ARTS

"My advice to you is not to inquire why or whither, but just enjoy your ice cream while it is on your plate." **THORNTON WILDER '20** AMERICAN WRITER

Seniors reflect on their experience within Yale's music scene

BY GEMARD GUERY
STAFF REPORTER

Every fall, many first years at Yale weigh how they'll take part in one of the University's largest selling points, the music scene, through everything from a capella rush to Yale Symphony Orchestra auditions. Now on their way out, four seniors spoke to the News about their participation in Yale's music scene, its impact on their Yale experience and what's next for them.



COURTESY OF THARA JOSEPH

Yale has an incredibly vast music scene, from student bands to a capella to orchestra. Here's how four graduating seniors took advantage of it.

The bassist

For Thara Joseph '26, music has always been an important part of her identity. A bassist from Jacksonville, Florida, in Grace Hopper College, Joseph began playing the piano regularly in elementary school.

"Every day, I knew I had at last ninety minutes of playing per day," said Joseph in an interview. "That really started in sixth grade, and it stayed consistently until I graduated, so it was very intensive in that way."

Joseph attended a magnet arts program for both middle school and high school, where her passion for music intensified. She was a part of her city symphony orchestra and youth symphony orchestra, where she played the French horn, and in her senior year of high school, she was accepted into a jazz combo through the Jazz Education Network, which connects young musicians with professionals in the field.

But as Joseph was preparing to come to Yale, she anticipated putting music on the back burner, focusing on academics instead and seeing where Yale would take her.

"I didn't know if I was going to be able to play and practice at the same frequencies that I had been for many, many years," Joseph said.

But when Joseph found herself unable to practice playing music every day during the First-Year Scholars program, she said she realized how little she enjoyed that experience. In fact, during the program, Joseph went to a local pawn shop and bought a bass bundled with an amp so she could practice.

"Looking back, even that moment should have clued me into how important music was as a core part of my daily routine and how hard it would have been to just drop it," Joseph said.

Joseph has been a bassist for the Yale Jazz Ensemble during the entirety of her undergraduate experience, playing in musical productions like "The Wiz" and "For Colored Girls."

She got to gig professionally with graduate students at the Yale School of Music on a regular basis, and she has performed for events held through Yale's Schwarzman Center and opened for celebrities such as Cécile McLorin Salvant and John Legend.

Originally, Joseph came to Yale planning to double-major in both global affairs and music. Instead, she tested out classes across many different fields and departments until she landed on Ethics, Politics and Economics. She said her interdisciplinary major, alongside her music experience, opened her eyes to the nature of Yale's liberal arts education.

"I realized I don't have to choose one path here. I feel like I'm the type of person where I want to have my hands in many different pockets," Joseph said. "Because of all that time I was able to still invest in my craft, it really had me making that shift into considering pursuing music in a more serious and intentional way."

Joseph says she will miss Yale's vibrant community the most from her music experience as she leaves Yale.

"You get to meet so many different people, and a lot of people, I don't think I would have ever crossed paths otherwise," said Joseph. "There's such an emphasis on collaboration here when it comes to the arts, where it's music that feels good, it sounds good, and it's enjoyable. I'll miss that a lot."

Joseph hopes to someday work in the more executive side of the music industry.

"There's a need for more artists as industry leaders, so that we can increase artist advocacy and bridge what can sometimes be misunderstandings between creatives and executives," Joseph said.

Following graduation, Joseph will be staying in New Haven as a Chauncey Fellow, where she will be developing a service-based arts project. She plans to continue gigging throughout her time as a fellow.

The singer-songwriter

Zaida Rio Polanco '26 has been passionate about music for as long as she can remember. An environmental studies major from White Plains, New York, Polanco grew up with a dad and brother who were both singer-songwriters, contributing to Polanco's decision to do the same.

Polanco grew up watching her dad play for weddings and her brother, who is 11 years older than her, play drums for her dad's band.

"There was always music playing in the house, and they let me find my own genre that I liked," Polanco said in an interview with the News.

Polanco was writing songs when she was as young as three years old. Her dad ran the songwriters club at her high school, and Polanco would perform at open mics as early as third grade alongside high school aged students.

By the time she entered Yale, Polanco had already released an album with 10 songs.

Polanco was drawn to Yale's theater and acting scene when she first arrived at Yale but knew she wanted to continue singing and songwriting.

"I just knew I wanted to keep going, no matter where I ended up," said Polanco. "I just got lucky I was able to go to a school that had a student record label that had a bunch of people willing to help bring this music to life."

Polanco was a member of the Shades of Yale for her first three years at Yale and a frequent participant in theater on campus. She was also an active part of 1701 Records, the student record label that helped Polanco release many of her own projects.

For a while, Polanco was reluctant to pursue a career as an artist, but her time at Yale showed her that it is possible.

"I've met people that turned this pipe dream of going into this career as an artist into something that could actually happen," Polanco said. "I love the fact that I can hear my best friends performing at Chi Psi from my bedroom window. There are not many places you can do that, be able to have that experience where you're literally living in a small little bubble of performing artists. I'll miss that a lot."

While she enjoyed her experience as an environmental studies major, it is not what she hopes to pursue professionally. Following commencement, Zaida plans to pursue music in Los Angeles while working in marketing with a company that has a creative entry point. She also hopes to continue auditioning for theater and film.

