

REPRESENTING  
MULTIPLE  
GENERATIONS  
AND DISTINCT  
STYLISTIC  
PATHS, STEVEN  
MACKEY AND  
JIJI ARE COMING  
TOGETHER FOR A  
NEW CONCERTO  
FOR ELECTRIC  
GUITAR.

BY MAYA MIRO JOHNSON

# The Guitar Heroes

Since Steven Mackey joined Curtis's composition faculty in 2022, students and fellow teachers have come to know his conceptual and stylistic versatility, as well as his engaging stage persona as an electric guitarist. He rose to fame by writing works for himself on electric and various classical ensembles; this year, however, was the first time in his 40-plus year career that he took on crafting an electric guitar concerto for *another* great virtuoso of the instrument—Jiji (Guitar '15). *Aluminum Flowers*—commissioned by Curtis for a premiere with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra—traces the history of the guitar from the 600-year-old Spanish vihuela to contemporary pop, rock, blues, and jazz electric styles. Mr. Mackey and Jiji spoke with his student, Maya Miro Johnson, about their recent collaboration.

**MAYA:** Steve, you write in your program note for *Aluminum Flowers* that the piece celebrates the idea of “polymath guitarists.” What does that mean specifically?

**STEVE:** I think of the term polymath as someone who has mastered several disciplines. Guitarists, more than other instrumentalists, tend to do that. The nylon string classical guitar is conceived of as a polyphonic instrument. This is really a different instrument than the electric guitar, which has no resonating body and is more like the organ. Without pulling the stops to engage the pipes, there's no sound. Similarly, the

electric guitar, without effects pedals and an amplifier, really has nothing to offer.

**MAYA:** Steve, you've written lots of music for yourself. What's different about writing for Jiji?

**STEVE:** This is the first guitar concerto I've written that I don't think I would be the best person to play. Jiji is more of a polymath than I am! I am in admiration. There are some things that are right up my alley that I think might stretch Jiji. The last movement is based on looping. It's fast passage-work on electric guitar. The second movement has this delay echo pedal.

Those things, I think, will stretch Jiji, whereas they're more comfortable for me.

On the other hand, a governing metaphor is the evolution of the classical guitar. So, there's a quote of a [16th-century] piece by Alonzo Mudarra called *Fantasia*, a wacky piece with a lot of dissonance; the beginning is also nylon string guitar—pretty, polyphonic ... I couldn't do that.

**MAYA:** Jiji, even though you trained classically at Curtis—known for its hyper-specialization—you have such a broad practice as a performer. Did all your abilities and interests develop at different times, or were they always a part of you?

**JIJI:** At the beginning of my journey, I wanted to play electric. My parents bought me DVDs of Deep Purple, Santana, Prince, Jimi Hendrix, and Ritchie Blackmore, shredding the middle of *Highway Star*. I was eight years old, and I wanted to play in stadiums and be a rock musician. I wanted to get an electric, but my parents said no. The electric guitar was too loud for the apartment in Seoul, so they bought me a classical guitar. I was in this rigorous classical program in Korea. Then I came to the States, and I was a full-on classical



guitarist ... but I was feeling burnt out and close to quitting music.

[What] changed my mind was attending the Bang on a Can summer festival in 2014 when I was a junior in college. I wanted to write my own music, but I felt like I wasn't allowed. So [BOAC] was an eye-opening experience. In the morning, we would practice and rehearse [new music], and at night, you could play whatever! I got asked to play with this band, and I thought, "Who cares! Music is music!" It always was part of me, but it all came out when I was 20 or 21. My senior recital ... was the first time Curtis ever had an electric guitar piece.

**STEVE:** I learned how to play the guitar by listening to Ritchie Blackmore, Jimmy Page, Jimi Hendrix, and guitarists of that time. So, for me, the new, exotic thing was classical music. It just seemed that classical music was aspiring to be the most that music could be. So, I had that same yearning, but for classical music.

**MAYA:** How does this piece go beyond the standard usage of the tradition of amplification?

**STEVE:** The classical guitar is the most ridiculously soft instrument. The best place to listen to the classical guitar is playing it!

**JJJI:** Guitarists are always locking themselves in their practice rooms!

**STEVE:** So we need to amplify that detail. With the third movement of *Aluminum Flowers*, the starting point for that was my appreciation of the sound of Carlos Santana and his singing tone. There's this one tune, in particular, *Samba Pa' Ti*. In *Aluminum Flowers*, the [Santana-esque tune] is amplified and distorted lyrically. The first movement is classical guitar. The second movement has this delay pedal that the guitarist has to keep up with. The fourth movement uses a crazy [prepared] guitar that I invented! You put a guitar pick through the lower string, so when you pluck them, they sound more like a gong than a guitar. And the left hand is

holding a bottleneck, so there's not a single "normal" note until Jiji puts that instrument down and grabs her classical guitar and [plays] this [Mudarra] quote from the 1500s. And the last movement again has the looping pedal, where she becomes her own orchestra...

**MAYA:** Jiji, so you're playing not only many distinctive styles of guitar but quite literally completely different physiologies of the instrument. What is the hardest thing about switching between them?

**JJJI:** I need to think differently. Classical is about resonance, but the electric guitar is about being precise with your sound and not having strings ring over. Also, the electric neck is way skinnier than the classical. I'm so used to stretching my left hand on my classical guitar. It's much tighter on electric, and it's like a totally different instrument.

**STEVE:** And for me, that's part of the theater of the piece. She starts off very simply: just her. A few instruments start to straggle in. And then the orchestra takes over from her. I'm looking forward to the theater of it: her putting down her classical guitar and strapping on the electric.

**JJJI:** I actually bought a new guitar! It looks so shiny and beautiful. I'm tributing this concert to Prince, so I'm going to have a fun jacket and pantsuit, fabulous high heels, big hair, big everything!

**MAYA:** And I'm sure a very big sound too!

To find out just how big everything will be, come hear Jiji's bedazzled premiere of Steven Mackey's *Aluminum Flowers* with Robert Spano (Conducting '85) and the Curtis Symphony Orchestra on March 9, 2024.

Interviews have been edited and condensed for clarity.