Arts & Humanities

Columbia Alumni Composers You Should Know (and Stream)

Specializing in everything from classical to show tunes to experimental electronica, these notable composers grew their music careers at Columbia.

By
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|
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Clockwise from left: Tyshawn Sorey (MacArthur Foundation), Tan Dun (Challenge Records), Charles Wuorinen (Columbia University), Wang Lu (Giorgia Fanelli), Kate Soper (Jim Gipe).

David Bird

Electronic composer and multimedia artist David Bird ’19GSAS codirects the TAK ensemble, a chamber group dedicated to experimental music. His ambient and avant-garde compositions have been performed at Lincoln Center in New York and the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, among other major venues. In 2020, Bird released *Mirrors*, his first full-length album as a solo artist.

Taylor Brook

Taylor Brook ’18GSAS, also a member of the TAK ensemble, grew up in Canada and spent several months studying Hindustani music in Kolkata, India. Brook’s work, which spans classical and electronic styles, has appeared on a number of recordings, including *Apperceptions* (2020), his first full solo album.

Courtney Bryan

Born and raised in New Orleans, pianist-composer Courtney Bryan ’14GSAS draws inspiration from jazz and gospel. In addition to performing at numerous concert halls around the US and internationally, she has released two full albums and is currently working on a third. In 2021, Bryan was one of three artists featured in the inaugural season of Miller Theatre’s podcast *Mission: Commission*, which follows composers as they create new material.

Wendy Carlos

Wendy Carlos ’65GSAS worked in the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center while a graduate student and helped develop the Moog synthesizer with engineer Robert Moog ’57SEAS. She is best known for the 1968 Grammy-winning album *Switched-On Bach* (released under the name Walter Carlos), and her iconic scores for Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Shining*.

Gerald Cohen

Composer Gerald Cohen ’93SOA has worked with a variety of forms from orchestral to choral to liturgical. His recordings include the 2014 album *Sea of Reeds*, featuring music for clarinet and chamber ensembles, and the 2023 record *Voyagers*, performed by the Cassatt String Quartet, clarinetist Narek Arutyunian, and trombonist Colin Williams.

John Corigliano

Classical composer John Corigliano ’59CC grew up in New York City and studied music at Columbia College. A recipient of three Grammys, Corigliano also won the 1999 Academy Award for original score for the film *The Red Violin* and a 2001 Pulitzer Prize for his Symphony no. 2.

Armen Donelian

Pianist and composer Armen Donelian ’72CC, who often infuses Armenian folk music into American jazz, is renowned for his solo, trio, and quartet work. His long list of collaborators includes jazz giants Chet Baker and Sonny Rollins, and he has released several full-length albums.

Tan Dun

Chinese-American composer Tan Dun ’93SOA wrote the Oscar-winning score for the 2000 film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. His operas, symphonies, concertos, chamber works, and solo pieces frequently blend traditional Chinese music with Western classical music.

Dick Hyman

Jazz pianist and composer Dick Hyman ’48CC broke onto the music scene in the 1950s with solo piano renditions of popular songs and has enjoyed a career spanning more than seventy years. Hyman’s compositions and arrangements have appeared in numerous films, including *The Purple Rose of Cairo* and *Moonstruck*, and he has continued to perform into his nineties.

Kander and Ebb

Famous for their razzle-dazzle musicals and the song “New York, New York,” composer John Kander ’54GSAS and lyricist Fred Ebb attended graduate school at Columbia. Their most famous shows, *Cabaret* and *Chicago*, became long-running Broadway hits and Oscar-winning movies. *Chicago*’s 1996 revival is the second-longest-running musical in Broadway history.

Tom Kitt

Tony-winning composer and orchestrator Tom Kitt ’96CC has scored a variety of hit Broadway shows, including *SpongeBob SquarePants* and *Jagged Little Pill*. His rock musical *Next to Normal*, written by Brian Yorkey ’93CC, won a 2010 Pulitzer Prize. During the pandemic shutdown, Kitt wrote the song “Oh, Columbia,” performed virtually by former School of General Studies student Ben Platt, as a gift for the Class of 2020.

Phil Kline

Composer and sound artist Phil Kline ’75CC started his music career in the New York City punk and avant-garde scenes, performing with bands such as the Del-Byzanteens with filmmaker and musician Jim Jarmusch ’75CC. Kline is best known for *Unsilent Night*, a 1992 performance-art piece and related album, and for the 2004 song cycle *Zippo Songs*, inspired by the Vietnam War.

Steve Lehman

Steve Lehman ’12GSAS, a saxophonist and composer who has led and performed with a wide variety of ensembles, is a key player in the contemporary jazz scene. His record *Travail, Transformation, and Flow* was named jazz album of the year by the *New York Times* in 2009.

