



Clasax Victoria Podcast

Episode 2 - Justinn Lu Air Music Australia Show notes

1. Air Music Australia - <https://www.airmusicaustralia.com/>
2. Joseph Lallo - <https://www.josephlallo.com/>
3. Kenneth Tsai and Ocean Saxophone Quartet - <https://www.airmusicaustralia.com/about>
4. Nobuyu Sugawa - https://au.yamaha.com/en/artists/n/nobuya_sugawa_yq.html
5. Air Music Australia x Clasax event 12th April - <https://www.clasax.org/events/airmusicaustralia/>
6. BPM Studios performance 25th April - <https://www.trybooking.com/events/landing/1370059>
7. Tempo Rubato performance 15th May - <https://www.temporubato.com.au/tempo-concerts/justinn-lu-peter-de-jager>
8. Justinn Lu Instagram - <https://www.instagram.com/junstinn2202/>
9. Justinn Lu Linktree - https://linktr.ee/junstinn2202?utm_source=linktree_profile_share&tsid=a296fa6f-ae01-4cd3-9326-3d828adeb525

Interview Transcript between Brendan Toohey and Justinn Lu:

BT: Hello and welcome. You're listening to the second episode of the Clasax Victoria podcast. I'm your host, Brendan Toohey and today we're talking all things classical saxophone with our special guest from Air Music Australia, Justinn Lu. Justinn, thanks for coming on the show.

JL: Yeah, thanks for having me.

BT: So for our listeners, could you just maybe briefly introduce yourself and what brings you here?

JL: Yeah, so I'm Justin, I'm a Filipino Australian saxophonist and I guess entrepreneur these days. I'm in my second year of Masters performance research at Uni Melb, which is where we're recording right now. and yeah, I don't know what should I say?

BT: *Laughs* No, that's great, that's great. Yeah, I should say, especially for our audio-only listeners, We're set up in a really swanky recording studio booth at the moment courtesy of yourself thanks for booking this really cool, it's like a podcast specialty built studio for recording in the library.

JL: There's a few here in Parkville and they just have the one here, but yeah, like Susan Eldridge is the one who ...

BT: Oh yes, I know Susan.

JL: Organises it for people, especially who do like the Ignite Lab, yeah, program, which is like a professional development program to use this room more. Yep, so finally get to use it.

BT: Fantastic, I'll definitely have to tell her because I know Susan we could we go way back, back to Brisbane days. So yeah, excellent. I'll have to tell her. So yeah, tell us a little bit about how you started playing the saxophone.

JL: Okay, so my parents don't actually have so much music background, but music is pretty integrated into life of like Filipinos. I think okay a lot of people know that Filipinos like always sing and do karaoke especially. And so like yeah, there's always been music around us, but they're don't they're not like musicians themselves or artists. And so we moved to Australia in 2007, so I was six years old and we had a toy piano and I was like copying like the Australian anthem and the doorbell and so they were like, okay we need to invest in piano lessons and so I actually started on piano. I think as most people do. And then I started playing the flute because my cousin, my older cousin, who I looked up to, played the flute. And then my sister picked up the clarinet and I was like, that instrument's bigger than mine. So I needed to play one that's bigger. So I started playing sax.

BT: Oh wow.

JL: Yeah, and then at that point, I started going to the Conservatorium High School. And yeah, actually both my piano and my flute teacher told me, I think you should stick to sax because you're improving a lot faster. And I think I was really interested in the repertoire of the sax. But yeah, as you said, all things kind of classical sax. Just going to a classical music school, that was kind of the direction I went to and just happened to be the instrument that I picked up because it was bigger than the clarinet to one-up my sister.

BT: Fantastic. Do you play clarinet at all or just saxophone?

JL: Um, I'll say just saxophone.

BT: Yep, fair enough.

JL: I think it would be pretty offensive for me to say that I play clarinet.

BT: and didn't continue with flute either?

JL: Um no, not since maybe year 10.

BT: Yep.

JL: Yeah, just ended up doing like all sax and actually even my piano teacher, she became my accompanist. Or, she was a accompanist already. And there was one year where we actually used our piano lesson time that the school was paying for to do rehearsals for my saxophone. Cause she was like, I prefer playing sax with you than teaching you piano.

