

# J I J I



**JJI, guitar  
Biography  
2024-2025 Season**

Praised by *The Washington Post* for her “mesmerizing” and “stirring” performances, JJI is an adventurous guitarist known for her virtuosity and command of diverse repertoire. Equally at home with both acoustic and electric guitar, her concert programs range from traditional and contemporary classical to free improvisation.

Through her impeccable musicianship, compelling stage presence, and commitment to commissioning and performing new musical works, JJI has solidified her reputation as a top 21st century guitarist. In 2021, *The Washington Post* selected JJI as “one of the 21 composers/performers who sound like tomorrow,” and *The Kansas City Star* recently described her as “a graceful and nuanced player.” In recent seasons, JJI has presented solo recitals at Carnegie Hall’s Weill Recital Hall; Lincoln Center; 92nd Street Y; Caramoor; Celebrity Series of Boston; Caffè Lena; Tippet Rise; San Francisco’s Herbst Theatre; and the National Art Gallery, among other distinguished venues. Her performances have been featured on PBS (On Stage at Curtis), NPR’s *From the Top*, WHYY-TV, FOX 4-TV, *Munchies* (the Vice Channel), *The Not So Late Show* (Channel 6, Kansas), and Hong Kong broadcast station RTHK’s *The Works*. In 2016, she became the first guitarist in 30 years to secure first prize in the Concert Artists Guild Competition.

JJI’s 2024-2025 season demonstrates her range and versatility on her chosen instrument. She performs Joaquin Rodrigo’s *Concierto de Aranjuez* with the Hawaii Symphony Orchestra, the Marquette Symphony Orchestra, the Westmoreland Symphony Orchestra, and Lincoln’s Symphony Orchestra; also in Lincoln, she performs Natalie Dietterich’s *light, beloved*, originally written for her. JJI also performs Hilary Purrington’s *Harp of Nerves* with the San Antonio Philharmonic, and she gives the world premiere of *ljósíd*, a new audio-visual work by Gulli Björnsson, in her debut with the Seattle Symphony. Other season highlights include performing on the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum’s celebration of Julius Eastman and an appearance with the Bach Festival Society of Winter Park, FL.

JJI has premiered solo and chamber works by a diverse range of musical artists, including David Lang, Nicky Sohn, Michael Gilbertson, Hilary Purrington, Shelley Washington, Kate Moore, Chris Rountree, Gulli Björnsson, Molly Joyce, and Paul Lansky. In 2024, JJI will release *UNBOUND*, the culmination of a multiyear commissioning and recording project. A sought-after and versatile collaborator, JJI’s recent chamber and ensemble performances include

appearances with the New York Philharmonic's Nightcap Series; Cuarteto Latinoamericano; the Verona Quartet; Wildup; Duo Linu; and soprano Molly Netter, among others.

JJJI has also gained a reputation as a sought-after concerto soloist. Recent appearances include performances with the Asheville Symphony, Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, Utah Symphony, Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, Augusta Symphony, Duluth Symphony Orchestra, Sinfonietta Riga, New West Symphony, New York Youth Symphony, American Composers Orchestra, Southwest Michigan Symphony, Kansas City Symphony and more. Equally fluent in classical and contemporary genres, her interpretation of *Concierto de Aranjuez* has enthralled audiences across the country, and her premieres of new guitar concertos, including Steven Mackey's *Aluminum Flowers* in 2024, continue to break new ground. Over the last five years alone, JJJI has premiered major concertos by composers Natalie Dietterich (*light, beloved*, 2018), Hilary Purrington (*Harp of Nerves*, 2019), and Krists Auznieks (*Apvāršnis Kamolā*, 2021), in addition to Mackey.

A committed educator, JJJI is Associate Professor of Music in Guitar at Indiana University Jacobs School of Music and former Assistant Professor of Guitar at Arizona State University's School of Music, Dance and Theater. She has presented master classes and workshops extensively, including at the Peabody Institute, Eastman School of Music, Yale University, and Dublin's National Concert Hall, among many others.

In addition to advocating for the music of her contemporaries, JJJI also performs and records many of her own works, and she continues to develop her distinctive compositional voice.

During her spare time, JJJI enjoys cooking and creating weird sounds on Ableton. She is sponsored by Augustine Strings and GuitarLift by Felix Justen.

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**JJI**  
**Critical Acclaim**

“...talented, sensitive...brilliant.”  
*Calgary Herald*

“A graceful and nuanced player...she presented an intimate, captivating performance”  
*Kansas City Star*

One of the "21 composers/performers who sound like tomorrow.”  
*Washington Post*

“She is not just a guitarist but an artist, this Jiji.”  
*New Criterion*

"The highlight of the concert was guitarist JJI's brilliant collaboration with the DSSO...dazzling...an utterly breathtaking, elegantly nuanced performance."  
*Duluth News Tribune*

“Jiji demonstrated extraordinary skills in her playing...”  
*News Gazette*

# JJI



March 8, 2024

## A whisper to a scream: ‘Aluminum Flowers’ plays out the guitar’s history

The world premiere by Curtis composer Steven Mackey samples the development of guitar sounds over hundreds of years.

