

How I Arrived at AI Music

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Before anything else, I was a pianist.

That is the simplest way I know to begin. Long before I had language for vocation, pedagogy, leadership, artistic ethics, technology, or creative practice, I had the piano. I had sound. I had the strange, magnetic feeling that music could alter the atmosphere of a room and the interior weather of a person. I did not decide to become a musician so much as I gradually realized that music had already become the organizing principle of my life.

I started playing piano when I was very young, probably around five or six, after my family moved to Apple Valley in 1982. I was four when we moved into a beautiful contemporary house designed and built by the architect who had lived there before us. It had a distinct inner life: modern lines, unusual spaces, and even a small courtyard with a tree growing in the middle of it. That house felt alive to me. It was full of music, technology, teaching, family enterprise, and sound.

My mother was a piano teacher — a Nationally Certified Teacher of Music and later a Minnesota Music Hall of Fame inductee for her work with music technology. She was also a deeply expressive musician. My father owned his own cost-analysis business for hospitals, work that was mathematically complex and highly specialized. He had the ability to hold an extraordinary amount of information in his mind at any one time. Both of my parents were entrepreneurs, and both of them seemed to understand that if you were serious about something, you built a world around it.

My mother built such a world around music. She taught under the name Casa de la Música, a name that has followed her work for many years. In our home, music

education was not something abstract; it happened in the kitchen, in the studio, in the living room, in the daily rhythm of the house. She had a computer lab for her students at a time when that was truly cutting-edge. Students would sit at the kitchen desk area in front of one of those large old computer monitors, working through music games and learning activities. We had a desktop computer and MIDI equipment in the house long before most people understood what that meant.

Casa de la Música also sold products. My mother and father created Time Sig, a studio-management software program, combining her experience as a teacher with his expertise as an accountant. She also created Music History in the Making, a student notebook teachers could use to track assignments, progress, and achievements. Looking back, I can see how unusual all of that was: music, education, entrepreneurship, technology, and administration all braided together under one roof.

At the time, of course, it simply seemed normal to me.

There was also another project in our house that influenced me in ways I am still understanding. My mother worked with a psychologist and hypnotherapist to create a series called Mind of Music, hypnosis-based exploration of how the mind could expand its possibilities around music. I remember listening to those tapes repeatedly as a child. The very premise fascinated me: that music was not only something one performed or heard, but something that could shape thought, attention, imagination, and consciousness.

That idea has never really left me.

A Family of Music, Memory, and Inheritance

My mother's story is central to my own. She is, in part, of Mexican descent. Mexico's contribution to World War II included sending workers to help build railroads in the United States, and my biological grandfather was among those sent to Nebraska. There he met my grandmother. My mother was later placed for adoption and raised in a very small town in Iowa — population eighty, a wide spot in the road. At eighteen, she left and never looked back.

She studied piano with a teacher connected to Grinnell College and played through high school before going into nursing, which was what many women were expected to do at the time. But after a hospital patient went into delirium tremens and fell on her, permanently injuring her back, she returned to college for a second degree — this time in piano performance.

I was a young child when she began practicing regularly in the house. I remember Beethoven, Bach, Rachmaninoff, Chopin, Debussy, and Granados pouring through the rooms. She had a beautiful tone, strong technique, and a deep musicality that was never merely technical. She also sang. Coming from a small town, she had learned to sing in church, and she had a real voice — strong, expressive, and natural. She accompanied singers, taught young musicians, and became a teacher to children who would grow into active musical lives of their own.

My older, middle brother, too, was deeply musical. He was a guitarist, and for years his rock band practiced loudly in the basement. By the time I was ten, he was in college for classical guitar performance. I have the sound of his guitar still in my ear. He had a teaching studio in my parents' house for a time, eventually operating his own studio with several teachers. I taught there when I was in high school. He was also fascinated by digital keyboards and MIDI, and it was he who gave me my first MIDI tone generator — a gift that opened an entire creative universe for me.

There is another part of my musical inheritance as well: my family in Mexico. An adoptee, my mother reunited with her Mexican family when she was in her forties. When I was a child, we visited them and music was everywhere. It felt like everyone was a musician. My uncle directed a university folk-dance troupe, and when we were there, mariachi bands, folk singers, dancers, and family musicians seemed to appear everywhere we went. There were songs and dances nearly every night. Music was not separated from life; it was part of gathering, kinship, celebration, and memory.

I have often wondered if part of my musical expressiveness comes from that side of my family — from people for whom music seemed less like a profession than a native language. There was a depth of feeling in those family gatherings that I have

never forgotten. It was not polished in the conservatory sense, but it was alive, embodied, and deeply human.

That distinction matters to me more now than ever.

The Piano as Home

As a child, I loved playing piano. I loved it so much that I practiced constantly. Because my mother taught in the afternoons, the best time for me to practice was in the morning. In middle school, I would wake up at 5:30 a.m. and practice for a couple of hours before school. This irritated my brother terribly. He was in college at the time and might come home in the early hours of the morning, only to have me begin playing piano a few hours later.

But I loved it. I loved the pieces my teacher gave me. My first teacher, Rich Clausen, had a wonderful ability to select music that set off sparks in my imagination. He had a deep love of jazz and swing — he'd once been a trumpeter with a traveling variety act called the Swinging Ambassadors — and it showed in what he chose for me. The pieces were engaging, rhythmic, jazzy, bluesy, harmonically interesting, and full of energy. They made me want to play. I memorized them quickly and performed them often.

As a child, performing was easy. There were no nerves, no self-consciousness, no fear of mistakes. That changed as I grew older and the stakes became higher, but in those early years, performing felt effortless. I played all the time — at least once a month, often more. I played solos, duets, and pieces with other students from my mother's studio. I performed duets with Rich's son, who later became a well-known artistic director for a major dinner theater. I played because the music gave me something to prepare, something to shape, and something to offer.

Regular performance created regular discipline. There was always something coming up, always a reason to practice, always a piece moving from first reading toward memory, confidence, and performance.

What I loved most about the piano was its emotional range. At the keyboard, one could move from tenderness to thunder, from clarity to mystery, from grief to exuberance, often within the same piece. I also came to understand that practicing

an instrument changes consciousness. There is a state one enters — a flow state, a zone — where time shifts and the mind seems to organize itself around sound, motion, pattern, and intention. I experienced that as a pianist long before I had words for it.