The Whiffenpoof

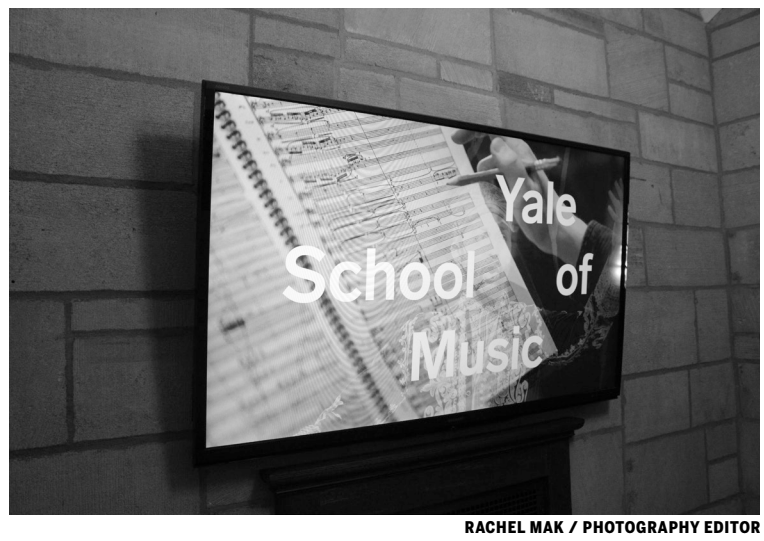
For John Colbert '26, the Yale journey was unlike what he originally anticipated. A humanities major, he originally matriculated in fall 2020, as a member of the class of 2024, but took a gap year due to the pandemic to get more out of his Yale experience.

Colbert played the drums often in his hometown of Montclair, New Jersey, gigging with jazz bands through his time in middle school and high school. He also participated in an after school and summer program where local musicians help youth create their own ensembles.

Colbert's older sister attended Yale and recommended that he try out for Yale's Tangled Up in Blue — or TUIB — a folk music group. While Colbert's sister was not a part of the group, he said she always enjoyed watching them perform.

"It was a big event for her and her friends to go to every year. She was like, 'You should do this.' Colbert said in an interview with the News. "So then I auditioned, and that's been a big part of my time at Yale. That's really what made me take singing more seriously as something that I did here."

Colbert eventually served as the musical director of TUIB during his junior year, in addition to participating in bands and theater on campus.



RACHEL MAK / PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR

He also became a member of the Whiffenpoof class of 2025, where Yale seniors take gap years to perform worldwide, something he said he had no intention of being a part of originally.

It wasn't until a friend from TUIB encouraged Colbert to audition after sharing her own experience that Colbert considered becoming a Whiffenpoof.

"The idea of being a professional amateur musician or an amateur professional was kind of appealing to me," Colbert said. "I spent so much time doing music stuff here that I was like, I really wouldn't mind doing essentially just that for a whole year."

Colbert enjoyed his time as a Whiffenpoof, which allowed him not only to have a fun experience but also gave him the opportunity to reflect on what he wanted his life after Yale to look like.

For Colbert, music was also a means of finding his community at Yale.

"Being involved in music here was a wonderful way to be engaged with campus life," he said. "I think playing music together is a really interesting and unique way to form bonds with people and it means a lot to me."

As Colbert prepares to leave Yale, he said he already feels nostalgic about his time in the music scene and how it became a serious endeavor.

"In some ways, the things that I'll miss about playing music here are the things that I'll miss about not being as young as I am now," he said. "I'll miss the strange, infinite possibility of college that is so, so alluring when you're here."

Following commencement, Colbert hopes to move to New York and continue playing with his band, Dog Boy, which he began during his time at Yale. There, he hopes to engage in the city's art scene while he continues searching for a job separate from his creative endeavors that he finds fulfilling on a personal level.

The concert pianist

Paul Ji '26 has been a well known and distinguished musician for years. A philosophy and music double major from France, Ji has been playing the piano since he was 4 years old.

Ji participated in many international competitions when he was younger, winning almost all of them, which further fueled his passion for music, specifically the piano.

"I did the Steinway competition for seven years, consecutively, and fortunately, I won all of them and that motivated me to continue," he said in an interview. "But at one point, I decided that music was much more than competitions, and there was so much joy to be found in connecting with people through music."

When Ji was 15, he recorded his first album after winning a national competition in France. Ji's second album, the one he recorded while at Yale, will be coming out in early 2027.

Much of Ji's Yale experience was finding the perfect balance between his professional piano career and his academic interests.

"I very much appreciate the liberal arts, and I really wanted to delve deep into philosophy," he said. "I also felt that it would help my music, that it would give me more insights and more intellectual experience."

The majority of his sophomore year was devoted to learning the work of Polish composer Frédéric Chopin. Ji's next album, recorded in Sprague Hall, consists of the full 24 preludes by Chopin, accompanied by other pieces.

This year, Ji had the opportunity to perform with the Yale Symphony Orchestra as the winner of the William Waite competition, where he played Chopin's second concerto, a romantic piece he performed on Valentine's Day.

Ji's talents have brought him all over the world throughout his time at Yale. During his sophomore year, he performed his debut recital in Paris at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. Since then, he's played in Vienna in spaces where famous musicians such as Beethoven have performed.

While Ji wasn't a consistent part of any music group, his experience continuously demonstrated to him how strong the musical community at Yale is. He often participated in graduate piano classes in Sprague Hall and would play alongside experts in the field.

"Meeting musicians who are also very intellectually driven and invested in many, many different fields has been a gift," Ji said.

Ji hopes to continue to build his career as a concert pianist while simultaneously finding solutions and strategies to make classical music more accessible.

"It's really such a great art that can help people transcend, and I think more people deserve to know it," he said.

Following graduation, Ji will be pursuing his master's of music in piano at the Juilliard School.

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COURTESY OF PAUL JI