

# DECLASSIFY

## Episode 7: Referenced Whinging

Guest: James Nguyen

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### SUMMARY

This week, long-time collaborators and friends Victoria Pham and artist, academic and filmmaker James Nguyen get together to talk about childhood experiences of classical music and a perspective of working with classical musicians from those outside the art world. James Nguyen is in his own words is “Asian passing,” dabbles with painting, documentary filmmaking, and conceptual art. Born on a coffee plantation in Vietnam, Nguyen arrived to Australia by plane. Having studied Pharmacy, Nguyen then pivoted to complete his Bachelor in Fine Arts and is now completing his PhD. He has been a Samstag scholar and fellow at Uniondocs NYC and been commissioned by 4A Arts Centre, Gertrude Contemporary, Bleed Festival, The National Exhibition for the Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Australian War Memorial. In this episode, a conversation between two friends revolves from early musical expressions, the odd lag of classical music’s ability to critique itself under its illusion of its elitist and apolitical position in society, the cyclical nature of research in academia, and the revealing phenomena of *Hamilton*.

## TRANSCRIPT

Victoria Pham (VP): And we're back for yet another week! Thank you to everyone for the little messages and for being supportive of the scheduling change of these episodes no longer dropping weekly due to my life change of moving and starting postgrad studies. I'm really excited to announce this week's episode because I get to chat with one of my favourite people and my very good friend, artist and filmmaker James Nguyen! You might be wondering why have I brought on an artist and not someone who is explicitly a classical musician, and it's because although James is not a professional musician he has a great deal of experience in the world of classical music from taking lessons throughout his childhood to his considered collaborations and thinking about decolonisation, the significance of representation and the nature of accountability all artistic institutions must undertake. It's sometimes important to consider the thoughts and impressions of those who do not directly work within the classical music industry to consider its challenges. In fact, it was James himself who encouraged me to make this podcast, so welcome James!

James Nguyen (JN): Thanks Vickie! So happy to be on and no worries, I get to hang out with you.

VP: [Laughs] And this time our hang-out is on record. So how to start in a semi-formal way? Hmm, so how about like in all the previous episodes, what I've decided has been a good way to start a conversation and introduce those who might not be familiar with your work to you, so although you are now an artist and a filmmaker, you once studied classical music – particularly and as many people do, growing up. So, it's a weird question starting question, but why did you stop?

JN: So, I think I stopped being a musician once I started making art. Yeah, so there was a definite no overlap [laughs]. I'm like, I can't be both. That's impossible.

VP: Do you think it was restrictive doing classical music, particularly the way it's taught, hence it affecting you pondering whether or not it was something you wanted to pursue professionally?

JN: I don't know. How about I went about it was always the wrong way, I guess. I was always, maybe because of my bad eyesight, I was always much better at copying what people did. So, I listened and mimicked sound, and so my violin teacher would give up making me do sight-reading. So, then she would play it and then I copied her and then, I would be fine [laughs], so I would always do miserably at sight-reading in all the exams because I basically copied and mimicked. And also, I didn't practice a lot, I would rather watch cartoons and my violin teacher would be really pissed off because I wouldn't progress. So, there would be no sign of progression until one month or so before the exam when I would just cram and I would just watch videos... well, at the time, there weren't any videos. But if you could go to the library and then find cassettes and you could listen to music and then I would do that and then cram

and then try to mimic the sound as much as I could and then I would do really well for exams. [laughs] I would work well under pressure but I thought that I couldn't be a professional musician. I had not a very good teacher so I had really bad technique and so that technique carried through so I couldn't unteach myself the bad bowing technique, because I hated bowing really close to the frog so I would just stop. So it was a combination of bad technique, bad application and so I gave up.