By Peter Crimmins



The guitar is roughly 600 years old, [more or less](#), and in that time has gone through many changes. Composer Steven Mackey’s “Aluminum Flowers” showcases the many voices the guitar has developed over that time.

“I wanted to paint a picture of not just the guitar, but the guitar player,” said Mackey, who teaches composition at [Curtis](#) and Princeton University. “Guitarists tend to be musical omnivores. They have a connection to

Spanish music of the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries. They also have an intimate connection with rock music of the ‘60s and ‘70s.”

“It’s not a linear story,” he said. “More showing the whole blossoming of what a guitarist and the guitar have become.”

“Aluminum Flowers” has its world premiere this Saturday at Verizon Hall in the Kimmel Center.

Mackey has spent most of this decades-long career championing the electric



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guitar in classical music. In “Aluminum Flowers” he makes the soloist — in this case Jiji Kim, or just JIJI, a graduate of Curtis who now teaches at Indiana University at Bloomington — to take on the many moods of the guitar, from nylon string acoustic inspired by the 16th-century Spanish guitar to the ‘70s classic rock sounds of Santana to the use of electronic looping pedals.

The piece requires JIJI to put down an acoustic guitar and pick up an electric, and back again, over the course of the five movements. She said it’s like switching characters on the fly, and it’s terrifying.

“I’ve been in night terrors for the last four months,” she joked, sort of. “But, no, it’s been really fun. It’s so cool to be going back and forth from the classical and electric guitar, completely different instruments.”

Mackey, an accomplished guitar player himself, admits he would not try to play his own piece because of the technical challenges of moving between acoustic and electric.

Written for the electric guitar and a full orchestra, “Aluminum Flowers” moves from lyrical melody to jarring dissonance, from soft finger-picking to raucous power chords. It starts quietly with a classic acoustic guitar, which Mackey jokes sounds best to the person closest to the guitar: the player herself.

“That’s so true,” JIJI confirmed. “House concerts are the best. Not in a big Verizon Hall kind of place, because we have to amplify it. It’s definitely much quieter. It’s very intimate.”

For the second movement, JIJI moves to an electric guitar and introduces delay pedals, allowing her to accompany herself.

“She’s plugged into this matrix of things, so that every note she plays has consequence to other things,” Mackey said.

Mackey gave his third movement the Spanish title “Canción” in homage to Carlos Santana: “Great guitar player that I grew up with, who has a very singing, lyrical sound that is more like a viola than anything else.”

The fourth movement takes cues from the avant-garde music of John Cage, who would prepare a piano by putting screws and washers on the strings. JIJI weaves a guitar pick through her bass strings to create a gamelan sound of a rattling gong then plays the high strings with a bottleneck slide.

The fifth and final movement incorporates looping pedals, giving JIJI a more polyphonic range to compete with the rest of the orchestra.

“You’ll see a really wide range of the colors and tones and timbres of the guitar,” JIJI said. “It feels like — I don’t want to say this — like a sampler. But you’re getting a five-course meal.”

Mackey has been putting electric guitars into classic music for so long, he takes both the credit and the blame for the instrument’s prominence in the genre. He can still recall, verbatim, the stinging criticism he received after the 1992 premiere of “Physical Property,” one of the pieces he is best known for.

“Combining the electric guitar with the classical string quartet is a terrible idea, and Mackey does it terribly,” Mackey remembers a critic writing. “The only good thing about being at this performance was the comfort in knowing that this will never happen again.”

In the 25 years since “Physical Property” debuted, the electric guitar has become more accepted in classical ensembles.

“Half of the new music groups — the young twenty-somethings out of conservatories that are starting new music groups — have an electric guitar in the band. So, I think I win,” he said. “Not to mention the fact that I’ve probably performed ‘Physical Property’ 300 times with 50 different string quartets.”

Although decades apart in age, Mackey and JIJI both came up steeped in ‘70s hard rock, Mackey as a guitarist playing blues rock in Northern California clubs in the 1970s and JIJI as an 8-year-old growing up in the 1990s in Seoul, Korea, with her parents pushing her toward

classical guitar when she would have preferred to play in bands.

Both say they were inspired to pick up the guitar by Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple's Ritchie Blackmore. While Blackmore was at the forefront of '70s rock guitar, he has always claimed that his deepest inspiration comes from early guitar

music of the Renaissance, bending "Aluminum Flowers" historical sweep into a full circle.

"Aluminum Flowers" will be performed Saturday, March 9, at Verizon Hall, on a program with the world premiere of James Ta's "Te Deum" and Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6 ("Pathétique").

# Ji Ji



April 10, 2024

## From South Korea to Amherst: Jiji to play UMass Fine Arts Center

By Keith O'Connor

She may not be a rock star like guitarists Eric Clapton or the late Jimi Hendrix, but in the classical world, Jiyeon “Ji Ji” Kim, is a rock star in her own right.

