Gracie · Nov 17, 2023 · 19 min read

# LIAM PHAN

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Hello, it's Chef Gracie again! Today on the *Song Soup Menu* we have an utterly amazing composer, producer and multi-instrumentalist out of Switzerland- ***Liam Phan***! Once again I was so lucky to be able to interview Liam about himself as an artist and what his journey within music has been like up to this point, but also talk with him about his debut album, *Entropy*, coming out on November 20th of 2023 (really soon!). It was a massive privilege to be able to listen in on his upcoming debut album and really be able to immerse myself in his work that he put so much time, effort, and emotion into. I want to say thank you Liam for trusting me to write about you, and for sharing so much about yourself with me. For allowing me so many pieces of detailed information on you as an artist in order to create another special part of the menu- to be able to share your brilliance with everyone who will read this. Liam honestly put so much effort into his responses, seeing within them and his work that he is a very intelligent and talented individual. He even provided me with his biographies which is something I usually type up on my own or link as to provide it straight from the source. I am so grateful, and my heart is full. Stated in previous posts, It is very important to me that I present everything below as it was sent to me. I feel this makes your experience reading more authentic and genuine, so if you notice formatting for font, etc. changes throughout this is why. Please enjoy everything you need to know about Liam Phan below- along with another astounding and introspective interview!

## Short Bio

*Liam Phan* is a composer, multi-instrumentalist and producer from Switzerland, known for his captivating music and profound compositions. Having recently been discovered internationally through his debut single "Near (Piano Rework)", he has also composed several soundtracks for short and feature films as well as commercials. His compositional style mixes piano, synths and sound manipulation through modular instruments, seeking minimalism above all.

## Official Bio

Swiss composer, multi-instrumentalist, and producer, *Liam Phan* got his start in the music world through his soundtrack projects and piano compositions. His creative approach resonates with styles he has been influenced by since childhood, such as classical, neoclassical, jazz, and electronic. Always open to a wide range of sounds allowed by analog and digital instruments, Liam explores harmonies and rhythms in the service of films and commercials. What If in 2021 became his first film project, followed by Paloma and Watchers. These films have a very personal and intimate feel to them and teach him the power of minimalism in music.

Born on 17th January 2000, Liam started playing the piano at the age of 7 after being moved by the film August Rush. He first began with classical repertoires such as Chopin, Beethoven, and Rachmaninoff, and deviated from this path once he reached college. He composed his first soundtracks at the age of 14, using advertisements as raw material. Jazz and the art of improvisation were taught to him shortly afterward at school by Moncef Genoud, a renowned pianist and composer. He also discovered the beauty of stringed instruments during courses at the Geneva Conservatory for his high school diploma.

Liam's debut solo album, "Entropy," is set to release on November 20, 2023. This neoclassical masterpiece showcases his captivating compositions, inviting listeners to embark on a profound and introspective musical journey.

## An interview with Liam Phan.

**We see within your personal biography on your website that you are a Swiss multi-instrumentalist, sound designer, and film composer. Even in having a very informative background available about you right off the bat, it would be intriguing to hear about where you are from and to have a brief introduction from you as a person.**

