

Andrew Saintsing: Hi, you're tuned in to 90.7 FM KALX Berkeley. I'm Andrew Saintsing, and this is The Graduates, the interview talk show where we speak to UC Berkeley graduate students about their work here on campus and around the world. Today, I'm joined by Selim Goncu from the Department of Music. Welcome to the show, Selim.

Selim Goncu: Hey, thanks for having me here.

Saintsing: So, great to have you here. I'm really interested to learn more about music. To start off, like what are you doing? What is your program? You're studying music composition, right?

Goncu: Yes, so I am doing a PhD in music composition, which is a little bit of a weird concept in itself because not only am I a fake doctor, I'm kind of like a fake fake doctor, you know? Not even a fake doctor in the real sense, but a fake fake doctor, you know?

Saintsing: What do you mean?

Goncu: So, what I mean by that is of course like the broad scope of PhD is now so wide, right? So, I mean, you could have your doctorate or research in any field but what makes sort of a music composition PhD a little bit like weird sounding is that it's, for some of us, it's... writing music is less tied to research. Although, there are many colleagues and many other composers who are really research oriented people, but I am not really one of them. So, for me it's even worse, you know. It's like there is another doctorate title for musicians, though. It's called DMA, so Doctor of Musical Arts, so some other universities only give that title. So, in Berkeley, it's PhD, but I guess there's not much of a difference between the DMA and PhD. Like, they're the same thing.

Saintsing: Okay, so I'm interested in the more research-oriented side, but I'm also interested in your side. So, let's start with you. So, you say you're not really doing research. So, are you essentially in your degree program is about creating your music essentially?

Goncu: That's true. I'm by no means, and well of course it also depends what you uh consider to be research, right? I mean there's some search first of all, right? Like, there's some search for whatever you want. Like, it could be the kind of language I would like to have, or there's the maybe kind of a search, for instance the kind of chords I would like to use in my music or the kind of instrumental timbres. But there's also a search for meaning, right? Like there's also a search of meaning because there's something weird about the like the whole musical thing in itself. I don't want to digress but what I sometimes tell people when I talk or also students is is there meaning to music. So, I mean, does music tell you something that you could express verbally? It's as if I were to have a like, you know, when I had like my classes at UC Berkeley, I sometimes tell them for instance if I were to give you one week and you have to read Waiting for Godot by Beckett, and you have and you come back after a week, and you know I make an exam and let's say you know you're like me and you haven't of course read the thing, and you just you know ask you know colleague, "Hey, what is it about?" Of, course it's hard. Okay, when it's about

Beckett, it's a bit hard to say. But, you know, I mean, you could possibly pass that exam. Maybe you know you could say, "Okay, but if I were to say let me pick something for instance a musical example that doesn't have any text because with text there's language in our sense coming to the picture, right?" But when I say, "For instance, okay, so we are going to listen to the Seventh Violin Sonata by Beethoven. Come back and tell me what you know." I mean, so it's really hard, right? I mean even if you have listened or not listened, how are you going to express what happened in there with words?

Saintsing: Yeah, I would... I have no idea would you say. The research aspect is kind of delving into these musical pieces and then trying to find the words to describe them trying to find the meaning of music. Is that?

Goncu: That's not... For me, that's more like, for instance, the area of a music theorist, right? Or I mean in other senses for instance ethnomusicologists for instance. They would be the real PhD people, you know. Like because they, you know, know how to do proper research, you know how to write scientifically. But with me it's like, with me what also got me into music of course, I mean I wasn't thinking about it back then, but like there's something about music that defies being expressed with words. It's like music is showing you the middle finger, and saying, "Okay, you are not going to tell me what I am. You are not going to be able to express me with the language you think that helps you communicate with others." So, whenever I try to speak of my own music, which is sometimes a disaster, you know. But also, other like, it's such a weird feeling because really, I don't know what to say. As if with every sentence I built, I'm wrong.

Saintsing: Music: it's its own language essentially, and you struggle to translate from...

Goncu: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean also in that sense, but you know, let's not get there but you know is music a language? Because a language has to be translatable. What are you going to translate? Like if I go to, you know, native Australians and show Kendrick Lamar, I mean I don't know what they're going to think of that, you know? I mean, so is music translatable? Also, it's a different story, but I mean for me, it's a little bit of, I mean why I make music... I mean where, maybe I'm digressing but, like one: it gives me joy, right? Like just also like writing or also just purely playing music, and it's also some sort of um like you're creating your own world in the meaninglessness of life, you know?