BT: Oh, wow.

JL: It was really great because we got to play some really cool repertoire. Yeah, so.

BT: Excellent, fantastic, and so what about your studies at the Melbourne Conservatorium?

JL: Yeah, so right now I'm doing a research masters and it's in concert design and concert curation and it's under the performance stream. And yeah, well, I've always been pretty interested in concert design. And yeah, the head of sax at the Melbourne Con, Joseph Lallo, he's pretty big into concert design. His PhD is in concert curation and he's done some work for like World Sax Congress and things like this. In organizing those events and, you know, the (saxophone) mega day here too. But even before I knew he was doing that type of research, because I think he started his PhD when I started studying my bachelor's here and he was my teacher. I was already really interested in doing integrating poetry and visual art into my programs. And so like, for my first year recital, it's just a 20-minute recital, I designed program notes that had some poetry and then some commissioned artworks. And it just kind of helped me to, I guess, connect to the music and develop interpretation and imagine like what kind of dynamics or effects I'm playing. And so I kind of kept doing this in my undergrad recitals that kind of turned into this research topic now that's about concert design. And specifically, I'm looking into curation in art museums and art galleries with a supervisor from the Boxton Contemporary Art Museum, Dr. Kyla McFarlane. Yeah, just trying to see how we can diversify concert experiences in classical music through looking at curation in museums, which has, it's been a practice for over 100 years already so very deep history.

BT: Wow, that sounds really interesting, especially because I imagine forging a path as a classical saxophonist is often quite difficult to do. So yeah, anything to broaden and expand that career path is amazing.

JL: I know like Ian Godfrey is the head of sax before Joseph, and Joseph's teacher. Yeah, he like comes into class every year and says like this is through any people and we don't have enough jobs.

BT: Oh no!

JL: But I think it's good that like, you know, Joseph's kind of encouraging this type of because it kind of helps you create your own brand and own voice as a soloist or as an ensemble member if you want to. I think that really helped me now doing some performances like solo and quartet stuff outside of uni. So yeah.

BT: Fantastic. We actually spoke to our previous podcast guest Nicole Canham about being a bit of an entrepreneur and I think it's great that there's lots of people interested in the saxophone, you know, and forging their own kind of path with it. That's fantastic.

JL: Yeah, definitely.

BT: You mentioned a bit of ensemble playing. You're currently playing with the ocean saxophone quartet. Is that right?

JL: Yeah.

BT: How did this come about?

JL: So, I made ocean with our Alto player and his iris and we actually met at the Sydney con while I was in the con high school and she was doing her bachelor's bachelor of music. I think I was in year 10 and she must have been a first year and we were both learning from Andrew Smith. And we would meet each other outside of the con every morning at 6.55 a.m. to wait for the doors to open.

BT: Wow.

JL: And there's like the high school side and the uni side and there's a door in the middle and we would practice like next to each other like starting doing scales. I had my school started at like 8 a.m. back then so I just had an hour to do scales and I'm sure she'd practice for like three or four hours back then. But yeah, so we met the must have been like 2015 or 2016. And then when she finished her bachelor's there she did her honours at Melbourne con and she knew Joseph quite well. She was studying for Michael Duke back then. And yeah, we just got dinner and she asked me like are there any like players here that you think we could make a quartet because we being students of Andrew and Michael like they have Nexus quartet and we always go to the concerts and it just seemed really fun and you know they just tell us like during our lessons like oh I'm going to go rehearse with the Nexus boys now and like they'd watch concerts at the con together and you know their story of meeting at uni they're all in the same year. Jay Nathan and Andrew all in the same year at uni I think or maybe Jay was the year above but going to uni together. Iris just wanted to try to see if we could make a group like that. And so, yeah. Yeah, we were actually enrolled as a quartet at the Uni chamber music. And we just asked our quartet at the time, like, "Do you want to do some external gigs?" And then, yeah, we ended up getting four people and doing our first concert it must have been 2023 in January. We actually did one concert in Melbourne and one concert in Sydney. And I think it went pretty well and yeah we've done four concerts since then. Um yeah, we started mostly doing like standards like just classical music and then ever since we did this one project that was called conversations at a Yumcha restaurant, which was a Asian-Australian composition project at ANAM and Jason our baritone player reached out to the composer Jordan He to arrange it for sax quartet and piano and that kind of kick started us on the direction of doing more Asian, Australian type of commissions and projects and identity type of things. Yeah.

