

# Finding Your Own Path: an Interview with Dr. Matthew Lau

By Carmen Lopez

**H**ailed by the *Aspen Times* for his “soulful and technically impressive solo” at his vibraphone concerto debut at the Aspen Music Festival, Dr. Matthew Lau performs a wide range of repertoire with an absolute commitment to communicating the meaning and essence of percussion music to its audience, from an arrangement of Bach’s “Violin Sonata” on marimba to avant-garde contemporary pieces by Franco Donatoni and Iannis Xenakis. He is aiming to democratize classical contemporary music through high-caliber and approachable performances, and an interactive social media presence with his miniseries #LauLicks, with a whimsical twist.

Pursuing a strong interest in contemporary percussion music, his vision and aesthetic are aimed to expand the ever-growing percussion repertoire by pushing existing boundaries, incorporating electronics and technologies, and discovering new sounds. His interest in exploration of new music has led Matthew to commission new pieces with many renowned composers. He is the co-founder and artistic director of the contemporary percussion group The Up:Strike Project, and one half of the percussion duo Fisher/Lau Project with percussionist Dr. Abby Fisher. As a queer Asian percussionist, Dr. Lau is passionate about challenging conventional narratives and helping other per-

cussionists create their own career paths. Dr. Lau is on the PAS Board of Advisors and PAS Keyboard Committee, and on the Board of Directors for The Vibraphone Project Inc. Matthew has performed and taught in universities, festivals, and competitions in the USA, Argentina, Mexico, Peru, Taiwan, Spain, Australia, and Russia.

**Carmen Lopez:** Why did you choose to go to percussion when you were younger? And what made you decide to continue pursuing it?

**Matthew Lau:** I started playing piano when I was in first grade or so. At about 15 or so, I knew very clearly I wanted to go into music. I had found out you can

pursue music as a major in college, and there was a pre-college program I could get into. But I was deciding between piano and percussion, because with percussion you get to play all these different pieces on different instruments – albeit at that point, marimba was my main instrument. In high school, I was always the mallet player because I played piano before I played percussion.

**Lopez:** Going back to your experience as a young percussionist, who were the people you looked up to, like mentors? At that age, did you notice any inequalities with different genders or races?

**Lau:** It was a little different, because I

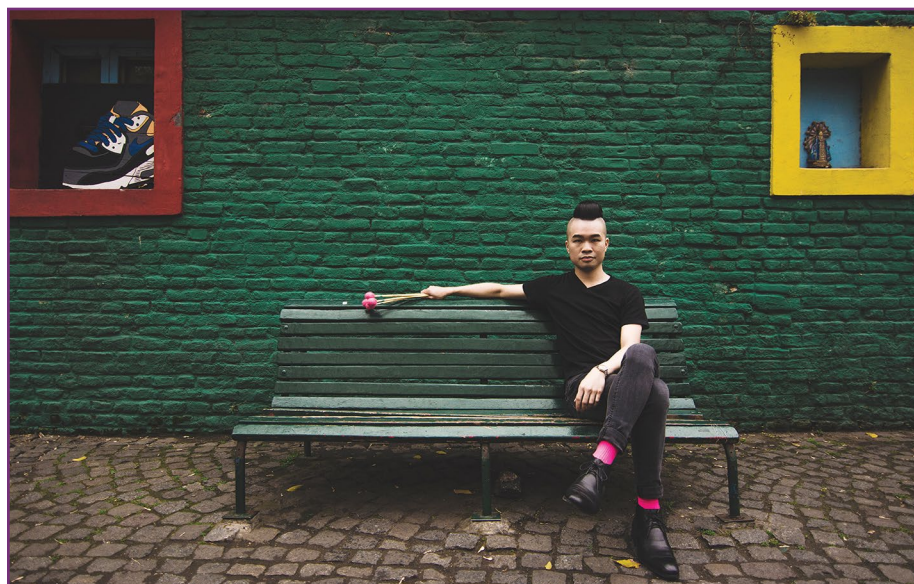


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## You can be who you are if you stay true to yourself.

grew up in Hong Kong, so this was back in the '90s to early 2000s. We are very progressive in certain ways, but back in that time – even now in Hong Kong – I don't think people were actively approaching the topic of racism and diversity, which is very sad, but that's just how it is in Asia. It's something that is always going to be a struggle. But it's deep rooted in society and institutions, and it has to deal with teachers and politics and all of those.

But growing up in Hong Kong in a very homogeneous Asian society, we played piano or some kind of melodic instrument. We didn't play drumset as a first instrument, or jam on things like bongos. At that time, resources were a little scarce. We couldn't just go on YouTube and search what's available. So my teacher was like, "You should play Ney Rosauero, you should play..." There's a lineage of pieces you should play, and I would follow that lineage because it was a very marimba-heavy program. So I would buy CDs, and the people I looked up to were marimba soloists, because those were the only people I knew. That music resonated with me.

