

STIX

to Watch by Jayson Greene

UP-AND-COMING ARTISTS READY



José Franch-Ballester

Age: 26

Instrument: **Clarinet**

Curtis alum José Franch-Ballester comes to the classical world with a unique pedigree; he was born into a family of clarinetists and *zarzuela* singers (a flamboyantly dramatic, lyrical Spanish genre that interpolates dancing and spoken interludes) and studied tango and other South American folk genres with native musicians throughout the continent. Franch-Ballester notes that he draws on his experience performing tango and other popular genres during his outreach work with schools. “I can explain to kids how the music is related to the culture, how the dances and all the stuff tied together,” he says. This season, Franch-Ballester will perform a battery of recitals across the country; he will also continue his affiliation with Lincoln Center’s Chamber Music Society Two and the woodwind quartet Astral Winds.

Favorite musical “first”:

Last May I did a chamber concert in the town where I was born in Spain, in Valencia. It was the first time they had chamber music there. Friends from Curtis came from Europe and the United States to play with me. I performed Mozart’s “Kegelstadt” Trio with viola and piano. My family and friends were there, and it was a very special moment.

Christian Steiner

Every year, SYMPHONY trains the spotlight on six promising young soloists whose careers are on the tipping point of greater fame and success. In an era when classical music stardom remains a hazardous prospect, these artists have demonstrated both the talent and the grit to rise to the top. Here, they reveal some of their hopes, ambitions, pet peeves, and expectations as they stand poised to take the next big step.



TO MAKE THEIR MARK

Whom do you admire?

I admired Leonard Bernstein when I was very young. It was his charisma and personality, his ability to talk to people and all the different things he did with music—Broadway, jazz, conducting, piano.

Do you think it's important to speak to the audience?

I make a point, all the time, of speaking to the audience. I always see the concert as being in the room with people that you would like to talk to, and them to you. I usually talk about the relationship I have with the piece.

Non-classical repertoire:

In 2003 I got to do a tour of South America. I got to visit most every country and it really changed my life, because I started realizing how much popular music they had, and I thought that it wasn't explored enough with classical musicians or clarinet players. Most of this music has been passed through the generations, not written down, and I'm very happy because I got to work directly with the musicians from each country and learned how to improvise during concerts. I do a lot of tango where I improvise with the clarinet.

Should a classical musician's job description include things like school visits?

It's one of my passions. I love to show students not only the beauty of classical music but the fun, the passion of the music. With this South American repertoire, where you can improvise and do a lot of things, I try to show them that classical music can be more than the boring concert they picture. It can be very fun.

Favorite orchestral repertoire:

In clarinet music, we don't have the great repertoire that violins and piano have. We have a few concertos that everybody else plays. That said, I love to perform the Copland Concerto. He was inspired by a tour that he was doing in South America; he was in Rio de Janeiro. You can hear folk song in it. He was so in love with the music that he wrote letters saying that he was inspired to write this concerto. Every clarinetist plays the piece a little different; some play it jazzy, some play it like klezmer—they have fun with it, maybe because it was written for Benny Goodman, and he was a jazz player.

Are you into jazz?

Yes I am. I love to listen to jazz and improvise along. I think it helps you with classical music. I take from jazz the idea that each time you play a piece, it has to be unique. I don't want it to be that I studied the way to play the piece and then I become a professor to teach people to play it the way that I did.

One person who really inspired me was the jazz player Paquito D'Rivera. During that tour in South America, he was there, and I had the opportunity to play with him. There is something in his playing that is very charming and unique.

If you weren't a musician, what would you do?

I am very much into art; I like photography very much. That is one of my other passions. When I travel for my concerts and I am in a very beautiful place, I always have my camera with me!

I make a point of speaking to the audience. I always see the concert as being with people that you would like to talk to, and them to you.

Yuja Wang

Age: 19

Instrument: **Piano**

Yuja Wang is about to have the year of her life. The nineteen-year-old

Curtis Institute of Music senior debuts this season with orchestral heavyweights like the New York Philharmonic; the Houston, Chicago, and San Francisco symphonies; and the NHK Symphony Orchestra in Japan. It's all pretty heady, but this shy, unassuming pianist from China seems disinclined to make a fuss, either about the big appointments or the fact that she was named a recipient of the 2006 Gilmore Young Artist Award.