Prior to immersing myself in the world of music, I was an inherently curious child with an insatiable appetite for knowledge. At that time, I never envisioned that my true passion would lie in the realm of music or art. My parents, both esteemed karate masters in Switzerland, dedicated their evenings to teaching at the local dojo. This sacred space became my second home, providing the foundation for my introduction to Japanese discipline, notably instilling in me the values of perfectionism and unwavering perseverance.
As I matured, my fascination with film and literature deepened, leading me to develop a keen interest in soundtracks, which I found to be increasingly distinctive and intricately woven into the fabric of the genres and stories they accompanied. My journey into music began with self-exploration on the piano, followed by formal classical lessons at the age of 11. However, it was during my secondary school years that my understanding of composition, arrangement techniques, harmonic progressions, and the overall structure of a musical score truly blossomed. As part of my college curriculum, I had the opportunity to delve into the realms of jazz and improvisation, further enriching my musical education. Additionally, on weekends, I actively engaged in an experimental rock-metal band, captivating the interest of our local community through our innovative compositions. Notably, I had the privilege of performing on stage at annual music festivals for two consecutive years, solidifying my dedication to musical expression.
During that period, I didn't really have a studio to speak of, just a digital piano, a computer and headphones. It was really after college, at the start of university, that I started to take my passion for development seriously and hoped to get involved in real film projects.
It's challenging to define myself, but I tend to prioritize work over rest quite easily. People around me often notice my hyperactivity across various domains, including music, studies, film, and photography. Though I consider myself an introvert at heart, my approach to people is more context-dependent. When an opportunity arises, I rarely hesitate to seize it, even if it entails expending social energy.
This difficulty in disconnecting from work is something I also have with all the information in the world, and it's true that it's hard to want to make art when you know that priorities are gradually becoming much more a question of survival than leisure. I think we have to take this into account, and I often work on films with stories and subjects linked to current issues, such as anxiety and psychological disorders (in What If 2021), family bereavement (Paloma 2022), but also war and climate (Firemen 2023).

**As a multi-instrumentalist, what other instruments do you play? When was your first time playing said instruments, and what do you love about them?**

It's true that my curiosity leads me to play a bit of everything and anything. I started with the piano, but in reality I also wanted to play electric guitar like *Van Halen*, an idol of mine as a child. So around the age of 7 or 8, I played piano and took the occasional electric guitar lesson. Later, as I became more confident in my ability to learn instruments quickly, I added acoustic guitar, bass guitar and drums. It was mainly my college jazz classes that inspired me to learn them, but being a fan of *Radiohead*, *Arctic Monkeys* or *Queen*, I also dreamed of being able to play all their albums at home.
With film music, I started to learn the use of synthesizers like the Korg MS10 or MS20, as well as the violin and more recently this year, the Duduk, a wind instrument used in “Dune”, but much earlier in “Gladiator”, a soundtrack signed by *Hans Zimmer*. I also love creating my own instruments, notably the modular synthesizer, which is like a case ready to receive a multitude of modules, which can generate electrical signals, sounds and mathematical functions to manipulate the audio signal in a multitude of ways.

**A Brief History of Neoclassical Piano…**

**“For a century and a half composers have been inspired by the classic works of composers from the Baroque and Classical periods. Composers who returned to the sounds and structures of the classics and used them as a model were called neoclassicists and created a new genre of music often identified as neoclassicism. It is commonly understood that the composer Igor Stravinsky and his contemporaries created this genre of music in the 1920s. However, Stravinsky would not have been able to promote this genre of music without the initial efforts of pioneer composers. In fact, composers were experimenting with neoclassicism even in the late 1800s and through the 1910s. Some of these composers include Edvard Grieg, Maurice Ravel, and Jean Sibelius. The neoclassicism genre spans a wider time frame than usually understood, and would not have become a genre in the 1920s without these pioneer composers.”**

**SOURCE (check out this amazing thesis by Breanna Corah):**
**(https://digitalcommons.du.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2157&context=etd#:~:text=Composers%20who%20returned%20to%20the,of%20music%20in%20the%201920s.)**

**Doing research into the history of the neoclassical genre of piano above, I came to wonder what you personally think of your genre and what it really means to you as a musician.**
**Are there any neoclassical pianists in particular whose work really stands out to you, or that of which you feel more connected to? What composer's work really defines the neoclassical genre for you? How do you see yourself as a pianist within the genre?**