My parents are in the fashion business, so we would come to the U.S. every year so my parents could meet with their clients. I would take lessons with teachers from different universities when traveling. I wanted to get first-hand information on repertoire. I took lessons with Naoko Takada in L.A., lessons with She-e Wu when she was still in New Jersey. So it was a lot of marimba playing in my undergrad.

It's interesting to think about this now, because I talk a lot about being typecast as that token Asian kid who plays keyboard. People in grad school in the States especially would typecast me as a player who can just play mallets.

But I think it sort of planted a seed in

my head that might be sort of self-deprecating to me, thinking "I'm not going to touch this drum piece," because people – for lack of a better term, the white boys and white professors – were telling me "This is all you can do." It's kind of a compliment that you can play mallets, but it sort of put me in a box. Playing a lot of instruments wasn't a thing back then. It was often discouraged by a lot of people. Now, I think it's a great time to be yourself. Society's changing.

I always say this country is very torn and very complicated. This country's history goes hand in hand with racism, with slavery, with colonialism. But that's not who I am. When I was a student, back in 2010–12, it was a different time. I remember my friends were celebrating DOMA [Defense Of Marriage Act]. This wasn't marriage equality. You couldn't even get married as gays. That was back in 2011 or so. People would talk about diversity, but not to the extent that we talk about diversity now.

Around 2020 I was looking at this one poster about diversity, fluidity, and inclusion, because at that point I was traveling, I was teaching in Hong Kong, and I had a studio established. I was touring in Mexico, in Argentina, in Russia. I met a lot of great students, and they told me their struggles. I told them how the path is very different for everybody. I'm in the really loving part of the percussion world, which is new music. Because we are the weirdos, right? We are sort of the outcasts. So then I had a crazy idea of applying for a grant from the Hong Kong government about diversity.

I'm out; I'm not hiding who I am, but a lot of my friends in Hong Kong and Asia are hiding who they are. People, colleagues, collaborators said to me, "Hey, you should be less of yourself. Can you be less gay in the school? You shouldn't do your hair this way. You shouldn't

have your pink thing." Now I have pink glasses and pink cutters. It's a lifestyle.

So you should have more faith in people because society is changing. A lot of Western countries are accepting and legalizing gay marriages, and more countries have been actively taking down these problems – Hong Kong included. We cannot get married in Hong Kong legally, but they changed the law. If you get married in, say, the U.S., when you come back to Hong Kong, you can have the same benefits as a straight couple. Not ideal, but still we're the first country/city in Asia to do that. So I'm like, sure, let's test out the government.

So I was unfiltered about this particular project and saying, "Hey, we need diversity. We need fluidity, we need inclusion because Hong Kong's an alpha city. Everybody's so smart. We have the money. But the people are so backwards about racism and all these issues. You guys need to wake up." So with my percussion group Up:Strike, I programmed pieces that we commissioned. One of them is about resilience, called "Evergreen" by Robert Tonstein, and he's an ally. Everybody else is either trans, gay or both, or Asian-Americans who struggle with this same thing in America.

As a Southeast Asian immigrant in L.A. we were told not to stir the pot. That was back in the '90s. So I'm like, "This is crazy." A similar thing is happening in Hong Kong. People are not really encouraging local talent in Hong Kong. They like the white people coming in. If you're going for a job there, they hire the white person. They would not say it, but they're very much that way in their programming, in festivals, in official press releases for government functions. It's unspoken, but everybody knows about this. We're a British colony. If you can speak English, if you look somewhat white, you have privilege.

So I did a grant about that. And then, purely by coincidence, all of my players are gay. We have one straight girl, who's my other director, Karen. But everybody else is gay, flaming gay, homo, and lesbian. It's great. I got the grant, which was a surprise because this is Asia; this is conservative. So we did that concert. And that was sort of my first sign. If there's a God, I think she's loving what she sees. I think it's a good sign that maybe I'm on a good route of doing something about diversity.

COVID happened right after the concert, so that grounded everything. I couldn't tour, I couldn't leave the country, I couldn't do anything. At that point I had students who were seniors going to masters programs. They were trying to apply for schools in the States and Canada, and they're all very diverse. Their interests are very different. Some of them were very clear about what they wanted to do. Some of them were very lost. They were like, "Okay, I need to write a statement of purpose. I need to write some sort of artist statement for this grad school, and I don't know what I should do." Besides just coaching them on how to choose repertoire, I'm like, "Hey, what's your voice? Who makes you, you?"

My teacher, my mentors, people I looked up to sort of follow a similar route. They're the outcasts, so they made something. They don't fit into society. They were the renegades of the group and they did things differently. I look into other people's route and what their mission statement is and how it resonates with mine.

Coming out is hard everywhere, but in Hong Kong especially, it's society's pressure, and people tell me they will choose to be in a closet forever and just lie. I can't do it. So I had this student who's in Canada now. He was struggling and he was like, "My family wanted me to be one thing and the school wanted me to be one thing." I'm like, "In a perfect world, what would you want to do? It doesn't need to be finished.

