

Clayton Stephenson

American pianist Clayton Stephenson's love for music is immediately apparent in his joyous charisma onstage, expressive power, and natural ease at the instrument. Hailed for "extraordinary narrative and poetic gifts" and interpretations that are "fresh, incisive and characterfully alive" (Gramophone), he is committed to making an impact on the world through his music-making.

Growing up in New York City, Clayton started piano lessons at age 7, and the next year was accepted into The Juilliard School's Music Advancement Program—a full scholarship program for under-represented students—where he lingered to watch student recitals and fell in love with music. He advanced to Juilliard's elite Pre-College at age 10—with the help of his teacher at the time, Beth Nam, who gave him countless extra lessons without charge—to study with Matti Raekallio, Hung-Kuang Chen, and Ernest Barretta. Clayton practiced on a synthesizer at home until he found an old upright piano on the street that an elementary school had thrown away; that would become his practice piano for the next six years, until the Lang Lang Foundation donated a new piano to him when he was 17.

He credits the generous support of community programs with providing him musical inspiration and resources along the way. As he describes it, the "Third Street Music School jump-started my music education; the Young People's Choir taught me phrasing and voicing; Juilliard's Music Advancement Program introduced me to formal and rigorous piano training, which enabled me to get into Juilliard Pre-College; the Morningside Music Bridge validated my talent and elevated my self-confidence; the Boy's Club of New York exposed me to jazz; and the Lang Lang Foundation brought me to stages worldwide and transformed me from a piano student to a young artist."

Clayton graduated from the Harvard-New England Conservatory (NEC) dual degree program in spring 2023 with a bachelor's degree in economics from Harvard and a master's degree in piano performance from NEC under Wha Kyung Byun. And his accolades along the way have been bountiful: in addition to being the first Black finalist at the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition in 2022, he was named 2022 Gilmore Young Artist; 2017 U.S. Presidential Scholar in the Arts; Jack Kent Cooke Young Artist; Gheens Young Artist; and Young Scholar of the Lang Lang International Music Foundation.

Recent and upcoming highlights include concertos with the Houston and North Carolina Symphonies and Las Vegas Philharmonic; festival appearances at Grand Teton and Tippet Rise; recitals at venues including Fondation Louis Vuitton and Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall; and collaborations with violinists Nikki and Timothy Chooi in Europe, Canada, and the United States. On the 69th United Nations Day, Clayton played with the International Youth Orchestra at the U.N. General Assembly Hall. He has been featured on NPR, WUOL, and WQXR, and appeared in the "GRAMMY® Salute to Classical Music" Concert at Carnegie Hall's Stern Auditorium.

Source: Cliburn