My Journey as a Classical Guitarist at Pepperdine University

My name is Thomas Wiedensohler and my journey to Pepperdine University began with the fall masterclass of 2024. That previous spring, I learned that Christopher Parkening, one of the most renowned classical guitarists in the world, held a masterclass at Pepperdine University, Malibu California, each academic semester. Having admired Mr. Parkening and his playing for years, I immediately knew I wanted to audition, not knowing the blessing that opportunity would eventually lead to.

I immediately began working on my application process, and over the next few weeks, I worked diligently to get the best recording possible. After submitting it, I anxiously waited for the results. About a week later, I received the email I had been hoping for, I had been accepted! At the time, I thought being accepted into the masterclass would simply give me the opportunity to perform for a guitarist I greatly admired. I had no idea that it would eventually lead me to become one of his students.

The masterclass took place on September 21, 2024, in Raitt Recital Hall at Pepperdine University. It lasted approximately four hours and was divided between classical guitarists who were not Pepperdine students and those who were already enrolled at the university. I was not yet attending Pepperdine, thus I performed with the outside participants and was the fourth classical guitarist to take the stage. Each guitarist was given approximately thirty minutes to perform and receive feedback from Mr. Parkening. For any classical guitarist, this is an incredible opportunity, but it is also an intimidating one. Performing on stage can already be nerve-racking, but performing while a world-renowned guitarist sits only a few feet away creates an entirely different kind of pressure.

I chose to perform *Capricho Árabe* by Francisco Tárrega, one of the most famous pieces in the classical guitar repertoire and a piece that Mr. Parkening admires greatly. Tárrega was a Spanish guitarist and composer of the late Romantic era, and *Capricho Árabe* is a piece that challenges the performer to balance technical control with expressive musicianship. As I sat down and prepared to perform, I remember feeling the nerves that come with knowing that every musical decision I made was being carefully scrutinized by someone whose career I deeply respected. Nevertheless, I persevered and finished the performance.

Afterward, Mr. Parkening told me that I had played very well. He then gave me constructive feedback on my technique and musical interpretation. He pointed out, for example, that my vibrato was too aggressive and that I was moving my hand more than necessary. He also encouraged me to experiment with the position of my right hand in order to create different dynamic colors and tones. What I appreciated most was that his feedback went beyond simply telling me what I was doing incorrectly. He challenged me to think about why I was making certain musical choices and how those decisions affected the sound of the guitar. The guitar is a very intimate instrument, and you should play it as such. I began to understand that becoming a great guitarist is not simply about playing the correct notes given on a sheet of paper. It is about learning how to express your emotions through the instrument, and letting the guitar ‘sing,’ mimicking the human voice.

After the masterclass ended, I had the opportunity to speak with Mr. Parkening. He congratulated me on my performance again and then offered me an opportunity to study classical guitar at Pepperdine University under his tutelage the following academic year. My original goal had just been to get into his masterclass, and suddenly, I had been given the opportunity to study at Pepperdine.



I had already completed my freshman and sophomore years at a community college, so I transferred to Pepperdine University as a junior in the fall of 2025. Transferring into the program was exciting, but it was also intimidating. I was now studying under a world-renowned classical guitarist whom I have admired for many years.

We spent the first week discussing ensemble music and getting accustomed to the program, but we quickly moved into performance preparation. One of the first things I noticed about Professor Parkening's guitar program at Pepperdine was how performance oriented it was. Our first concerts took place only a few weeks after the semester began, meaning that we were performing almost immediately. The second Tuesday and second Friday of each month are dedicated to student performances, with the Tuesday concert being held in Payson Library's Surfboard Room on campus and the Friday concert being held at the Malibu Public Library. Along with these monthly concerts, we have two Music @ 3 performances each semester in Raitt Recital Hall. These events bring together music majors, music minors, professors, and faculty members and are open to the public as well.

I quickly learned that performing regularly was an important part of the education at Pepperdine. Rather than treating performances as something that happens only at the end of the semester, it is incorporated into our education throughout the year. This quickly became one of my favorite aspects of being a student here. Near the end of each semester, we also have ensemble performances. These give us the opportunity to collaborate with other music majors and minors, including vocalists, violinists, flutists, and other instrumentalists. For a classical guitarist, this is especially valuable because so much of our practice involves playing alone. Performing with other musicians teaches us how to listen to others, as we learn how to blend our instruments together.