You can just say 'I don't know, but maybe going to the school in Canada would work because...'" So it was a lot of helping my students find their voice.

I've been applying for grants every year since I graduated, and I'm very fortunate to have been funded so many times. But every time they ask you: "What is your voice personally as an artist, and what is the impact of your project? How does it tie into society? What is the bigger impact of your project?" It's not just "I want to play this piece because it's really impressive and shows how fast I can play." I wanted to leave my audience thinking "This is something I don't know. I don't like the sound of it, but I would like to think more about it." Why is raising awareness of, let's say, the closeted gay American composer so important? What is it to me and to them, and how is it helping this message in the bigger classical music world? How is it helping in the gay community?

So when we moved back to the States, I started looking for grants here, and one of the first grant's deadline was like in two days. That particular grant was very eminent about raising awareness on something new. It wasn't only for music, it was sort of a mega grant for everybody – performance art, street art, literary arts, dance, sculpture, printing, anything that didn't fit into a category. You just had to be creative about your output and how your work will impact what you're addressing. The second thing is they wanted to value the immigrant population in Boston. At that point, I already sort of developed a musical identity, so to speak. People would know me as that person with the big hair who played vibraphone. That's me. Unapologetically.

So I applied for that grant. I've been putting these vibraphone pieces together as a concert and how they, musically speaking, reflect my mission as an artist to push boundaries, to enhance the vibraphone, to use live electronics. But as a good programmer, I wanted to

introduce my audience to the buffet of the diversity of contemporary composers, so many different styles.

Voices in my head were telling me, "You're not going to get funded doing this; you need to play all the pretentious music." But with the little power that I can do with my little gay self, that ties in with what's been happening to students; that's the little part I can do. I can show you that you can be who you are if you stay true to yourself. Embrace who you are. Embrace how weird you are with reasons and with what kind of impact you want. And you can find opportunity, resources. Society will help you. There are resources there. You just need to know where to look for them. So I've been trying to be very vocal about this in my grant proposals.

This second-year masters student came to me. She told me two teachers told her, "This is a really hard route for you – bringing new music into new territory. With the way you look, you should get a job in an office. That's an easy life." She was like, "I don't know how to react, because I moved from a small town to this big city to hopefully get more opportunities so I can develop this new style."

Then she should absolutely dismiss these people. You're going to have so many teachers and mentors and acquaintances in your life, but you can filter all the information that you are given. You ultimately are the only person to know what's best for you. I'm not going to tell you it's going to be easy. I got tons of rejections from grants and festivals saying, "What you're doing is not good enough. It's not in the forefront of the art." That's just part of the game. But you shouldn't hold back. Especially in grad school, you're there to experiment. And if it doesn't work out, we'll cross that bridge later. But don't let some teacher tell you what to do.

So I was thinking about my own route. I started to learn what society is, and I'm learning about this as I go more toned down. It's like the other way I

should use my experience as a queer and Asian person to break through this mold. This country's built on immigration, and there's so many great things happening because of that, but there's also a lot of things that need to be done. I was given comments because of the color of my skin and because I'm gay.

**Lopez:** What are some things that we can do to help make a more inclusive environment?

**Lau:** It's very difficult to see changes in a short period of time. But I think it has to come from both directions — the students and top down. For example, if you're my student, I should be telling you all this relevant information and you need to be receiving this information and choose what's good for you, right? And then from top down, let's say PAS wanted to bring changes, same thing. But it works both ways. Yes, in university job interview, I want a job. But I can still challenge them. I should bring out the problem, the norm, what needs to be done about that particular set of problems. It has to do with both listening from the bottom of the ladder — the students, the people who are trying to figure out who is shaping society in the future — and people who are making rules. Just be vocal about it; don't be afraid.

**Lopez:** I am at a school in Texas, and it is predominantly white men. I am not the only queer person there, but there's very few, and I am definitely the only woman person of color. The diversity here, especially in Texas and smaller schools, is just not much, and it's hard to explain to, maybe, the white man who hasn't experienced the same point of view. What is your advice on how to approach a community that maybe isn't as aware of the struggles of the queer community, people of color, or women?

**Lau:** In the more conservative places, I think I would state my message even louder in how I phrase my mission,

how I'm playing these concerts. It's not one person, it's a lot of people over a period of time. So it's about finding the right people, and then multiplying that into other places. Someone's got to do it. Someone's got to be able to lead it.

**Carmen Lopez** is a fifth-year senior at Texas A&M University of Commerce pursuing a Bachelor in Music Education degree. Carmen has participated in multiple ensembles at TAMUC, most notably performing in the 2022 TMEA and PASIC 2023 Showcase Concerts with the percussion ensemble. Active within DCI, she performed with The Academy Drum and Bugle Corps in 2019, and she will be a front ensemble tech with The Genesis Drum and Bugle Corps for the 2024 season. Carmen serves as the point of contact for the Queer Diversity subcommittee of the PAS Diversity Alliance.