While I haven't been extensively exposed to the specific nomenclature of the genre, I am aware that neoclassical piano music is considered a contemporary style pioneered by composers like *Nils Frahm*, *Ólafur Arnalds*, and *Dustin O'Halloran*. They introduced unique modifications to upright and grand pianos, such as the use of mutes placed in front of the hammers. This technique adds a distinct quality to the sound.
Traditionally, I have associated neoclassical as a movement that emerged after the First World War, where composers like *Igor Stravinsky* and *Sergei Prokofiev* explored new and contrasting compositions. Their works stood in opposition to the softer, more soothing playlists often found on streaming platforms labeled as neoclassical. I find that these playlists often fail to provide a diverse representation of what truly characterizes the neoclassical piano genre. Personally, I appreciate the delicacy and expressiveness of an unmuted piano, as it allows for a nuanced interpretation by both the piece and the pianist. However, I also find enjoyment in completely experimental compositions with a percussive edge, such as those by *Volker Bertelmann* (aka *Hauschka*).
Considering the evolution of neoclassical piano, I believe it is, to some extent, a convergence of two worlds. Firstly with film music, where we began to emphasize the actor's dialogue, previously considered impossible due to technological limitations, and secondly, with the modernization of the upright piano, which was intended for domestic use, and therefore the addition of the mute to practice in harmony with one's neighbors. The softness of the piano, with its reduced midrange and treble, allows the mix to accompany a scene of dialogue discreetly and effectively, and also plays on a form of intimacy, as the listener is used to hearing this instrument in a domestic room.
Of course, it is important to note that the focus on the piano in neoclassical music is not a comprehensive representation of the genre as a whole. However, I personally think it is one of the reasons why it has gained popularity and evolved into a distinct branch of neoclassical music.

**How, if at all, have these pianists from previous time periods, including any potential modern day pianists, inspired you along the way or within your music today? Can you tell us a bit about the film *August Rush*, and what within this film specifically moved you?**

When I started my first private lessons, I had a teacher who saw a lot of potential in me because of my dedication to perfection and training. She quickly realized that I had difficulty reading classical piano scores, because at the time I preferred to play jazz charts rather than spend an afternoon unraveling a passage from a *Beethoven* sonata. It was difficult for me at first, because I hadn't really taken the time to get to grips with this register of music, but we had a sort of deal with my teacher. She saw that I had an extremely visual memory, and that I could quickly play a piece that she had played before, and so every week I had to learn a score from a book, but could simply practice the others by memorizing them. I think I probably wouldn't have been able to become a classical pianist for that reason, because I preferred to spend more time playing and improvising over pieces, rather than practicing the nuances written on the sheet music. But I think I've been able to learn the usual hand patterns on the piano over these 8 years, mainly influenced by the works of Chopin or Beethoven, and that guided me unconsciously in my composition.
*August Rush* (played by *Freddie Highmore*) is an orphaned child whose parents both come from contrasting musical backgrounds: one from the classical world and the other from rock-pop. Although I watched the film when I was younger and cannot recall all the specific details, there is one scene that remains vivid in my memory. It is the scene where *August* plays the organ in a church. This particular moment made me develop a deep admiration for the instrument, and it highlighted the significance of the film's main theme. The latter originated with the sound of wind in a field near *August's* orphanage. He gradually expanded upon it, utilizing various instruments, until he created a complete rhapsody in his quest to reunite with his parents. I believe I saw a reflection of myself in this resilient child who,

despite facing adversity, always wore a smile and relied on his inner voice to create and progress in life.

**In referencing your press kit, you state how you composed your "...first soundtracks at the age of 14, using advertisements as raw material." At only the age of 14 it is very impressive that you were starting to compose on your own. Can you go into more detail on how you were able to do this using advertisements?**

I was actually referring to the first personal soundtrack test I made on a *Peugeot* ad, a project for a car called "Exalt" and directed by *Paul Mignot*, a very talented French director who recently made "Vaincre ou Mourir '' for the cinema. I also had the immense pleasure of getting his feedback on this personal project, which included an encouraging review on his part, and which prompted me to continue down this path.
The idea behind this project was to practice using the symphony orchestra and hybridize it with more modern digital instruments such as synthesizers and other effects. It also taught me a lot about the importance of working on tempo when synchronizing images, as I'd been advised at the time to train in this format, which is very short and requires a lot of precision.