Known professionally as Jiji Guitar, the adventurous classical guitarist regarded for her virtuosity and command of diverse repertoire will complete the UMass Fine Arts Center’s [classical guitar series](#) for the season on Thursday, April 11.

Showtime is 7:30 p.m. in the Bowker Auditorium.

Jiji was born in South Korea, home to the many K-pop bands now seeing success in the American market with their mainstream music. Believed to have begun in 1992, K-pop was born one year before Jiji’s birth in 1993 in Seoul. But her success in music would take another form.

Considered by many as a child prodigy, Jiji began playing classical guitar when she was 8 years old.

“Our parents (she has two sisters), especially our dad, had a great influence on us. He wanted us to be artists of some sort, which he thought would be cool. He wanted to be an artist himself, but went on to become a doctor. My dad would buy tons of CDs and live concert DVDs for us to listen to and watch.....Eric Clapton, Deep Purple and others like the ‘Jesus Christ Superstar’ movie. That is how I got into music. I wanted to be in a band. He

said no to the drums, no to an electric guitar, but bought me a classical guitar and thought I should start from there,” Jiji said.

At the age of 14, Jiji was accepted as a student at Korea National University of Arts before a life-changing experience would send her to America to further her studies with Grammy-winning classical guitarist Jason Vieaux, considered “among the elite of today’s classical guitarists.”

“Jason was touring South Korea and giving master classes. I loved his album which featured the song, ‘Letter from Home,’ and when I saw him perform it live, it sounded just like the record. I said, ‘Who sounds like this?’ because so many times recordings sound better than a live performance. His teaching style was so amazing and constructive, and I told my parents that I wanted to go to Cleveland to study with him,” Jiji said.

And, that is exactly what she did, moving to Cleveland to study with her mentor at the Cleveland Institute of Music, where he headed the guitar department. After studying with Vieaux for two years, Jiji became one of the first guitarists to study at the Curtis Institute of Music, where she graduated in 2015 with a bachelor’s degree in guitar performance.

In 2016, Jiji became the first guitarist in 30 years to secure first prize in the Concert Artists Guild Competition.



More recently in 2021, she received acclaim by The Washington Post, who selected her as “one of the 21 composers/performers who sound like tomorrow.”

In recent years, Jiji has presented solo recitals at Carnegie Hall’s Weill Recital Hall, Lincoln Center, 92nd Street Y, Caramoor, Green Music Center, and the National Art Gallery among other distinguished venues. Her performances have been featured on television and radio on PBS’ On Stage at Curtis, NPR’s From the Top, Hong Kong broadcast station RTHK’s The Works, and others.

Jiji has premiered solo and chamber works by a diverse range of musical artists such as Michael Gilbertson Hilary Purrington and Shelley Washington. A sought-after and versatile collaborator, her recent chamber and ensemble performances include appearances with the New York Philharmonic’s Nightcap Series, Cuarteto Latinoamericano, the Verona Quartet, and violinist Danbi Um among others. This March she made her debut at Verizon Hall with Curtis Symphony Orchestra premiering a new guitar concerto by Grammy-winning composer Steve Mackey.

The popular classical guitarist has gained a reputation as a sought-after concerto soloist including recent appearances with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, Augusta Symphony, American Composers Orchestra, New York Youth Symphony and a host of others. Equally fluent in classical and contemporary genres, her interpretation of Joaquin Rodrigo’s landmark “Concierto de Aranjuez has enthralled audiences across the county, and her premiere of new guitar concertos continues to break new ground. Over the last five years, she has premiered three major concertos by Natalie Dietterich, Hilary Purrington and Krists Auznieks.

She will soon release on CD “Unbound,” the culmination of a multi-year commissioning and recording project and plans on performing three

compositions from the piece during her UMass concert.

Jiji also performs her own compositions combining the old and the new by introducing electronic media and acoustic music together. In the more modern world, Jiji is also a DJ sharing her love for more upbeat dance style music such as happy hardcore, a subgenre of hardcore dance music, and Berlin experimental electronica.

After earning a master’s degree from Yale School of Music, Jiji turned her attention to more than just making music, but teaching the art form to students as an assistant professor at Arizona State University School of Music. Currently an associate professor of guitar at Indiana University’s Jacobs School of Music, Jiji has presented master classes and workshops extensively, including at the Peabody Institute, Yale University, and Dublin’s National Concert Hall.

Today, teaching is one of her “favorite things to do.”

“Teaching comes naturally to me. I love working with people....for me that is my personality. I enjoy helping people and solving problems together,” said Jiji, who was a teaching assistant during her undergraduate years at college before teaching Korean while attending graduate school.

Equally at home with both acoustic and electric guitar, Jiji’s concert program at UMass will range from traditional and contemporary classical to free improvisation, including “classical goes electric.”

So, when asked if she ever wishes she could be Eric Clapton or Jimi Hendrix instead of Jiji, she responded, “I have a great answer for that.”

“Everyone is taken. So, I have to be myself and I am happy being Jiji,” she said.