I experience something similar now when I create AI music.

The instrument is different. The physical relationship is different. But the creative faucet — that sensation of ideas moving through me faster than I can fully explain — feels remarkably familiar.

I still play piano occasionally, but my relationship with the instrument has matured. I believe my performing days are likely behind me. I miss certain things about performing: the heightened attention, the shared energy of a room, the applause, the sense of occasion. But I do not miss the stress. As one pianist observed, the higher the level of playing becomes, the more the audience demands. The pressure builds. At this stage of my life, I love music too much to confuse it with unnecessary suffering.

The piano is still my instrument. But I no longer need it to prove anything.

I love music now for the sake of music.

Orchestra Hall and the Spark of the New

One of my earliest orchestral memories remains vivid. I was around six when my mother took me to hear the Minnesota Orchestra perform Bartók's Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta. I believe Eiji Oue was conducting, though memory from childhood always carries its own atmosphere. We sat about halfway back in the hall, near the middle, and I remember being captivated by the sound.

Bartók did something to my imagination. The music felt strange, alive, angular, colorful, and electric. It did not behave like the music I already knew, and that was precisely what fascinated me. It set off sparks and fireworks in my mind.

I still respond that way to new music, especially contemporary classical music. There is something about encountering a sound world that does not immediately

explain itself. It asks the listener to stretch. It demands attention. It refuses to become wallpaper.

That has become increasingly important to me. We live in an age of constant sound and diminishing listening. Music is everywhere — in kitchens, commutes, stores, offices, phones, elevators, earbuds — and yet genuine listening is increasingly rare. We are surrounded by music and often barely hear it.

One of the convictions at the heart of my current work is the recovery of intentional listening: the act of bringing real attention, presence, and openness to music. There is a difference between sound as background and sound as a living companion. There is a difference between consuming music and receiving it.

When we listen with intention — alone in the morning quiet, or gathered together in shared experience — music becomes more than entertainment. It becomes reflection, connection, memory, and meaning.

That conviction did not arrive suddenly. It was planted early, in rooms full of piano sound, in family gatherings, in Orchestra Hall, in the strange blaze of Bartók.

MIDI, Computer Music, and the First Creative Laboratory

In high school, music creation began to take over my imagination.

My brother gave me a Korg tone generator, and I went to town with it. I had a desktop computer in my bedroom, MIDI equipment, and a hunger to make things. By today's standards, the sounds from that old setup are not great. Not at all. But at the time, they were miraculous. They represented a new technological frontier, a way for one person to hear multiple instruments, textures, and ideas come to life through a machine.

I composed constantly — probably too much. I was not a great high school student as a result. I practiced piano some, but writing computer music became everything to me. I loved it. I still listen to some of those old tracks and think, “Yes, I really was in high school then.” They are not great pieces. But I remember the joy of creating them.

That joy matters.

My first attempt at writing music with pencil and paper had come earlier, around age thirteen. I wanted to write something like a piano piece, but I gave up almost immediately because what came out of me was not as good as Mozart. Looking back, I recognize how common and damaging that kind of self-comparison can be for musicians. We compare ourselves to the great composers, the great performers, the great recordings — often to perfection itself. Perfection may be a noble ideal, but it can also harm the developing artist.

To create anything, one must survive the knowledge that it will not be Mozart.

Later, during my senior year of high school, I transferred to the School of Environmental Studies — the Zoo School — a new charter high school built around environmental education. It was a fascinating place, though the school itself had a rocky beginning. A teacher who knew about my piano playing suggested that I write a theme song for the new school. I agreed.

It was the first full piece I ever wrote.

It was not the theme song they were hoping for. I had no training, no compositional mentorship, and not much skill yet. It showed. But I look back on that piece as a turning point. It was the beginning of my serious exploration of the creative process in music.

That creative process — the desire to say something in sound that has not been said in quite that way before — is the throughline connecting my early computer music, my formal composition study, and now my AI music practice.

I have always loved creating music because it allows me to hear my own thoughts and ideas transformed into sound. The point is not novelty for novelty's sake. Originality must have purpose. It must carry meaning. It must be bold not merely to be different, but because the message behind it requires boldness.

Choosing Music, For Better or Worse

My parents never forced me to practice. They knew I was playing all the time, but there was no expectation that I had to become a musician. I never set out with a grand career plan. Music simply kept revealing itself as the thing I could not leave.

When I went to college, I was not mentally prepared. I struggled in those first years with depression, isolation, and a feeling of separation, even though I lived at home.

At one point, I wanted to drop out and study computer animation, which was then an emerging field. I loved computer animation and graphic design. I still do. They fascinate me in a different way than music does.

But I knew, at the core of my being, that I was a musician. I also knew that a musician's life could be difficult. Still, I did not really want to do anything else. So I chose music, for better or worse.

My studies had slowed down a bit by then — there was a stretch in high school where writing computer music mattered more to me than practicing did — though I still gave a senior recital with Beethoven's Waldstein Sonata and the Liszt E-flat piano concerto, which I performed again, not long after, with a local civic orchestra. It is a performance I sometimes wish I could do over. In college, I got something like a second chance: I played the first movement of Beethoven's Emperor Concerto with a festival orchestra, and it felt redemptive in a way the earlier performance had not.

College was also where I finally leaned into composition. I took formal lessons and wrote my first serious concert pieces — a string quartet, something I titled Overture to an Unwritten Tragedy, a handful of choral works and lots of miscellaneous pieces. I completed a minor in electronic music production along the way, which meant learning to record and sample sound, and even spending time with reel-to-reel tape, technology that already felt like an antique by the time I got my hands on it. My musical diet in those years was wide: lots of piano literature, wind band repertoire, saxophone, percussion and choir music, jazz piano lessons, evenings at the Minnesota Orchestra or The Dakota jazz club listening to whoever was passing through that week, long arguments with friends about contemporary composers none of us could quite agree on.

My choice to be a musician eventually led to graduate work in piano pedagogy. It was, in part, a practical decision. I had been teaching piano since I was fourteen. Because my mother was a teacher, I had access to students, and I began teaching in high school. I used the money to buy CDs, including music by Prince, whose musicianship astonished me. Prince seemed like an alien brought to this planet to

write Earth music — a musician of outrageous imagination, command, groove, color, and fluency. I'm still a superfan to this day.

