

# Identity: Embracing your Individuality

By Dr. Matthew Lau

**A**s artists, we must embrace who we are through our artistic voices. In this article, I will discuss my own experiences in moving beyond the graduate school mindset, discovering a unique voice, programming to broad audiences, securing grant funding, unifying a solo project, and embracing my unique stance as a performer. This is largely in the context of my 60-minute, non-stop solo vibraphone program, *IDENTITY*. I hope that these topics will provide entry points and concrete examples for readers who are aspiring performers. Strive to design a career that is unique and honest to you.

*IDENTITY* features custom video and electronics with a diverse selection of original arrangements, new commissions, and seminal works from the contemporary repertoire. *IDENTITY* re-examines the jazz-dominant vibraphone in a contemporary world and simultaneously expresses my own identity in the classical percussion scene. *IDENTITY* means embracing my own individuality and idiosyncrasies by pushing boundaries set by institutions and synthesizing different genres that I like. Additionally, as half of the percussion duo Fisher/Lau Project with Abby Fisher and co-artistic director and co-founder of the contemporary percussion group The Up:Strike Project in Hong Kong with Karen Yu, I bring examples from those endeavors.

## OVERCOMING THE GRADUATE SCHOOL MINDSET

As a classically trained percussionist, my education was geared towards placing me in the orchestral timpani or marimba categories. I still love that music – the techniques I acquired from them have enabled me to execute the pieces I do today – but it’s not what I do when I tour. I emerged feeling constrained. Looking back at my playing at the time, it was a product of this mindset: risk-averse.

For example, “Cálculo Secreto,” by José Manuel López López, is quite popular in the contemporary vibraphone world, and it has become a core work in my set

since 2017. I looked back at my first recording of the piece from 2017: it’s so academic, calculated, and clean; I’m not taking any risks. As I play it now, I say to the composer: “Look, I know what you wrote, but I think I should interpret it this way.” I decided that I could offer something else to it. The composer seemed to like it, so I keep doing what I’m doing.

That composition by López López and my arrangement of “Vermont Counterpoint” by Steve Reich were two seminal pieces since 2017, long before *IDENTITY* came about. In its current version, a work by López López called “La Céleste,” is part of the program and includes bespoke video, with images by French videographer

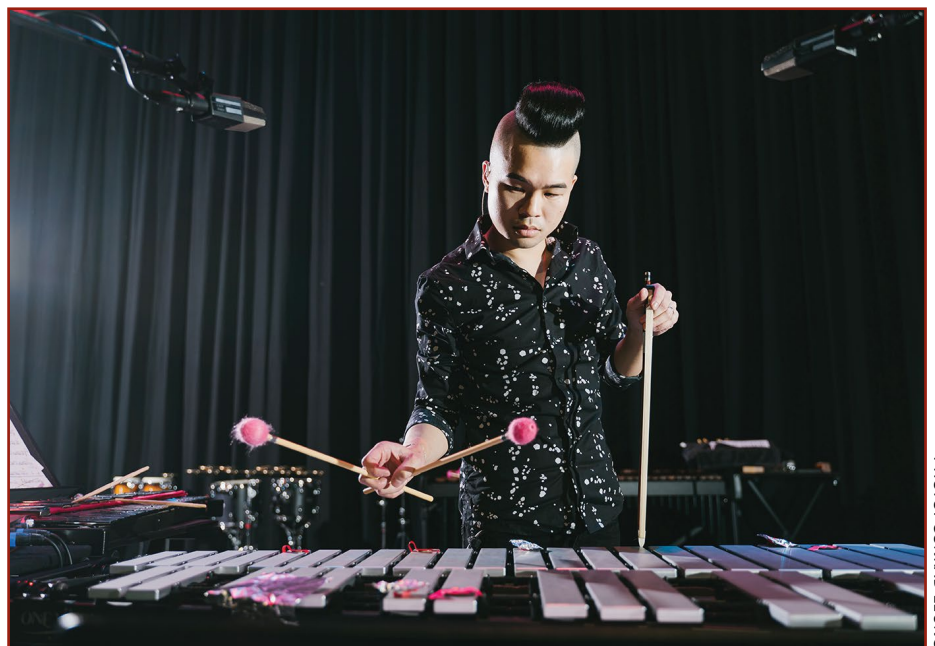


PHOTO: CONRAD LEUNG

Pascal Auger; together with real-time audio-generated visuals for the Reich made by London-based Hong Kong artist Cheryl Hui.

As performers, our job is to bring alive what's on the page through a variety of methods. First, by understanding and communicating what the composer intended, and equally by injecting our own personalities in the context of the musical syntax. This validation, in turn, helps one move beyond the internalized graduate-training mindset.