JN: I think that sound is *always* really important. My friends and I always have this discussion where we're like 'If you were cursed and you had the choice, would you be deaf or blind?' And my answer would always be I would be blind, and even though that's horrible because no one wants to be blind. Then I would still be able to listen and hear music, and I can hear the conversations around me, I can still cry over sad music. Whereas, I've never cried over a sad painting [lights]. Like I've never seen someone break down in front of a physical artwork, whereas I've seen people cry at the theatre, at music concerts, you know, even at the pub. You cry over a beer, you don't cry over art. I'll always prioritise sound. But what really consolidated it was when I was at *Uniondocs* in New York, we were running around making short documentaries and stuff. And we had this workshop where one of the filmmakers said "Look, if you're making a film and the sound is terrible but your shot has beautiful footage. People will tolerate it for 30 seconds. Whereas, if you recorded the sound really well and but it together and it's not awful, but your footage is shaky and shitty and it's blown-out, people will sit there and watch it. Because it looks like art, it looks bad but it sounds really great." And so, kind of that really instilled in me that actually film that is a very visual medium is actually a very auditory artform. And also, when I think of performance and dance, when you perform and when you're performing to an audience you're also listening to them. Like, you might be dancing in a really awkward way where you can't see them or you're performing in a way where you can't see your audience but you can almost hear their anticipation and you can hear how much attention they're paying for you, their talking and their laughing. You can hear those things and you can feel it, and so, to me, sound was always a priority. If I was going to make any artwork, I would always try to bring in a new sound designer. Another friend who I've worked with previously has been Haley Forward, and she's amazing. Do you know her?

VP: Yup, I've seen some of her work and she's really, really cool.

JN: Yeah, and so are you and Kezia. Um, and so I was thinking about how when you're making film and visuals there is always this hierarchy of the producer and the director, you have a story-writer, cinematography, a sound recordist, and sound designer, and sound always gets shuffled down to the bottom even though it's the most important emotive part and so for me in my work, I wanted to bring my sound friends along and kind of work with them and collaborate with them in a kind of more flattened and even engagement. I think that's really important, just calling someone in and going 'I need some sound to fill in this spot, and I need that art sound where it's kind of this drone,' I'm like – that's basically someone going to your studio and going 'I need a painting that's blue to match my couch.' Like you're never going to be painting your best painting when someone walks in and has a shopping list and dictates to you what they need. I think your best work is always after you've had a conversation, and hang out and go 'What can we do together?' But sometimes, it's clunky and crap but you work really hard to make it enjoyable at least, you're not kind of delivering some kind of arbitrary brief. The brief is more friendship and laughter and conversation and it's super cute.

VP: And also, I think you create a more cohesive collaboration by working like this, especially when it comes to combining different artforms and perspectives. Other than working with you I've worked with maybe 2 or 3 quite young short film makers or aspiring film makers, either the director or producer... well, they called themselves the director...

JN: [laughs] "I'm the director and the producer, I'm directing this! I'm important!"

VP: One incident, which was the last time before you I worked with before you and I went 'No, I'm never doing this again!' because the young director emailed myself with a brief as they normally do. 'Our film is 4 minutes long, here is our style, here is one piece of music to demonstrate what we're looking for and it was a 7-minute piece from UP!'. Anyways, that always happens in that they'll give you a demo in the style they want and it's always highly produced and impossible for replicate, particularly for a film that is in total half the length than the piece of music they've sent as a sample. And no budget, it was \$200 I think. But what transpired was, this director gave me a basic contract in terms of how the pay operated, deadlines et cetera, and then a friend of mine – because I don't think he realised how small the composition and music world was – was talking to me about this short film she was working on and then we realised it was the same film. So, he'd been shopping around for someone to collaborate with and they would've dropped whomever they weren't as happy with, so we both emailed and they were screwed because suddenly they had no composer relatively close to the deadline. Just a note to any directors out there or any artist, don't do that do anyone you work with.

JN: I don't know. When you're making a work, you want to care for it and caring for it spending a long period of time building these relationships and conversations. You don't just go "Hmmm, who's a sexy composer who has a really big social network who if they're in my film, I can reach a bigger audience." That's so bullshit, yeah, you don't shop for people's skills and fame or whatever. That's yucky. No artist wants that, you want someone to. It's a relationship, you want to feel wanted and not disposable.

VP: Also, you're all supposed to be telling this story together for it to feel... successful is the wrong word. But for it to feel meaningful in some way. So, you have to get a good team together.

JN: Yes absolutely. And that team you have to give it time to find itself. The worst is to end up rushing these collaborations before you kind of like... I don't know... I think I like having friendships before I start collaborating and maybe it's because I'm a control freak and I need to trust that, that person cares enough about a project to invest time in it, talked and all the thinking processes have been done together. And at the end when you're desperately slapping stuff together, those things actually came from some beautiful conversations.