Saintsing: The meaninglessness. Are you, would you say music gives a meaning?

Goncu: Oh, no. No, I mean it's just like, you know, I mean it gives my life a meaning, you know. It gives my life a meaning, maybe. Maybe in that sense, you know.

Saintsing: Like you don't have, you can't see a meaning until you apply one, and music is a way to do that maybe?

Goncu: I mean in a very just like a little bit of a just like philosophical way, maybe. Yeah. But you know... because there's meaning you know. There's meaning. There's food for instance

you know. That's enough meaning for me. You know I just had great Indian food, for instance, that was great you know. There's this place called Satkar, and they don't even deliver. They say, "Corona, we don't care. You come here. You pick up." Like, it's been like this for a year now. But what I mean is I don't know how I even got into it, but it's just I don't know. It's just like as if you want to create your own world, as if like you're still a child and playing with your own toys, you know?

Saintsing: Right, no, yeah. Would you say the degree is essentially granting you the space to look for that world?

Goncu: So, there are a couple of things of course. Number one it's very difficult for I mean many researchers or musicians especially. Like especially composers because you know your income right is not really stable. Like as either you get commissions or you get you know grants, fellowships. But you know when you do your PhD... so, here says, for instance, Berkeley says, "Hey, you have time and space here for five years, you know. You come here without worrying too much about your finances and you're going to study with people who you want to work with, and they hopefully want to work with you as well." If you want, if you want to get a lot of teaching experience, that's one of the great things about, for instance, Berkeley Music Department, we get to be instructors. Like, we are not TAs or anything. Just we teach the classes. That's really very good about it because many colleagues that I know, they just do TA work and which is just like basically like correcting homeworks. Like here, like one-on-one against these you know great students of Berkeley, you just like have amazing connection.

Saintsing: And when you say study with someone, what do you mean by that? Like you have an advisor, a main advisor?

Goncu: Yes, and it doesn't have to be one person. It's actually, well you can do whatever you want actually, you know? You can just go and study with one person from the beginning till the end, but it's generally encouraged that you study with you know two, three different people, you know. You just meet with them. So, the reason why I came was there were like two great musicians that I knew that I wanted to come and study here with. So, it's actually still the master and apprentice relationship. You get one-on-one you know lessons, which is also a weird thing in itself like because composition lesson is a funny thing.

Saintsing: Yeah, what's a composition lesson?

Goncu: Like, yeah, what's a composition lesson? You know it's just like a composition lesson is difficult because it's really hard to teach the thing, right? It's really hard to teach composition I mean you could really teach songwriting. For instance, you could say, "Hey, here's your verse and your chorus and maybe this is how you connect them together. Hey, maybe here the chorus came back twice, but should it come a third time?" You know stuff like that are... So, maybe it's... so there are is like, there are really things to learn, right? Like you learn things about like harmony, right? You know

how chords go together, how to harmonize a melody, you know. But composing and the way you develop your own ideas is a really difficult thing to teach right? And like many composers also... you know I mean of course you teach some like what you call handcraft. That's something you teach, but then the composition lesson becomes I mean at this doctorate level maybe more of, "Hey, we could do it this here or this here. What do you think of this idea?" So, it's just like really it becomes a discussion between you know advisor and you know the doctorate candidate. And of course sometimes, sometimes we even just like end up watching a movie or something, you know? Like the teacher says, "Hey, you know I'm going to show you something. This could be interesting for, you know, what you're thinking of." And just like we'll spend an hour of nothing to do with music. I mean nothing to do with the piece. Well, of course it has something to do, but you know we won't even talk about it you know.

Saintsing: Right, so before you get to the PhD, you've already kind of done the work of learning like the harmonies, the scales, like of the building blocks of like writing music, right? And so once you get here, it's mostly about those interactions where the advisor is trying to push you further maybe? Like show you things you might have not seen before, and then once you actually have something written down and you can play it for them, then they're essentially acting as an editor?