And luckily, when I came here, I studied with Gary Graffman, and he was Russian-taught as well.

Here we have more chamber music. We have more exposure to the whole spectrum of classical music—opera, dance, ballet. In China I was just focusing on solo piano.

If you weren't a musician, what would you do?

I would want to be an actress. I did some acting when I was really little in China. When I was cuter! (*Laughs.*) I was in this biographical series about a Chinese leader. I was his

We have really fresh composers at Curtis. When I read through music and listen to why they write it, it's often so different. I learn a lot that way.

Had you been to the United States before Curtis?

No, only for the audition. I hadn't learned any English in China. I had to learn English when I came to Canada for a year before starting Curtis. It was a big transition from playing in China to studying in the U.S. I came to Canada when I was fourteen and to Curtis when I was fifteen.

How is musical training different in China?

My teacher was really critical; they have really high standards. My teacher was Russian-taught, so there were a lot of similarities with the Russians about the sound, how to produce the sound.

granddaughter. So either an actress, or I can see myself as an architect.

What do you do offstage when you visit an orchestra?

Often I'll perform a recital or do an outreach program. I like that. I did that once with elementary school students and high school students. I like how excited they were, and there was definitely more participation and enthusiasm. It was just more fun. I'd like to do more of that kind of thing, if I get past the language barrier! I think getting ready to talk is actually more nerve-racking than playing the piece.



Christian Steiner

What was your reaction to becoming a Gilmore Young Artist?

I was like, "Are you guys spying on me?" They made an exception because [Gilmore Artists] usually have to be U.S. citizens and I still only have my student visa. So I'm the only Chinese Gilmore Artist!

Do you get tired of performing a piece?

I'm performing the Prokofiev Second fifteen times this year, and yes, that's one of my weaknesses. I get bored easily, so I have to find something deeper so the piece doesn't get dull for me.

Exploring new repertoire:

I'm doing Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* with some

Curtis students, and I've done some Ligeti etudes, which I really enjoyed working on. We have really young, really fresh composers at Curtis who show me their stuff. When I read through music and listen to why they write it, it's often so different. I learn a lot that way.

Dream collaborators:

Jeff Buckley, but he's dead, unfortunately. A lot of jazz players I really admire. I love Art Tatum. I would have loved to play tango with Astor Piazzolla. My dad is a jazz drummer in China, so he listens to a lot of that. My mom is a dancer, so I heard a lot of Tchaikovsky ballets and jazz all mixed together.

Lisa Pegher

Age: 26

Instrument:

Percussion

As a classical solo percussionist, Lisa Pegher is blazing a particularly rocky, untrodden trail. Preconceptions in the field often stereotype percussionists as time-keepers and special-effect generators rather than as equal musicians. There are almost no role models. In fact, there's almost no repertoire, let alone a set of proven warhorses to sell to orchestra programmers. None of this seems to particularly faze Pegher, who splits her non-orchestral time between soloing with forward-thinking groups like the Pittsburgh New Music

Ensemble and drumming with her art-rock band Mira Mira.

Role models:

As a soloist, I try not to just look at percussionists as role models. One of the reasons that I became a solo percussionist was because whenever I was playing in the back of the orchestra, I was always jealous of the solo violinist. I was like, "I don't want to be sitting back here playing the triangle; I wanna make all that beautiful music!" And then I said, "Well, why can't I do that?" Just because I play percussion that doesn't mean that I shouldn't be able to play all the beautiful melody lines and create all of these new things.

As far as role models, I tend to look more at someone like Hilary Hahn or Yo-Yo Ma. One of my favorite drummers, just because he's in one of my favorite popular bands, is Carter Beauford, who plays with Dave Matthews Band. I just think he is an extraordinary musician.

