what we consider "modern" syncopation.

Your piece *"From C to E"* moves through different musical styles. What was your guiding idea behind this work?

Classical pianists are profoundly influenced by the work of J. S. Bach, and in particular, "The Well-Tempered Clavier". "From C to E" is not a compendium of preludes and fugues, but rather a small selection of individual piano pieces arranged in ascending chromatic order. Unlike Bach's exhaustive pairing of major and minor keys, this collection does not adhere strictly to modal symmetry.

The first piece, "in C major", serves as a modest homage to this "basic" key, well-known to beginners, and concludes with somewhat clumsily played parallel scales. The second piece, "C Sharp", features Afro-American additive rhythms. The third, "D minor (Monsieur Croche)", clearly reflects the influence of Claude Debussy. The fourth, "D Sharp", is essentially a short piano étude, perhaps reminiscent of Prokofiev. The final piece in this set, "in E major", takes the form of a waltz.

"From C to E" comprises the first five pieces of a larger album entitled "From C to B".

What would you like listeners to feel or imagine when they hear your music for the first time?

First of all, none of my piano compositions have been performed by a live interpreter; in most cases, they are "performed" by a computer. This represents a "new" form of interpretation: editing the playback of a piece in order to achieve a result as close as possible to that of a human performer. This is both an advantage and a limitation. Piano compositions are traditionally associated with human interpretation, and hearing a computer-generated performance—at least for now—tends to distance the listener from that traditional experience.

So, in response to the question, what do I expect from the listener?—listening to a computer interpretation requires a certain extra auditory effort: an effort to hear what is there, rather than what should/could be.

You've developed a teaching method called "Musical learning on a blank sheet." What inspired this approach?

What led me to develop this method was the realization of how crucial it is to understand a musical staff rather than merely obey it. I have spent years researching and shaping this method, which is the result of my work in music education, specifically in solfège and piano.
The neo-Guidonian staff is an extraordinary system for reading music—it's the most effective among the various notational systems I know. Yet, paradoxically, I believe it is too complex for beginners due to its very "simplicity". Learning to read notes becomes unnecessarily difficult for novice students, and when reading is difficult, true understanding becomes unlikely. There is a profound difference between studying something you understand and something you don't.
The method "Musical Learning on a Blank Sheet" (it is handwritten in pencil on blank sheets of paper), aims to temporarily separate reading from comprehension—only to reunite them later in the learning process. To achieve this, it uses numbers to represent notes (as in the systems of the Genevan Rousseau or the Chinese jianpu), and introduces five primary symbols designed to explain the combination of notes by forming small chains of information.



Do you compose with a performer in mind—or more with a philosophical or emotional concept?

Yes, I sometimes compose with a specific performer in mind—though I very much suspect that the performer is not thinking about my composition! This is precisely the case with the second piece of this small album "From C to E". The second work, titled "C Sharp", was composed after I listened on YouTube to "You Come Here Often?" by Michael Tilson Thomas, performed by Yuja Wang. Tilson Thomas's piece presents a certain level of difficulty, and I attempted something along similar lines, imagining a performer like her.

You mention jazz influences—what role does jazz play in your compositional voice?

It is precisely through this research that I have come to understand music as rhythm, and sound as the synchrony that gives it form. While I personally believe this to be true, it may not be universally so—but it guides me in the creative process: "I begin with rhythm, and the notes follow". Rhythm is time, and our very existence is structured around time. Grasping this notion led me to a deeper understanding of the harmonic percussions found in early 20th-century European music.

How do your experiences as a performer (on piano, violin, organ, saxophone) shape your writing for each instrument?

Although I am currently much more focused on the piano as my main instrument, studying other instruments is always enriching—not only for the different technical resources they employ, but also for the opportunity to explore other repertoires, which can serve as a valuable source of inspiration for composition.

Taylor Louise Fong



How did you first discover your love for singing?

I first discovered my love for singing when I was very young. I actually had a speech delay as a toddler, and my mum used music and singing as a fun way to help me speak more clearly. She would play Disney songs at home, and I would try to sing along — that's how it all started. I didn't realise it at the time, but singing slowly became something I truly enjoyed. My parents saw how happy and expressive I was when I sang, so they encouraged me to take vocal lessons and join small performances.
Over time, singing became more than just a way to learn words — it became a way for me to express myself and connect with others. That's when I realised it wasn't just a hobby, it was something I truly loved and wanted to grow in.

What do you enjoy most about performing musical theatre songs?

What I love most about performing musical theatre songs is that they allow me to express how I feel — not just through singing, but also through acting and storytelling. Each song feels like a little story full of emotions, and I enjoy stepping into the character's world to bring that story to life.
Musical theatre has also helped me connect with others. Through rehearsals and performances, I've made new friends who love the same things I do. It's really special to share the stage and grow together with them. It's not just about hitting the right notes — it's about making people feel something and creating meaningful moments, both on and off stage

Why did you choose "Quiet" from Matilda the Musical for this competition?

"Quiet" is such a special song to me. Matilda is a character who feels misunderstood but finds strength in her own way — and I really connected with that. There were times when I felt overwhelmed too, especially after going through bullying at school. It was confusing and painful, but like Matilda, Singing this song allowed me to express those emotions in a safe and honest way and to turn something painful into something beautiful. This beautiful piece shows both vulnerability and strength, and I hope other children who may feel the same can also find comfort and courage in it.

Do you feel more like yourself or like a character when you sing on stage?

It's a mix of both! When I sing musical theatre, I become the character — I try to understand their feelings, their story, and who they are. But at the same time, I bring a little bit of myself into every performance. So even though I'm playing someone else, my heart is always in it. I think that's what makes performing so special — it's a blend of imagination and honesty.



You sing in different styles – do you have a favorite genre?

That's a tough question because I really enjoy learning different styles! But if I had to choose, I'd say musical theatre is my favourite. There's something magical about combining music, acting, and storytelling in one performance — it really allows me to express so many emotions.

I also enjoy singing classical Italian pieces because they challenge me and help me improve my vocal technique. At the same time, I love pop music too — it's fun, current, and allows me to connect with younger audiences. Honestly, I just love music in all its forms, and I'm always excited to explore new styles and keep learning.

Who are some singers or performers you look up to?

I look up to so many amazing performers. Whitney Houston and Adele are my biggest inspirations — their voices are so clear and powerful, and I admire how they bring so much heart into their performances. I also love Cynthia Erivo for her emotional depth and vocal strength. In the pop world, I admire Billie Eilish for her uniqueness and ability to connect with young audiences. Every artist I watch teaches me something different, and I'm grateful to keep learning from them.

If you could sing on any stage in the world, where would it be – and what song would you choose?

If I could sing on any stage in the world, I would choose the West End in London — it's one of the most iconic places for musical theatre, and I've always dreamed of performing there. The energy, the history, and the amazing talent on those stages are so inspiring.

I would love to sing "Part of Your World" from The Little Mermaid, because it was the first Disney song I truly fell in love with when I was very young. It's the song that made me want to sing and dream bigger. Performing it on a world-class stage like the West End would be so meaningful — it would feel like I've come full circle from that little girl singing at home to sharing my voice with the world.

"I found peace in my own quiet space — especially through music.

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