# JJI

## ACOUSTIC GUITAR

April 28, 2024

### Classical Guitar Phenom Jiji and Her Polystylistic Adventures

The South Korea born guitarist/composer reflects on her diverse influences, shares practice techniques, and previews some upcoming projects.

By Gretchen Menn



Jiji plops to the floor the moment she sees there are cats. Allowing them to approach at their own pace, she earns their immediate approval. She is swarmed with purrs and fluffiness as we sit in my apartment, talking about music, matcha, and the Steven Mackey guitar concerto that we are both scheduled to perform—Jiji with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra

in March, and I with the Utah Symphony in April. I hand her the Kenny Hill classical that I currently have on loan. I have been dying to hear what a one-of-a-kind instrument sounds like in the hands of a one-of-a-kind musician. A few phrases, and the beauty of the tone, fluency, and effortlessness expressed in a mere handful of notes overwhelms any melancholy I might feel that I don't sound like that *at all*.

Jiji's playing reminds me that virtue and virtuoso share a common Latin derivation. Though in guitar circles, the term virtuosity may carry implicit associations with ostentatious displays of technical prowess, superfluous speed, and ego-driven musical one-upmanship, Jiji exerts her facility toward the highest artistic purpose: allowing music to be experienced in its fullest potential. Whether she is breathing fresh life into staples of the repertoire or introducing new pieces, her sensitivity allows the music to bloom in her hands.

Jiji began studying classical guitar as a child in Seoul, South Korea, and ultimately continued her education in the U.S., earning degrees from the Curtis Institute of Music and Yale School of Music. Her interests extend beyond the classical guitar, as the 31-year-old artist embraces the spectrum of music,

gracefully navigating and integrating worlds that seem at odds with each other. She performs concertos as a soloist with orchestras across the country, while listening to metalcore in the dressing room; sculpts otherworldly sounds with distortion and flangers on her Fender Stratocaster; is perfecting her two-handed tapping technique in preparation for the Mackey concerto—most of which is on electric guitar; and cites influences as diverse as pop, rock, and doom metal.

As both a composer and an advocate for her contemporaries, Jiji has premiered a variety of new works by modern artists across genres—three major concertos in just the past few years by composers Natalie Dietterich (*light, beloved*, 2018), Hilary Purrington (*Harp of Nerves*, 2019), and Kristis Auznieks (*Apvārsnis Kamolā*, 2021). Jiji is a busy performer as well as a passionate educator, currently an associate professor of guitar at Indiana University Jacob's School of Music. Her upcoming album, *Unbound*, set for release this year, is a collection of commissioned compositions.

Here, Jiji reflects on her diverse influences, shares practice techniques, and previews some upcoming projects.

### **When and why did you first pick up the guitar? Who were your teachers and mentors?**

I started playing guitar when I was eight; I actually wanted to play the electric guitar. My parents bought DVDs of great artists for me to watch, including Eric Clapton, Deep Purple, Santana, the Assad family, and more. I asked for an electric guitar, and they said they would get me one after a year of classical guitar learning. They never bought me that electric guitar [*laughs*]! My first teacher, Cho-in, really helped me fall in love with the guitar. It was incredibly helpful in my early years of playing.

[Jason Vieaux](#), a Grammy-winning artist, was the reason I moved to the United States. He taught me so much, and I am incredibly grateful. Professor Benjamin Verdery at Yale University also played a significant role in helping me find my own voice. I am still in touch with them; they are my mentors to this day.

**The worlds of classical and electric guitar are often quite separate. How**

### **do the two interact and overlap for you?**

There was always this yearning to play to play the electric guitar, so I always had that world close to me. I have much appreciation for both worlds; I know they are very different, but I love music in all its forms. The sound of the electric guitar and all the effects inspire me a lot as a composer. I am always checking out the plug-ins and the pedals that other artists are using and how they use them to create cool sounds. This track I recorded ["Touch Him When (Heavy)"] was inspired by [drone metal band] Sunn O))) and Robert Fripp. Polystylism is so cool.

### **You have an interesting story about moving to the U.S.**

I moved to Cleveland to study with Jason Vieaux at the Cleveland Institute of Music. However, I couldn't live in the dorms because I was too young, around 15. So, because my parents couldn't move to Cleveland, I had to get a legal guardian. I ended up finding one through Craigslist. In hindsight, that was not the best way to go, but it all worked out.

### **Have you dealt with obstacles or setbacks, and how did you navigate them?**

Moving to the U.S., learning a new language, and experiencing cultural shock proved to be quite challenging. Trying to live on my own for the first time in a new country was very difficult. Navigating it all was quite a feat. I had to go through it; I didn't fight it much. I think all these challenges made me a better person. Somebody told me growth is a painful process.

During my second year of the master's degree program, I encountered a left-hand wrist injury. I wasn't taking care of my body and practiced through the pain, a decision I now realize was wrong. With a big competition on the horizon, I practiced through it all. The injury still affects me to this day if I push myself too much. I am now extremely cautious, listening to any pain signals and taking shorter practice segments. It's important to note that practicing should not resemble the movie *Whiplash*—that's not a healthy approach for anyone.