Teaching was always around me as a youngster. I was raised in a family of teachers and surrounded by music educators, but I did not really study pedagogy until graduate school. I applied, received scholarship support, and was given a teaching position at a nearby community music school. It was the right path. I had considered conservatories, and in retrospect I am grateful I did not end up in one. I have known too many musicians who left such environments damaged by the very institutions that were supposed to cultivate them.

What pedagogy gave me was the ability to present musical concepts and repertoire logically and sequentially. That skill has served me in teaching, administration, leadership, writing, and now AI prompting. The ability to understand how complex ideas unfold — how one concept prepares the ground for another — is transferable across almost everything.

Graduate school also expanded my worldview. I met musicians from around the world and steeped myself in repertoire I had never encountered before — traditional sacred music, opera, musical theater, an entire world of choral literature. I lived on the East Coast, where the arts scene was thrilling and intimidating, and I lived in Princeton, New Jersey, an eclectic and intellectually charged place close enough to New York that we would take the train in for concerts whenever we could. I was there for the opening of Carnegie Hall's Zankel Hall, conducted by Pierre Boulez. I heard operas at the Met. I sang in the Concert Choir, performing Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* with the New York Philharmonic under Lorin Maazel, and later with Charles Dutoit. Friends who were deep into period performance introduced me to Baroque instruments and to the great choral works of Beethoven, Brahms, Bach, and Mendelssohn — a tradition I had mostly known from recordings until then. Those experiences widened my sense of what musical life could contain.

During my performing life, I played solo piano, accompanied instrumentalists and singers, performed chamber music, and collaborated in many settings. I have always loved chamber music, though I was most comfortable as a solo pianist. But the most

musically rewarding collaboration of my life was still ahead of me, and it began in a way I did not see coming.

A Life Woven in Music, Love, and Family

It was immediately after graduate school, and I had just moved back to Minneapolis. I was deep in the thick of building a career — head down, eyes forward, no distractions. That was the plan, anyway. That year, a new piano faculty member joined the community music school where I was teaching. We went for coffee, had a genuinely lovely time, and I thought to myself: this is a remarkable person. And then, true to form, I went completely MIA for a year and a half. Career first, everything else later. I was a lone wolf. That was my thing, that was my motto.

But life has a funny way of course-correcting you.

She hosted a dinner party sometime later, and I found myself watching from across the room as everyone around her simply lit up. People were drawn to her warmth, her energy, her presence. I saw it plainly that evening: this was someone truly special. The food was extraordinary too, but that is entirely beside the point. We began dating, and I never looked back.

As fate would have it, I had also made a pivotal decision around that same time. I chose to forego doctoral study for the moment and commit fully to planting roots in the Midwest, building a career as both a performer and a teacher. And in one of those moments where life rewards a leap of faith, I met my future wife again at the black-tie grand opening gala of the magnificent new building for our community music school. We talked late into the night. We played piano for each other. We fell in love that very evening.

She is a gifted, conservatory-trained classical pianist of the highest order — the kind of musician shaped and refined by decades of serious, devoted study. Originally from Türkiye, she entered the conservatory at the age of ten and remained a student there all the way through graduate school, fourteen years in total. Every graduate of that conservatory I have ever met has been a stellar musician, and she is no exception. She is extraordinarily well-trained, deeply musical, and endlessly inspiring to be around.

Due to my wife's Turkish background, an entire world of music and culture opened up to me that I had never fully encountered before. She was an active and accomplished performer — as a soloist, as a chamber musician, and as one half of a piano duo. That duo was something special. They built a genuine following, nearly selling out tickets at every event they organized, and they received grants to commission new works by local composers, works that drew rich influence from Turkish and Portuguese musical traditions, honoring both her heritage and that of her duo partner.

The sound of Turkish folk and Turkish classical music is unlike anything else. It is distinct, layered, and full of history. Hearing it opened my ear in ways I had not anticipated, and living with it — hearing spoken Turkish in our home, absorbing those sounds day after day — opened me even further. Türkiye is not widely recognized in the United States as a source of classical music, but there is a tradition there that is deeply embedded and beautifully alive. I was introduced to Turkish folk dance as well, and I was struck by how much it reminded me of the Mexican folk dance I had experienced as a child — the women's outfits brilliantly colorful and adorned, the men dressed sharp and dignified, so many of the dances moving in mixed meters like 5/8 and 7/8, the scales unfamiliar to Western ears but profoundly beautiful. This part of the world has truly been a cradle of civilization, and the musical tradition that lives there is worthy of every bit of that description.

Before our children were born, my wife and I performed together regularly as a piano duo — the whole range of music written for piano duet or two pianos. I can say with complete honesty that the sense of ensemble and togetherness I have with her is unlike anything I have ever experienced with another musician. Perhaps it is because we are married. Or perhaps, in some beautiful and circular way, we got married because of that connection.

When we decided to make it official, we did it in a way that felt entirely like us. We held a small, private wedding ceremony on Minnesota's North Shore, intimate and quiet and ours. Then we came back to Minneapolis and threw open the doors for a grand Wedding Concert, inviting our friends and colleagues to share in the celebration. Thirty-two performers and a small choir filled the afternoon with

music, and we remain so deeply grateful to this day, not just for their artistry, but for their friendship.

Watching my wife's career grow and blossom has been one of the great privileges of my life. It also taught me something essential about what it truly takes to be a performing musician: you have to hustle. No one else is going to define your career for you, build your reputation, or put in the hours required to keep a following alive. That is entirely on you. She embodied that spirit completely — the grant writing, the commissioning projects, the recording sessions, the ticket sales, all of it demanding a relentless go-get-it energy that I deeply admire. I have seen that same quality in every successful composer I have ever known. They always had a recording on them, scores in their attaché, a business card with website, a willingness to show up unexpectedly at performances all around town. That hustle is not separate from the artistry. It is part of it.

Reputations take enormous energy to sustain, and when the pandemic arrived, it changed everything, as it did for so many. Her duo partner returned permanently to her home country. They performed together again in Minnesota and Portugal in the years that followed, but maintaining a long-distance working relationship is genuinely difficult, regardless of the medium or the profession.

