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Music Without Borders: Don't Fence Him In

The sky's the limit for electro-jazz cellist/composer Dana Leong

By Louise Lee

Catch cellist Dana Leong in concert, or check out his YouTube videos, and you won't hear Romantic concertos or Bach suites. Instead, you'll find a musician in full hip-hop regalia with a cello, trombone, and laptop computer, surrounded by rappers, drummers, electronic keyboardists, and even dancers.

For Leong, who wholeheartedly embraces influences from urban, pop, rock, classical, hip-hop, rap, and jazz, there are no creative limits.

"I'm interested in music with a true original sound," he says.

Building on a background in classical cello, the 29-year-old self-described "electro-jazz cellist/composer" melds a range of styles and electronically generated sounds into his own works. Besides regularly teaching at jazz clinics and workshops around the country and running his own production studio, the Manhattan-based Leong has performed on three continents with others and with his own band, Milk & Jade by Dana Leong.

When onstage, Leong switches between cello and trombone, often while playing the same piece. He connects his instruments to a ThinkPad laptop, which he uses to bring onto the stage special effects usually kept in a recording studio. With electronics, he says, "you can elevate the excitement level of the music, give it an extra boost at the right moment, and put it into overdrive; you can sparkle up high or rumble the ground or punch out front and get the point across."

Growing up outside of San Francisco, Leong as a child first took up violin and then cello, and finally, in the fourth grade, the trombone. His mother, a piano teacher, started him on multiple instruments, he says, in part to keep him out of after-school

mischief. The serious crisscrossing didn't start, however, until college at the Manhattan School of Music. "I decided to use all the skills I'd learned in classical and jazz and switch them around, so I studied more classical stuff on trombone and learned different styles on cello, learned different ways to pluck, how to support a band in a bass role," Leong



says. "I learned to play melodies on the trombone the way a cello does and I learned how to play fanfares and anthems on the cello."

In recent years, Leong has played around the country, performing with legendary avant-jazz saxophonist Henry Threadgill, Cuban jazz clarinetist and saxophonist Paquito D'Rivera, and drummer Dafnis Prieto, among others.

Leong's own band has played everywhere from tiny coffeehouses to auditoriums in Southeast Asia, where the band traveled in 2007 as part of a cultural outreach tour organized by the US State Department.

Reviews have been upbeat.

Online jazz community All About Jazz has opined that "whether playing straight-up jazz, classical, or the many hybrid concoctions his work has already produced, Dana Leong seems to acknowledge no boundaries."

These days, Leong spends much of his time composing for cello and other instruments. "I use the fundamentals of classical music," he says. "But while I have respect for that, I don't feel I can dedicate every day of my life to just that."

"My interests span wider."

Learn more about Dana Leong at danaleong.com