BT: Amazing, yeah. I've heard you guys play and it's incredible and like you guys sound very homogenous and like just dialed in and really together which is not always easy to do in a saxophone quartet. So well done, that's fantastic.

JL: Thank you.

BT: You'll have to record your debut album next.

JL: Yeah, actually. That's a good idea. Yeah.

BT: Oh well, stay tuned for more. So I'm going to say two words to you and I'll get you to tell me what the story is behind it. Cyber Bird. *Laughs* What is this?

JL: So yeah, you're probably referring to the Concerto that I just did.

BT: Yes.

JL: I mean, it was August 2024. I got to play with the UniMelb Symphony Orchestra in Hamer hall. So yeah, so in 2022, I was in my honours year and every year they have a Concerto/Aria competition at the Melbourne University and it's like open to all, I guess all degrees and students. And there's a few rounds so that you do instrument round so we have a sax round and then a woodwind round and then an everyone round. And then yeah, I ended up winning it in 2022. And yeah, that year was my honours year and in that year is a pretty good year to try to win the competition because you have to do a concerto for one recital. You just pick one concerto. And yeah, I picked the cyberbird.

BT: Who's the composer?

JL: Yoshimatsu.

BT: Okay.

JL: Yeah, a Japanese composer. He's still alive and does lots of cross between the like classical or neoclassical with jazz with rock and funk type of music, yeah. It's super interesting composer I think I also like really found a lot with his music his piano writing he has like a lots of piano etude type of works and yeah this like kind of japanese neoclassical style I've always really liked even like in like japanese films and animes and stuff you know the melody writing is just really cool. This is a piece that I've known for a very long time. And yeah, in my honours year I had to pick a concerto. But actually like everyone says that this is not a piece that you can win the competition with.

BT: Oh?

JL: Especially when you're selecting a piece to play in Hamer Hall. I think like the cyberbird which has like a jazz ensemble at the front is not something that you would normally program in Hamer Hall. But actually, at this time I was working. I really wanted to work on playing happier pieces. Because I think like the deeper, sadder, French repertoire. Like most of the stuff that I was hearing. And hearing something that's like a jazz trio that's like happy and energetic. It's not a style that came very naturally to me. And I thought like if I could get this feeling, I could probably like make my audience feel something interesting. and I was really lucky, because I had a really good team, because I played with Peter De Jager, who's a pianist, and Aditya Ryan Bhat who's a percussionist, and Peter works at the con as a accompanist, but Aditya started first year with me as a percussionist, but studied, now finished at ANAM, he did his three years, and now it's just doing a freelance performance with lots of different ensembles, especially like contemporary music ensembles, but just having this team work on this piece for that much time, and then we ended up basically reuniting two years later to perform it in Hamer Hall, and yeah, it was just a really nice experience doing that gig.

BT: Amazing. Oh well, congratulations. That's fantastic. Is the Cyberbird Concerto considered sort of part of the standard repertoire for sax? Or not really?

JL: I would say so, but I think the opinion of it in classical sax community is not very high. Like, yeah, I got a lot of comments that it's not very deep.

BT: Oh?

JL: And yeah, there was actually a lot of teachers who said, "Oh, can you play something else? Cause I don't know this that well." Cause I guess it's only written in 1996.

BT: Okay.

JHL: But yeah, I thought it was pretty popular and I really liked it the first time I heard it because I know Nick Russionello played it with ABC when he won that I think it's like a young virtuoso competition.

BT: Yep.

JL: And when he won it, I was like, wait, this piece can win. So why don't I just do it?

BT: Yeah.

JL: I've always liked Yoshimatsu's stuff. I actually did the, he has a saxophone sonata called the fuzzy bird sonata.