Goncu: Yes, so first they check, oh, for instance they check sometimes like from like the most basic things sometimes. "Oh, you know, with these instrumentation here, the saxophones wouldn't sound from those things, you know, because like their experience speaks, right?" I mean, maybe, I have written like two works in that instrumentation, they did like seven, ten, you know? So, I mean they know, right? That's... from there until like the overall picture of things, but like what is great about like the doctoral studies here is, it's as if you are in a residency, you know? As if you get, because they're like these artist residencies, you know? Like there's one that I've been to that was in New Hampshire, and it's called MacDowell. It's a huge place like with a huge forest, and there are 32 little cabins, and an artist is in there, you know. And it's like, here's like that, you know, you're all, you are free to do whatever you want, you know? Of course, like your output, like your creative output is encouraged, but nobody says for instance, "You have to have a lesson with me every week" or something like that. So, they try to support your artistic goals, and of course, they also do some career advice and everything you know that's also something that needs to be said but yeah I did the the other stuff. I mean before, and of course, it's a never-ending thing, but so I studied in Europe, so my bachelors and masters, I did in Austria, so there's a bit of a difference. We should talk about this maybe, if you don't mind. There's a difference between approach to music and musical composition in Europe and the States.

Saintsing: Oh, like how does, how is it different?

Goncu: Yeah, but I'm going to exaggerate a bit, okay? I mean like for simplicity, okay? So, there is something in Europe that says, "We are the tradition. Learn your tradition. Like, learn your Beethoven symphonies. Learn to do this, this, this, this, and then knowing the

tradition, come and do your own thing. Like, break the tradition and do your own thing. Or stay in the tradition. Whatever you want." In the States (again very superficially put, okay?), in the US, it's like, "You come up with what you want to come up with, and then we'll work on that. Don't deal with, 'I have to know everything in the past' because that might handcuff you." Okay?

Saintsing: Yeah, that's interesting. that definitely doesn't seem surprising to me, but yeah, I guess... Is that, you think, that's more intimidating? In America?

Goncu: Okay, for me? Okay, for me, I am glad that I did my doctorate here. Okay, so I would have, I would have... I mean my ways like, I like that. Maybe it's the way I'm raised, but if I were to, for instance, begin... Of course, there are like institutions who... I don't know how Berkeley does it with composition bachelors or something, but I'm glad that I got that handcraft first and then built upon that. But I mean both can be very dangerous, too, you know? Versus, if you... I remember I had a... it wasn't a composition teacher of mine. I had a teacher in Austria, and he knew so much music. So, whenever he would speak of an idea, he said, "Oh, yeah. This sounds like this. This sounds like that." So, whenever he would come up with like five seconds of music, he knew, "Oh, this sounds like that." So, he would like scratch and start over again, so it was just really not enabling him to move further. The other thing is like, "Okay, let me express myself. Whatever, whatever I do, it's good." That's also something weird because then the problem is you might be really repeating something exactly. There's nothing wrong with like writing in a certain style or something like that, you know? You don't have to go, you know, avant-garde the whole time, you know? But it's good to... But for me it's good to know what came before because I mean that's also something I enjoy, you know?

Saintsing: Yeah, that's like most degrees, right? Like, you need to establish that understanding of your field to be able to build something new. Although, I guess with music it's interesting because I guess, you know, in terms of research, right, like I'm in a science PhD and I guess we kind of think of a progress of knowledge, right? Like of building on to get to something that humans didn't know until now, right? Whereas with music, I don't know. Is there necessarily kind of that idea of progress? Like does that even make sense in music? Do you... Do you need to push forward? Or are you always trying to... Everyone is trying to find something that maybe everyone who's ever been writing music has been trying to find and it's just something hard to express like you were trying to express?

Goncu: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I completely understand what you mean. It's, it's, it's, that's a really difficult... I mean, it's not difficult. I mean it's difficult for me at least to express. Again, again, you know the language barrier right here. But there's some, and we can talk about some sort of a progress, but I mean not progress in a scientific way because you know like it's I'm speaking of maybe a progress of, for instance, let's say like in the time of Bach like, you know, you know, like mid 18th century, he passed away. So, 18th century and before, for instance, not every (because we have 12 keys, right?) I'm not, not... 12 possible pitches, right? And scales, like 12 times 2 let's say in the western music. Not every scale was usable in his time because, you know, because of that the