VP: Yes, and those conversations are so important and so crucial otherwise it's very difficult to create anything, artistic, musical or whatever, isolated and on your own. I think there's a great love for that idea of, well I don't know where it came from perhaps some media or figures that are now legendary, but there's love for the notion of a singular genius. And it exists in science and art, but we love that idea of an independent genius. But it's a complete fallacy and not possible because there's the tactile, social and practical elements of working and conversing with others in an exchange of ideas and processes or basic things like stories and repertoire. In classical music for example, some of the classical composers exist in this special bubble and are revered for being a certain kind of genius but of course this comes down to context, family,

prestige, support and environment – and the fact that we now obsessively play their music on endless rotation and I suppose the art world has figures such as Van Gogh whose stories are often read about in a certain light – in his case the need for creativity to be borne out of his unfortunate daily experiences with his mental health. However, I don't think it story-telling can exist without support from a community on both ends, from creation and then presentation and sharing.

JN: How I think about it, there has never been an artist genius. There's no such thing. If you think about the Renaissance, from Giotto to Raphael, there was a continuity and there was a community. There weren't just painters and fresco people and sculptures and stuff, they were in a mire of Medici money and church money and also the capacity to exchange and have conversations. And also, they all trained under different studios and masters and leaders and teachers, and the idea of the Teacher is so important and the progress of Art. I always think about how our bodies are archives. It picks up and retains things that are important to us, but it cannot retain everything so we kind of rely on other bodies to supplement your archive. And also you die so your archive disappears and before it disappears you need to pass on what is important to the next people and allow them to percolate these documents within them. I think that artist genius thing... fucking Vasari.

VP: Who ruined it all for us.

JN: I know right? Ruined it all.

VP: And in music it's Mozart because the image of genius, child prodigy is a thing we have in classical music. To a degree they exist because there are always really young virtuosic performers, such as solo performers, that is always present in classical music, but it breeds this idea, similar to in elite sports, that if you're older than 20 you somehow can't make it as a soloist which is untrue, to anyone out there who is studying right now.

JN: Yeah no definitely. And the crazy thing about investing so much time in these geniuses is that you can exclude so much. It becomes easy to exclude. If you're only paying attention to baby Mozart then you ignore all of Mozart's peers and friends. It makes me think of YoYo Ma and his poor sister.

VP: And Mozart had a sister as well.

JN: Mozart had a sister? I didn't know that. Tell me more.

VP: Yeah, he had a sister. She was also a brilliant violinist and harpsichordist. She actually started composing at an earlier age than he did and continued to do so until she was married. I think there's a letter from their father Leopold that alludes to her being even more skilled than her younger brother, and there are probably many reasons why we don't hear much about her. But if we think about how both Mozarts or *the* Mozart has become such an important thing, is that the family was in a political and financial position in which they could facilitate both children to be talented musically and with such intensity in that way. Not everyone has access to lessons, and people, aristocracy and money in the way that particular family did.

JN: Yeah, it's like sports right? Like all these things are a process of sacrifice. To get an Olympic sportsperson, you have to have this family willing to invest all of their time waking up at 3am to drive them to the pool, and it's pretty much the same with musicians. It is an

investment and families move cities to find the perfect teacher and make connections, and it's kind of freaky actually.

VP: Well it is and it doesn't just stop when you're child. Once you get to a certain age and you want to go to a Conservatorium and you're really ambitious and talented and you want to go to a place... what's extreme, you want to go to Juilliard in New York, and you have to move countries and you need a certain amount of money – particularly if you can't get a scholarship – and it just keeps going on like that. But that applies to everything from artistic creation all the way to academics.

JN: Yeah, a lot of the time we forget to talk about class and the only reason why we as ethnic people can invest our time and effort into these superfluous artforms is because a lot of times our parents are economically stable. They've gone past the teething of resettlement and it takes the 2nd generation to kind of have the capacity and ability to invest all the time and resources into producing crap. [laughs] It take a long period of time to develop these things. There are probably thousands of Yoyo Mas, right? But only 5 people can afford to invest the time and money into allowing that child to flourish and in Yoyo Ma's case – his poor sister, I only just learnt about this recently. What is it? Yeong-Cheung Ma?

VP: Yup that's her name.

JN: She was like an incredible violinist right? And her family went 'the boy will probably make us more money, you learn the piano so you can support your brother with the cello.'

VP: Oh as an accompanist, that's right.