**Talk about your practice routine and how it has evolved. How do you currently divide and prioritize your time?**

First, I figure out the left- and right-hand fingerings. I don't start practicing until I have figured this out. Then, I plan out my priority group practice. Group A involves tasks that require the most time, like learning new pieces or anything that's new. Group B is for refining pieces that are 60 to 80 percent done. Group C is dedicated to chamber music, sight-reading/technical workouts, and running through pieces.

On a good day, I aim for three to four hours of practice, and I don't play anything beyond that. I allocate 50 percent of my time to Group A, 35 percent to Group B, and 15 percent to Group C. Recognizing that you can't finish everything in one day, consistent practice is the key to success.

**You shared with me a technique for getting difficult passages up to speed. Would you describe it?**

It's called bracket practice. JV [Jason Vieaux] taught me this—I can't take credit for it. Let's say you have a 16th-note passage for two bars in common time. I'll play the first three notes close to tempo, maybe a few clicks under. You aim to play them perfectly seven times in a row, with two to three seconds between the groupings, not like a continuous loop. Then, you add one more note, and so on, repeating the process. If you make a mistake, you start over the seven countdown [back to one]. Once you feel comfortable, you then start in the middle of the passage, like the sixth or seventh note. The key is that you play exact left- and right-hand fingerings and then you start a new bracket, repeating the process.

**What are some of your strategies for preparing difficult music?**

Trying not to panic, start by reading through the piece first. Identify the most challenging parts and follow these steps: 1) Work on fingerings; 2) implement bracket practice; and 3) refine every day. Don't expect to play perfectly in one day. Patience is crucial, and don't be afraid to throw in a few laughs and maybe some swearing during a practice session [laughs].

**You draw from a wide array of styles and influences. Talk about some of the most important ones and how they have shaped you.**

Pop music, electronica, and doom metal really inspire me as a composer. When I'm

not performing, I write music that is influenced by that sound world. Writing music has been instrumental in my growth as a musician, and I find it incredibly helpful. DJing was a way for me to discover cool new music and explore. Although I haven't done it in a while, I really want to get back into it.

**The Steven Mackey concerto you're playing at the Curtis Institute is a beast of a piece. What are the biggest challenges it presents, and how are you preparing?**

The biggest challenges were the new technical aspects of the piece. Being mostly a classical guitarist, tapping and looping were really foreign to me. It's very, very different from what I've ever done. I'm just taking it day by day, practicing, and receiving great teaching from you, Gretchen! I love the challenge and learning new techniques.

**You have done some wonderful collaborations with your husband, Gulli Björnsson.**

The Seattle Symphony has commissioned a new piece by my husband, who is creating an audio-visual piece for me at their incredible venue, Octave 9. This is set for May 2025. I feel blessed to work with him; he's truly one of my favorite composers. We perform together and create weird, fun music, exploring areas like virtual reality and digital art music.

**What have been some career highlights so far? Anything you're hoping to do in the future?**

Getting an associate professor position at Jacobs School of Music, a role I hold dear alongside my colleagues Petar Jankovic and Daniel Duarte; winning Concert Artists Guild Competition's first prize in 2016 (I can't believe that was eight years ago!); and signing with Kirshbaum Associates management are my highlights.

Artistically, I have premiered over 20 solo guitar pieces and three guitar concertos, which has always been my dream: to be working with living composers and premiering new works. I am super excited for my collaboration with R&B singer Daniel Fears, supported by the Austin Guitar Society, a totally new experience for me. Additionally, I have a new solo guitar piece written by one of my favorite composers in the whole wide world, David

Lang, a Pulitzer winner, scheduled for April.

Looking ahead, I am excited about the possibility of continuing collaborations, be they classical or otherwise. While I admit that I don't have everything figured out, and I am not entirely sure about my future plans, I am always down to explore the unknown and figure things out as I go.

### **What She Plays**

Jiji plays a 2009 Gernot Wagner spruce double-top guitar (650mm) equipped with a Kremona piezo pickup, and prefers normal tension D'Addario Pro-Arté strings. In place of a traditional footstool, she uses a GuitarLift guitar support

# JJI

I CARE IF YOU LISTEN

July 7, 2022

## 5 Questions to JJI (guitarist, composer, arranger)

By Ciyadh Wells



Guitarist, composer, and arranger **JJI** is most known for her striking performances on both the classical and electric guitar. Her collaborations and premieres include new works by João Luiz, Hilary Purrington, Kristis Auznieks, Gulli Björnsson, and Nina C. Young. **JJI** continues to push the boundaries of modern musicianship, with her only artistic limitations being those of her own imagination. Most recently, she took on the role of bandleader for [Wild Up's](#) latest album, [Julius Eastman, Vol. 2: Joy Boy](#). Released June 17, 2022 on New Amsterdam Records, the album is the second of [several forthcoming](#)

[volumes](#) in which *Wild Up* will explore the late composer's music.

