On creating systems that work



Conductor and composer Christopher Rountree discusses balancing multiple roles, building systems and networks with people and ideas, using procrastination as market research, and the power of being vulnerable at any stage of your career.

March 13, 2025 -

As told to Angelica Olstad, 2094 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Inspiration, Creative anxiety.

As lead conductor and founder of Wild Up, you run one of the biggest new-music ensembles in the United States. Did you always know you wanted to run your own ensemble? What has your journey been like building one in Los Angeles? When did you fall in love with new music and what drives you to be a champion for it in today's climate?

I've always been someone who wants to bring people together and make teams. I coached peewee hockey when I was 16 because it paid a lot better than working at the nacho stand. I realized that being a professional conductor was my ideal way to bring people together.

I came really late to classical music. I played bass in a rock band when I was in high school. I was playing trombone in the jazz band and baritone, euphonium, and trombone in the wind ensemble and the orchestra. I never heard Beethoven but I was actually listening to Philip Glass's Einstein on the Beach on repeat in my 1994 Toyota Camry, driving to the beach through the canyon near my house.

I was in college when I heard Beethoven for the first time. One of my history professors said, "If you all don't have this recording of the Vienna Philharmonic playing Beethoven's 5 and 7, you must own it. It's mandatory." I remember going to Barnes & Noble and buying this record and then putting it on in the car, and I felt like I was right next to the instrument. I'd always thought of an orchestra as a thing that was far away making sound that was not very loud. Of course, Beethoven and his concept of the orchestra was "I need as many people on stage so that it will be the loudest thing anybody has ever heard."

Early on I was questioning what a concert was and why we liked it. I think so many approaches to classical music curation have the same tunnel vision we get when looking at a score, which is so many details. We haven't zoomed out to think, "What's the context of those details in society? What effect will this concert have on someone's day as a functional object that could change them or not?"

Wild Up has received numerous Grammy nominations, most recently for the album Eastman: Stay on It, which is part of an ongoing anthology of recorded work by the ensemble. What drew you to Julius Eastman's work specifically? How do you consider holding space for a composer who was gay, black, and largely ignored during his lifetime in a way that doesn't feel performative in a landscape that has historically been white?

Sometimes you meet a composer through their work. Composers like Eastman teach you so much that your practice is radically changed. The attraction to Eastman's work is that by doing it, we felt as if our dynamic between each other was actively evolving. In classical music we're usually prompted, "Did you do it right?" and suddenly we are all anxiety problems. With Eastman, it's the opposite. The work makes us all think, "What did I bring today?"

The notation is simple and open. It causes everyone to be making choices all the time. Our dialogue shifts to, “How did my choices work with everyone else?” What an amazing thing to teach, this empathy among classical musicians.

I’m a white cis man who’s 41, and my positionality to Eastman’s work is one where I must avoid being centered at all costs. I must ask, “What are we centering?” Eastman died unhoused. He was marginalized, he was black, and he was queer. Are we centering the tragedy of his demise, or are we centering the power of the work in context of the tragedy of his demise? Every time we talk to the press, everybody wants to retell this tragic story of his life, but they end up telling the story of the joy of the music and how transformative the pieces are.

You just released a record, *3 BPM*, on Brassland Records, which is your debut as a composer. What has that process been like for you transitioning from conductor to composer, both artistically and professionally? Where do you draw your inspiration from?

A conductor is an interpreter. We’re getting text, we’re getting a score, we interpret, we look for details, we magnify, and we change some of the timings. The score is not us. We have to wear it as a mantle and deliver it to the audience and organize it, but it’s not us. Being a composer is like doing open-heart surgery on yourself, pulling out your own heart, handing it to someone else while it’s beating, and saying, “I’m not sure if it’s good enough.” They could not be farther apart, being a conductor and a composer. For me, composition has been a hobby for a long time. It comes from love but it is terrifying. It’s so close to my heart that it’s quite devastating.

Motivating my group is easy. Writing emails like, “Let’s do this gig at the art museum,” all of that feels easy. When I have to write for myself and say, “Friends, would you play this piece that I wrote?” it’s terrifying. My procrastination spikes through the roof. It’s unbearable. I read a good book about procrastination, which described it as market research, and that was incredibly helpful to me. I realized, “Oh, when I’m scared I procrastinate.”

In the moments that I’m feeling procrastination (which is daily) I figured out how to label it and say, “Is this fear or is it market research? And let’s just figure out which one it is and I can go slow.” Slow is not bad, but we just always have to be in that category of thoughtfulness. It’s a category of saying, “What would happen if I took two more days to figure this out? And how could that serve the process and my heart?”

