

# Stand-up comedy, with strings attached



ARIN SANG-URAI

BY THOMAS FLOYD

Isabel Hagen was pursuing her master's at Juilliard when the violist experienced a literal awakening, followed by an existential one.

One morning, a shooting pain in her shoulder and wrist jolted her from sleep. Then, when a physical therapist at the fine arts academy recommended that Hagen take two months off from playing, it came as something of a relief for a musical prodigy who had begun to experience crippling performance anxiety.

"I thought I had my life all figured out," says Hagen, 32. "Meanwhile, I could barely play. I would shake and botch every per-

formance. So it wasn't going well for me."

Around that time, Hagen — the daughter of an accomplished saxophonist and the younger sister of a burgeoning conductor and pianist — was honing an affinity for stand-up comedy, with Mitch Hedberg, Bill Burr and George Carlin among her influences.

With free time on her hands, Hagen decided to hit up an open mic and give stand-up a shot. The nervousness persisted, she re-

calls. But in comedy, trembling hands won't throw off a set the same way they might derail a precisely calibrated classical music performance.

"I mean, I was terrible at telling jokes," Hagen says. "But just the act of it felt even more suited to me than music had."

After Hagen graduated in 2015 and entered a career as a freelance violist — a pursuit that has included broadcast performances with the likes of Ed Sheer-

an, Max Richter and Phoebe Bridgers — she became a regular of New York's open-mic circuit. In 2019, she booked the New Faces showcase at the renowned Just for Laughs comedy festival in Montreal. Having previously performed on "The Tonight Show" as an accompanying musician, Hagen returned as a stand-up with sets in March 2020 and October 2022. Along the way, she wrote, directed and starred in the web series "Is a Violist," which she hopes to shoot as a feature film later this year.

This weekend, D.C. audiences can catch Hagen's act — now interspersing viola vignettes with

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If you go

**ISABEL HAGEN**

The Comedy Loft of DC, 1523 22nd St. NW. [dccomedyloft.com](http://dccomedyloft.com).

**Dates:** Friday and Saturday.

**Prices:** \$20-\$30.

**Isabel Hagen comes from a musical family and graduated from the Juilliard School as a viola player, yet she felt a "wild drive to do stand-up." Hagen became a regular on New York's open-mic circuit after graduating from the fine arts academy and did stand-up sets on "The Tonight Show" after previously performing on the show as a musician.**

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comedic quips — at the Comedy Loft of DC. In an interview last month from a tour stop in Richmond, Hagen discussed her unconventional comedic roots, the similarities between stand-up and classical music, and how she strings them together onstage.

*(This interview has been edited for length and clarity.)*

**Q:** Let's talk about your pivot into comedy. As a Juilliard-trained musician, how did you come around to the idea of putting that career on the back burner to pursue something totally different?

**A:** I never thought it was crazy. I knew other people would think it was crazy, of course. But I just had this wild drive to do stand-up, and I was so worried about my future as a violist, just with the injury and the negative feelings I had developed about myself as a musician and the demons that had built up over the years. I was so ready to shed it in a certain way and start this new thing that I was starting at a much more healthy point mentally. And it felt like really my own thing now — not just what my family does.

**Q:** What did your life look like when the pendulum was swinging from viola to comedy?

**A:** There was a point where I had my own chair at a Broadway show for six weeks. It was a short run of a show called "Rocktopia" [in 2018], and because I had this regular nighttime gig, it kind of interfered with stand-up. So I would finish the show, run downstairs, put all my stuff away in my locker and then run down to the Village — or sometimes I'd just have my viola with me. It was just this really stark contrast of this big audience in a Broadway theater and then a little bar with five people. So there was a point where it felt very much mixed together.

**Q:** You've mentioned your performance anxiety as a violist. Has getting onstage regularly as a comedian helped alleviate that?

**A:** Yes. A comedian performs way more often than a classical musician does, because comedians are performing multiple times a night sometimes. A really serious classical musician might perform every night for a stint,



MINDY TUCKER

**Isabel Hagen once avoided combining her music with her comedy. "Then one day, I just had the idea of, 'What if I just literally put them next to each other?' ... The humor just lies in the juxtaposition."**

but it's just much less regular. So just by getting more practice onstage, that certainly helped. Also, being a beginner at comedy kind of reinvigorated me and

restored my faith in the process. When you're a beginner, the improvements are really tangible. I had been stuck in a rut with music, thinking I was as

good as I'd ever be and it really wasn't good enough. So doing comedy made me enjoy practicing [viola] again more.

**Q:** How did it feel to return to "The Tonight Show" as a comic after previously performing as a musician?

**A:** Anytime I had played with an artist there, I would have a spiritual moment backstage and think, "One day, you're going to tell jokes here." So then when I finally was there, I was like, "Yes. You're here. You knew this would happen." But also it was the day before everything shut down for covid, and Bernie Sanders was there and I was meeting him, and it felt like a dream — like the world was ending, but also I was getting what I wanted. So it was very surreal.

**Q:** Recently, you've started incorporating the viola into your act. Had it never occurred to you to splice those together, or were you actively avoiding mixing them?

**A:** I was definitely actively avoiding mixing them. With stand-up, I wanted to prove to myself that I could do this thing that I really loved. But people when they found out [I played viola] would be like, "Well, you should bring it onstage — that would be amazing." And I was just like, "That is so hacky. What would I even do?" Then one day, I just had the idea of, "What if I just literally put them next to each other?" So I'm playing beautifully, I'm telling a joke I believe in, and the humor just lies in the juxtaposition. I'm not compromising the integrity of either one.

**Q:** How would you describe the similarities between performing classical music and comedy?

**A:** There's definitely overlap, though I would say they're obviously very different in a lot of ways. There's an improvisatory element to stand-up that's not in classical music — it is in jazz, and people often compare jazz to stand-up. What feels similar to music is the audience laughter. When it's a really good audience, I suddenly feel like I'm playing with the audience. It's like they're another instrument, and the timing can feel very musical, almost like when I'm playing in a string quartet and you have to feel the other people's energy so intensely to be able to play well with them. So it feels like chamber music with the audience.