I have said elsewhere that above any professional achievement, any accolade, any milestone in my career, being a father is the thing I am most proud of and most humbled by. Having children changed me considerably. It was for them, for the hope of a better future for them and children just like them, that I later returned to pursue my doctorate. They gave me a reason that was bigger than myself. My two sons have taught me more about life than any formal education ever could.

After they were born, my wife and I performed together less. That is simply the honest truth of parenthood: time and energy become precious, and you give them where they matter most. And they mattered most.

What has been a genuine joy to witness over the years is that both of my boys have become musicians in their own right, each in his own way. Our oldest plays guitar and noodles freely on the piano, creating his own melodies with a natural ease I find remarkable. He is also drawn to digital music creation, exploring sounds and

production in ways that feel entirely of his generation. Our youngest plays drums and marimba, sometimes with real ferocity, and he and his friends formed a band back in elementary school that still rehearses weekly, even though they no longer all attend the same school. Watching their musicianship grow, their ensemble tighten, and their artistic instincts develop over the years has been one of the quiet, steady joys of my life. I am so often reminded, watching them, of watching students at the community music school find their voices and grow into the young artists they were always meant to become.

One of the most unexpected gifts of parenthood has been the music my sons have brought into my life. They have introduced me to EDM, dubstep, and all manner of electronica. They have opened my ears to a vast world of video game music I had largely overlooked, and I am genuinely glad they did. There are extraordinarily skilled composers writing for games today, scoring hours of music for large-budget productions, and some of it is really, really good. Artistic, even. Nintendo in particular has become a source of real delight for me, not just for the games but for the music itself. The catalogue of themes Nintendo composers have built up over the years is staggering in its breadth and quality: colorful, inventive, deeply evocative, genuinely joyful. My sons brought me there, and I am grateful for it.

Engraving, Research, and the Craft of Detail

During my undergrad work, I became deeply involved in digital music engraving. I had been composing and needed to create scores and parts in Finale, which was then relatively new software. Because I learned the program for my own work, my composition teacher asked me to prepare the score and parts for his opera. That became my summer project in 2004. It was a major undertaking.

I took the work seriously. I read books on engraving and notation practice. I studied the history of music copying and score preparation. The work permanently changed how I see printed music. I can spot notational mistakes quickly, even in published materials. There is a long lineage behind music notation, and copyists and engravers require a trained eye.

The central principle is simple: the score must be readable and playable at first sight. Every rule — beaming, stems, dynamics, spacing, systems, page turns,

rehearsal marks — ultimately serves the musician. The performer must be able to decipher the score as efficiently and accurately as possible.

Between stages of formal study, I pursued extensive research on Spanish piano music. That project taught me about the breadth of Spanish music that has never fully reached general public awareness. There is a deep tradition there, though not as much piano music as one might expect. I learned about Felipe Pedrell, often described as a kind of Spanish counterpart to Bartók — an ethnomusicologist and composer who collected folk songs and church music and helped shape a national musical consciousness.

What I loved most about that research was the quest itself. Curiosity opens doors, and then more doors behind those doors.

That same curiosity later animated my doctoral coursework. In a course about curriculum development in educational settings, I set out to observe as many forms of music praxis as I could find — private lessons, classes, ensembles, chamber coachings, conducting, you name it — and by the end had observed some fifty teachers across nearly every kind of setting imaginable. One strand of that research has stayed with me longer than any other: a dementia-friendly choir the community music school ran for people living with dementia and their caregivers. The stories that came out of that choir were extraordinary — spouses who had not spoken to each other in years beginning to sing again, standing side by side; adult children who, for ninety minutes a week, were not caregivers but co-equals with their parent. It was some of the clearest evidence I had yet encountered that music does not merely accompany a life. It can reach a person when very little else can.

My doctoral dissertation studied organizational lifecycle at a community music school — how an institution faced and overcame adversity across its history. I also wrote a companion historical document on music education practices in Minneapolis from the city's founding in the mid-1880s. That research explored singing schools begun by new immigrants, performing organizations, teaching institutions, and the larger story of music in the Upper Midwest.

Because dissertations in Leadership Studies are anonymous, much of the institutional research I had compiled could not be used directly in the dissertation

itself. So I wrote a second full historical document. In some ways, it felt like completing a second doctorate.

All this attention to detail shaped me. It taught me that craft is not decoration. Craft is care. The smallest details affect the human being on the other side of the page.

I still try to bring that same care to my research, my playing, my administration, my AI music creation — and, as I would learn, to teaching most of all.

The Students Who Taught Me What Music Could Do

I believe my teaching career has shaped my approach to AI music as much as anything else in this story. Before I can explain what I learned, I should account for a little of what I actually did as a teacher.

I cut my teeth immediately after graduate school, taking a position at the community music school and teaching as much as I could to make it work. Those early years included learning and recording a vast amount of piano pedagogy repertoire, work that eventually brought me into the orbit of a well-known composer who has built a career across music publishing, educational materials, and royalty-free music. He and I became close friends over the years — close enough that he flew in to perform at our Wedding Concert.

In those same early years I tried something I called vLessons — Virtual Lessons. I recorded detailed, step-by-step voice messages for my students, walking them through exactly what to practice and how. The results were extraordinary; their progress accelerated in ways I had not seen before. But the project was enormously time-intensive, and eventually I could not sustain it. Looking back, I recognize it now for what it was: an early, analog attempt at something AI now makes possible at scale — detailed, sequential, personalized instruction, delivered directly to the person who needs it.

As I developed as a teacher, I began receiving more advanced students alongside the beginners. I especially loved teaching my high school students. There is something deeply rewarding about talking with a passionate, curious teenager about Debussy or Beethoven. I had many memorable students over the years, both young and old, but a handful shaped how I think about what music can do.

One was a boy placed with me almost by chance — his family had received a voucher for four lessons, and he landed on my roster. He was being raised by a single mother, and it was immediately clear he was exceptionally talented. I could not shovel repertoire to him fast enough; he would learn a piece in a week, two for the demanding ones, and play it back from memory the next lesson. One summer, almost in passing, I suggested he learn Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto for the fall concerto competition. At his very first lesson in September, he played the entire first movement for me from memory. I coached him through the auditions, which he won, and he went on to perform with orchestra and win scholarships and honors of various kinds. He later attended medical school and is now a family practice doctor. I am enormously proud of him.