tunings were different and stuff. And then slowly music started spreading like and became more flexible with harmony. It's not that it's better or something, but there was a progress in the harmonic use for instance. And that took us to all this, you know, crazy stuff that happened, you know, in the 20th century. But of course, there's a difference, and that also comes... Maybe that is not necessarily because it's like more developed or better but, for instance, orchestras grew bigger, you know? Like a baroque orchestra is very, very small and then, you know, classical is a little bit more, and then with romantic you have trombones, and then 20th century you have huge percussion, and now maybe you have like electronics and stuff like that. So, it's weird. Like the tendency is to grow, you know? It's just like something, you know, accumulates, right? But there have been enough, there has been enough proof that, well, it doesn't necessarily have to be bigger or more complex. For instance, one of the most known like living classical composers of, you know, right now is an Estonian composer called Arvo Part. Maybe you've heard of the name? And he writes very simplistic music, and he also comes from the school where he wrote all this crazy stuff. But he just like, I think, said, "All right, no. I'm just going back." And he even, like, his music even went back to some kind of a Renaissance-like mood. But of course now from the kaleidoscope of a contemporary, you know, composer. But, but the last 50 years, for instance, is a little bit more now. You have more of a, for instance, especially let's say like what's more popular. There's a little bit of this fashion, and contrast like, you know, 50s, 60s music is more like the birth of pop, like radio-friendly, two/three/four minutes songs, verses and choruses. And then some people got tired of it, and there comes Pink Floyd, and they say, "We're gonna write like 18 minute long songs. 'Shine On You Crazy Diamond' will have like seven minute intro" or something like that. And then they, they grow more and more, you know, like complex music. And suddenly comes punk, you know? And it says, "All right, the hell with them." Where everyone is able to do music, you know? Nobody needs to be a virtuoso. And then back to like garage kind of playing, you know? It's just like, there's like these ups and downs of the whole thing, but the times are changing really fast. Like music fashion changes very quickly

Saintsing: I was thinking it's like less like studying evolution and more just like evolution where you just...

Goncu: Exactly, yeah, yeah.

Saintsing: What do you think drives changes in music?

Goncu: I think we humans tend to exploit whatever we find, you know? Some, let's say, some good mind came up with a great idea, let's say. Okay, and that it gets exploited so bad, you know? It's just like, you know? And you know, people who do in the similar style come up, and just like, that gets exploited, exploited, exploited until nothing else is left, you know? And then a change needs to happen, you know? And we are exploiting at such a fast rate, you know? We're really exploiting at such a fast rate that it's really weird to see these changes.

Saintsing: You think that just has to do with accessibility? Like the amount of people who can make and produce music?

Goncu: I think so. I think so, yeah, yeah.

Saintsing: So, we kind of like talked about what in general happens in the program, but I was interested to know what is the end point? Do you produce a piece of music? Is that like your dissertation essentially?

Goncu: So, there are different ways, I think, and maybe while I answer this one, I could also, you know, answer your question based on research. We are basically... We can do two things. (I might be wrong, by the way.) But anyway, so what I'm going to do is I have a dissertation piece, right? It's a piece that I'm writing. So, you hand it to the jury, and that's it. So, my piece is my dissertation. But you can also write a thesis. I mean, you know, why? Let's say you're composing, but you say, "Okay, I want to write a thesis." You know, I mean, maybe you like it, or maybe you just want to, whatever. That's also possible. Maybe you could, let's say, maybe you use a newly found, maybe, like maybe, you're, you're researching to make instruments. There are some colleagues who use electronic means to create some instruments. For instance, some gloves with some, and as they move, sound comes out, you know? Like, there are people who work with stuff like that. And that could be then your research. We have maybe even more than 50 percent of my colleagues spend a lot of time at the Center for New Music and Audio Technologies at Berkeley. CNMAT for short. And they are, for instance, more, for instance, research-oriented than maybe I am. Not that they don't write music. They of course do, but some of them just, for instance, work with electronic devices and how to, for instance, create instruments or how to, for instance, change sound and work with sound. Or, you know, now that, for instance, you know, just like we could right now add some video effect on zoom, right? You have different glasses and stuff like that. You know these things, so now our computers are able to do these things. So, can they do it with audio. So, while, you know, let's say a rock band is performing. You know, a DJ somewhere could push a couple of buttons or change some knobs and the sound changes. So, there are a lot of people who are doing research on live music processing, live audio processing, you know? So, that would be a more like, "Oh, yeah. Okay, I could see that being a PhD kind of attitude" you know?

Saintsing: Right, and the thesis, if you were to write one there, it would entail something like that. Like there would have to be...

Goncu: Absolutely, absolutely. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Saintsing: So, you wouldn't write anything about the dissertation piece? Like, that's not part of...

Goncu: I asked, but no. No, we don't.

Saintsing: I guess the music just speaks for itself. It's the world you created like you were saying.