**THERE ARE NUMEROUS TECHNICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE CLASSICAL GUITAR AND THE ELECTRIC GUITAR, WITH EACH NEEDING A DRASTICALLY DIFFERENT APPROACH TO PERFORMANCE. WHAT MADE YOU CHOOSE TO BEGIN PLAYING THE ELECTRIC GUITAR AFTER HAVING ALREADY EXCELLED AT PLAYING CLASSICAL GUITAR?**

I've always played electric guitar. I'm not great at it, but I love it. Actually, my first choice of instrument was electric guitar!

My heroes were Jimi, Ritchie Blackmore (from Deep Purple), PJ Harvey, and Eric Clapton...But my parents bought me a classical guitar first and promised to buy me an electric guitar after a year of studying classical (which never happened). I bought my own many years later.

Growing up, I was always listening to pop music. I always wanted to play in a band—I did play in a punk band one summer in Winthrop, MA, and it was awesome. I started to write more stuff on electric guitar and realized that I didn't see the need to separate my passions. I started playing electric guitar in my "classical" recitals, and it's been really fun! The stuff I write is inspired by midwest emo, drone music, and doom metal.

**COLLABORATION IS A LARGE PART OF YOUR ARTISTIC PRACTICE AS A PERFORMER AND SOMETHING THAT SEEMS TO EXCITE YOU. CAN YOU SHARE WHY COLLABORATION IS SO IMPORTANT TO YOU?**

I think a huge thing has to do with my personality. I love working with others—I feel like I become a better artist by working with others because it requires a lot of flexibility, open-mindedness, and curiosity. For example, I have been working with architect [Drew Busmire](#) and composer [Gulli Björnsson](#). We were like, "We like technology and music, what can we create together?" We developed three VR projects together, and we had no idea how we were going to do it, but we just started and things came together. For me, at least, it's exciting that three folks from different worlds can create new and exciting art together!

**YOU WERE A FEATURED BANDLEADER ON WILD UP'S JULIUS EASTMAN, VOL. 2: JOY BOYWHERE YOU ARRANGED AND RECORDED TOUCH HIM WHEN (LIGHT) / (HEAVY). THOUGH YOU HAD PERFORMED THE WORK PRIOR TO THIS**

**RECORDING, WHAT LED YOU TO CONTINUE EXPANDING IT, AND HOW HAS YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO THE PIECE CHANGED OVER TIME?**

WildUp started the [Julius Eastman anthology project](#) with New Amsterdam records a few years ago, and we decided it would be a cool thing to release my arrangement of *Touch Him When* on the new album! I love performing the piece, and I really wanted it to be part of Wild Up's large vision. It's an honor and an absolute dream to be part of the band's project.

"Light" is the version I had performed regularly, and the "Heavy" version came together just in December 2021 when working with Wild Up Artistic Director and conductor [Chris Rountree](#) and producer [Lewis Pesacov](#). Wild Up has been performing other works by Eastman for years now, and we've been approaching the pieces with our own interpretations that I feel are very unique and exciting.

**WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO RELEASE TWO VERSIONS OF TOUCH HIM WHEN, AND WHAT DO YOU HOPE THAT LISTENERS GET FROM HEARING THEM CONCURRENTLY?**

Chris Rountree, Lewis Pesacov, and I went back and forth before the recording session. When I had arranged this piece back in 2017-18, there wasn't a score available, just a recording on YouTube, and it's really cool. It sounds like it was recorded in an apartment; you can hear all the noise of NYC: cars, people walking, birds, etc. I thought it would be cool to recreate that.

When arranging this piece — since I don't have a perfect pitch — I had to listen with headphones and play on the piano like every five seconds and write down each note. It took me a whole week! But during the process, it felt like a beautiful mind scene. I started finding all these clues and answers in the phrases and intervals. It totally made sense to me. I felt like Eastman left a cookie crumb path for me to find. I found myself being totally immersed in

the beatings, each interval producing a different rate of beatings, and it just made sense to me. (In acoustics, a [beat](#) is an interference pattern between two sounds of slightly different frequencies, perceived as a periodic variation in volume whose rate is the difference of the two frequencies. With tuning instruments that can produce sustained tones, beats can be readily recognized.)

Chris and Lewis also know that I love doom metal, so we thought, “Why don’t we take that acoustic beating to the extreme, the next level?” Lewis was really the master of the sound world for Heavy version: the right fuzz and distortion, and dubbing with baritone guitar. We also used [frippertronics](#) (we love Robert Fripp and Brian Eno), and we had fun taking this piece in a different direction. The notes are still the same, but it feels like a totally different piece! That’s also why it was so important to us. The notes (Light/Heavy version) are identical, but a new

interpretation can really make the piece so different. I really think Julius might have enjoyed the heavy version, at least that’s my hope!

**YOU HAVE A WIDE VARIETY OF INTERESTS AND WEAR MANY HATS IN YOUR DAY-TO-DAY WORK, BUT WHAT IS SOMETHING THAT YOU HAVEN’T HAD THE CHANCE TO DO YET ARTISTICALLY THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO IN THE NEAR FUTURE?**

I’d really like to work with a gaming company! In my free time, I play a fair amount of video games. I think video games are a perfect art form, in my opinion. It checks all the boxes: visual/auditory/interactive/story-telling. I mean, I would die to work with a gaming company. These days, I’m really into Don’t Starve Together by Klei Entertainment and Stardew Valley by ConcernedApe.