Another student, on scholarship, was equally memorable — bright, clever, and close with his hardworking mother. His parents were both immigrants, and he was the first American born child in the family. Early in his high school years, I asked him what he imagined for his future. He mentioned that UPS was hiring and offered good benefits. I told him, simply, that he was smart and had a lot to offer the world, and that he might think about where he could put those talents to use. We did not speak of it again for a couple of years. Then one day he came to his lesson grinning and told me he was going to college — a substantial scholarship, awarded in part because of his heritage, had made it possible. I still well up thinking about how proud he was that day, and about how much that moment affected me.

After my sons were born, I began teaching more adults as well, which turned out to be rewarding in a completely different way. There is something to be said about sitting with someone for thirty minutes a week, year after year. One adult student in particular changed how I understood what music could do. He was a man in his late seventies, and at his first lesson he told me that his wife of more than fifty years had died unexpectedly a few months earlier — there had been no chance to say goodbye. His lessons became a way for the two of us to work through his grief together. Months in, he mentioned a piece he and his late wife used to listen to together, and I suggested he learn it and play it for her. That became the start of something larger: every night, like clockwork, he played their favorite songs in the quiet of the evening, and it was, he told me, the thing that let him sleep.

Eventually he asked whether he might start a scholarship at the music school. Together we shaped it into something specific: an award for students who use their music to help another person heal, cope, or mend. The first year, it went to a student who spent his Sunday mornings singing and playing guitar at a crisis nursery for underprivileged children — a student who went on to become one of the standout successes of a program I supervised, and who still represents, to me, the finest outcome of my administrative work.

That experience taught me something I now carry directly into AI music: that music is not only expressive, it is restorative. A grieving widower found solace playing love songs to his late wife. Musicians have long said, half in metaphor, that music might save the world. Here was something closer to proof — that music can reach into a person and change them from the inside, that it can restore, at least in part, the inner architecture of someone's being. That conviction sits at the center of everything I now try to build with AI music.

Leadership, Teachership, and Music Inside Organizations

My path into administration began quietly, almost without my noticing it was administration at all. After graduate school, I began teaching immediately and performed and presented widely, building a body of knowledge in piano pedagogy repertoire along the way. In those early teaching years, I also took on a new role at the community music school — Student Performance Coordinator — and through it I was exposed to an entirely different body of repertoire: pedagogical literature for strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion, and the sheer range of styles, composers, and traditions that pass through a school like that in any given year. It was my first real glimpse of how much music lives inside an institution, not only on a stage.

The more formal turn toward administration came later, and it was practical at first. I was thinking hard about how to earn more and build a sustainable professional future — the kind of future I now knew I wanted to build for my family. I researched degree programs and initially considered arts administration, but I realized those programs did not quite align with what I wanted to do. Running an art exhibit is not the same as running a music school.

Then, one day while brewing beer at home — a past hobby that takes several hours — I heard a radio advertisement for a doctoral program at my alma mater. Because brewing takes time, I heard the same ad again three hours later. I looked up the program, applied, and deferred enrollment for a year so I could align my professional and personal life. I began in 2016, completed coursework in two and a half years, and had started my dissertation when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in 2020. That halted my momentum for a time, but I eventually resumed and graduated in 2023 as Dr. Iverson.

My first major administrative role at a large community music school was as Director of Group Instruction. The department had been devastated by the pandemic. In the summer of 2020, there were nine registered students, down from nearly four hundred the year before. Rebuilding it meant learning genres and ensembles I had never worked with directly before — string orchestra, a high school musical theater program, a community youth choir, rock bands, jazz combos, a chamber music program, and eventually an adult strings retreat on Madeline Island.

My role later expanded to include private lesson instruction across the school as well, which meant watching countless teachers teach and countless students play, across nearly every instrument you can name. I came out of that stretch with a genuinely broad knowledge of music instruction — not from playing all of it myself, but from being responsible for the people who did.

Rebuilding that department required strategy, communication, marketing, persistence, and organizational clarity. Over time, the department recovered and grew dramatically. By early 2026, we were on track to break the all-time enrollment record by a significant margin when Operation Metro Surge brought ICE agents into Minneapolis. Registrations came to a halt. What might have been a major institutional milestone became instead a footnote in the organization's history.

That experience taught me a great deal about people, systems, connectivity, communication, and leadership. I had previously completed additional professional development along the way, including a mini-MBA, a fundraising certificate, and a Diversity Leadership Certificate. These credentials mattered not because they were “music” credentials in the narrow sense, but because they helped me understand

how music lives inside organizations, budgets, missions, communities, inequities, and systems.

And as I discovered, my doctorate in Educational Leadership turned out to be an extension of my teaching. Leadership is teachership, and teachership is leadership. They are two sides of the same tortilla. As leaders, we teach. As teachers, we lead.

I became fascinated by the idea of the Artist as Leader. I once wrote a long paper on Beethoven as both artist and leader — someone who broke molds, reshaped expectations, and helped define a new artistic era. Beethoven's leadership was not administrative in the conventional sense. It was artistic leadership: the leadership of vision, force, refusal, and transformation.

That remains a powerful model for me. Not because I compare myself to Beethoven, but because I believe artists can lead culture by opening new imaginative possibilities.

That belief matters deeply to my work in AI music.

Interruption: Parsonage Turner Syndrome

In November 2024, I experienced my first bout of Parsonage Turner Syndrome, a rare and notoriously hard-to-diagnose neurological condition, in my left arm. Basically, the network of nerves in my shoulder malfunctioned for several days, followed by months of healing and recovery. I'd had a neck fusion the year before, so at first I assumed the nerve pain was related to that. It took a string of scans and tests before my orthopedic surgeon finally sat back and said, almost offhandedly, “well, there's something called Parsonage Turner Syndrome.” I went home, looked it up, and there it was, exactly what was happening to me. It was frightening, because for a while I thought I might never play piano again. But I recovered faster than I feared, back at work within a few weeks, even if full strength took a few months longer to return.

On March 28, 2026, it happened again — this time affecting my right shoulder, arm, and hand much more severely than the first instance. The pain was excruciating and torturous, but I do not want to dwell on it. The more important part of the story is interruption.