Wang Lu

Originally from Xi’an, China, pianist and composer Wang Lu ’12GSAS is influenced by traditional Chinese music as well as the sounds of nature and urban life. Her chamber opera *The Beekeeper* premiered at the Chicago Opera Theater in March 2022.

Nico Muhly

Composer, pianist, and arranger Nico Muhly ’03CC has worked in a range of genres, including orchestral music, film scores, and pop songs. His notable compositions include the 2017 opera *Marnie*, which was performed by the English National Opera and the Metropolitan Opera, and the 2017 album *Planetarium*, a collaboration with indie artists Sufjan Stevens and Bryce Dessner. Muhly is also a cofounder of the Icelandic record label Bedroom Community.

Rodgers and Hammerstein

Composer Richard Rodgers ’54HON and lyricist and librettist Oscar Hammerstein II 1916CC, ’54HON worked together on the 1920 Columbia Varsity Show. Although both artists initially found success with other collaborators — Rodgers, who transferred out of Columbia, had a fruitful partnership with Lorenz Hart, and Hammerstein with Jerome Kern — the duo reunited in the early 1940s. Their legendary musicals include *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, and *The Sound of Music*.

Tristan Perich

Tristan Perich ’04CC, an electronic composer and visual artist who studied computer science and music as a Columbia undergrad, takes inspiration from math, physics, and the sounds of machines. He has released several albums, including *1-Bit Symphony*, *Noise Patterns*, and the more classically infused *Drift Multiply*.

Dave Soldier

As a Columbia neuroscientist, David Sulzer ’88GSAS studies everything from Parkinson’s disease to drug addiction. As a composer and musician who performs under the name Dave Soldier, he creates experimental music. Sulzer explores the connections between his areas of expertise in the 2021 book *Music, Math, and Mind: The Physics and Neuroscience of Music*.

Kate Soper

Vocalist and composer Kate Soper ’11GSAS is known for her avant-garde contemporary classical works, which she often performs herself. Her chamber opera *Ipsa Dixit*, which came to Columbia’s Miller Theatre in 2018, was a finalist for the 2017 Pulitzer Prize in music, and her latest work, *The Romance of the Rose*, premiered at the Long Beach Opera in February. Soper is also a member of the experimental music ensemble Wet Ink along with pianist-composer Eric Wubbels ’10GSAS.

Tyshawn Sorey

Composer and instrumentalist Tyshawn Sorey ’17GSAS, who is also a professor of music at the University of Pennsylvania, is known for his experimental jazz compositions and his collaborations with musicians like John Zorn and Vijay Iyer.

Sorey’s work has made numerous best-of lists in jazz.

Philip Springer

Prolific composer Philip Springer ’50CC is best known for cowriting the Christmas classic “Santa Baby.” In a career spanning over seventy years, Springer has worked on hundreds of songs, including the Frank Sinatra hit “(How Little it Matters) How Little We Know” and Judy Garland’s “Heartbroken.”

Joan Tower

Joan Tower ’67GSAS, ’78SOA, the first woman to receive the prestigious Grawemeyer Award for Music, is best known for her string quartets and compositions such as *Sequoia* and *Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman (*the latter inspired by Aaron Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man*). Tower is currently a professor of music composition at Bard College.

Chou Wen-chung

Born in Shangdong, China, composer Chou Wen-chung ’54GSAS moved to the United States in his twenties and earned a master’s degree in music from Columbia. He taught at the Electronic Music Center and went on to serve as a professor of composition in the music department from 1964 to 1991. Having trained in traditional Chinese music, Wen-chung, who died in 2019, was highly influential in bridging East Asian and Western styles.

Eric Wubbels

Eric Wubbels ’10GSAS, a pianist and experimental composer, codirects and plays with the Wet Ink ensemble (which also includes vocalist Kate Soper ’11GSAS),

among other projects. His compositions are performed around the world, and he has appeared on several studio albums.

Charles Wuorinen

Composer, pianist, and conductor Charles Wuorinen ’61CC, ’63GSAS, the son of former Columbia history professor John H. Wuorinen ’31GSAS, grew up on the Upper West Side and attended Columbia for undergraduate and graduate school. His diverse oeuvre includes over 270 works, ranging from opera to orchestral music to electronic compositions. In 1970, Wuorinen won the Pulitzer Prize for his synthesizer piece *Time’s Encomium*. He died in 2020.

Nina Young

Composer and sonic artist Nina Young ’17GSAS, who works largely within the realm of electronic music, has produced and composed for a diverse range of studio recordings. Her orchestral compositions have been performed at Carnegie Hall and by major orchestras such as the New York Philharmonic and the Philadelphia Orchestra.

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