This clinical mindset extended into many other works. I zoomed in on tiny imperfections and flaws, never feeling ready to tackle recording seminal pieces by such composers as Donatoni or López López. It took years to move beyond this perfectionism, not only to focus on expression, but into a new way of interpreting. Sheer accuracy does not make the piece.

## DISCOVERING MY OWN VOICE

Developing my artistic identity has meant embracing unique influences from across genres. My tastes span from avant-garde works to country, disco, can-topop, and Spanish pop. For too long, I felt self-conscious and apologetic for my varied interests, believing they didn't fit the narrow lanes prescribed to classical musicians.

I've learned to proudly incorporate diverse passions into my programming and commissions. This *mélange* of styles resonates with audiences, allowing them to make up their own minds. For example, with Up:Strike, we juxtaposed Piazzolla, Cage, and Manoury in a bespoke cocktail pairing concert. We sold out two shows, with the majority of the audience being non-musicians. When the program tells a story that includes such variety, then even if the audience doesn't understand everything I play, they develop a sense of "I don't like these parts, but I like these other things." After all, art is subjective. I'd rather leave my audience with questions in their heads rather than have them looking at how impressive/fast I can play.

This self-acceptance has shaped my

programming philosophy: offering diverse entry points to connect with broad audiences while retaining my artistic integrity. I aim to feature under-represented composers alongside novel styles, communicating through high-caliber performance with my own whimsical twist rather than intellect alone. Staying open to broad interests has also allowed me to secure funding from diverse organizations for commissions, recordings, and touring.

## PROGRAMMING TO THE PUBLIC

I'll ask audience members, "What do you like about this?" They'll say, "I don't understand the music at all, but it led me to different, interesting thoughts."

Smart programming is not about committing to the European avant-garde tradition (which I love so much), but about presenting periods and styles of music from which contemporary composers are drawing influences, and which are diverse. It took me years to understand this; voices in the back of my head from graduate school and from communities I was a part of (e.g., contemporary classical musicians who sneer at anything with a groove) had created an insular bubble that I needed to break free from.

Widening my scope of view, as an audience member, I wouldn't want to go to a 75-minute concert of Donatoni's mu-

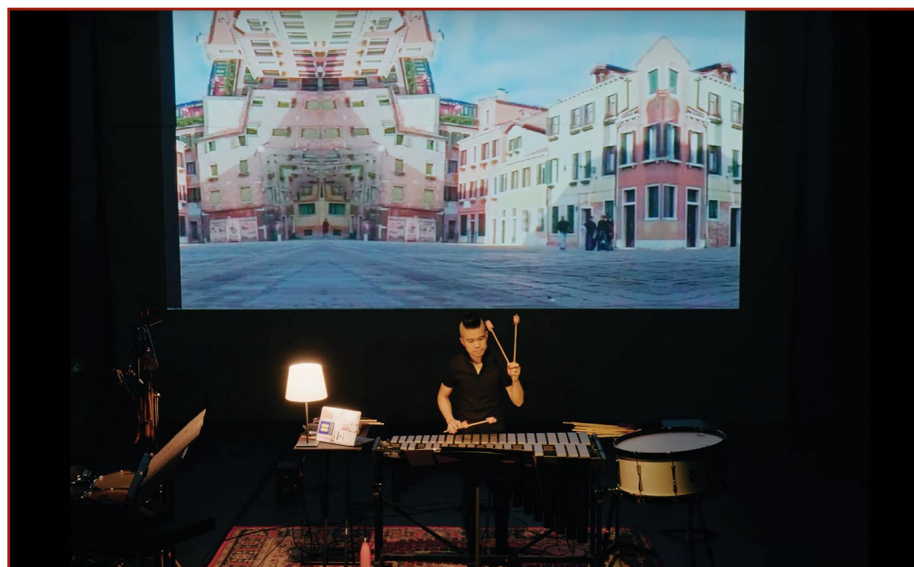
sic. Then, as curators who present music to the public, that's not the only kind of music one should be playing. It is best to promote a wide variety of composers to the public. We are so lucky to be working with living composers whose styles are all over the spectrum. Programming only one-note aesthetic works is rather dull to me and doesn't celebrate the wonderful diverse world of our living composer cohort today.

It took me until last year to stop being apologetic about what I like: I love country music, I love disco music, I love certain pieces that I commissioned that combined the sound of disco with difficult licks, but I also love Donatoni, Lauricello, Berio, Saariaho, and Manoury. The product of my love for hard licks and early '90s Spanish-discopop resulted in *Loops* for live electronics and vibraphone (2019) by Von Hansen. The second movement *Gr@wEix* closes my current *IDENTITY* set.

