

Aaron Larget-Caplan: Building a Career through Talent and Savvy

Interview by Melissa Eddy, *Mu Theta*, International Editor

Classical guitarist **Aaron Larget-Caplan** (*Beta, Boston Alumni*) began learning clarinet in the fourth grade. He took up electric guitar at age eleven, playing in jazz and rock bands and learning from cassette tapes of Led Zeppelin, Ozzy Osborne, and other iconic bands. He dabbled in classical, following the example of Osborne's guitarist, but it was only when he saw Andrés Segovia play, in a video during sophomore Spanish class, that he was smitten. He began private classical guitar study at sixteen and at seventeen made his debut at the Tabor Opera House in Leadville, Colorado, playing with his teacher.

Aaron went on to Boston University and the New England Conservatory, where he studied with David Leisner and Eliot Fisk and received his bachelor's degree in performance in 2001. His extensive post-graduate study has included attendance and performance at numerous festivals in the U.S. and abroad (including the Chautauqua Summer Music Festival on a Mu Phi Epsilon Foundation scholarship), master classes with several classical guitar luminaries, and chamber music coaching. He also began teaching privately at the Community Center of Boston and in his own private studio, work which he continues today.

He launched his solo performance career in 2002 as an artist with Young Audiences of Massachusetts, performing in schools and community settings, which he says taught him how to present lively, non-boring programs. An active recitalist, he has premiered more than twenty-five solo works for guitar, performs with several chamber ensembles, has recorded two-and-a-half solo CDs, and is featured on two others. One of his many recent ventures is The Lullaby Project, with performances and a solo CD that features fourteen premiere works. Aaron graciously gave *The Triangle* this e-interview about his life as an artist-entrepreneur.

The Triangle: How did you become interested in classical guitar?

Aaron: At sixteen, when I saw a video of Andrés Segovia playing "Asturias" by Isaac Albéniz (The Doors used the theme in their song "Spanish Caravan"), I wanted to play like that. Once I got started, I found the tactile sensations to be so amazing that I didn't want to put the guitar down. I also loved the ability to adjust timbre, much like one would use electronic foot pedals or whammy bars in electric guitar, but doing it myself and not with a device. Since my first performance when I was seventeen, I had the bug: I knew I wanted to perform.

How did you choose your career path after college? Or did it choose you?

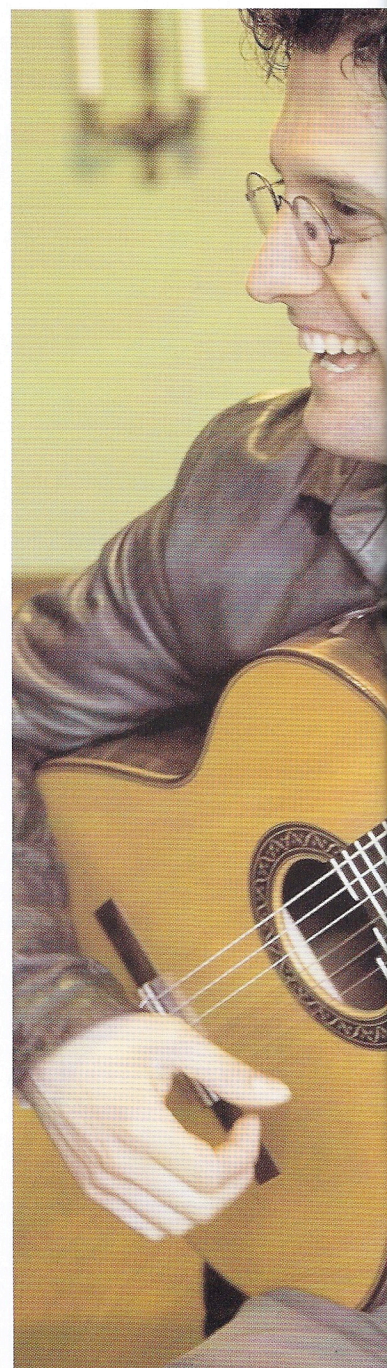
My path is the one I'm on. I like to think I'm choosing it but life (house fire, injuries, love, good coffee) often gets in the way of my ideas. I try not to turn down an opportunity and I pay more attention to what I can improve than what I have done.

How did you learn the skills to be an artist-entrepreneur, to take charge of your own career?

I learned the skills I have (by no means all that are necessary!) by taking on responsibilities, because I knew nobody else would or could do them for me. If one wants to perform and eat, one gets over one's fears – of rejection, talking on the phone, writing, organizing – which are still not fun, but do become easier.

I jumped in by gigging while at the New England Conservatory, which introduced me to contracts, calling clients, collecting money, being punctual, programming, and other important skills. NEC offered a Career Skills class where I put together my first press kit. For my website, I traded lessons with a student and learned the basics of how to update it. For performance opportunities, I began calling arts organizations, applying for grants, and asking for advice. I loved new music (still do) and would offer to play composers' latest works. To build ensemble experience, I collaborated when I could and tried to be a good student with the groups I played with.