On the lack of repertoire for percussion and orchestra:

It's a good and a bad thing, I think. The bad part about it is that a lot of conductors will not be comfortable with the repertoire and so they'll turn away from hiring a solo percussionist. But in some ways,

Most audiences really love to see a solo percussionist because it is art onstage, basically. Even with the instruments laid out—it's beautiful in itself.

it's a great thing, because it's the only instrument right now where the repertoire is being created. That's part of what I get to do, go out and find composers and say, "Listen, would you be interested in going in on this grant with me to get a concerto?" Actually, I'm working on one with composer David Stock.

Is percussion repertoire unfairly stereotyped?

Yes and no. Most audiences really love to see a solo percussionist because it is art onstage, basically. You're not just playing one instrument. Even with the instruments laid out on the front of the stage—it's beautiful in itself.

I get worried that musicians are the ones who stereotype solo percussion pieces. Musicians will say, "Oh, here comes the circus act." There is a difference between someone who gets onstage and plays the drums and someone who gets onstage and makes music. When that starts to happen—whenever you see a solo percussionist get up there and play like a musician and bring that to the front of the stage—then hopefully musicians will stop using that stereotype.

Favorite work:

My favorite piece right now, just because I know it so well and I feel I'm very close to it, is *Veni, Veni Emmanuel* by James MacMillan. I just think it's a beautiful, well-written piece for percussion in that it's continuous—it doesn't stop,

so there's no awkward, you know, "Here's the first movement, here's the second movement." It's built in an arc, and it's this continuous thing that happens onstage and it's very climactic at the end.

Most unusual instrument ever played:

Recently, I learned a solo work that called for quarter-tone glockenspiel bars. That was an odd instrument. I actually had to get them made specifically for the piece that I was learning. Things come up where you either have to build the instrument or you have to go and find that one craftsman who's willing to make it for you. Composers come up with these sounds in their head or something that they've witnessed over in Asia or Africa or somewhere, and they come back with it and say, "This is what I heard in my head; can we make this?"

Do you find yourself trolling for materials?

Oh yeah, I have my own shop, and I get the saw out and build my own instruments. It's part of the fun of it, because I like to paint and draw and stuff, so building instruments to me is part of the art.



Tanya Bannister

Age: 29

Instrument: **Piano**

Tanya Bannister was among the last pianists to perform in New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina swept in and forever altered the course of the city's history. A month before the storm, Bannister was awarded the Gold Medal at the 2005 New Orleans Piano Competition. In response to the dismaying situation post-Katrina, Bannister co-founded Pianists for New Orleans with three previous competition winners, performing across the U.S. and raising money for NOLA arts groups.

Favorite musical "first":

The first thing I remember was performing, I think, when I was five years old. It was a little music competition in Hong Kong, where I was born, and I did a little piece by Shostakovich. It was the very first time I played in front of a full audience and I actually remember it very well. My teacher said for me to go out and bow, so I did that. I went out and gave a deep bow to the piano with my butt to the audience!



Alexandra Petlin

Efe Baltacigil

Age: 28

Instrument: **Cello**

A particularly vicious snowstorm brought sudden attention to Philadelphia Orchestra Assistant Principal Cello Efe Baltacigil in February 2005. With most of the orchestra sidelined by the weather, administrative heads got together and devised an impromptu recital program featuring Emanuel Ax, the scheduled guest artist, and Baltacigil. *Philadelphia Inquirer* critic David Patrick Stearns braved the storm to hear the concert, and his rave review, calling Baltacigil "an artist about to have a major career," proved prescient. The next

year, Baltacigil was awarded an Avery Fisher Career Grant, and he will make his Carnegie Hall concerto debut in February, performing Tchaikovsky's *Rococo Variations* with the New York Youth Symphony.

Favorite musical "first":

The first one that comes to my mind is when I was eight and I played for my elementary class

I love improvisation. There are no music stands; there are no rules; there are no mistakes. It's an unimaginable feeling.

in second grade in Istanbul, Turkey. When I played low strings, they started laughing their heads off. I was so offended! I guess lower strings in the cello can sound like many things, especially if you're a beginner!

Whom do you admire?

The founder of modern Turkey. I owe him, because if it wasn't for him, I wouldn't probably play Western classical music. His name is Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, from the 1920s. Because of his incredible leadership, Turkey became the only secular country with a Muslim majority.

