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Beethoven by Day, Tiki by Night

By *Julia Laughlin*

APPIAN STAFF WRITER

While many at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) see their future careers taking place within a school building as teachers or administrators, Randy Wong sees himself on stage.

This laid-back, 22 year-old Hawaii-born student in the Arts and Education program wants to play the classical bass, discovering ways to learn and teach through music.

Originally from Oahu, Hawaii, Wong was surrounded by music from birth. He started playing the piano at age four, and he began playing the classical bass at age nine. Since college, he has been involved with education, and he is here at HGSE to find ways to mesh these two worlds.



When Wong attended Tanglewood Camp for musicians in his teens and was exposed to top-notch players, he began thinking of classical music as a viable career for himself; he calmly but passionately explains that he “dug” the music and musicians there.

Claiming sheer luck, Wong soon received a fellowship to study music with the National Symphony Orchestra and subsequently enrolled in the New England Conservatory (NEC) for college where he majored in classical bass performance—a far cry from the Hawaiian music he grew up with. (Wong admits that he “performs classical music but *plays* everything else.”)

During his time at NEC, Wong had an internship at the well-known Boston Arts Academy, where he taught music literacy skills to grades 9-11; specifically, he tried to resurrect the old musical pedagogy called “solfege” (you know, *The Sound of Music* “do-re-mi” style). Wong poetically describes solfege as the “language of music.” His challenge was to discover inventive ways to get today’s youth interested in classical music: not one to shy away from seemingly incompatible ideas, he used hip-hop and rap as a segue into classical music.

Wong seems to be making a habit of juxtaposing traditionally segregated styles together in a new ways. One of Wong’s three (yes, *three*) bands—*Akamai Brain Collective*—“fuses elements of jazz, exotica, Tiki, Latin classical, and pop,” with song titles such as “Bananas and Rice” and “Dew Drop Inn.” This unique band, comprised of three Hawaii-born men who all attended prestigious music schools in Boston, already has airplay in such varied locations as Japan, Alaska, New Jersey, and Las Vegas. The band dubs their style “progressive island jams,” a fresh take on traditional Hawaiian music. Listen to the fun and lively sound at www.akamaibraincollective.com.

The band’s name is unusual and somewhat contradictory: Wong translates “akamai” as “clever, but not *too* in your face.” The use of the words “brain” and “collective” in a band’s name, Wong ardently explains, sounds more highbrow than the popular image of pastoral, laid-back Hawaiian musicians; thus, the band’s name combines traditional Hawaiian language with academic-sounding English. The first letter of each word in the title ends up as “ABC,” connoting the band’s goal to mesh complexity with simplicity.

The band has even created its own record company, Pass Out Records (a double entendre meaning “pass out” the records and also reflecting the band’s tendency to “pass out” after pulling all-nighters). The label’s logo is the

Menehune, an impish Hawaiian creature akin to the well-recognized Leprechaun. Once again, Wong spices up the familiar with something fresh.

Still, this classical bass player's favorite band (because it is "wacky") is his novelty Tiki band, *Waitiki*, which plays an sultry and exotic form of Polynesian music, complete with hula dancing, storytellers, a "vibraphonist," and a "reed-player" (www.waitiki.com); listen to "*Flower Humming*" to get a sense of their sound. You'll feel like you're on vacation with its self-described "flowing island breeze-like tunes."

And that's not all: Wong's third band, the HARK, created a beautiful instrumental holiday album, literally jazzing up your old favorites, like "*Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*."

Wong says, "I guess the music that I write is considered kind of 'out' or 'weird' from a mainstream profession, but I don't mind that."

His students don't seem to mind either. In the summer of 2002, Wong taught English in Dalian, China. He used his musical skill and creative touch as a vehicle to education, teaching vocabulary and intonation by singing phrases and sentences (based on the theory that any subject can be taught using music).

Now a professional bass player, Wong hopes to become involved with the now-trendy "musician in residence" programs popping up around the country, otherwise known as "performance outreach." At Harvard, he is not only learning inventive ways to contribute to this movement, but he is also exploring how fundamental music literacy skills can reinforce more traditional academic subjects (reading, writing, arithmetic), similarly to when he used song to teach English.

When asked his goal, Wong says he'd like to be "making things happen that haven't happened yet" in the music world. It looks like he's well on his way.

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