BT: Oh?

JL: and I think it was commissioned after, it was written for Nobuyo Sugawa who's the Head of Sax at the Tokyo National School of Music. And uh, from what I understand, uh, he wrote this concerto first and then was asked to develop a sonata, like similar style. Um, and I played this for my audition for Melbourne Con and played it for the first Clasax competition that I entered. And I knew there was this concerto, but then I always heard like, oh, it's not deep, it's not, it's not going to be a picked. And then Nick won. So I was like, well, I'm going to.

BT: It can be done.

JL; Yeah, it can be done. But yeah, so that was my experience.

BT: Well, you proved the haters wrong.

JL: Yeah, turn your haters into motivators, you know?

BT: Yeah, take that, take that. I'm glad you mentioned Nabuyo Sugawa because you recently had a chance to meet him. Is that right?

JL: Yeah, so I went to the New Zealand (saxophone) summer school. They have a New Zealand saxophone society there. Really, really nice and talented community. It's kind of my first time getting to connect with them. But yeah, I actually only found this event through Jason, our baritone player, because he's looking to study in Japan soon, like a Masters. And he just sent me the screenshot of this event. And he's like, I'm getting tickets because Sugawa's going to be there. And I was like, I have to go.

BT: Yep, yep.

JL: Like, um I've been listening to him since I was in high school. And so yeah, I went. Jason couldn't even actually end up going because he got sick. He got very sick.

BT: Oh, no.

JL: Right before the event. But yeah, that event also said yes to Air Music going there. So I could represent Air Music there. But yeah, it got to meet him, Nabuya Sugawa, and watch two of his performances, a one in Christchurch and one in Auckland. And I had some lessons with him. I actually showed him my cyber bird recording. And he said, wow!

BT: Oh, great.

JL: I'm going to remember that forever.

BT: Yeah. Fantastic. Excellent. So you mentioned, ah hang on a second I'm just referring to my notes. Yeah, you mentioned Air Music Australia.

JL: Yeah.

BT: Could you explain to our listeners sort of what that is and how this came about?

JL: Yeah, sure. So Air Music is a saxophone equipment brand. They do neck straps, ligatures and weighted (neck) screws. And the founder is professor Kenneth Tsy, and he's a professor based in Taiwan. And he's actually he learned from Sugawa for a while as well. But I met him at the Asia Pacific Saxophone Academy, which is a event in Thailand that Joseph is on the staff for and he takes a group of students, the uni financially supports as well us to attend. And I first went to that event in 2019. And then I went and then COVID hit. And I went again in 2023 and 2024. And Kenny is one of the teachers there. And yeah, so he always has a stall there. And basically in 2024, I offered him, well, yeah, I offered him if we could distribute in Australia because it was such a popular product. Like uh, everyone was waiting for us to go to APSA to bring them back Air Music stuff and we couldn't find it online since 2019. Um, and so yeah, um, I had, I had built a kind of a media team here by then. Uh, who was also, uh, I brought them to ASPA that year to be the media team for APSA so I told Kenny like, okay, I, we can advertise and my quartet I can put on concerts and I can get in contact with stores cause like I'm also originally from Sydney and I'm now studying in Melbourne I think there's a lot of people who would be interested in trying and buying this product and you know there's not many options for ligatures and neck straps here especially in this price range. In Asia and maybe Europe and America definitely there's a lot but we always struggle to get equipment here in Australia.

BT: It's the same in the clarinet world. There's a few really big key brands that they're just really hard to get a hold of in Australia particularly.

JL: Yeah definitely. And luckily, he just said absolutely, yes. And so we were on a trial contract, yeah, basically I had to make Air Music Australia as the distributor in Australia for this brand. And so we were on trial from November and we just started the official distribution contract in February. So yeah.

BT: And things are going well so far?

JL: Yeah, I think so. I mean, the best thing that's happened so far. Well, I'll name two good things that I've been so far. So like when we went to New Zealand, a bunch of people just ordered them and I just shipped them out, a bunch of them out from that event. So that was really good. And just getting their messages just being like so excited to try this, like never seen a neck strap that looks this nice before. Yeah, like what the feedback they've been giving. But I walked into the Melbourne Con sax class and maybe one third of the people were using Air Music like neck straps or ligatures.