Yo-Yo Ma has been very kind and helpful. Six years ago, I played with him in a memorial concert for Isaac Stern, and on the way out, he said, "I'll be watching you."

How has your Avery Fisher Career Grant been put to use?

It's going to definitely help two things. One is that I do love to communicate through music with younger audiences, meaning kindergarten and elementary school. I think that's the age that you can really reach as far as possible. Thanks to Young Concert Artists, I had some opportunities to do this, and I'm hoping to expand them. The other one is of course towards my instrument and bow and all those expenses.

Describe your experience playing for kindergartners.

You play a piece and then you ask, "What did you think of that?" Then they draw you this picture in thin air and it moves you so much. It's so inspiring. Hopefully one student goes home and says, "I'd really like to play the cello. Could you

Dream collaborator:

I would have liked to have worked with Carlos Kleiber. He's my absolute musical obsession. He was such a musician; every note is so alive. Everyone under his baton just sounded like a supreme soloist, yet the sound was so cohesive.

Whom do you admire?

I admire Claude Frank, whom I studied with. I just find him the type of musician that I would aspire to be. He's almost 80 and he's still so humble; he's always learning and he's constantly searching to be a better musician.

Most memorable performance:

Probably playing at Wigmore Hall in London. Even though I grew up in Hong Kong, I've always known Wigmore Hall as very prestigious, a place where great people played. So when I played there, where I had been

to so many amazing concerts, I was keenly aware of what I wanted to live up to in myself.

What do you do offstage when you visit an orchestra?

I definitely love to talk to the audience. That's something I've been wanting to do anyway, so that a conventional program can be pertinent to a different perspective through the knowledge that I can give them in between pieces. It's something I think we all have to do.

If you weren't a musician, what would you do?

Something more social than being a pianist!

How was Pianists for New Orleans formed?

It was basically an idea that came up between myself and Petronel Malan. We're good friends and she's also a prizewinner in the New Orleans Piano Competition.

When I played Wigmore Hall, where I had been to so many amazing concerts, I was keenly aware of what I wanted to live up to in myself.

We decided we had to help in some small way and the Musical Arts Society of New Orleans and everyone else at that time was just on the floor, obviously. So the only way I thought that they could raise money was through us, through a performance of all the previous winners who could play concerts. We sort of all organized concerts in our area; I organized ones in New York and in Connecticut. We ended up doing one last summer in New Orleans, and we

actually managed to raise \$100,000.

Favorite orchestral repertoire:

In terms of concerti, I must say I really do enjoy playing the old standards. I've also been playing the Clara Schumann concerto; I've got an interest also in women composers, like Amy Beach, Sofia Gubaidulina. There are tons of fantastic 20th-century women composers.

What contemporary works do you prefer?

A lot of solo work. I've been lucky enough to have a piece commissioned for me by Christopher Theofanidis. He's a big orchestral name, but I'm premiering a solo work of his in March at Symphony Space in New York.



Christian Steiner

get me one?" If so-called "classical music" can reach younger audiences, then I think the future is really bright.

Non-classical collaborations:

The Istanbul Festival takes place in June. I'm playing with this incredible Argentinean guitar player. His name is Ricardo Moyano. He's about 42 and he's a dear friend of our family. My brother, who plays bass in the Minnesota Orchestra, will join us and we'll play this trio concert. It will not be very classical; it will be Latin-American and Turkish folk music. I love doing that stuff. I love improvisation.

Do you get a chance to improvise?

I try to get together with my good friend Nick Kendall and bass player Ranaan Meyer, who both are involved in

Time for Three with Zach Dupue, as often as possible, and we just play our hearts out for about an hour or two. There are no music stands; there are no rules; there are no mistakes. It's an unimaginable feeling. I come out of it reborn. You really cannot do that in an orchestra; if you do that, you'd probably get fired.

If you weren't a musician, what would you do?

That's an easy answer. I would be a professional windsurfer. I started windsurfing when I was seven, thanks to my dad's boat, and I've been sailing for about 20 years.

Where do you see yourself, career-wise, ten years from now?

I never make any concrete plans in my life. I just follow the path in front of me.