JN: yeah and so it was kind of like this crazy thing where she was the child prodigy in the violin and they decided, probably at the time an Asian girl playing the violin would not be interesting or would not be supported whereas a cute little Asian boy with an oversized cello, people would swoon over that shit right? And so, the poor sister had to become the accompanist for her whole life and that just totally breaks my heart. And so it's that sense of genius is crazy because without the investment of his parents and the forced sacrifice of his sister to give up everything to be his accompanist because these two cute Asian kids on stage, he wouldn't have had the opportunity or capacity to develop into this world-renowned performer. So it's this amount of level of support and people around you that magically disappears when you win the Mozart prize, or whatever.

VP: I mean, I'm sure there's a competition somewhere called the Mozart prize. [JN laughs].

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INTERMISSION I

VP: For our first intermission, James has chosen some excellent music to accompany his episode. First up is an excerpt of a 2005 work by Gabriela Lena Frank 'Canto de Harawi: Amadeoso,' performed here by Ensemble Meme.

*Follows a 4-minute excerpt*  
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VP: But do you think now that it's driven by the media and touting this idea that is so widely spread in the public - this unreachable artistic achievement for an individual?

JN: I think the economy was so geared towards personal achievement and personal gain and the single artistic genius overcoming whatever unsurmountable situations to become this amazing creative. I think the economy really loves that because it forces you to think that as an individual everyone can achieve these things, even though they can't, and so people invest time and effort into achieving these things by themselves. And in sports as well, we celebrate the individual when actually the individual relies on so many people around them, and actually the sacrifice of so many. Maybe it's a boring story to tell but maybe it's changing now. People love hearing about the struggles of a sporting family and the struggles of a migrant family putting everything into that child. And what people also love is when that child fails because it's also entertaining to watch [laughs]. Like 10 years down the track, what happened to them? It's this weird thing of being obsessed with the individual that I'm not comfortable with.

VP: I remember a while back when we were talking about process and essentially it goes back to how much more fruitful it is to collaborate in order to create music and art. Sometimes I meet specific creators or artistic practitioners who can only create when they're in a mood, but in fact conversations going around me in order to nourish work, or really what I often find to be more important and provoking is nourishing thought or thinking in a different way. For example, I can read as much as I like from academic texts to biographies but that would limit the ability in which to apply those skills and modes of operating into a practice. I don't think it would be happening with responsibility and accountability without conversations with others, such as with you.

JN: Yeah, I think information is presented to us in kind of discreet units or modules and that's how the West loves to categorise things. But when you have these conversations, those barriers between knowledge is shifted and pushed around from person to person, you contest and argue and shape your words around someone else's thought and they shape theirs around yours, and you have this beautiful, weird, contestation, competition and dance, and that is how you can bridge ideas and create new knowledge.

VP: Do you think that's been evident in all the research you've been doing for your PhD balancing how academics works as a structure with your art practice?

JN: Hm, like in my PhD I whinge about everything.

VP: Professional whinging with sources.

JN: Referenced whinging! Very important

VP: Do you find that a really weird thing, to the process of referencing to validate all your responses is a really odd thing to do that a Western structure forces us to do if we choose to study anything academically?

JN: It kind of brings back to my bad way of practicing and learning classical music. My academic work is slightly horrendous in that I can just write down anything I want and because of technology, 'Hmmm, these are the keywords that I need to have supported and then 'click, click, click,' into the search engine 'key words, skim,' through papers and...

VP: Google scholar, right?

JN: Yes, and scholars that support my opinion. It's horrendous, because you end up producing knowledge that is narcissistic and finding sources that support your own rather than looking more broadly and really challenging yourself. But I think I shaped my thoughts and my opinions by having these conversations and these aren't very referenceable, even though I try to like 'I talked to my friends and we talked about this,' but the Foucault said this... [both laugh]. So it's kind of really idiotic do I wonder if I'm the only one who cheats in this way.

VP: No

JN: And kind of like, if I can get away with this in academia, you know having a terrible and porous approach to "being academic" and maybe I'm not the only one, maybe all academics are cheats and swindlers, right? So academia is the process of swindling and convincing people of your authority when it's all completely bullshit, and you've hand-picked irrelevant or irreverent sources to build your non-existent argument on.