I also had medical issues and had to learn to make healthy decisions from a pretty early age. This is something conservatories and



colleges need to teach! Too many people lose careers due to injuries, bad habits, or ill health. Not all of us are blessed with amazing health and energy, but there is a right way to use the body.

I also made sure I was not like every other guitarist or classical musician, in that I aimed at being a good businessperson, something that really impresses promoters. I started an email list, informed people of my concerts, wrote many thank you notes, booked for the



ensemble, and designed programs for communities and schools. I learned to enjoy being successful in business (it's sexy!).

What do you think are some personal qualities essential to the successful artist-entrepreneur?

Honesty with oneself: if you hate what you're doing, don't do it. Hire someone or change something. Audiences can usually tell.

Desire: if you want it, do what is necessary to get it (without physically hurting or cheating others).

Patience: classical music careers can be long (unlike most in pop music). One concert is not a career, nor does one rejection equate to no career.

Vision: know what you want to play and why.

Love: love your music. If you don't, play it until you do.

Communication: share your music with the audience and try to connect, not just play.

Observation: pay attention to what others do and like.

Listening: the life around you and in the concert hall is a great teacher.

Perseverance and commitment: very few things happen quickly, so plan to stick around for a while. Deadlines and budgets don't always work for art. See patience.

Humility: surround yourself with smarter people. I married one.

What mix of tasks makes up your work life?

Practice and performance, of course, but as an artist-entrepreneur, what else?

In no particular order: Teaching. Receiving Shiatsu body work. In-person networking. Yoga practice. Website updates & social networking. Emailing performance contracts. Reading about other artists and projects. Creating program ideas for upcoming seasons. Collaborating, commissioning. Designing and disseminating promotional materials – emails, newsletters, CD advertisements. Going to concerts. Paying bills, balancing checkbooks and credit cards. Seeking out sponsors and investors for concerts and projects. Speaking with and looking for mentors. Meeting with ensembles outside rehearsals, for planning, advertising, logistics. Performing to promote my CDs. Cleaning my studio and equipment. Taking care of my transportation. Looking for ways to make buying easier (currently use a credit card reader with my cell phone). Trying to book concerts close to hot springs.

How has Mu Phi Epsilon membership contributed to your career development?

While I was in school, the concert opportunities and scholarship were most beneficial and appreciated. I'm

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lucky to have an active and wonderful alumni chapter in Boston, whose members are very supportive in coming to concerts and in some cases setting up opportunities. As I have known many of the members longer than I have my wife, they have heard me play well and not so well and they are still my friends, so that is reassuring. I also find reading the *Triangle* to be enlightening, with all the diversity of members' activities and interesting ideas. Not growing up in a musical or musically connected family, I have found MPE to be a welcome friend.

What advice would you give today's music students about taking charge of one's own career?

Start now. Agents and managers want people who are already established, so don't wait. Have a tangible product, a demo CD or DVD, something that can also be sold. A demo is expected in the industry, and it's wonderful to make money for something you've done. Business cards: make them cool, make them hip, just have them! Get a good website that reflects your personality and artistry and is up to date. Youtube, Facebook, myspace are all extra; they do **not** replace a website. Good video is better than great audio.

If you want to stand out, program great contemporary composers as well as Beethoven or Mozart. Perform what you are best at while you work on your weaker aspects, and find a way to connect the music you play to the people who are listening. Sometimes beauty is enough, but telling an anecdote about the music or a personal story can add to a performance and allow someone to connect with you. Speaking can also open the door to a lecture opportunity, teaching gig, new student, or media interview. This recently happened to me while performing at a bookstore to promote my CD. A woman invited me to come and lecture to her business students at Suffolk University.

Money does matter and the love of music does not pay your bills. We usually undervalue ourselves for fear that another will do the gig for less. Ask around about local rates if you are new to an area. Use contracts; most businesspeople will have more respect for you. Those that refuse a contract are not worth working with. Don't be afraid to ask for advice, and don't waste people's time. Manage your own time: think about what matters to you and what your goals are, and act accordingly.

Health & diet are important; change habits that can cause illness or injury. If you are injured, find someone who can fix you without drugs or surgery; it is worth the investment. Appearance and manners count. If you want to be treated like a professional, dress and behave like one. Make a good first impression; musicians have long memories. And the industry's golden rule: if you want gigs, pass along gigs. Recommend and hire people. They will do the same for you at some point.

Any other thoughts?

There are many ways to measure success. Money is one. Competition wins or losses are another, or a good commission, or a great performance of that one Bach fugue. A full studio with four weeks vacation might be your marker. Maybe marriage, two kids and a dog do it for you. It is up to you to define success.

I haven't perfected any of the things I described earlier; like life, some days are better than others. Whether I win a competition or get a record deal, I know that as long as I have the health and desire I will perform on the guitar. Business is the work that makes music easy – most of the time. Now back to that fugue...

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Resources on Music Entrepreneurship & Career Management

Ask Edna - Edna Landau is an iconic former artist manager, now director of career development at Colburn Conservatory of Music. Free career advice blog at www.musicalamerica.com.

Institute for Music Leadership, Eastman School of Music. Career guidance and cutting-edge ideas; includes publications and programs. www.esm.rochester.edu/iml

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