The semester eventually concludes with juries, where we select two pieces from our repertoire and perform them for Professor Parkening and Professor Enstrom, along with other music professors. These performances serve as an opportunity to demonstrate the work we have done throughout the semester and receive feedback from our professors.

Outside of performances, we also have several opportunities each week to learn directly from Professor Parkening. Every Tuesday from 2:00 to 5:00 p.m., Parkening holds an ensemble and performance skills class for the classical guitar students. Each student performs pieces they have been working on for the guitar department and receives feedback from both the other students and Professor Parkening. We work on virtually every aspect of performance, form, technique, musicianship, rhythm, tone, dynamics, phrasing, and interpretation. In addition to receiving feedback after performing, one of the most valuable experiences in the class is being able to hear my peers perform. Listening to other guitarists has taught me to become more observant and critical of my own playing.

The following day, we meet with Professor Parkening again for another class immediately before Music @ 3. The class is somewhat different. Rather than focusing entirely on performance skills in the technical sense, Professor Parkening spends about five minutes of the class telling stories about his career and sharing lessons he has learned throughout his life as a guitarist and as a Christian. One of my favorite stories he has shared was about his performance with the famous soprano Kathleen Battle at the 1987 Grammy® Awards.

Professor Parkening and Kathleen Battle were preparing to go on stage when a man approached them and reminded them that they were about to perform for millions of people. He emphasized the enormous pressure of the situation and suggested that it could be the kind of performance that would make or break their careers. Despite the enormous pressure, Professor Parkening turned to Kathleen Battle and said, “All that matters is that we play and sing for the Lord.” That statement has stayed with me ever since. It is easy for musicians to become consumed by the opinions of others. We worry about whether we are good enough, whether we made mistakes, or whether the audience enjoyed the performance. Professor Parkening’s story reminded me that there is a greater purpose behind music.

In addition to our group classes, students have the opportunity to receive seven private lessons with Professor Parkening throughout the academic year. These lessons take place in his office, which contains photographs, newspapers, awards, and other memorabilia from his remarkable career. Sitting in that room is already an experience in itself. I am surrounded by reminders of decades of performances and accomplishments by a guitarist who has had an enormous influence on classical guitar in America. Amongst all these remarkable items is a single sticky note that reads, “Pray before each lesson.”

Professor Parkening begins each lesson with a prayer, asking the Lord to guide our time together and reminding us to glorify God through our craft. During the lesson, we typically work on one or two pieces. We may focus on fingerings, dynamics, tone, phrasing, musicality, or other technical aspects. Sometimes Professor Parkening will demonstrate parts of a piece himself. I will never forget when he demonstrated the rasgueado technique for me. Rasgueado is a flamenco technique in which the fingers rapidly roll across the strings to create a rhythmic and percussive sound. Watching him pick up my guitar and demonstrate the technique in such a masterful way was an experience that I will always remember. Lessons with Professor Parkening are unlike anything I have experienced before. Not only am I learning from his knowledge of the instrument and experience, but I also get to hear stories from a guitarist whose career has been so influential that he is often referred to as “America’s reigning classical guitarist.”

My education at Pepperdine has not been limited to studying with Professor Parkening. I have also had the opportunity to take private lessons with Professor Kevin Enstrom, one of Pepperdine's adjunct classical guitar professors. Professor Enstrom has a unique connection to Professor Parkening. He had the opportunity to study with Parkening from a young age and would often attend and perform in his masterclasses. He later earned his Bachelor of Music from Pepperdine University in 2014, studying under Professor Parkening, before earning his master's degree from the University of Southern California in 2016.



Kevin Enstrom performing at Christopher Parkening's Masterclass as a student.

Professor Enstrom's teaching has helped me approach the guitar from a different perspective. We worked extensively on mastering the fretboard, playing with confidence, eliminating unnecessary tension, and becoming more comfortable with the instrument. One of the most important lessons I have learned from Professor Enstrom is to not let one performance that may not have gone as planned define me as a musician. His guidance has taught me to recognize that we are all human, and that every performance–both the successes and the challenges–can be part of our growth as musicians.