VP: Well, when you look at what contemporary academics is when you move to the process of publishing things and going to conferences some academics produce really short or a series of small published papers that represent their research as a whole. And that's partly down to some institutions and universities moving towards a quota-based system for departments, in that they need to publish a certain amount of things or to research wise do a certain amount of things in order to keep their position and sometimes funding, so then you get increasingly or a high rate of papers that are produced by certain departments and universities, but they thinly base the amount of knowledge across a series of papers rather than one or two. So, if you have that longer series of replications, its really annoying for the academics, but the knowledge is spread thin so it feels more like factory producing knowledge.

JN: And thankfully that has occurred because artists can every exhibition that they do as "publications." It's my research put out into the public sphere. Artists would hate me saying this but really, if you count group exhibitions or things you put out into the world, like now Instagram posts and artworks, like last night I made a linktree and potentially it's an artwork referencing linktree so I could easily write about my linktree artwork publish it on some website as a linktree, show it as a video form in some gallery space and before I know it... that's like three publications.

VP: It's bizarre in a way because everything's on-line and we need an audience for every aspect of our lives. Now, everyone's probably wondering, what has this got to do with classical music? I was actually wanting to use academia as an interesting world as the academic worlds both you and I engage aside from our practices as artists and through our PhD research, we work in universities and academic intuitions that are of course Western oriented in its education model and in Western countries, you in Australia and me now in the UK. We have once spoken about the questionable cyclical nature of referencing and how if we trace it back, a lot of the crux of academia probably blossoms out of a small pool of references from the 17<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> century in Europe or really, the 17<sup>th</sup> century during the Enlightenment period as its shaped much of what academia and research looks like at a tertiary level. So how on earth does this link to classical music?

So, in classical music, when you go and book a concert from that same period of time, the 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century with the more notable organisations, institutions and ensembles – so for



example in Australia it'll be the MPAs like the state orchestras, Australian Chamber Orchestra etc. we keep playing the same repertoire. In a sense, we continually replicate and reference this same historical experience from the past and projecting it into a contemporary sphere and listenership as the ideal experience of this particular artform, so my question to you is, do you think from the perspective of someone who once studied classical music and who is now an artist, do you think this presents a similar issue and challenges that we've talked about in terms of academia?

JN: I'm glad I escaped classical music. I wouldn't have had the self application or self-discipline to have gone anywhere, whereas in art, it's more relaxed. There is more willingness to have conversations around bad art, it's actually really fun to rip apart bad art and kind of unpack it, and learn from it and say "it was good once but it's now quite bad." You know, we have a new context for things and things that were bad once can become really interesting and good now. Whereas, I think classical music has this thing where it aims for an idea of perfection. In a way, because it's so big as an organisational thing like a big orchestral work, maybe it loses some of its playfulness and its ability to take risks, and loses its ability to see it as a creative artform that could be pushed and pulled and challenged. And also, maybe what we think now is the perfect way of playing, it's not. It's actually a mutated version of what Beethoven would've have wanted once. Isn't there the argument that Beethoven is supposed to be played at 5000 times the speed...

VP: yeah, because we don't know what he meant.

JN: And it's also a crazy thing where 'Yeah, maybe Beethoven did want people to play it super fast so that they would fuck it up.' Like that would be super punk, and even boring old Mozart, my favourite work of Mozart's work is the 'Musical Joke.' It was that crazy thing where Mozart was being a little bitch, and basically mocking all of the other composers around that were producing music in a formulaic and mechanical way and so he wrote this musical joke mocking them and writing terrible pieces of repetitive music to get at his peers. Where's the spirit of classical music in the contemporary practice of it? Classical music had this dynamic, it was contested, it had these passions and it had fun and joy, and I think contemporary art in a way has that... like the structure of the biennales. There's always new waves of artists coming up in the works who propose alternative ideas and crush what's already up and pull and rip it apart, and if classical music has that sense of dynamic, risk-taking and being able to absorb these disruptions, it would be such a powerful medium. If you could actually embody the spirit of Beethoven, Mozart and Haydn and who-ever, it would be so much more exciting, you would make shit tonnes more money from it.