That's how *IDENTITY* came about: all the pieces I like.

That's how we program for Upstrike: what's needed? What's the void? How do we program in a way that promotes our voices and doesn't sacrifice our core values as artists?

I choose the pieces I play not because I want to show how fast I can play, but because I'm playing the music I want and because of the meaning behind the music.



Matthew Lau performing López López's "Cálculo Secreto"

## SECURING GRANT FUNDING

*IDENTITY* received funding from two major grants: the Iguana Fund and a Live Arts Boston Grant (LAB Grant) from the Boston Foundation.

The Iguana Grant was the smaller of the two from a club in Cambridge, Mass. who are interested in folk and country music. I told them I like country music and that I have a concert-length commission, “Raven Black Hair,” with my duo by Indianapolis-based drummer, creator, and multimedia artist Jordan Munson, based on my autoharp iteration of “Wildwood Flower,” scoring for drums, autoharps, autotuned singing, tuned wrenches, and live electronics.

For many of these, the search process is often simply a round of Googling. I was

moving to Boston when *IDENTITY* was forming, so I was looking to get a sense of that area. You apply for many things, you get rejected. That’s normal. There have been countless rejections around my own projects and with Fisher/Lau Project, but there are also many great things happening – including getting acceptances! It’s a boost of confidence when what was accepted is what you believe in. It validates you and you move on to the next thing. In fact, my campaigning statement for the PAS Board of Advisors was based on embracing who you are and breaking traditional narratives.

Deciding who to apply to and who to ignore is also an essential part of the process. I always read the funding body’s mission statements, because you can real-

ly tell whether you align with what they believe in. Then I read the requirements for the application. When you try to force it to happen (e.g., when you don’t meet all the requirements), then it won’t happen. It’s very much like looking for jobs. My husband always says: “It’s not about you, it’s about them.” Yes, you want/need the job, but are you who/what they’re looking for? Even when you have all the abilities and skills, it’s not about you.

In Hong Kong, with Up:Strike, we learned that we needed to be strong with our mission; similar to catering to audiences, we stick to our guns. It’s important to have a strong artistic statement. With that, your voice and your project should be funded. With my colleague and co-director Karen Yu, we always say we are not changing the scene, we are adding what’s missing to the community.

As I keep going, keep playing, keep refining the program, meeting composers, adding and subtracting parts, everyone who then breathes life into the project shares insights. Through this process, I’ve learned about similar experiences others have had, and heard many stories that have gotten me to the stage where I no longer prevent myself from applying. Likewise, others’ negative experiences or warnings don’t prevent me from moving forward and applying. You just keep going.

You don’t arrive at a destination, you’re always in progress. Avoid stagnation, or deciding something’s good enough.

## DESCRIBING AND UNIFYING A PROGRAM: A NONLINEAR PROCESS

The biggest challenge for me was finding the idea of *IDENTITY*. I was playing the pieces for years, just doing normal concerts where I introduced each piece separately. Bringing it all together under one title was the main challenge. For other types of issues, there’s always support: if I don’t know how to use a piece of software I can find YouTube tutorials, troubleshoot, or ask others for help.

But coming up with something so core

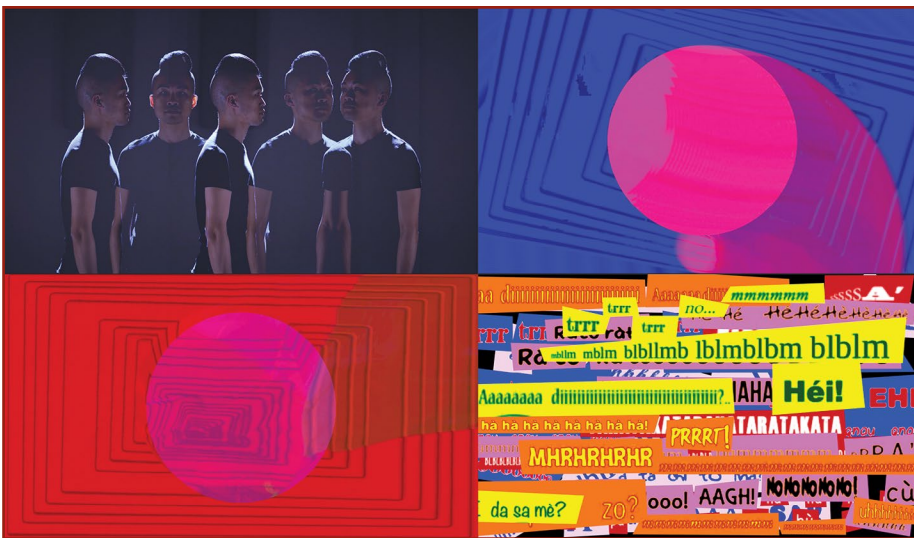


PHOTO: XUAN

Images from the video for Massimo Lauricella’s “Ritratti Surreali”



PHOTO: MEMPHIS FUNG

to you, writing down your artistic statement, describing your values and voice, is something that is very vulnerable, requiring a conversation with yourself that only you can answer. I had nascent ideas but hadn't yet arrived fully; the process was like peeling layers of an onion. Sometimes you're not aware that you're peeling them throughout the experiences you have.

