D. J. Sparr
composer &
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A LETTER FROM D. J. SPARR

On the electric guitar, your orchestra, and the audience you haven't reached yet

Greetings. My name is D. J. Sparr. Actually, I'm not a DJ. I'm an electric guitarist and composer. DJ stands for Donald Joseph. I'm writing on behalf of something I truly believe in: the combination of the most popular instrument in the world and your orchestra.

I won the fifth grade talent show with my rock band playing original music. By high school I was in the jazz band at Baltimore School for the Arts alongside kids who ended up arranging Super Bowl halftime shows and teaching at Berklee. Then I went to Eastman, where I became the first guitarist-composer to graduate. I knew it was important to study my craft as a composer. I didn't want the stigma of being a guitar player who also composes. Outside of the guitar and orchestra world, I have also composed for the Washington National Opera and the Houston Grand Opera. No guitars anywhere near them.

That path led to a recording with the London Symphony Orchestra at Abbey Road Studios, and performances with the Cabrillo Festival with Marin Alsop, the Filarmonica Arturo Toscanini in Italy, the Buffalo Philharmonic, Memphis, and more. Along the way, I composed an electric guitar concerto written for clean tone and orchestral beauty rather than distortion and dissonance. I named it Violet Bond, after my great-grandmother, who gave me my first guitar for my fourth birthday.

It was actually a ukulele.

Don't take my word for it. Here is a score follower video of my concerto, *Violet Bond*, performed live with the Memphis Symphony. Seventeen minutes, clean guitar tone, standard orchestral forces.

Your audience grew up with Chuck Berry, The Beatles, and Buddy Holly. They have heard electric guitar in film scores their entire lives. They already love this instrument. They just don't know it belongs in your concert hall yet. Once they get past the idea that we're going to blow their ears off, they're all in. And yes, we will get loud, but not any louder than your brass section does in Shostakovich 5. I have had people come up to me after concerts and tell me they bought their grandkids tickets so they could experience an orchestra, and the guitar was the way in.

The people who go to guitar shops on Saturdays are practicing harmonic minor scales and talking about modes. Instagram and YouTube are filled with guitar players nerding out over music theory. And those players are everyone: teenagers posting covers from their bedrooms and retired professionals who finally picked up the instrument they always wanted to learn. That world is closer to concert classical music than anyone realizes. Bring me to town, and we'll reach all of them. We've done it through guitar shop visits, Battle of the Bands events, and Boys & Girls Clubs. I'm not a fly-in soloist. I help orchestras connect with their community.

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When I show up at your hall, the first people I connect with are your stage crew. They see the guitar pedals, and the conversation starts immediately. They want to talk about old rock 'n' roll albums. I want to hear their stories about B.B. King coming through town or that time they worked the Led Zeppelin show at the Pyramid in Memphis. By soundcheck, we're friends.

I understand how your hall works; I know how to rehearse efficiently with your conductor, and I promise you I am easier to manage backstage than most of the soloists on your roster. The technology I need to make this work is no different than any pops concert you're already doing. My rider exists for one reason: to make sure the guitar sounds great, and the performance works for your audience. Other than that, a few cups of black coffee will do it.

As Composer-in-Residence at the California Symphony, one of the things I valued most was the time I spent with the board. I treasure that interaction every time I visit an orchestra. When I teach young composers, I ask them to look at a picture of an orchestra and list what they see. They list the instruments. Then I ask them: Who put those chairs there? Who helps the audience find their seats? Who parked their cars? An orchestra is not just the musicians on stage. It is the administration, the ushers, the development team, the board, and the volunteers in the parking lot. I understand the work it takes to keep all of that alive. Put me at your donor reception, and I will help you make the case for why this music matters.

If any of this sounds like your orchestra, I'd love to talk.

Six strings and an electrical outlet,

D. J. Sparr

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