I love this idea of using procrastination as a tool, reframing that narrative, and how you used that to do something that vulnerable. What was the final push for you that finally helped you get it over the finish line and out into the world?

I went into a little cave during the pandemic and composed for a month. I haven’t had a month off in a long time. I think that’s part of it: to have the time and space to do it. The external answer is, the power of a deadline cannot be overstated.

How do you manage your time? What advice do you have for other artists and creatives who are looking to build their own ensemble? What is something you wish you’d been told early in your career?

Right now the makeup of my work is 50 percent Wild Up as the artistic director, conducting a lot of concerts, and making a bunch of recordings. The goal is to look for different paths for classical music in Los Angeles.

I’m also the music director at Long Beach Opera. Opera jobs are the most dramatic thing I could ever imagine, and it seems obvious given what’s happening on stage. The amount of times I’ve been doing an opera and I’m watching someone get hit in the face (by accident) and then rolling down a stage while they start screaming instead of singing is many times.

In Wild Up, I am the one that is the artist, I’m the chaotic one. In the context of Long Beach Opera, there is such an agent of chaos present that I am the one who is holding the spreadsheet. I have the clipboard. Those two jobs take up most of my time at this point. About six to eight weeks a year, I’m guest conducting and traveling

around.

My godmother, Hope Tschopik Schneider, has been an arts planning strategist for her whole career. She was a big part of the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival in Los Angeles, and she's helped so many organizations all over the globe and on the West Coast. When I started Wild Up, I asked her, "How can I not mess this up? What should I do?" She had a couple of big bullet points which I have held for my whole career, and they've changed my life.

The first is, don't wait to be asked to dance. You must go over there and begin dancing. To match that with someone who procrastinates quite a lot is something. That's why it was useful. In every moment where I have so many things I want to get done but I just can't move, those words resound in my head. I must move a little bit.

You are not going to be good at everything. You have to really figure out all the things you're good at and all the things you're not so good at, and you have to figure out how to grapple with that.

For example, I'm not that organized. Every month I miss a meeting or two because I forgot or I thought it was at the wrong time. I know that's going to happen to me, so I have to be diligent to make sure that I'm present and organized enough to get all my work done. I know that I'm good at high-level business strategy and also curation. I'm not good at knowing what goes before what to get to the goal, but when we're in rehearsal I know exactly what to do.

I love it.

We could obsess about those things that we're bad at. Many people won't see the thing that you're bad at. Do people see in me that I have crippling self-doubt? Usually no. What they see in me is I'm good at telling stories about music. I think I've become rather fluent in doing that. Take the things you're good at and send them off the charts. The things you're not great at, solve them. You don't need to fix them, but make a solution. Be honest with yourself and go to do that introspective work.

Chris Rountree Recommends:

James Hollis's book *The Eden Project: In Search of the Magical Other*: All of Hollis's books on his learnings as a Jungian psychoanalyst have shaped my life. This is one of my favorite books about relationships, and I feel as if it, and Hollis's writings generally, have shaped my life more than just about anything else.

***Dungeons and Dragons* 5th Edition:** We all have to have a hobby, don't we? I've run D&D games for the past 33 years. This system of group storytelling, an improvisation, has spawned the deepest creative thought in my life. Get someone to teach you. Or ask me. What a joy! Sheesh.

Pharoah Sanders's record *Wisdom Through Music*: There's not much more to say except there is real wisdom there. What if all of our practices and our buildings stood as unabashed as this blossoming florid record?

The chicken club (with a latke inside of it) from Belle's Delicatessen and Bar in Highland Park, CA: Continuing the tradition of delis that are a bar at night, Belle's has everything going right about it—and holy hell, the bagels, thank goodness for the bagels, seeds on both sides ride or die. There have been nights at Belle's where it feels like a true art salon café, six experimental dance makers chat at one table discussing wages for dancers and folks unwillingness to simply go beyond themselves, four of us are at another table planning a transcendental sci-fi opera, and gaggle of Academy Award-winning directors walk in. I'm telling you, if you want to feel the arts in L.A., go have a late bite at Belle's.

Bub's Beer at Solarc in Glassell Park, CA: Archie Carey, the brewmaster at Solarc, is an experimental bassoonist I've made work with for two decades. His brews are ancient, the beer that paid for the pyramids. Hops be damned, he's added sage instead; there's burnt lapsang souchong and braised peaches over there; someone is playing experimental music through the open barn doors, while through "ladle night" lentil soup that hits above its weight is hawked behind the bar. I remember the solstice party where we all danced in the grassy median outside the bar, drinking Archie's collab using next-door neighbors Bub and Grandma's sourdough starter in the mash. What a joint.

Name

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Vocation

conductor/composer

Collin Keller