VP: That's what I think as well, even with the money they would long-term make more. So, for example, a lot smaller in size ensembles and chamber groups like Ensemble Offspring in Sydney and Speak Percussion down in Melbourne do a lot of the cool collaborations and they attract substantial audience numbers, but when it comes to the bigger organisations and given the previous conversations I'm had in prior episodes, the main undercurrent as to the primary reason they fear any risk-taking will be an economic one. So the result is, we hear the same stuff and they've substantially cut down on working with the new or with the living practitioners despite having flourished doing so in the 70s and 80s. And you're right, they should certainly imbue the spirit of people like Haydn beyond simply playing his music. And yet another example of this more adventurous and unexpected piece of music from Haydn himself is a work that's one of your favourites, the symphony with the staged leaving – the Farewell Symphony.

JN: Yeah, it was like so cool because it was like an act of protest. Who would think that playing classical music would be an act of protest? For those of you who don't know, it's kind of that thing where, I think it was the person who commissioned the work, or who commissioned the orchestra wouldn't let go home and see their families he was like 'entertain me.' And so the musicians were like 'what the fuck, we're tired, we want to go.' So what they did so each musician would deliberately leave the orchestra and when they stopped playing, they would blow out the candles and leave the stage, and in the end there would only be the conductor left. And then the king or whatever, realised how important it was for these artists to have time off for themselves and be non-slaves, and through art you could carry this really amazing message. So I'm like, why can't classical music reflect the times and comment on politics. They're so worried about making money then I'm like fucking look at Hamilton.

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INTERMISSION II

VP: And we cut to a quick intermission before we return to our conversation about Hamilton. For our second musical intermission is another selection from James this time from revered composer, musician and sound-artist Pauline Oliveros. Here is an excerpt of her 1967 work, *Bye Bye Butterfly*.

Follows a 4-minute excerpt of Oliveros' *Bye Bye Butterfly* (1967)  
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VP: So so much money. An unbelievable amount of money.

JN: And people would pay, like, \$2000 for tickets. You know like if classical music can kind of challenge itself to such a degree and make such a political statement towards its social relevance, people would pay shit loads to go see it, and then it'll open up so much breathing space and opportunity. I personally hate musicals

VP: It would be really bad if I just started rapping right now.

JN: No, don't! [both laugh]

VP: And if we break down Hamilton from another sense. Yes, it's wildly successful to a point where musical theatre, which some people will argue is the contemporary counterpart to Opera, couldn't before. It's this cultural phenomena because it integrated things that weren't considered "traditional" or "Expected" in a manner that was so undeniably interesting, creative, and just amazing story-telling. But if we take a look at their casting, for example, it was undeniably diverse. For example, in the original casting you have Philippa Soo playing Hamilton's wife, Eliza, you have and the composer Lin Manuel Miranda himself as Hamilton, and Jackson playing George Washington, and the plain fact is, it did not matter. Theatre, Opera and to an extent art and music, it's all enveloped in a degree of spectacle that if you are telling your story successfully and execute it well enough with some degree of authenticity, considered thought, the idea of such a diverse cast or diverse stories will no interfere. It's so dramatized anyways, why does it visually need to meet our expectations in terms of casting or costuming... and hint, hint, I am implying some tactics still employed in opera to exoticize characters through costume and make-up or to "tan-up" you know, the lead in Verdi's Aida. Hamilton is

proof that if you tell the story well and its artful, it doesn't matter as much or at all what anyone looks like or how the story is told.

So, there's so bring it back its relation to classical music. Classical music as a practice and a genre, loves to paint itself as apolitical. Firstly, because it's supposedly the classical tradition and again it goes back to this ideal representation of absolute truth and of human emotion, and anything that is absolute cannot be tied down to a specific time or place so despite us now being in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they've conveniently constructed this image to avoid having to address anything that's happening day-to-day by wholly separated it.

JN: Music has always been political. Composers have made art because they were angry or passionate about things they felt really strongly about and to take that away from the piece of music, that's just like turning it into zombie art that no one can really connect to. No wonder why classical music people find classical music boring.

VP: And also the structure of how you get a new piece of music on the stage is that there's a commissioner or more likely for something like an orchestra or opera company, a commissioning board, and sometimes depending on where you are or who you are, it is akin to a system from a hundred years ago. So it hasn't changed that drastically and if you are where I am now in London, there still remains a dominant aristocracy that have a lot of sway as arts patrons of major performing arts companies and you have patrons in a similar fashion that you would have in the past, for example I have one and for several recent works he's been the primary driver for new music and the commissioning of new music. So that idea of that level of commissioning or how art and music is produced, it's not a historical one, it still functions in a way.