**I noticed that your lovely art covers for your pieces are all created by you. How do you go about finding the perfect art cover idea? Does it take a while for you to get these shots, and do you have to spend any or a lot of time editing these as well?**

My first single, "Kernel", was a truly special project as it marked a collaboration between my father, a talented graphic designer, and me. He taught me a lot about typography and photography, and I needed to know the fundamental technicalities, both in terms of lightning, camera lenses and the specifics of framing a subject. I've always had my visual concepts before developing music, which may seem counterintuitive to some, but after working alongside my father, my ideas were able to materialize, and now I can more easily create images that match my concepts.
Macro photography, for example, is used in the majority of my projects, as I've always been fascinated by miniaturism and precious small stones (and maybe the movie "Arthur and the invisibles", since I followed *Freddie Highmore's acting* career and composer *Eric Serra* after the "Big Blue"). Macro photography is technically quite complex, but also incredibly satisfying, because you discover images that are rarely taken elsewhere.
For example, my visual cover for the soundtrack of "Watchers" is actually the inside of a mushroom, having been very impressed by the textures and structures that made it up on closer inspection. Sometimes, I think I'm taking too long to research my next visual idea compared to writing music instead, probably several months, but I think it's a way for me to get inspired musically too, looking for a common thread in my future project. The shooting itself generally takes two days, but it's the color grading and retouching that can take weeks, until I'm satisfied that the result is realistic but also close to the emotion provoked by the music.

**Being a musician who is also a human being at your core, I think it is very inspiring to see everything you have achieved so far in your life within this work, and how dedicated you must be as a person in order to reach these achievements. What advice could you tell those reading this right now, about finding your passion and what it means to really devote yourself to it? From any personal experience, could you inform us of any ways to deal with struggles along the way and how to stay motivated within yourself during those times?**

Having sometimes given piano lessons to teenagers and sometimes to adults, I was mostly confronted with a recurrent subject, which was self-confidence and the fear of failure. We're all confronted with this, no matter what we want to achieve, be it academic, artistic or more personal. For those who are still looking for a passion, I think the most important thing is to try as many things as possible, and above all not to force yourself to saturate your day with an activity that doesn't make you entirely happy.
It's through the accumulation of diverse experiences, no matter how small or significant, that one gains confidence in their abilities. I've personally encountered moments where I felt uncertain at the piano, moments when I contemplated giving up playing altogether, or even moments of self-doubt when I struggled to comprehend a musical score. I used to compare myself relentlessly to others my age, questioning why I couldn't perform at the same level. However, I eventually realized that our goals and individual sources of joy in music differed. Constantly comparing myself to others hindered my progress rather than propelling me forward.

What I've learnt is that a passion is never constant, you have to appreciate its ups and downs, but it's by recognizing that you're never attached body and soul to something, that you can really enjoy returning to it to create something new.

## *Entropy*: The Album.

**To begin talking about your debut album *Entropy*, I find it very interesting to think about the inspiration behind each piece of music musicians create, even if it is something small. Was there anything specific that inspired you into creating *Entropy?* If so we would love to hear about it!**

Even before the project had a formal name, I was already captivated by the concept of order and chaos and the fundamental essence of music itself. Coming from a background in economics and statistics with a bachelor's degree followed by a master's in data science, I frequently encountered concepts like convergence and random walks.
To simplify, imagine a drunk man wandering aimlessly on a two-dimensional plane. Could we determine how far he would be from his starting point? This concept extends to Brownian motion, which helps model the behavior of particles. The pioneering work of *Jean Perrin*, who confirmed the existence of atoms and molecules, further expanded my fascination with these ideas. I soon became interested in sound manipulation, particularly through modular synthesizers, which can create this kind of random motion.
It was later that I came up with the name of my album **Entropy**, which is none other than a concept in physical science that allows us to measure the state of disorder or randomness in a system, also applicable to data science. My experiments are more materialized in my track "Grains", as well as "Particles", while “Inertia” and “Entropy”, have sought to use more traditional methods such as melodic answers and questions, without manipulation of the recordings.

