



Jason Vieaux

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Musically Multilingual

JASON VIEAUX PLAYS—AND TEACHES—ACROSS GENRES AND TRADITIONS.

BY MATTHEW BARKER

For over twenty years Jason Vieaux has built his career around the periphery of what many would consider “mainstream” classical music, only to find himself and his instrument a musical bellwether. With each generation the guitar is leapfrogging its way to higher points of prominence in classical music, even supplanting the piano as the preferred polyphonic instrument among some of today's most influential composers. That said, it can't be understated how much influence a collective of 1960s English songwriters have on today's artists. Says Mr. Vieaux, “My mother bought me a guitar when I was five because I couldn't stop listening to her Beatles records.”

It's a memory that perfectly encapsulates the musically multilingual, border-free nature of Jason Vieaux's artistry. It's also consonant with the guitar's position as a nexus point for “classical” music, connecting the traditions of the past to the fresh possibilities of the future. Since he and fellow guitar faculty David Starobin founded Curtis's guitar department in 2011, the program has epitomized this pivotal quality, while also offering superb young guitarists the opportunity to collaborate freely with exceptionally gifted students musicians in other disciplines—something rare in the conservatory world.

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Mr. Vieaux in a lesson
with student Alec Holcomb
PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA



most formidable techniques of any virtuoso guitarist performing today—but he also clearly loves what he does, and his pursuit of musical nourishment doesn't stop at the water's edge. His demeanor is relaxed without any hint of ego, coupled with a sense of humor that permeates everything he does. His teaching and playing are filled with a genuine sense of enjoyment and discovery.

"Mr. Vieaux really brings a lot of fun into lessons and makes the process of learning a piece of music interesting," says sixteen-year-old Curtis guitar student Hao Yang. "His way of teaching makes me feel the magic of music so vividly and strongly, that I enjoy practicing so much more."

A PERSONAL VOICE

Even in the teaching studio, that idea of "play" isn't limited to specific musical categories or traditions. Observing Mr. Vieaux in a lesson with Hao reveals a completely fluid and organic musical dialogue that transitions seamlessly among J. S. Bach, Queen, John Scofield, and Astor Piazzolla. He allows her to find her own voice and is supportive of her approach as she works through a solo, while offering constructive feedback as he kneels down to play beside her. They find solutions in an innovative, genre-hopping way. "I always believe that rock 'n' roll helps me with my rhythm and violin music helps me with my lyrical melodies," says Hao.

This approach is not only successful for musical problem solving—why not call upon a Pat Metheny solo for Baroque improvisatory inspiration?—it also reflects a growing movement in classical music. Many emerging and influential artists who buck trends and traditions (such as eighth blackbird, Brooklyn Rider, and David Lang) are redefining what it means to be a classical musician, particularly as they spend much of their time performing non-classical music. This trend has started to merge with a similar movement from the other direction: Witness rock guitarists such as Jonny Greenwood and Bryce Dessner working in classical forms.

Even though his bread isn't buttered by Beethoven and Brahms, Mr. Vieaux doesn't hesitate to put himself in the classical camp. "It's just more in my blood, from the 20,000 hours or so of practicing," he says. "Even though I can solo over changes and function

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‘on the bandstand’ in a jazz setting, I still think of myself as a classical musician visiting the jazz world.” But he quickly adds that, over time, he has become less likely to categorize. “I definitely think less about music according to genre; in fact I have a weird habit of making analogies between disparate writers from wildly different styles, or composers or rock bands to famous athletes. Like Ellington said, there’s only good and bad music.”

ALTERNATIVE PATHS

Blending innovation with tradition has kept Curtis among the world’s elite musical conservatories for the past 90 years. One current manifestation of this mindset is the school’s focus on what it means to be a musician and artist-citizen in the 21st century. “There used to be a more-or-less-standard formula for developing a career in classical music, but this way of working is no longer paying off,” says Jordan Dodson, a former student of Mr. Vieaux who in 2013 was Curtis’s first guitar graduate. “So we have started looking for alternative paths.” He cites “collaborations with non-classical artists, new repertoire that doesn’t play to conventional classical audiences, ideas about what a venue can (or should) be, [and] ideas about the audience’s role.”

This fall, audiences in Athens, Seoul, Hong Kong, and Shanghai will witness this melding of traditions firsthand, as Mr. Vieaux joins Curtis students for his third foray in five years with Curtis on Tour, the Nina von Maltzahn global touring initiative. The tour program will feature quartets for guitar and strings by Paganini and Piazzolla, along with a reprise of the Curtis on Tour commission *Red Trees, Wrinkled Cliffs* by Zhou Tian, a Curtis alumnus. Touring is an experience that Mr. Vieaux savors not only for the collaboration but also for the opportunity to share the Curtis magic. “Nothing delivers our goods like the live concert experience,” he says. “I hope music lovers of any kind will recognize not only how great these kids are, but also be able to see how so many of them are wonderful, down-to-earth young people as well.”

As guitar continues to integrate itself into the fabric of Curtis, Mr. Vieaux, along with Mr. Starobin and their students, offers an indispensable perspective: translating previously foreign genres and styles, defying the need for labels, and reminding us that “play” means more than practice and performance. “Guitarists can absolutely be more of a leader in classical music and new music,” he says, “producing classical musicians that are comfortable improvising, writing, arranging, performing new music, while continuing to remind us of where we came from with the traditional repertoire.” ♦

Matthew Barker is the director of recitals and master classes at Curtis.

WHY CHOOSE CURTIS?

—Jason Vieaux

“A guitarist should choose Curtis because of the guitar faculty’s wealth of information and experience, given freely and without hesitation, and given with passion towards helping some of the most talented young guitarists around. The emphasis on chamber music is way ahead of the curve, and it is a rare thing for a guitarist to have the opportunity to perform regularly with such incredible young musicians in different disciplines. Plus, the way performances are set up puts the guitarist performing solo and chamber music regularly in front of appreciative audiences.”

More Reasons at
www.curtis.edu/WhyChooseCurtis

Curtis guitar faculty Jason Vieaux and David Starobin
PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