JN: But that also devalues the patron. It assumes that the patron are stodgy, boring people who enjoys stodgy, boring music. If you're actually really smart and if you had, say, five orchestras in a city, what you would do is collude with each other and create different characteristics and the politics between each of these orchestras could be really competitive. Maybe one orchestra could be the 'queer' orchestra, the next one could be the 'ethnic' orchestra and one is more punk, and reinvents Mozart... so if you've got all these opposing contestations that you could manufacture and you could make the aristocracy really excited and pick sides. And when aristocracy picks sides, decide to bet against each other, they'll put shit loads of money. People with money love betting against their nemesis. So you just get a bunch of rich people together, tweak out what they like and then just push it to the extreme, and so they'll be confronted and be excited. And I'm like why are all these organisations so dumb that they would just continue to replicate and perform in such a way that's as boring as batshit. No wonder why they're leaking money, no wonder why people are dying out not paying any interest in them, what would be exciting is if you had a few conservative ones and a few progressive ones that are constantly battling it out! That's exciting. People would pay to watch it as a sport, you know, if conductors started fighting each other and then dissing each other out in public, it'll be so exciting.

VP: I'm just trying to think if that's happened anytime recently because there are *so* many that don't like each other, but no there's too much decorum and tradition for them to leak that publically I think. Do you think it's a matter of class? For example when you go to a classical concert in a bit concert hall, you're paying – to an extent – you're paying to have a certain, bourgeoisie experience from the past? You know, you dress a certain way, your ticket costs a certain amount – often at least \$100 in Australia – you eat near the opera house or in it, you sit

completely silently and clap at the right time or three times at the end – as in there's a certain order that's required in the experience of classical music.

JN: Oh yes definitely. For example, I think of my parents being migrants and being so obsessed with “high art” from a Western perspective and forcing me to have these lessons that I pretty much fluted away, I think it was to give me that sense of being just as good as white people. Because when they walked down the street they spoke English with a terrible accent and doing humiliating work that no one else wanted to do, so they would invest so much money and time, making their children enter these realms of high art so that their children when they could become adults could sit and perform these rituals of status and class. So their children wouldn't be bent down by the society that they would, or be excluded, little did they know that the society would continue to exploit and treat their highly educated and highly skilled children in different ways because racism is really adaptable. But I think what's actually interesting about class is that people with class don't worry about it, people with money don't worry about money so if you're demonstrating or performing class, it means you're not classy. The ultimate marker of class is to go to selective schools, go to these big institutions and know where your forks and plates are, and how to eat an entrée, and mispronounce words... so if you're able to perform class and privilege, the ultimate marker of it is to subvert it, to not care, and so what's really interesting now is a lot of immigrant children who have achieved and reached these higher echelons of class go ‘Phew, that's fucked. I'd rather go hang out with my mates down at the club rather than perform these dumb stodgy things.’ And that's class. You know, class is realising that none of this shit matters and what really matters are your relationships and your networks that will protect you.

VP: And even you and I being both second-generation or Asian-Australia... or is it Australian-Asian – I don't know which one to say first...

JN: It depends on which grant you're trying to get.

VP: [laughs] Well, then I'm Asian-Australia. But even if you and I enter these spaces, which I'm sure we both have, and these spaces are definitely designed to be exclusive, and I'll quickly explain to anyone who might not know what we're getting at. With me being a composer and with classical music it'll probably happen more often, for example when I've been a composer for an event and you're invited to meet a group of patrons for an event or concert, for example the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, or of an ensemble and they will often be much wealthier people... and some of them are politicians. And the numbers of times I've gone to these events and I've been mistaken for waitstaff has been insane, or actually the amount of times I've been mistaken for someone else's nurse or career probably because I'm a little younger than they would expect and certainly because I simply don't look like what a composer should look like.

JN: Right, and you're occupying a space that doesn't even exist in their minds. And so when you're able to beat them at their own game like ‘Oh did you know this about Mozart?’ And what's really fun is when you're hiding, or when you're out of sight, but then you shock them with the class your parents have imbued into you, it dislodges their sense of comfort and that's always really fun to play with. ‘Oh so you thought I was a career? Fuck you.’ I can kick you to the curb with how much knowledge I have so get fucked. That always feels super satisfying and always so grateful that my parents have allowed me to have education, they've invested so much time to allow me to have this kind of power. Yes, it's not economic power but the power to move between any class of people and dislodge expectations.