Finally, it happened when I was applying to this year's PASIC with Up:Strike. The Focus Day theme this year was Latin composers, and our chosen piece was by Argentine Facundo Negri based on a poem by queer Chilean poet and diplomat Gabriela Mistral. It was about immigration and pain and losing your voice, on point with what has been happening in Hong Kong over the past two years. It struck me that this also captures who I am — as a person. The following month, I rolled out my first iteration of non-stop *IDENTITY* (without applause between pieces), which I have continued since.

## OWNING MY IDENTITY AS A PERFORMER

Defining my artistic identity has meant boldly challenging expectations. We as Asians aren't underrepresented in the classical musical world, but as a queer Asian percussionist, I'm underrepresented. You can find Asian American players in major orchestras in the country, but how are we otherwise being heard? Are we embracing who we are? Embracing my identity has empowered me to confront narratives that used to limit my creative ventures.

By touring programs aligned with my vision, I'm expanding the percussion repertoire and technique. Technique serves the art rather than existing for its own sake. I aim to push boundaries by fusing electronics, looping, videos, and extended techniques in my commissions. I asked Asian-American video artist Xuan to make an accompanying video to go with Massimo Lauricella's "Ritratti Surreali" (PAS 2021 Composition Contest winner), to elevate his music with striking visu-

al images much like the ones in López López's music. He initially wrote this piece for Italian percussion virtuoso Ben Mauricio Omar (of Donatoni's Omar), and later dedicated it to me as part of *IDENTITY*, for which I gave the premiere in November 2022.

"Ritratti Surreali" was idiomatically so well-written. Some licks demanded hard work, but overall its language falls so well and is so beautiful on the instrument — something I hadn't seen in a while. As a soloist and in my duo, I avoid pieces that sound as though they fall into a category or type, which is something I often come across from academic clusters. Massimo's piece is different — gorgeous in a way that I hadn't heard before.

This journey has required scrutinizing my motivations. Am I programming works out of genuine interest or seeking validation? Through this continual self-reflection, I've found that aligning programming with my values elevates integrity over chasing acclaim.

Discovering my artistic voice remains an ongoing process of growth and self-discovery. As I peel back the layers, I aim to program with authenticity and share my delight in the vibraphone's myriad possibilities. This individuality connects with listeners open to new sonic experiences. By embracing my multifaceted identity, I hope to empower other artists in defining their creative paths. This journey requires risk, but paying attention to what one genuinely identifies with will guide the way.

## CONCLUSION

I often meet younger players, such as graduate students, who are in similar positions of being ready to move on from the mold and become their own person. Some teachers inhibit this by keeping them on the fundamentals or a set curriculum, not necessarily encouraging their creativity. I hope that *IDENTITY* and these insights into the process of being a touring musician, acquiring funding, and defining one's voice will help these individuals move forward boldly.

Stay true to who you are! The jour-

ney ahead might not be straightforward and may often be tumultuous, but if you can find your voice and make impactful art with the techniques you acquire in school, it's fully worthwhile!

If you are interested in hearing the pieces mentioned, visit [www.matthew-laumusic.com](http://www.matthew-laumusic.com).

Dr. Matthew Lau was hailed by *The Aspen Times* for his "soulful and technically impressive solo" at his vibraphone concerto debut at the Aspen Music Festival. He is an award-winning percussionist who performs a wide range of repertoire with an absolute commitment to communicating the meaning and essence of percussion music to audiences through high-caliber performances with a whimsical twist. As a queer Asian percussionist, Matthew challenges conventional narratives and works to change traditionally prescribed career paths. He is on the PAS Board of Advisors and PAS Keyboard Committee, and Board of Directors for The Vibraphone Project Inc. Matthew is the co-founder and artistic director of Hong Kong contemporary percussion group The Up:Strike Project, and is part of the duo Fisher/Lau Project. Matthew has performed and taught in universities, festivals, and competitions in the USA, Argentina, Mexico, Peru, Taiwan, Spain, Australia, and Russia. Matthew is a grant recipient from the Boston Foundation and the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, which named him winner of the Award for Young Artist.