# JJI



June 30, 2022

## Time Future

By Olivia Giovetti

... The other first recording here is “Buddha,” one of Eastman’s last-known works, and one—like many of his compositions—left open to interpretation. Wild Up commits to this by offering “Buddha” in two iterations, subtitled “Field” and, later on in the album, “Path.” The score for “Buddha” visualizes the architecture of its sound; there are notes and dynamics, but Eastman’s design of the score also shapes the notes as the center of an oval, with concentric lines emanating from the center. As “Field,” this emanation feels like the meditative exercises that locate the practitioner’s seat in a room, on a street, in a neighborhood and a city—emanating ever outward to understand the place we occupy in the universe and the subtle interconnectedness of all life. “Path” still maintains that circularity, but charges outward, slow but surefooted.

With director Christopher Rountree, Wild Up mimics this same structure in the outline of the album, beginning with “Joy Boy” before moving into “Buddha (Field).” At the center of the album then is another duo pairing, “Touch Him When” performed in a pared-down solo arrangement by guitarist Jiji (the stage name of ensemble member Jiyeon Kim) in versions subtitled “Light” and “Heavy” that move from a Zen-like space of neutrality (“Light”) into a holy war of dissonance (“Heavy”). It’s here that “Buddha (Path)” picks up, leading us into the twins of “Joy Boy” and “Stay On It.” We’re once again in a sea of ticker tape, of Pollock-like splatters of joy. Listening to the album a second and third time, it’s this sense of hard-won pleasure that continues to echo out, ecstatic and enduring.



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# JIJI



The Creative Independent

September 14, 2022

## On finding the courage to do your own thing

Musician JIJI on following an unexpected path, the things she's learned from teaching, and embracing what you love without fear.

A conversation with Vanessa Ague

### **I know you travel a lot and you've been to a lot of places. What have you learned from that?**

I learned there's ways to get better at traveling. After the pandemic, I got rusty with the traveling; I was just losing stuff and forgetting to bring some of the gear. It's a thing that you need to practice and really think about. Also, going to places I've met so many amazing people. I feel like that's been really special to me, if I get to stay a little bit longer, really getting into the community.

### **You've been making so much music lately. I was wondering if we could talk about your collaboration with Hillary [Purrington]. How did you two first meet?**

Hillary and I met in 2015. We were housemates. We'd moved in without knowing each other, though. We responded to this Craigslist thing for an eight bedroom house, and we've been having this amazing friendship and this collaborative friendship since. I have hundred percent trust in her. It's an amazing thing to have in a friendship, and then also in collaboration.

There's two projects we're working on now. She won a competition, so she got to write an orchestra piece, *Harp of Nerves*, for American Composers Orchestra. And I commissioned a solo piece from her last year, too.

### **The commissioned project is for an album that you're working on to come in the future, right? Could you tell me a little bit more about that?**

The album is called *UNBOUND*. I commissioned eight composers to each write solo virtuosic guitar music to explore what 21st century virtuosity would sound like on guitar. They're from all over the world, and they all happen to be my friends, too, which has been really cool. I feel like I always work with people that I have a personal connection with. I'm putting a lot into these pieces and it's a lot of empathy and connection.

This word "virtuosity" is weird. It's a term that has really followed me around, a term that I had struggled with. As a soloist, it's always been like, "Oh, you need to be a virtuoso. You need to play things that are flashy and virtuosic." I always struggled with the term.

I wanted to do it on my own, with people that have amazing voices, and with their scope of the world and their perspective, to see what they thought virtuosity meant. One composer thought rhythmic complexity was a form of virtuosity, and somebody wanted to use this guitar resonance technique called campanella style as a form of virtuosity. Everyone has such a different take on it. You give them one word and everyone's so different.



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### **How has your interpretation of virtuosity for yourself changed through working on these pieces?**

I've learned a lot. Even my technique changed. Some [of the] composers are not guitarists, so I had to learn my guitar in a new way to make certain passages work. In doing so, that's another form of virtuosity, figuring things out that haven't been done before. I love challenges. I love working on something and doing it every day. This work of discipline. It has been incredibly rewarding when something works if it's something I hadn't been able to do a month ago.

### **Do you have a practice routine that you follow?**

Yes, I always do my fingerings first whenever I get a piece. What fingers am I going to use on my left hand and my right hand? And I make a path. And then I swear by this practice technique that was taught by my former teacher Jason Vieaux. It's bracket practice. You start a passage that's incredibly difficult—let's say there's a 20-note scale that's ridiculous. I start with a three note cell, and then if you do it at tempo and you do it seven times in a row, but with breaks between, and if you don't make a mistake, you can add one more note. While doing so, if you make a mistake, you have to do it all over again. So then you start over, and you do it until you get it seven times in a row.