**How long did it actually take you to finish the full production of *Entropy*? Is it a tedious process to go through creating each and every song, or do you find ideas come to you easily?**

The entire production process for the album spanned over six months, with the initial composition work commencing in early 2023. I dedicated three months to recording the piano at home and an additional period in the studio for the string arrangements. Crafting the premix, which served as a blueprint for the emotional intention and direction of each track and instrument, was a meticulous process that took several weeks. I collaborated closely with my sound and mix engineer, *Raphaël Herzig*, during this phase. Afterward, the mixing and mastering process (by *Martyn Heyne* at Lichte Studio) took approximately one month.
This album was undeniably an iterative project, particularly due to the extensive piano recordings and the diverse range of sounds involved. I often found myself dissatisfied with certain compositions, prompting me to revisit and re-record them. This approach allowed me to refine the emotional nuances and capture the essence I sought to convey through the music.

**Your third piece on *Entropy*, *Decay,* took me by great surprise- specifically at one minute and four seconds in when the addition of strings came into play. Soon after, your beautiful piano playing arrives and meshes the two instruments together seamlessly. Previously discussed within your biography, we see you are a multi-instrumentalist- not only specializing in piano but other instruments as well. What was your process in adding strings within your piece? Is this you performing on the strings, and how were you able to layer them so well on top of each other?**

I am deeply moved by the impact this piece has had on you, especially considering that very little of the album was shared before its release. The strings were actually considered very late in the production, and thus caused some nervousness as it meant having to write scores for other musicians at the eleventh hour, merely two weeks prior to the studio session. It was a challenging task, but one that I embraced wholeheartedly because I strongly desired the presence of violin and cello in my album. Originally, I had planned to address these arrangements much later in the year.
Since I am still a beginner on the violin, I enlisted the help of my talented musician friends, *Lisa Tourniaire* on cello and *Pablo Larrieu* on violin, to interpret my pieces. The piano recordings were completed at home initially, which provided an opportunity to contemplate the mix before incorporating the strings. This allowed me to collaborate with my sound engineer in planning the optimal approach to capture the strings, whether it was to recreate a spacious ambience surrounding the piano or to focus the energy of the piece in a more direct manner, taking into account the pianist's perspective. However, it's worth noting that a significant portion of the harmonious interplay between the strings and piano was already embedded in the arrangement of the piece itself. The rest of the production process further supported and enhanced this sense of harmony, culminating in a cohesive and balanced integration of the piano and strings.

**Speaking of strings, the very next piece which is also your debut album's name, *Entropy,* starts off with a beautiful serenade of them right away. Throughout the song, we can really hear the strings and how strongly they grasp onto the piece- your piano playing slowly but delicately entering later on and making its way out of the piece on its own. In stating this, I wonder how you felt during your production of this piece *Entropy*, as it is the title of your debut album and what emotions or thoughts you felt to be conveying through said piece.**

I had a clear vision for the placement of "Entropy" within the album. It was intended to serve as a transitional piece, bridging the compositions that featured a blend of piano and strings with the solo piano pieces. To signify this shift in focus towards the piano, I deliberately chose to begin the piece with a solo violin motif and conclude it with the same motif, but this time performed on the piano.
This piece was actually very difficult for me, because I made the mistake of choosing a first arrangement that was too simple, in terms of the strings voicing. I learned the hard way that, despite the use of sound libraries to help glimpse the final result, the most important thing was in the moment of recording and not in what was written on the score. So I ended up re-recording this piece a second time, to perfect the harmony and sense of fullness at the climax with the piano.

