



EMORY | arts

2021-2022

# MUSIC @ EMORY

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2021-2022

# MUSIC EMORY@

## *Culture Shock: Finding Music in Compromises and Tradeoffs*

**Brian Le, composer**  
Senior Honors Recital

Saturday, March 19, 2022, 3:30 p.m.  
Performing Arts Studio | 1804 N. Decatur Road

### **Introduction and Welcome to the Podcast**

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In tonight's episode *Culture Shock*, I share my multiethnic experience of the clash between aesthetics of Vietnamese and American musical traditions. During my years at Emory, I have rethought my multicultural identity, choosing different tradeoffs than I had when I was younger. An essential part of the journey has been the music I consume and create. Tonight, I present my Vietnamese-American identity in a potpourri of dialogue, staging, music, and sound—blending various podcast genres with live classical, electronic, and pop music.

The works on tonight's program are inspired by a wide range of memories—from the pits of musical theater to the ivory keys of Sergei Rachmaninoff and Sonia Posetti. You will also hear my native language, stories from my life, and even a few unsponsored commercials.

As a liberal arts scholar, I seek to explore multiculturalism in a conscious, respectful, and honest way. This engagement with academic research and self-reflective processes guides my composing. Through this honors project, I hope to confront histories of colonialism, reflect upon Asian American identities, and create music that can communicate both joy and responsibility.

—Brian Le

# Program and Notes

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This performance is both a recital and podcast. Between the programmed works below, there will be podcast segments of various types. You are welcome to move throughout the performance.

## *Variations on an Original Theme* (2019)

This piano piece explores an original theme informed by my early musical influences. The melancholic lullaby traverses genres of tango, jazz, and Russian romanticism. I use Western compositional techniques such as octave displacement, rhythmic fragmentation, jazz harmony, modulation, and sequences. I chose this piece as tonight's starting point because Western music is the first music I claimed as part of my musical identity.

## *Protest* (2020)

### *What Democracy Looks Like*

#### *The Preamble*

*Protest* is a fixed audio work in two movements. *What Democracy Looks Like* features recorded voices. It uses repetition and fragmentation to musicalize the protest chant of the same name as an expression of the feelings, textures, and history of the Black Lives Matter movement. This movement makes use of minimal processing. Instead the focus is on the extended harmonies of the voices. Ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth chords are used to create a shimmery wall of sound that are ultimately shushed into silence. Composing this movement helped me cope with and express the emotions I felt at the protests, as I reflected on what it means to be "American."

*The Preamble* uses MIDI instruments and field recordings from various protests I attended. These recordings included speeches given by local activists and leaders, as well as the soundscape and chants. The movement explores the heroism, solidarity, and community I experienced while protesting. Long horn phrases and poignant string textures are punctuated by urgent calls to action from my community members. In contrast to the previous movement's focus on anger and frustration, the second movement aims to recenter a feeling of "joyful militancy," as described by authors Carla Bergman and Nick Montgomery.

### *Danzon Prelude* (2020)

This multi-tracked chamber piece is written as a prelude to Mexican composer Arturo Marquez's *Danzon No. 2*. The piece was composed during a time of virtual learning and performance—a tough time to be both a musician and citizen. I was invited to compose this companion prelude for a virtual concert by the Emory University Symphony Orchestra. The prelude employs call-and-response between the winds, the *tresillo* rhythm of Latin American music on the cello, and fast arpeggios on the violin. These techniques were derived from what spoke to me in Marquez's score, and I used them to maintain the integrity of the original piece while imbuing my own style into the prelude. This recording is an artifact of the livestream. To me, it evokes a strange nostalgia for the beginning of the pandemic and reminds me that the world is still so messy.

### Four Songs from *Two Sisters* (2021)

These four songs—"My Own Ship," "Death To My Sister," "Spirits of the Ocean," and "Finale"—are from my music theater piece *Two Sisters*. I based *Two Sisters* on a Vietnamese folktale about a woman and her evil stepsister competing for their king's affection to escape their abusive stepmother. I chose to replace the king with a ship, in reference to the boats used by Vietnamese refugees after the Vietnam war, which recontextualizes the idea of freedom. The musical uses Broadway-style pop music along with certain pentatonic scales and extended harmonies because of my experiences in musical theater. Songs reflect different styles and moods, some being quite light and cartoonish while others being dark and deadly. The piece captures my current balance of tradeoffs between my Vietnamese and American selves in an identity that feels whole, comforting, and unfamiliar.

### *Astral* (2019)

This string quartet is the first work I completed at Emory. It explores musical influences from different periods of my life. Growing up in Dallas, Texas at a diverse school in a neighborhood that had withstood years of over-policing and gentrification, I was heavily influenced by Latin and other immigrant musics. In this piece, I used techniques such as the Andalusian cadence from flamenco music and the habanera

and clave rhythms from Afro-Cuban music. There are long, intricate chord progressions inspired by East Asian rock and extended harmonies of jazz. Rhythmic and harmonic motifs take on an eclectic identity that is influenced by many genres and cannot be reduced to one label. Writing this piece grew my love of rhythm and extended harmony. At the same time, it drew me away from a western understanding of music and drove me towards my voice as a composer—because who am I if not an immigrant? And what is the authentic response for a Vietnamese-American composer if not integrative?

## Brian Le, composer

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Brian Le is a graduating senior from Dallas double majoring in music composition and business and society. Le began his musical journey in 2012, when he picked up the cello through his elementary school's orchestra. He was principal cellist of his high school orchestra, the Greater North Texas Youth Orchestra, and co-principal of his All-Region Symphony Orchestra. Le joined the Emory University Symphony Orchestra and Emory Tango Ensemble. As a composer, Le has taken an interdisciplinary approach to address cultural politics, social justice, and the question of authenticity through both acoustic and electronic music.

Le is also passionate about educational equity. He serves as the president of Emory's First-generation Low-Income Partnership (FLIP). In this capacity, he has advocated for 130 laptop rentals for low-income students, published 60 pages of handbooks and other resources, and co-designed Emory's newly annual First-Gen Week with the Office of the Provost. Le also served as the founder of Emory's Matriculate Fellowship and helped recruit hundreds of Advising Fellows who assist thousands of low-income High School Fellows navigate college applications. Le has interned at Americans for the Arts and the Bloomingdale School of Music as a Diversity in Arts Leadership intern to support diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in New York City's community music schools. Eventually, Le aims to become an educator, specifically a history teacher for high school students.

Le thanks his instructors Adam Mirza and Katie Young for three provocative years in the composition track. He would also like to thank Paul Bhasin, Meredith Schweig, and Tim Dowd for their support and guidance throughout the honors journey. He expresses his gratitude for his performers, the Performing Arts Studio crew, and Emory Arts. Finally, he is deeply appreciative of his friends, family, and loved ones for their constant support.

## Performers

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In order of appearance:

Magdalena Shumanova, piano  
Anjali Shah, soprano (multi-tracked)  
Nathan May, tenor (multi-tracked)  
Hannah Morrison, soprano  
Sophia Bereaud, alto  
Eric Zhang, violin I  
Alyssa Stegall, violin II  
Christian Chae, viola  
Andrew Choi, cello

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