Cultural Daily

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Cho-Liang Lin on How Music Education Has Evolved

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Want to play guitar? There's an app for that. How about the piano? Check out YouTube. You can even find music lessons on TikTok. Music education, especially in the classical genre, has undergone significant transformations over the past few decades. The rise of technology, from social media platforms to advanced learning tools, alongside the shift in global musical influences and the shifting performance landscape, have reshaped how students are trained and how they build careers. Starting his music education at age 5, renowned violinist **Cho-Liang Lin** has seen it all — and is happy to share his well-earned insights.

"Nowadays, it's really incredible," he notes. "I find students very easily distracted. There are so many things out there on the internet, whether it's YouTube, texting, or reading up on whatever gossip they wish to catch up on. When I was their age, there was nothing to distract me. There was no phone, no cellphone, not even email or even fax. I just had to do everything. I had to go to a pay phone and make a phone call. And so once I walk into a practice room, I do nothing except practice."

From Rigid to Holistic Training

Classical music education has traditionally emphasized technical mastery, demanding students focus extensively on perfecting their craft through rigorous practice. This approach, deeply rooted in centuries of tradition, prioritized discipline and technical precision above all else. Lin's experience growing up in Taiwan exemplifies this traditional approach, but he realizes he's dealing with a different generation: "I try to get my students to focus as much as I can to only play the violin for one hour. If you just do quality practicing for one hour, that's better than two hours of wandering around, like texting somebody for three minutes and then practicing another five minutes, and then back to texting for three minutes. That's pretty useless. So I try to apply my own life experience about how to deal with modern technology but with the old-time principles of teaching and analysis."

While technical excellence remains fundamental, modern educators equally emphasize creativity, emotional intelligence, and industry navigation skills. Cho-Liang Lin, now teaching at Rice University in Houston, has adapted his methods to reflect this balance, fostering development of both musical ability and personal growth. This transformation acknowledges that successful musicians need more than just technical proficiency to thrive in today's complex musical landscape.

The shift toward holistic education is strongly supported by empirical evidence. Research from the

National Endowment for the Arts shows that students engaged in integrated music programs — combining theory, history, and performance — achieve greater success in music and other fields. These comprehensive programs develop critical thinking, collaboration, and innovation skills that are increasingly valued in today's music industry. The integration of various musical elements helps students understand the broader context of their art form and its connection to other disciplines.

The Role of Technology in Classical Music

Technology has revolutionized music education. The internet provides unprecedented access to resources and learning opportunities, allowing students to study with top musicians worldwide. Digital tools have transformed how students learn, practice, and perform music, creating new possibilities for musical expression and education. Lin, who has witnessed this technological transformation, integrates modern tools while maintaining traditional values.

But, says Cho-Liang Lin, there's no getting around the fact that "you have to play so well to be recognized. Nowadays, of course, people utilize internet platforms to gain fame. I mean, we all know that, but even in the classical world, it's very prevalent. So if you put on a good Instagram and you do pop stuff or you can do short two-minute videos playing a quartet version of a Beatles hit song and stuff like that, people want you, they think that it's really, really good.

"But I didn't grow up in that world. In the world I grew up in, what really counts is your quality of playing, your integrity as a musician, and your ultimate skill as a violinist. Those are the most important things. But to that, the world has changed a lot."

Indeed it has. Microsoft's research reveals that average human attention spans have decreased to just eight seconds due to increasing technology use, presenting new challenges for focused practice and learning. Educational institutions must now develop strategies to help students maintain concentration and dedication in an increasingly connected world.

Despite these hurdles, technology has significantly enhanced music education. Recording tools, virtual lessons, and online resources have democratized access to musical training. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this trend, with programs like Lin's embracing virtual platforms to reach students globally. This fusion of tradition and technology has enriched the learning experience, though educators must carefully balance technological benefits with the need for focused practice and personal interaction. The integration of digital tools has also enabled new forms of musical collaboration and performance that were previously impossible.

The Realities of a Musical Career

Today's competitive music industry demands more than technical proficiency. Musicians must understand business aspects, from contract management to effective self-marketing. The modern musician needs to be both an artist and an entrepreneur, capable of building and maintaining a sustainable career in an evolving industry. Cho-Liang Lin integrates these practical skills into his teaching and advice: "You need to know how to market yourself, how to negotiate contracts, and how to build relationships within the industry."

Leading institutions, including Lin's alma mater, Juilliard, and the Royal Academy of Music, now offer arts management and business courses, preparing students for industry challenges. These programs recognize that artistic excellence alone is no longer sufficient for career success in the

modern music industry.

Lin's summer programs in his native Taiwan exemplify this comprehensive approach, combining technical training with professional development in collaboration, communication, and networking. This preparation equips students for diverse career paths in orchestras, chamber ensembles, and beyond. The programs also emphasize the importance of adaptability and resilience in building a sustainable musical career.

Cho-Liang Lin: Young Musicians Are 'Just Bombarded'

Music education's evolution reflects broader societal and technological changes while preserving musical excellence. Through Lin's insights, we see how modern music education successfully balances traditional mastery with contemporary demands, preparing students for successful careers in an evolving industry. This transformation represents both challenges and opportunities for the future of classical music education.

But there's still work to do. Observes Lin: "They're not aware, these young players; they don't know who Fritz Kreisler was. They don't have any idea who Jacques Thibaud was. These are great violinists who were lionized in their time. And so what is a pity is that they don't know where their style evolves from. In other words, there's a constant evolution of style playing. And so you have to know where you come from, and it's really fun to know. It's like if you want to be a visual artist, I mean, if you want to be a painter, for instance, it would be really nice for you to learn something about the Flemish school, the Renaissance school, this and that school, and figure out where your roots come from.

"And so a lot of young musicians, because they go on YouTube and they listen to performances by the hottest new name in the business, and they don't really know what I call immortal performances from the past. And I don't blame them in some ways because there are so many new posts on YouTube. I can just imagine how they feel inundated with so much information. They're just bombarded to no end.

"But the thing is, I would like young musicians to be at least curious about it. Of course, [there are] plenty of great players today, still playing great concerts and all that. But I really miss that lineage that you could feel. I could feel even from recordings that there's a school of training that's clearly say from France or training from Germany, training in America, training from Russia. And those lines are all blurred nowadays. So it's very hard to discern a particular style, and that's what I miss the most."

Bio:

Cho-Liang Lin, born in Taiwan, is an internationally acclaimed violinist with a distinguished career spanning over four decades. He made his debut at the age of 19 with the New York Philharmonic, and since then, he has performed with major orchestras worldwide, including the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the London Symphony Orchestra, and the Philadelphia Orchestra. Lin is celebrated not only for his exceptional technique and expressive playing but also for his contributions to music education.

As a former faculty member at Juilliard and currently at Rice University's Shepherd School of Music, Lin has been dedicated to nurturing the next generation of musicians. He has also served as the artistic director of prestigious festivals like the La Jolla Music Society SummerFest and Hong

Kong International Chamber Music Festival, where he actively commissioned new works to expand the violin repertoire.

Lin’s career also includes numerous recordings for labels such as Sony Classical and Naxos, earning Grammy nominations and critical acclaim for his interpretations of both classical and contemporary works. His long-standing commitment to teaching, performing, and promoting contemporary music solidifies his influence in the world of classical music.

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