I knew from the morning it began that the road to recovery would be long. I had already lived through one episode. I was not as afraid of never playing again, but I understood immediately that my life was going to shrink for a while. I took time away from work in stages: first paid time off, then three medical leaves. I was grateful for the time to heal. I was also terribly bored.

For someone active, curious, and always wanting to learn or do something, being trapped in one's body for months is profoundly difficult. It allowed me to read things I would not otherwise have read — on spiritual practices from around the world, on quantum physics, on genetic modification, and all manner of mind-bending material I would never have made time for on a normal week. I watched hours of documentary material on deep space, the history of the planet, the long unlikely story of the dinosaurs. It forced me to slow down, and it turned into one of the more quietly reflective stretches of my adult life. How often, really, does an adult get three months just to think?

I had steady support around me throughout, patient and practical in exactly the ways that kind of stretch requires. That support was a gift.

There was one period during recovery — perhaps three weeks — that felt almost heavenly. If heaven on Earth exists, I may have lived through a small version of it. My routine became simple: wake up, check the news, eat a small breakfast, walk around Lake Nokomis, read, eat a small lunch, play late Beethoven, eat a small dinner, and listen to music at night.

It was spectacular.

I would live those days again if I could, perhaps now with AI music creation as part of the daily rhythm.

During that time, I listened to healing music, spiritual chants, looping vocal songs, frequency music, meditation music, and music designed not merely for listening but for centering. Sure, it may have been placebo effect, but this listening had a profound impact on me, and not just because of the chronic pain. One YouTube musician in particular posted spiritual-themed chants and looped songs with a natural, breathy voice that was not classically trained but perfectly suited to her

music. Her sound brought me peace, calm, and centeredness. It made me feel aligned and whole for a moment.

Before PTS, I had already begun listening to a wider variety of world music and really started to indulge myself. Afterward, I discovered Sami Yusuf. There is an energy, depth, and musicianship in his work — and in the musicians he works with — that resonates strongly with me. His music carries a sense of spiritual and musical architecture that I find deeply compelling.

During recovery, I began to hear music differently. Not as entertainment. Not only as art. But as a form of praxis — a tool, a companion, a method of returning to the self.

Lake Nokomis and the Ordinary Music of Being Alive

By April and May of 2026, I had been homebound for five or six weeks. By mid-June, the pain had subsided enough and the weakness had become tolerable enough that I simply needed to get out of the house.

We live about five blocks from Lake Nokomis, so I decided to walk there.

It was a perfect day: seventy-five degrees, bright, clear, sunny. The kind of day that feels almost staged in its beauty. I walked toward the lake, and there is a point where a long bridge opens onto the water. As I approached the bridge and the whole lake came into view, a warm breeze moved across my body.

It was one of the most sensational experiences I have ever had.

For the first time in weeks, I felt not merely less ill, but alive. I heard leaves moving in the trees. I heard birds singing. I heard fragments of conversations from other people walking nearby. I saw cars going about their daily business. The ordinary world had become miraculous.

I felt privileged to be alive.

Not in an abstract way. In my body. In the breeze. In the sound of leaves and birds and voices and traffic. The world itself seemed musical — not because it was arranged, but because I was finally able to receive it again.

Around that same period, my wife and kids took me to hear Barber's Adagio for Strings performed by my beloved Minnesota Orchestra. We sat about seven rows from the stage. The beauty of that piece left me an emotional wreck. I cried quietly through the performance.

What struck me was that I understood the beauty differently because of what I had lived through. Suffering had changed the instrument through which I heard the music: my own body.

That experience raised a question that has become central to my work:

If music can have this kind of effect on me as a listener, can I intentionally create music that helps open something in another person?

Could music be engineered — not cynically, not manipulatively, but artistically and ethically — to support reflection, healing, presence, memory, or inner brightness?

That question, to this day, shapes my approach to creating AI music.

The Workstation, the Blockade, and the Doorway

I initially purchased a music workstation for several reasons, not least of which was simply wanting something creative to do for my second medical leave. My boys were tremendous helpers and assembled the standing desk for us. For a few weeks, they got real use out of the workstation — they tinkered with, explored, played around with music and composing. And then, as happens, the novelty kind of wore off.

So I decided I should do something with the new computer and workstation myself.

I tried to work with digital audio workstations — Cubase, FL Studio, Reaper, and MuseScore for notation — certain that one of them would behave for me. I was a trained musician, after all. I understood composition, notation, performance, pedagogy, and technology. Surely I could make this work.

But one Sunday morning, after multiple failed attempts to make the equipment and software work correctly, I became deeply frustrated — angrier and more disappointed than the situation probably warranted. I wanted to create music. I

thought I was doing the right thing. But the technology was not opening a door for me. It was blocking one.

Looking back, I understand that the software path I was pursuing was not the right technology for me at that moment. It felt less like a failure now than a redirection — perhaps even the Universe giving me a nudge, or a blockade, away from one door and toward another.

I tried again a few days later because I did not want to admit defeat. Eventually, I found my way back to Suno.

I had first encountered Suno in the fall of 2025. At that point, it seemed interesting, maybe even novel, but it did not yet become central to my work. On July 1, 2026, I took another serious look at using Suno v5.5.

That was the beginning of my AI music practice.

Speech-to-Text, Claude, and Learning to Think Aloud

Because my right arm had been affected, typing was difficult for months. I began using speech-to-text and talking with Claude, an AI assistant. Those early conversations were not initially about music. They were about other subjects entirely.

But the process changed me.

Having to articulate my thoughts aloud before they became text changed how I understood input, structure, and intention. I had to think clearly enough to speak my thoughts into an AI system. That experience shaped how I now approach prompting — whether by voice or keyboard.

Working with AI requires clarity. It rewards concision, structure, context, and specificity. It also rewards imagination. The better the input, the better the output. That is not a technical trick; it is a creative discipline.

I quickly picked up the basics of AI music creation. Then trial and error became my teacher. I learned by trying things, failing, refining, listening, rejecting, keeping, and trying again. I quickly discovered that the richer the prompt, the richer the music

rendered. “Rich” does not always mean longer. It means contextually alive. It means giving the AI something meaningful to work with — musical characteristics, emotional intention, instrumentation, texture, structure, energy, cultural care, and sonic imagination.

The AI needs meat on the bone.