Michi Wiancko

Age: 30

Instrument: **Violin**

Depending on the night, you can catch Michi Wiancko performing as a member of the renowned Los Angeles Piano Quartet; soloing with orchestras like the Los Angeles Philharmonic; playing among her friends in the conductorless ensemble ECCO (East Coast Chamber Orchestra); or belting out tunes as singer and violinist for her innovative ensemble Kono Michi in downtown venues like New York's The Knitting Factory or at jazz strongholds like the Blue Note. "I have such a wide range of musical activities and I feel they all enhance each other," says Wiancko.

Other favorites:

I love hip-hop. I love Run DMC—I've had all the lyrics of the album *Raising Hell* committed to memory since fifth grade! Pure poetry! I love good, old-school country, like Johnny Cash, Dolly Parton, and George Jones. Sufjan Stevens is a new favorite of mine. Radiohead inspires me in the same way Björk does, in that they are constantly exploring.

What would you do if you weren't a musician?

One thing I've always wanted to do is explore my more scientific side. When I was younger I was obsessed with animals and the ocean; I wanted to be an oceanographer or a professional diver.

To open up my nonclassical side took a lot of thought, almost like psychological permission to allow myself to stray from something I had been doing my whole life.

"Sometimes I will take away an idea from a session with my quartet members and apply it to a solo piece I'm playing."

Whom do you admire?

Right now, I'm adding a completely different dimension to my creative side, which is that I'm beginning to compose non-classical music for string quartet, drums and bass, and I'm also singing. Just in terms of learning how to open up different channels of creativity, which I'm not trained to do, there are a lot of pop artists I admire. Björk is a good example; the way that she's formed her own creative path I find really inspiring.

How was ECCO formed?

You wake up one day to realize that so many close friends and colleagues are among the best chamber musicians in the entire world, and you think: "I'm surrounded by these people; I'm hanging out with these people. We're getting coffee every week. There's so much potential there and so much energy; what would happen if we all got together and tried to create something?"

How do you cultivate your non-classical side?

Well, I'm still in the process of that. I formed my own band, called Kono Michi—"Kono" means "with" in Japanese and



"Michi" means "path," or "road," or "way," or "that which is yet unknown." To open up my nonclassical side took a lot of thought, almost like psychological permission to allow myself to stray from something I had been doing my whole life. It is hard to find balance in that regard, just in terms of time, because I'll be on tour for a really long time or playing concerts and what I need for songwriting is a week where I'm just completely free and I can stay up til four in the morning writing.

Also, in terms of singing, I've been told I have a very nice voice, and I love to sing, but I'm a total perfectionist because of my violin career. So I'll get up there and sing and I have no training at all! It can be really scary. In a way, it goes against everything I've been raised to think. I didn't win a ton of competitions in order to sing.

What do you do offstage when you visit an orchestra?

Sometimes I'm asked to do out-

reach at a local school and I always get a big kick out of that. I love relating to kids and it just reminds me of when I was that age—I started learning violin when I was three, on a Cracker Jack box—and looking up to older musicians. I know a lot about nonclassical music as well, and I can use that as a hook to pull them into what I'm trying to say musically.

Where do you see yourself ten years from now?

I'm still very ambitious about my solo career and also about the chamber ensembles that I'm involved with. But I'd also like to become very serious as well about my own band and creating my own music. I think I'll probably be playing the Beethoven concerto one weekend and maybe playing at a punk club with a band the next weekend! ∞

Jayson Greene is associate editor of SYMPHONY.

SYMPHONY'S

2007

Guide to Emerging Artists

Our annual listing of emerging soloists and conductors is inspired by the breadth and sheer volume of young classical talent—more than we could hope to capture in the preceding short profiles. This list is intended as a reference point for orchestra professionals who program and book classical series, and does not imply any endorsement by the American Symphony Orchestra League or SYMPHONY.

SYMPHONY asked artist managers who are Business Members of the League to provide us with the names of artists who have performed professionally with orchestras, but have been under representation for five years or less as of January 2007. Managers have provided web addresses for the convenience of orchestras seeking new talent; there you should find details on each artist and contact information for managers at each firm.

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