BT: Wow!

JL: Yeah. So I don't know, that made me pretty happy because I think people were looking for them for a long time, but just couldn't get their hands on it. And it's not really that I'm like even that attached to like, oh, that's my product. It was more just like, these are people who were looking for an equipment that suits them. And now they can actually get it. That was kind of the accomplished feeling I got, so yeah.

BT: With the neck straps, is it because they're really comfortable or functional? Like what's the selling point of them?

JL: To be honest, I think the biggest selling point is how they look.

BT: They look nice?

JL: Yep, but they are really comfy and actually on a practical level, a reason why that I switched was because, so I used to use the jazz lab and they're really comfy, and I think like 100% you will never get a neck or shorter injury from them. But for me, it put the instrument a bit far away from my body.

BT: Yeah, they've got this bit that kind of sticks out from your sternum.

JL: Yeah, and some teachers pointed out because they haven't seen jazz lab before, but are very popular in Australia, that it actually shifts the angle a little bit of the instrument, which makes it a more open sound, which I think can be good. sometimes I still have my jazz lab. Maybe I'm not supposed to say that? Nah, I don't know but I still have my jazz lab, but with the neck strap design, the saxophone should be entering your mouth at a little bit of an angle and it can cause a little bit of biting to get a homogenous sound if it's a bit too high. This is a big thing I've been telling people who are testing that there's also like an ergonomic element to it because I think like a lot of neck straps have cushioning. But yeah, I guess those would be the three key reasons why I'm using these, but to be honest everyone uses them because they look nice. There's three different colours. People can also like fight about which colour is the best and things like this.

BT: Well, one thing for sure, like when it comes to neck straps, it's something that a lot of people perhaps don't consider they just use whatever came with their instrument. But you can really notice when you have a bad neck strap, you know, you start to get shoulder pain or neck straps rubbing, you know, on your skin. And then you put on a good neck strap and all of a sudden, it's like, oh my gosh, I never knew playing could feel this way. Because it's the same. I use the jazz lab XL for bass clarinet, if I play standing up. And it's the same thing. You want to have the angle of the neck just right for your mouth pressure and yeah, it can cause problems.

JL: I guess another thing about these neck straps is that that they have the metal bar. It is also like contributes to the look, but I feel like this actually just helps customizing the height and the weight distribution a lot too. So yeah, I just find it really comfy. I use it for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, I don't play Baritone so, all saxes that I play I use it for those things. So yeah.

BT: Amazing, what about the Air Music ligatures? What can you tell us about those?

JL: Um, so I actually didn't know how much of an extensive range they had until I became a distributor. Cause I just used their most recent model, which is the X1. I think it's a 2021 or 2022 model. Someone described it recently as an H, H model. So it's basically two very thin rails, and then just a thing connecting it. And these ligatures, or this type of ligature, is meant to have very little contact with the reed and mouthpiece to give natural resonance. And I think Especially in the Asian schools like Taiwan and Japan, they're very big on this, like even mouthpiece patches, they try to go as thin as possible so that it doesn't dampen the feeling on your mouth or any of this type of thing. And so yeah, this one, I bought my first ligature in 2023 and actually, like, I used to get very injured because I use very hard reeds to get a very hard read. So it's very big sound and I practice a lot as a soloist, so this is very important to me. Don't do much on some more orchestral playing, so it's just like, just make a big sound and you'll be good. That's like how I like that. And so I use like three and a half reeds. I use a very heavy setup, I use an optimum AP3 as a Vandoren ligature. I was getting a lot of draw pain, a lot of the time it went down to my neck and shoulders, the injuries I went to like, music specific physios. And yeah, it was just like a very heavy setup and I actually stopped playing for about seven months in 2023, at the end of 2023. Mostly I was doing research, so it was a good time for me to take a break and then