When the prompt is unimaginative, the result often is too. When the prompt is fully fleshed out, the music becomes far more compelling. The generator contains countless possible combinations, but the human creator must know how to draw something worthwhile out of that possibility field.

This is why I sometimes describe AI music creation as extractive. Not extractive in the exploitative sense, but in the sense of discovering, selecting, and drawing forth. There are seemingly infinite permutations of musical possibility within an AI music generator. The creator's role is to extract, refine, and choose.

AI may generate possibilities. I make the artistic decisions.

The Geode, the Void, and Musical Sorcery

At first, AI music seemed to me like a geode: plain, perhaps even unimpressive from the outside, but containing hidden brilliance if cracked open with the right angle, pressure, patience, and discernment.

The first experimental sounds that truly captured my attention were not ordinary. I used AI to help me create prompts that were unusual from a human standpoint but made a strange kind of sense to the AI. The results amazed me. They did not sound like anything I had expected. They were novel, textured, and alive with possibility.

So I kept pushing.

I wanted to see how far I could take it. I experimented with unusual sonic combinations, textures, genres, atmospheres, and emotional fields. I began to understand that the way I think about music works well with an AI music interface. I have an abundance of ideas, and prompting allowed those ideas to move quickly.

The creative faucet opened.

There is a scene in *The Matrix* where Neo has martial arts downloaded directly into his mind, sits up, and says, simply, “I know Kung Fu.” That is honestly close to how it felt the first time I understood what I could actually do with this. Not that I had become someone else, but that a capability I already had, musically, had suddenly found a startlingly direct way to express itself.

There is a state I enter when prompting AI music that feels similar to practicing piano, composing, or working in deep focus. The mind locks in. Time changes. Decision-making sharpens. The work becomes less about forcing and more about flow.

Privately, I sometimes think of the AI creative process as a kind of musical sorcery — not because it is supernatural, but because it feels like summoning possibilities from a place I cannot fully see. I have joked that I do not simply create this music; I conjure it.

But I use that phrase carefully. AI music creation is not magic in the sense of escaping responsibility. It is a partnership between human intention and machine generation. My music would not exist if I did not prompt it. It also would not exist without the AI. I am fully aware of both facts.

AI music creation and traditional composition are different skills. They should not be treated as identical. Composition, performance, improvisation, production, engraving, teaching, and prompting all involve different forms of musicianship. AI music creation does not replace those skills. It adds a new one: a new meta layer of creation above everything all things music.

The question is not whether AI music is the same as composing with pencil and paper, or performing at a piano, or producing in a studio. It is not. The better question is: what kind of artistic intelligence does this new instrument require?

For me, it requires imagination, musical knowledge, creativity, taste, discernment, ethical clarity, and judgment. A trained musician and an untrained one will get an entirely different result out of the same tool, the same way a trained cook and an untrained one get different results from the same set of ingredients. The instrument is new. The musicianship underneath it is not.

Especially judgment.

Taste, I have come to believe, is really two things at once: knowing where a sound or a tradition came from, and knowing where it is about to land. A creator needs both — the history behind the material, and the judgment to know how it will be received and used now. Without both halves, you are only borrowing without understanding.

I prompt many more pieces than I keep. There is no universal bar for what makes something keepable or disposable beyond artistic judgment. I have heard so much music, in so many styles and contexts, from so many performers and traditions, that I have a strong sense of whether something has artistic credibility. There must be something in the music that makes it worth keeping — an internal connection, an emotional truth, a sonic identity, a sense of inevitability or surprise.

AI slop, it appears, comes from unimaginative, uninteresting, uncreative prompting that merely tries to copy, mimic, or imitate. It is devoid of human thought and bereft of creativity, and it sounds that way. Unfortunately, it has done real damage to public perception of AI music.

That is part of what I now have to contend with.

But poor uses of a tool do not exhaust the meaning of the tool.

A New Instrument, Not a Threat

Many listeners and musicians have legitimate questions about AI music:

Can music generated with an algorithm carry genuine emotion?

Is it authentic if no human hand performed it?

Does it have soul?

These are worthy questions, and I welcome them.

But throughout history, every major musical technology has faced suspicion. The player piano, the microphone, radio, the electric guitar, the synthesizer, the drum machine, the digital keyboard — each was, in its time, accused of threatening the soul of music. Each eventually found a place in the larger musical ecosystem.

The microphone did not ruin singing. It changed it. Acoustic pianos and digital keyboards now peacefully coexist. Electronic music did not erase orchestras. Recording did not eliminate live performance. New tools change the landscape, but they do not automatically destroy what came before.

AI is the latest chapter in this long story.

That does not mean we should be naïve. AI raises serious ethical questions. It affects artists, performers, composers, audiences, cultural traditions, copyright, labor, attribution, and trust. Musicians who fear AI are not foolish. Their concerns deserve to be taken seriously.

But fear cannot be the final word.

We need to learn how to situate AI music beside human-made music. Each will have its place. Each will serve different purposes. AI music need not take over everything. It need not replace live musicians. In fact, one of my strongest convictions is that AI music should increase musical participation, not reduce it.

AI can become a gateway into musicianship. It can spark curiosity. It can inspire people to sing, play instruments, join ensembles, study music, compose, and listen more deeply. It can open doors for people who may have felt excluded from music-making. It can help people imagine sounds they could not otherwise access.

The goal should be more musicians, not fewer.

My Creative Laws

As my AI music practice developed, I found myself needing a clear artistic foundation. I eventually wrote what I call My Seven Creative Laws. These laws govern my creative decisions. They are non-negotiable and a pact between the AI and me:

- Truth before beauty — If it is not honest, it is not ours.
- Simplicity is strength — The most powerful line is often the quietest one.
- Every style has a soul — We do not chase trends; we follow feeling.

- The body knows first — If it does not move something in us, we start again.
- No one is left outside — The music must have room for everyone.
- The earth is always listening — We create with reverence for the world that holds us.
- Rest is part of the work — Silence, stillness, and surrender are creative acts.

These are not slogans to me. They are practical artistic principles.