So now you have a, let's say, seven note cell that you've been doing perfectly seven times in a row. Now you're going to start a new cell from the fourth note, and then you're going to start a three note cell from the fourth note, and you're going to keep doing these little brackets. At the end of the practice, you have these crazy brackets that you've made, and that you've built on this 20 note passage. And then you try to play from the beginning, and if you've been practicing really well, you should be able to have finished learning it within 10, 15 minutes.

It's really efficient practicing, and it's one of the things that feels like totally Zen, meditative work. I actually have videos of me doing it, so I can show to my students how to practice this way. Sometimes I feel like they [put it off] and think, "Oh, this is too hard, I'm going to practice it later." So, I was like, "Think about it. It's like a monster in your closet. Are you going to be scared of it all night? Or do you want to open the door and make sure there's no monster?" You have to fight your fear.

### **How has it been teaching?**

I've learned a lot as a teacher. The younger generations, they're really asking the right questions and they're very strong and they're very aware and sensitive. I've had a lot of deep conversations with them. You know, what's going on in the classical music world, and what they think they need for their education. I had this one student who's like, "Oh, it's a lot of Western classical, European men. What can we do? Is there anything that we can do to have more inclusive repertoire in our repertoire class?" And I was like, "Yes." I totally revamp my curriculum every year. These conversations that I have with my students have helped me grow as a person.

### **What in particular have you loved about teaching recently?**

Recently we've been doing a Women's History Month annual concert that started from last year. I find the repertoire for them, but the really cool thing was that they bring their own music they want to learn. So they were the initiating these projects, or they were initiating to find these composers. It was so different from when I was a student. Just seeing that shift, that change, has been really rewarding to me.

### **What was it like for you when you were a student?**

You were just told what to do. I had to always rebel a little bit. When I was a student, you just did it, you didn't really ask questions. You didn't even really think. You just played, like, "What are these competition pieces? What are the audition pieces?" That was it.

**Things have changed so much recently, especially in classical. I feel like people are much more open to being more creative. And including other voices. Not just, you know, Bach.**

Exactly. Everyone's been interested in finding their own voice. That's the shift that I'm seeing, finding your own voice and being sensitive.

**In your own playing journey, how have you been able to find your voice?**

Basically my biggest thing was, growing up, I wanted to play in a band. I was not trying to do the whole classical thing. I was seeing Prince, seeing PJ Harvey, and seeing Jimi Hendrix. That was my dream. I wanted to play in a band. And my parents got me an acoustic guitar and they were like, "This is on sale, this is what you're going to do, and maybe we'll buy you an electric," which never happened. So growing up, I was always listening to bands. I was listening to Radiohead or Björk or Muse. And punk. One of my favorite Korean punk bands was called Cherry Filter. And that was my thing.

I always felt like you needed to compartmentalize your liking of classical music. You couldn't embrace all these different genres of music if you're trying to be a classical guitarist or a classical musician. And one year, it totally changed my life, and that was 2014, going to Bang on a Can Summer Festival. You didn't have to separate those passions. That was huge for me.

So, I've been doing classical and electric guitar recitals, which has been super fun. And I've been calling them my mixtapes. I want to show you the scope of my world, the music that I like. This is the music that I listen to every day. So I start with super crazy arrangement from like 400 years ago by this really amazing Renaissance female composer named Claudia Sessa. I start with that and I do the commission pieces, and I end, always, with my own electric guitar pieces, and they're very influenced by doom metal and Midwest emo. That's been my jam now. I was just like, "This is it. This is who I am. Take it or leave it. I don't care." It's been so great. I have a lot of musicians come up to me and say, "Oh my gosh, I love that you embrace all this different music, because that's how I feel, too."

I see so many more people doing really different things with their solo recitals. I've been just finding that voice and not being scared anymore. That voice, right? It's like, "Oh, I should be playing this kind of thing," or "I should be doing that." And then I was like, "Well, no. There is no such thing as 'I should be.' It's more: 'I want to do this. And I want to show what I'm doing and what I love.'" That's been the big shift for me. Finding that kind of courage and going forward with that has been life changing.

**How did it feel once you started going along this path you wanted to be on, where you're blending lots of genres and just doing what you want to do?**

First I was terrified. I was like, "Oh my god, everything that I'm doing is terrible. Everyone's going to hate it." But I've been [getting] such great feedback. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying everyone loves it, but the people who love it, they love it. And, I'd rather be either loved or hated than get a lukewarm response.

**How do you balance all of your projects?**

It's therapy and working out. I feel like people are shy about that kind of thing, but I am aware that I can just go go go go go go. I have experienced bad burnout. I definitely felt the burnout in December. I had this big project, and I was so done. I was so burned out. I'm trying to pace myself to slow down a little bit more and also talking to a therapist and taking care of my health has been important for me.

**If you could go back in time, what's one big of advice that you would give your younger self?**

I used to be more a people pleaser. I always knew what I liked, but I was always afraid. I was like, "Oh, people are not going to like this." If I could give any advice, it's this: It's okay

not to be loved by everyone and the people who really love you exactly for who you are matter the most. Don't be afraid.





