MUSIC AS MAP, MEMORY & MOVEMENT

...a Caribbean voice reshaping classical music

A CONVERSATION WITH DOMINIQUE LE GENDRE · BY GISELLE HUDSON

There is a rhythm to the way a life unfolds. Dominique Le Gendre's is an entire score: motifs layered and revisited, rhythms from Port of Spain to Paris to London, harmonies that refuse to resolve because the conversation is never over.

> *"Music has been mapping a very, very clear route through life and how to express being alive. The music is the heart, the blood, the oxygen."*

A CHILDHOOD SCORED IN SONG

Dominique's earliest classrooms were living rooms alive with music. Saturdays often meant sitting under Auntie Olive Walke's piano as La Petite Musicale, the beloved choir Olive founded, rehearsed folk and sacred songs from across the Caribbean. Those rehearsals spilled beyond notes and lyrics; they taught children like Dominique that music could be worship and storytelling, culture and connective tissue.

Olive even slipped Dominique and her sister into La Petite's Christmas shows at Queen's Hall, giving them an early taste of stagecraft and the quiet discipline behind beauty.

Family gatherings were their own concerts. Uncle John Henderson, armed with his beloved cuatro, filled the air with parang and old-time calypso. Her parents' love of classical records added a European counterpoint, while two older brothers opened doors to the wider world (Jimi Hendrix, Mongo Santamaria, Miles Davis) stacked on the family turntable. Evenings in Port of Spain carried the soundscape further: distant drums and late-night steelband rehearsals drifting through the neighbourhood air, an atmosphere that seeped naturally into her musical imagination.

By nine, Dominique had a guitar in her hands. By ten she was the youngest member of the Assumption Church folk choir, stepping in with just three chords and a brave heart. Within weeks she was accompanying

hymns with ease; before long, she and her sister were playing weddings, funerals and christenings all over the city.

> *"It was like living in a pan yard. Everyone belonged, everyone had something to contribute. That philosophy of the pan yard, collective creation, shared ownership, has never left me."*

The pan yard, where music is learned by ear, where arrangements live in memory and every player can switch parts, became the blueprint for her life. It is still the metaphor she returns to: music as community, collaboration as artistry.

BECOMING, AND ALWAYS BELONGING

That Trinidadian foundation carried her outward. Dominique trained as a classical guitarist in Paris with Ramón de Herrera, and studied harmony with Yvonne Desportes and music analysis with Christian Accaoui. In London she built a career composing for theatre, dance, film and radio drama; she wrote music for all thirty-eight of Shakespeare's plays and became an Associate Artist of the Royal Opera House.

Yet the heart of her practice never shifted. The work that nourished her most echoed the collaborative spirit of her Caribbean beginnings: theatre ensembles and radio studios where writers, actors and composers built something together in real time.

> *"When I'm fully invested in a project, that's home. The place doesn't matter as much as the work and the people."*

PORTRAITS FOR GUITAR: A HOMECOMING AND A QUESTION

After decades of creating for others, Dominique has returned to the instrument that started it all.

"In over fifty-six years of being with the guitar, this is the first time I'm sitting to write pieces just for the guitar."

Her new album, *Portraits for Guitar*, is both statement and question. It asks: What does Caribbean classical music sound like? Does this touch you? Is this part of you?

The project gathers six original sketches for solo guitar and two suites of her own, alongside music by Cuban composers Flores Chaviano and Walfrido Domínguez and British composer Stephen Goss. Performed with virtuoso Ahmed Dickinson, the works form what Dominique calls "a conversation of guitars": Caribbean, Latin and European voices meeting on the same page.

Here her philosophy meets a wider conversation. In a recent essay for *The Atlantic*, composer Matthew Aucoin argued that classical music isn't defined by a European sound or era at all, but by writing: the act of putting music on paper so it can live again in each new performance. For Aucoin, notation is the connective tissue across centuries, the way ideas travel beyond the composer's lifetime.

Dominique embodies that idea. For her, a score is another kind of pan yard: a living archive where knowledge is shared and reshaped. When she writes these guitar portraits, she isn't just recording an album; she's creating a written conversation that future guitarists can inhabit and transform.

> *"Getting to the end isn't the goal; the discovery inside the process is."*

"When I'm composing I can feel an urge to rush ahead, to reach the ending," she says. "But with this music I have to let each section unfold in its own time."

The process is as deliberate as the music. Recording will take place over four days in a resonant church outside London, followed by editing, mastering and the subtle sound-sculpting of a classical producer. The label will handle licensing, design, distribution, reviews and radio

submissions. The release is planned for September 2026, allowing the music to breathe and find its listeners.

In this light, *Portraits for Guitar* becomes more than a beautiful album. It is Dominique's way of expanding what classical music can mean: a Caribbean imagination inscribed in notation, ready for anyone, anywhere, to discover and play forward.

SONGMAPS RYE: ART AS QUIET CLIMATE ACTION

While the guitar draws Dominique inward, SongMaps Rye sends her outward.

This multi-year project unfolds in a small English coastal town already on the front line of rising seas. Working with scientists, poets, circus artists and residents, she and her team use music, poetry and environmental science to help people see, feel and act.

> *"We're not making activists. We're giving people the information, tools and creativity to ask the questions that need to be asked, and to make demands."*

"Councils have decided which towns will be sacrificed, but they haven't told the people," she adds.

Workshops are free by design. Young people write and podcast about their world. Families learn gardening and stilt-walking. Local experts lead river walks and bird-identification sessions. The goal is empowerment and resilience.

"Otherwise, it remains an elite activity. These activities are too important. It's about making the future possible for people for whom hope is disappearing."

Here the pan yard philosophy finds new life: collective creativity as resilience, a community orchestra of scientists, elders and children writing their own survival score.

HOPE AS AN UNFINISHED SOUND

When I ask what hope sounds like, Dominique pauses, then smiles.

> *"My compositions sound as if they're never finished. The end is always hanging in the air. That is what hope is: this conversation isn't over."*

THREE TAKEAWAYS FROM DOMINIQUE'S SPOTLIGHT

1 *Music as a lifelong compass.* From Auntie Olive's living room to Europe's grand stages, music has mapped Dominique's sense of belonging: Trinidadian roots, classical rigour and collaborative artistry converging into one voice.

2 *Composition as community.* In a pan yard, a theatre ensemble or a coastal town, Dominique treats every creative act as collective authorship, proof that music, like community, thrives on shared rhythm and respect.

3 *Hope as unfinished sound.* Classical music as living notation; climate action as art. The music, and the work, is never finished. That openness is her legacy, and her definition of hope.



Dominique Le Gendre

Trinidad-born composer and classical guitarist based in London. Trained in Paris, she has composed for theatre, dance, film and radio drama, written music for all thirty-eight of Shakespeare's plays, and is an Associate Artist of the Royal Opera House. Her album *Portraits for Guitar*, performed by Ahmed Dickinson Cárdenas and Helen Sanderson, is out on Convivium Records.

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