when I returned back on my instrument, I already had the X1 ligature by then. But I heard Kenny telling me like actually with ligatures that have less touching you can go softer reeds and actually have more control for the same projection. So I really focused on this I went all the way, well, not all the way but I went to size 3 reeds, I'd never played size 3 like I was on three plus or three. And I just focused on, you know, not tensing anywhere and just blowing air and it made a really horrible sound for a while. Um, but I actually still just play size 3 reeds now even in a Hamer Hall and I could fill that whole hall and I really do think the ligature and maybe also the mouthpiece made a very big difference. So yeah, that is my preference on the X1. But yeah, they also have a model called the F1 which is the one you tested actually that you said maybe is similar to the Ishimori and this one has a little bit more contact with the reed. So it gives a bit more of a focused sound. And then the last one we have the honeycomb ligatures, which is actually, I like to say it has characteristics of both like somewhere in between. But as a model, it's actually quite just our version of the standard ligature, just with the honeycomb shape to also integrate some of the design that's like less contact with the reed. And all the ligatures come in gold and platinum material, which means you can have a bit of customizations here, sound the platinum is a bit more forward, bright, strong, and the gold is a bit more smooth and good for maybe blending and chamber music and things like this.

BT: Yeah, incredible. Just for our listeners, just so you know, yeah, I had a chance to play test a bunch of these ligatures last year at one of the other Clasax testing events and I did actually manage to try the sopranos sax ones on E-flat clarinet, the alto sax ones on B-flat and it's either the tenor or the baritone one?

JL: The baritone.

BT: and baritone ones on bass clarinet. So they do work, they do fit, although they're specifically designed for saxophones. But yeah, I found them great like they all played really, really well. Very similar to my Ishimori ligatures that I play on all three. And yeah, the different platings were really interesting. They make a subtle difference, but yeah, I think your description of them was perfect. And it's funny, after that day that I play tested them all, I intended to go home and write down all my thoughts and maybe write a bit of an article for the magazine. And I completely forgot to write it all down, so I'm going to have to play test them again, I think. Is there an opportunity that we can do that?

JL: Yeah, yeah, so the upcoming afternoon tea event between Clasax and Air Music. Um, we'll, yeah, we'll provide pastries. My sister is a pastry chef so we'll be making the pastries.

BT: Sounds delicious.

JL: And my parents love organizing afternoon tea events so they're gonna be giving like soft drinks and tea and coffee. And yeah, we'll have all the equipment there for people to test if they want and buy as well. So yeah, that's on April 12th, a Saturday, yep, in Ormond Anglican Church.

BT: Fantastic, I'll have all the details and we'll link it up in the show notes and things, Justin, thank you so much for coming on the show. Is there anything else that you want to plug at the last minute, any upcoming gigs or anything like that?

JL: Yeah sure, so I have one artist, it's a BPM artist concert, so BPM is my music studio. We focus on doing media for musicians, but we have a few artists that we collaborate with. So, a few of our artists are doing a combined concert on April 25. Friday, that's on Anzac Day in St. John's, Malvern East. And then I have a Tempo Rubato concert with Peter De Jager on May 15th, it's a Thursday night at 8 p.m.

And yeah, all the details you can find on, I have a link tree and it's on my Instagram as well. It's Justin 2202, Spelt a bit weirdly, so that's my stuff.

BT: No worries, I will get all the details, we'll put it in the show notes, people can check it out, and yeah, again, thank you so much for coming on the show. I'm really looking forward to this upcoming Air Music/Clasax collaboration, and I'm going to play test all the ligatures, all the neck straps. I'm going to write a big article, review everything, it's going to be fantastic.

Thank you so much for this.

No worries, thanks again. You've been listening to the Clasax Victoria podcast, I'm your host, Brendan Toohey. Make sure that you subscribe to our YouTube channel. If you like the video, hit the bell so you get notified when our next episode drops. Next episode will be back in the land of clarinet, but I'm not going to tell you who our special guest is just yet. I'm going to keep that as a surprise. Hopefully it'll be released shortly. I'm hoping to keep these episodes fairly regular, but we'll see how that goes. Justin, thank you again so much, and we'll see you soon.

END TRANSCRIPT