**Within the seven pieces of your album, we can see you have track number one, *Inertia*, and track number three, *Decay*, also listed as the last tracks seven and eight- in their piano version. I wonder which you produced first. Their piano version, or track one and three where strings are involved? Did you always plan on presenting both versions when putting the album together?**

Indeed, I may have mentioned it earlier, but the piano versions of the pieces were actually the initial iterations. This is why the piano rendition of "Decay" possesses a more melodically rich quality compared to the string version. I've sometimes hesitated to have two versions of a more or less similar composition, fearing that one would overwhelm the other. However, it was clear to me that this was not the case, and that if the essence of the composition was preserved, then it was the interpretation of the work that made it unique and independent.

**This may seem like a question that should not have an answer, as I believe all music created by the musician has equal value and meaning- however I am curious to ask, is there one piece on your debut album *Entropy* that really speaks to you more than the others? Say, one that you may feel more connected to, or that you found came to you easier while producing?**

"Decay" was undeniably the easiest and most natural composition to write and produce, encompassing a seamless process from recording to mixing. There are instances when a composition simply falls into place effortlessly, and I believe this track embodies that phenomenon. While it's difficult to pinpoint the exact reason behind this ease, some compositions organically come together, and "Decay" is a manifestation of that harmonious creative flow.

**I'd like to close out of these questions on your debut album *Entropy* with a simple one, what could you hope for others to feel when listening to your debut album *Entropy*?**

The intention behind my music is to transport listeners into their own memories and evoke a sense of introspection. I aspire to create an experience where one feels as though their life unfolds before them like a cinematic journey. My aim is to momentarily disconnect them from the bustling world and liberate them from the hyperactivity often associated with music consumption, where the constant search for the next track or the next social media content dominates our attention. Instead, I encourage listeners to surrender control and embrace the uncertainty of what lies ahead.

For me, **Entropy** is an album where every emotion has its place.

## Concluding Statements from the Chef

When I initially received Liam Phan's responses back in my email, I was extremely intrigued and inspired by his way of presenting himself through them. Every answer conveys his professionalism and intelligence with plenty of detail to come with it- and my jaw was sincerely dropped after I had read each one! I have been an admirer of classical music in all of its forms since I was younger, but to be able to actually hear about how pieces are put together, and what really goes into their creation from the pianist's point of view is mind blowing to me. There is so much to learn about the classical music genre, and as always when I have the pleasure of researching and presenting a new artist I continue to take in loads and loads of knowledge with which I probably wouldn't have ever known or understood otherwise. In this case, I once again am so lucky to have been able to talk with Liam. Having the talent to play piano is complete magic in my eyes and always has been- Liam Phan allowing us in on his own magic. You have to be so completely dedicated to learning the craft that is piano playing, for it is truly an art. Liam has absolutely shown how his complete dedication to his work of many forms led to finding his own unique and beautiful place for himself as not only a captivating neoclassical pianist, but an outstanding creative as well. His journey he shared gives me so much inspiration and motivation as I continue to trek through my own, which means more than the world to me. Liam works so hard- putting his entire being into what he does. I hope you who are reading this will find Liam to be just as admirable as I do and continue to follow him while he shares his beautiful talent with us for the times to come. Please listen to Liam Phan's debut album *Entropy* on various services linked below- releasing November 20th, 2023! Entropy is a wonderful experience for the ears and you are sure to feel it as well. I am so immensely grateful to have been able to speak with an outstandingly talented musician once again- and forever will be. **Thank You Liam!!!!**

**Liam Phan's links** you gotta check out:

Website- https://liamphan.com/
Instagram- https://www.instagram.com/liamphanmusic/
SoundCloud- https://soundcloud.com/liamphanmusic
Spotify- https://open.spotify.com/artist/4HIb6xhqfXDro0hkpwILwR

What is something **YOU** would like to see on the menu next? Request it by sending it to me down below! See you next time!

-Chef Gracie

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