Another unique opportunity available to Pepperdine's classical guitar students is professional recording. Once each semester, Professor Enstrom organizes and produces a professional recording session to give us the opportunity to record one or two pieces with sound engineer Chris Landen. Working with Landen was an incredible opportunity as he has over 25 years experience as an audio engineer and producer, and also helped record and produce Professor Enstrom's 2024 album, *Novelette*. Each student selects one or two pieces to record and provides a copy of the music along with any notes regarding editing or interpretation. During my first semester, I chose to record *Catalonian Song.*

When I first walked into the recording room, I did not think too much about how different the experience would be from a normal performance. I assumed I would simply sit down, play the piece, and leave. I quickly realized that it was completely different. When you are sitting in a quiet recording room and you see the red light turn on, an entirely different feeling takes place. You are no longer playing for an audience that you can connect with. Instead, you are playing into professional microphones and recording equipment that can capture every detail of your performance. A slight inconsistency that an audience might never notice becomes obvious in a recording. A section that you thought was near perfect might reveal flaws you never noticed. Conversely, you also begin to hear just how well you play certain passages and how beautiful your tone *can* be.

Recording forces you to listen to yourself in a completely different way. It puts your musicianship under a microscope, and that can be terrifying. But it can also be extremely rewarding. The more time you spend in front of the microphone, the more the nerves begin to settle, you begin to focus less on the equipment and more on the music. You get the opportunity to let your inner musician come out without the distractions of a live performance. The more I record, the more comfortable I become with the process. It has taught me another important lesson, sometimes the most valuable way to improve is simply to listen back to yourself.

One of the most meaningful experiences of my junior year came during Professor Parkening's spring masterclass in February 2025. I was told that a six-year old classical guitarist named Gregory Pupko would be performing at the masterclass. Gregory, who is currently studying under the guitarist Craig Devine, had auditioned to play *Waltz No.1* by Bartolomé Calatayud, a piece he had learned through the Suzuki method. Because Professor Parkening knew that I had also learned classical guitar through the Suzuki method, and because he knew that I teach guitar to students of Gregory's age, he asked me to accompany him during his performance. Gregory was scheduled to be the first performer at the masterclass. He initially performed the piece by himself, after which I joined him as his accompanist.



Thomas Wiedensohler accompanying Gregory Pupko at Professor Parkening's Masterclass

As I began playing, I looked over at Gregory. What I saw was a young musician with an incredible amount of focus and passion. Despite his age, he played with confidence and intention. He was not simply playing the notes, but he was genuinely engaged with the guitar. The audience, Professor Parkening, and I were all very impressed. For me, the experience meant more than simply accompanying another guitarist. I have spent years developing my own passion for music, and I have also had the opportunity to teach that passion to younger students. Being able to help a child experience the same excitement and love for music that I have felt throughout my own journey was a feeling I won't forget.

Eventually, my junior year began to come to an end. But before I could finish the year, I had my biggest performance yet, my junior recital. At Pepperdine University, juniors and seniors are required to hold their own recitals. Students are responsible for advertising and programming the entire event. Juniors are required to prepare at least thirty minutes of music, while seniors prepare at least an hour. For my recital, I performed works by Isaac Albéniz, Johann Sebastian Bach, Francisco Tárrega, Stanley Myers, and Heitor Villa-Lobos. Everything I had worked on throughout my junior year led to that performance.

I had spent countless hours practicing these pieces, focusing not only on playing the correct notes but on developing intentionality in my playing, musicality, expression, tone, and confidence. I had performed them in lessons, rehearsals, masterclasses, and concerts. I had received critiques and encouragement from my professors and fellow students. I had recorded myself and listened back to my playing. And now, all of that preparation came down to one performance. When I finally walked onto the stage, something surprised me. I wasn't nervous to be up there performing, but I was excited to share the music I had worked so hard to prepare for my friends and family. Most importantly, I was excited to play to give glory to the Lord.

Transferring to Pepperdine was difficult for me because I felt like I had something to prove. When I first arrived, every time I walked onto a stage, I lost sight of the beauty of playing an instrument, which is to play with emotion. I was now studying with Mr. Parkening, and despite him already offering me an opportunity to study with him, I felt pressure to demonstrate that I deserved to be there. I wanted every performance to prove that I was a capable guitarist. I began to lose sight of the reason I play guitar. I do not play guitar simply to impress people or to prove that I belong at Pepperdine. I play because I love music, and I play because I believe God has given me the ability and opportunity to use music to glorify Him.

Professor Parkening would pray for us before each of our performances, and his prayers slowly began to resonate with me. He always prays, "Lord, I pray that you lift up everyone's performance today, let the audience hear exactly what you want them to hear, and above all else, let this performance glorify You." Over time, performances became easier. I became more comfortable walking onto the stage. Instead of asking myself, "How can I prove myself?" I began asking, "How can I use this performance to glorify God?" That change in perspective has been the most important thing I have learned during my time at Pepperdine.