Goncu: Exactly, exactly. But of course, I mean it's like because the department is not... I mean, it's not a huge department, so there are like two or three people admitted every year. I mean to the composition PhD. So, everybody knows, like the whole faculty knows what every individual is doing. So, I mean they're always looking, "Okay, maybe this person is more like creative output-oriented." Or you know, they're like, you know, they're, "Your performances and stuff." So, they're aware of what's happening. If I were to come here and do nothing, I mean, this would... it wouldn't take me too long to get kicked out, you know?

Saintsing: Yeah, I wasn't questioning the degree or anything. I was just...

Goncu: I am. I am.

Saintsing: But yeah. I was kind of interested in like what happened. You just hand them some music. Do you perform it? Or do you record it and like give them a recording? Or do you write and you...

Goncu: So, you write the score. You hand in the score. Sometimes it gets performed. For instance, my dissertation was supposed to be... the dissertation piece was supposed to be premiered like a month ago or something like that, but of course that got postponed because ensembles cannot operate as well. So, it was for an ensemble. So, it's like 16 players playing at the same time. So, it's going to be next year. But I mean in cases where it cannot get performed, I mean your score sort of speaks for itself. Of course, they would prefer to hear it, of course. But I mean, it's also like, there's this personal relationship with the faculty as well.

Saintsing: I guess that at that point you've been speaking with all the faculty, and so, they've all kind of given their input if the music is finished at that point. So like, essentially it's just like, "Yeah, now we... Now you're done. Yeah, we knew you were."

Goncu: Yes, but I mean, I don't know whether every PhD has this, but we have this qualification exam, right? I mean, so there you have a lot of analysis to do. So, analysis of works. So, the jury gives you three works, and you pick three works that you have to analyze and come back and just like talk about them, you know? And they really give you a hard time on in. There, like they really give you a hard time, you know? When you are just like talking about these pieces, you know?

Saintsing: And that's where you kind of get at that issue that you're talking about at the beginning that how do you put music into words?

Goncu: Yeah, yeah. I remember, for instance, there's this Italian composer I picked the music of. And then one of the teachers said... So, the Italian composer's name is Sciarrino, and one of the, you know, faculty members said, "Um, so Selim, why do you think... Let's say



you have a composition student. Why do you think it's important for him or her to know Sciarrino?" So, that was the question I had in the quals. And I just, and I said, "It isn't important. It doesn't have to be, you know? You don't have to know." But I mean, you know, so you get really like these tough questions, you know? But what I really loved was I was always looking forward to teaching. I was really looking forward to teaching. That was one of the things that really made me happy, too. And every time I went to teach, I was quite, even on the days... Did you teach as well?

Saintsing: Yeah, yeah.

Goncu: So, you know, there are days where you don't want to go and teach, right? But I would go into the classroom, in five minutes I would be just like, like in the zone, you know? Like would be... So, I really loved teaching a lot, and there is this something, like quite fundamental, there, right? Like, you know, you're sharing that experience with them, with the students, and you cannot believe like how, oh, what amazing ideas they come up with.

Saintsing: So, you're teaching composition?

Goncu: Not like, no. I wasn't teaching composition here. I was teaching more like, you know, introduction to music or sometimes, you know, how to harmonize melodies and chorales and stuff like that, you know? That has been really rewarding for me I have to say.

Saintsing: Yeah, and do you think that's going to be something you keep doing after the...

Goncu: I would love to keep teaching, yes. I would really like that. The thing is, first, some people say they don't want to do it, and there's nothing wrong with that. There's a little bit of, how should I say? Unless you're a superstar, it's very hard to have a stable income without a, like, position. Not that it has to be an academic position, you know? That's not the only way to live, but, you know, I, even if I were, let's say a superstar, let's say. Okay? But I would still love to teach. I would then say, "Hey, I'm teaching one day a week, okay? That's it." But I would still love to teach because it's like, because they show you so many things as well.

Saintsing: So, unfortunately it looks like we're running out of time. Is there anything you'd like to leave us with before we go?

Goncu: Don't zap your music. Don't zap your movies or books. Take the time to listen to an album or a piece from beginning till the end without being interrupted. If you watch a TV show, don't text. Observe it without dealing with other stuff that's around you. That's all I can say.

Saintsing: Today we've been speaking with Selim Goncu, from the Department of Music about what even is a PhD in Music Composition. Thanks so much for being on the show, Selim.

Goncu: It's been my pleasure.

Saintsing: Tune in in two weeks for the next episode of The Graduates.