



Portrait

THE PIANO GUYS®

BIOGRAPHY

Hailing from Utah, [The Piano Guys](#) became an Internet sensation by way of their immensely successful series of strikingly original self-made music videos. They've made over 35 since joining forces in early 2011, including their hit video, an innovative 10-handed version of One Direction's "[What Makes You Beautiful](#)." But it's the Guys' highly original blend of classical music with pop that has really been the cause of an Internet phenomenon that brought them to their major label self-titled debut album released on **Sony Music Masterworks** in 2012. This release was followed by their sophomore album, *The Piano Guys 2*, holiday album, *A Family Christmas*, and recently released *Wonders*, all available now on **Portrait**, an imprint of Sony Music Masterworks.

The Piano Guys have performed everywhere from *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* to *The Today Show* as well have been featured in *The New York Times*, *Fast Company*, *Buzzfeed*, *People Magazine*, *Mashable* and so on. Their remarkable video for "[Batman Evolution](#)," off the album *Wonders*, featured Batmobile replicas of the 1966 version, the 1989 and the Tumbler from *The Dark Knight*. The scenes were shot in the style of the show/movie they appeared in so that it's an evolution of Batman as the music follows the progression as well.

But just who *are The Piano Guys*? Actually, there's only one piano player, **Jon Schmidt**, and one other instrumentalist, **Steven Sharp Nelson**, on cello. Yet the other two - **Paul Anderson** and **Al van der Beek** - are equally significant members of the group. *The Piano Guys*' name comes from Anderson's piano store in St. George, Utah, which was called The Piano Guys. Looking for an alternative to low-yield conventional advertising, Anderson devised a Facebook promotional page and YouTube channel featuring the most famous pianist he could find - local pianist, Jon Schmidt. A self-described "New Age Classical" player, Schmidt was indeed well-established locally, thanks to eight albums and seven piano books of his song transcriptions. He also performed concerts throughout Utah, one of which featured a young guest artist, Steven Sharp Nelson, who adventurously combined traditional cello playing with percussion effects. "I was 15 when I met Jon and started playing with him," Nelson recalls. "I had to get a ride to shows! But we've had a great brotherhood that's now lasted 20 years."

When Nelson moved from Salt Lake City to the suburb of Sandy, providence, if not serendipity, intervened. Al van der Beek, who came from a musical family and played several instruments and sang, lived down the street from Nelson's new place and helped him move. "I suggested we 'collaborate' sometime and he hesitated because I think he didn't want to disappoint me if I was horrible!" says van der Beek, laughing. "But," says Nelson, "I checked out his home studio and started playing some of my unfinished songs, and he told me what the titles should be and their meaning - and finished them on the spot! The guy is music *incarnate*!" In *The Piano Guys*, then, van der Beek is charged with the studio operations, as well as co-writing and some vocal texturing, music arranging, "and a lot of percussion work," adds Nelson.

Anderson was so taken by the music of Schmidt and Nelson that he closed his store at the end of 2011 in order to devote himself to the group, which only became a full-time operation in February 2012. "I had to let the piano store go!" he says, laughing. "Some of the pianos are still in storage and have been used in the videos."

The spectacular *Piano Guys* videos, which have so far netted nearly 600 million [YouTube](#) views (their YouTube channel also has over 3.6 million subscribers), are essentially divined by Anderson. "Jon had built up a fan base for 20 years, and we used that as a springboard for getting exposure," Anderson notes, "but it's all about the merits of the videos, and *share-ability*. People see them and then share them with their friends on Facebook, and before you know it, they can take off."

And sure enough, *The Piano Guys* have over 1,277,706 [Facebook fans](#) who have shared videos like "Michael Meets Mozart," which features over 100 tracks of cello textures, including a deep bass drum sound created by tapping on the cello body; a shaker sound made by Nelson rubbing rosin on his bow; and a record-scratch noise caused by his scraping a quarter on the strings. "[Michael Meets Mozart](#)" is on *The Piano Guys* debut CD, as is "[Cello Wars](#)," the ambitious video which resulted from a six-month production required to realize its *Star Wars*-inspired light saber/cello bow concept, since rewarded by over 14 million YouTube views.

"We try to put a 'wow factor' in every video," says Anderson, promising that future videos for *The Piano Guys* tracks will likewise factor in plenty of wow. This certainly is true for "[Peponi \(Paradise\)](#)," the Guys' African spin on Coldplay's "Paradise," for which the group, hours after coming up with the concept, helicoptered a grand piano onto the edge of a 1,000-foot cliff, where stellar African guest vocalist Alex Boyé sang the translated words. Same with "[Code Name Vivaldi](#)," which blends *The Bourne Identity* soundtrack riff with a similarly intense Vivaldi cello concerto in a breathless video culminating with Schmidt and Nelson, who was originally swayed into classical music by the Vivaldi piece, performing on a flatcar on a high-speed train. "[Titanium/Pavane](#)" is a mash-up of French classical composer Gabriel Fauré's "Pavane" with David Guetta's "Titanium." - the Guys having previously lensed a lovely take on Guetta's "Without You." A clip will certainly be created for "Arwen's Vigil," a *Piano Guys* original. "[Beethoven's 5 Secrets](#)" merits special mention. The piece itself employs five separate melodies from the four movements of Beethoven's *5th Symphony*, in conjunction with One Republic's "Secrets."

"We love showcasing the beauty of the earth—where people don't expect to find classical instruments," says Anderson, and sure enough, the Beethoven video combines stunning outdoor performance footage from the mountains surrounding St. George, Utah, with a concert featuring the American Heritage Lyceum Philharmonic Youth Orchestra, thereby manifesting *The Piano Guys*' dual goal of bringing people to classical music and inspiring young musicians.

"Lots of parents are using our music to show their kids how fun classical music can be and motivate them to learn instruments," says Schmidt. *The Piano Guys*' cover song mash-ups, adds Nelson, have become "a great way to introduce ourselves and make an instant connection with our audience as a classic spin on new stuff - and a new spin on classic stuff."

With van der Beek's studio prowess together with the inventive cinematography of Anderson, Schmidt and Nelson have forged a fresh approach to the growing classical crossover fusion of classical and pop music that in their case has connected quietly but emotionally with a massive audience.

"We're all spiritual guys, and the only way to properly explain it is not to take credit!" says Nelson. "It really seems meant to be."

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