VP: Sometimes I think it's more powerful because you no longer feel beholden to any set of behaviours.

JN: Yeah, and what's really interesting is when you're an outsider in that way, then you're more willing to take risks. 'Oh you're not going to let me in? Well, I'll go to Cabramatta and eat really great food.' And none of their niceties are actually not important, and in a way they're scared of us because our superpowers are actually really threatening. And I'm really glad my parents gave me that.

VP: I'm so glad that my mother gave me that. The power to think differently and to not worry that much about fitting in. Occasionally it's a problem but only when you're in an environment where no one is like you, you start to feel pressure, but as I'm getting older I think that's beginning to change.

JN: Totally, people always say a tiger mum is a bad thing, but A if you want to go see what a tiger mum is go to a fucking footy or netball game. Sometimes your parents put you into situations that you're not comfortable with and sometimes when you're able to survive that and endure that process, a lot of times that's quite amazing. You come out the other end with a big dose of perspective and being aware of what's actually really important.

VP: So would you say coming from our experience being cross-cultural in our practice and our identities, not just to have these conversations like the one we're having now, but in our work to constantly challenge these systems or Western systems, whether or not its Classical music, art making or academics?

JN: I don't know. Because I think these norms or these conventions, we're naturally just unconventional anyway so it's not that much of an effort to provide an alternative perspective to a conversation. It just comes naturally, and you're always constantly thinking on your feet and you're always thinking 'Oh, what's the alternative of this!' because you're always been at the alternative end of these conversations. So potentially, it gives you really thorough and rigorous thinking, and these actually amazing concepts and it's just amazing that we can exist in-between and also without these places. We don't actually need these spaces, like sickos and hang around and troll people and it's hilarious because we can. 'How can we troll privilege?'

But also, in saying that, we also have to acknowledge our limitations and our prejudices, existing in this colonised nation, we inevitably absorb its violence, its prejudices and its hierarchies. It's always good to fight against people who are higher up on the hierarchy than you and have more power than you, but there's always that chance that you get comfortable in your practice, you start to implement your own violence on the people who have less than you. And it's actually really important to have these conversations because basically we're trying to keep ourselves in check, you know, we're trying to keep our conversations thorough by speaking the work RACISM. Racism is not the outcome of whiteness, racism is in everyone. We fear people, we're scared of people that are different from us, so if we are able to talk about it, it means that other people are able to talk about it, and when other people are able to talk about it, they're able to think about approaching things in other fun ways.

Why wouldn't you want to move around the world and be challenged? It's actually so fun and so many new ideas come out of being uncomfortable, and being challenged to your friend and saying 'dude that's racist.' And you then create and produce art in a way you wouldn't if you were taking everything for granted and it makes art more interesting, and it's not just racism,

it's any form of injustice and if you're able to think about your place within these forms of injustice, then your art and your practice will be so much more nuanced.

You know, everyone suffers from pain, everyone suffers when they're rejected or when they're told that they're not enough, and everyone has felt that, and when those things emerge in your art and there's honesty and truth in there, and I think that's important because you are reflecting the human condition.

VP: I have nothing to add. That was perfect and enlightening – I hope those who are listening will think about the things that go into thinking about art making – whether you're a musician of any genre, visual artist, filmmaker or really a creator or creative of every shape. In fact, you've probably answered everything I had on my mind in this last week so I really just have to say a huge thank you to you, James, for letting me record this conversation for the podcast this time round.

JN: No, not a problem at all it's so fun!

VP: Once again, thank you so much for chatting me. I'm pretending as if we don't do this every week already [laughs]. If you want to find more information about James, I've linked all the info about him and his upcoming works and research below, as well as information about all the things we covered in this episode. Thanks for listening and catch you all next time!

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## **RESOURCES**

James Nguyen

<http://jamesnguyen.com.au/bio/bio>

PhD portfolio and research: <https://chobotrouble.com/>

Resources

Yeou-Cheng

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/19/arts/music/yeou-cheng-ma-childrens-orchestra-society.html>

<https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/culture/yo-yo-mas-sister-yeou-cheng-continues-family-legacy>

Maria Anna Mozart

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/sep/08/lost-genius-the-other-mozart-sister-nannerl>