Every musical decision — instrumentation, genre, texture, lyric, silence, tempo, voice — must be intentional. Nothing should be accidental. Everything should be defensible. Silence and space are sacred. Spaciousness and intimacy are not absences; they are textures. Lyrics must be art, whether sparse or dense. Stylistic diversity is a core value. Musical traditions must be treated with respect, depth, and authenticity. Multilingual elements may appear when artistically warranted. Profanity is avoided by default and used only when genuinely justified.

At the heart of all of this is the same belief that began forming in childhood: music changes consciousness. Music affects the body. Music shapes attention. Music can make people feel more alive.

That is why intentional listening matters so much to me.

A Human-First Code of Ethics

Because AI music raises real ethical questions, I wrote A Human-First Code of Ethics for AI Music & Art Creation in August 2026 — nineteen principles, in the end, though they all really return to the same handful of convictions. Its purpose is to establish the principles by which I create, publish, and share AI-assisted music and art.

The foundation is simple:

Human art comes first. Live musicianship is sacred.

AI is an instrument, not a replacement for the human artist.

I value human-created art, music, and performance above all else. The physical act of a human being making music — breathing, touching an instrument, singing, moving, listening, responding, improvising, communicating — is irreplaceable. AI music should encourage participation in live music, not diminish it.

My code commits me to transparency. I will not intentionally present AI-generated or substantially AI-assisted work as though it were entirely human-created when that distinction reasonably matters. I will not use AI to deceive an audience.

It commits me not to directly imitate identifiable living artists in prompts for the purpose of reproducing their distinctive artistic identity. Instead, I describe musical qualities: instrumentation, tempo, harmony, rhythm, texture, production approach, historical period, broad tradition, emotional character, and formal structure. The goal is to create something new, not manufacture an imitation of a person.

It commits me to respecting artists, preserving attribution, honoring copyright and creative ownership, and not cloning a person's voice, likeness, performance, or artistic identity without consent.

It commits me to treating cultural traditions with care. Musical traditions are not raw ingredients to be extracted, commercialized, or caricatured. When drawing upon culturally specific traditions, I must strive to understand their context, history, meaning, and human origins. Appreciation and appropriation are not the same.

It commits me not to manufacture false human experience — not to claim that an AI-generated song represents a real person's testimony, a real musician's performance, a real recording session, or a historical event unless those claims are true.

It commits me not to flood the cultural commons. AI makes it possible to generate enormous quantities of music, but quantity is not creativity. I would rather release work selectively and intentionally than contribute indiscriminately to disposable content.

Above all, it commits me to responsibility. “An AI made it” is not an ethical defense. If I release a work, I am responsible for its content, originality, cultural implications, representations, possible harms, and artistic integrity.

The guiding principle of the code is the sentence that has become central to my work:

AI is an instrument. Humanity is the music.

Music for Human Flourishing

I use the phrase “Music for Human Flourishing” because I believe music should help human beings become more present, more connected, more curious, and more alive.

That belief joins my work as a pianist, teacher, researcher, administrator, and AI creative artist. It also joins my work as an advocate. I want to use AI music to start conversations about music itself — about listening, creativity, education, participation, technology, culture, ethics, and access.

AI music may become a lightning rod for criticism. I understand that. Some criticism will be thoughtful and necessary. Some will not. My task is not to argue with every objection, but to create responsibly, speak clearly, and continue supporting the larger human music ecosystem.

I want to be known not as someone who abandoned human music for machines, but as one of human music's strongest advocates. I support live concerts, local musicians, composers, performers, educators, recording engineers, independent artists, music venues, community music organizations, music traditions, and music education.

AI music does not cancel that commitment. It intensifies it.

My hope is that AI-assisted music can become a bridge into deeper musical life. A listener may first encounter a compelling AI-assisted piece and then become curious about the tradition behind it, the instruments it evokes, the singers it resembles in spirit but does not imitate, the rhythms, languages, histories, and human communities connected to it. A student may hear something created with AI and decide to learn piano, join choir, study composition, or pick up a guitar.

AI can serve as a mirror. In that reflection, perhaps humanity can hear itself vibrating.

The Next Phase

I arrived at AI music at age forty-eight, after a lifetime inside music and after a medical interruption that forced me to reconsider what music was for.

The irony is not lost on me. Suffering did not become the subject of my music, but it did change the conditions under which I heard, imagined, and created. Parsonage Turner Syndrome interrupted my body and routine, but it also opened time. It returned me to listening. It made the ordinary world sound miraculous again. It made Barber's Adagio for Strings almost unbearably beautiful. It led me to ask whether music could be intentionally shaped to help others feel more present, open, peaceful, energized, reflective, or whole.

Then technology appeared — not as a gimmick, but as an instrument.

When I was a child, my mother's computer lab represented the frontier of music education. When I was a teenager, MIDI opened a private laboratory of sound in my bedroom. College taught me the discipline of composition. Finale taught me the craft of notation. Research taught me curiosity. Pedagogy taught me sequence and clarity. Administration taught me systems, lifecycle, communication, and leadership. Illness taught me listening. AI brought these strands together.

In that sense, I did not stumble into AI music. I arrived there by a long path.

I arrived through the piano.

Through my mother's studio.

Through my father's systems mind.

Through Casa de la Música.

Through Mexico, Iowa, Apple Valley, Minneapolis, Princeton, and Lake Nokomis.

Through Bartók, Beethoven, Barber, Prince, Pedrell, Sami Yusuf, and countless unnamed musical encounters.

Through teaching children, engraving scores, accompanying singers, rebuilding programs, writing research, and listening through pain toward beauty.

Through a lifetime of asking what music can do.

Now I am asking what becomes possible when human imagination and artificial intelligence interact creatively.

Not because AI can replace humanity.

Because it cannot.

The purpose of AI-assisted art should not be to make human creativity irrelevant. It should help human beings imagine, discover, express, perform, and experience things that might otherwise never have existed.

Human creativity remains the center.

Human musicians remain irreplaceable.

Live performance remains sacred.

Artists deserve respect, attribution, consent, and compensation.

Cultural traditions deserve care.

Audiences deserve honesty.

Technology deserves discernment.

Music deserves attention.

And listening — real listening — deserves to be recovered.

We live in an age of distraction. I want to create intentional sound for intentional living. I want people to feel that something has opened inside them when they listen. I want them to feel brighter, more present, more connected to themselves and the world around them.

That is how I arrived at AI music.

Not by leaving music behind, but by following music and learning to play its next instrument.