

Artigian Studio Story

Today, I'm a music producer. But that wasn't always the case. There was a time when music was going to be a long-forgotten memory. I'll get to that soon!

In 2009, freshly graduated from a prestigious sound engineering school in New York, I returned to my hometown of Mirano, Italy (spelled with an r, not an l) with the quest to become an apprentice to gain real-life experience in sound engineering. Little did I know that the first place where I would interview was going to reject me. I honestly thought that they'd be very eager to take on someone like myself who had spent all their money and time to learn what they needed to know.

It's kind of embarrassing to admit it now, but I cried in my car when they declined me. Was I going to give up? Despite a heart full of emotion, I continued to my next potential job. I was so surprised when I was accepted! And it turned out that my mentor was going to be someone who had won a Platinum Award for working on Jay-Z's album Kingdom Come.

These days, I have my own workplace where I mix and produce music, and I still regularly record in the commercial studio where my path began. But you might be surprised to discover this: I actually quit music during my first year of high school, with the intention of never playing an instrument ever again.

How did I regain the passion to get involved in music and help enhance the music careers of singers, songwriters, musicians, bands, and other artists? If this interests you, then you should

read onward.

It all goes back to the direct inspiration I found when my mother would take me to see theatre and music performances. I still have vivid memories of many of them: the majesty of a full orchestra, the dark and profound yet colorful atmosphere of a klezmer show*, the breathtaking laughter thanks to hilarious comedians, the hypnotism of a modern dancing crew doing the most extreme acrobatic moves. Sure, I remember the boring ones, but I won't talk about those. (My mom might read this, and . . . you know, "Never anger an Italian mom!")

(*In case you don't know what klezmer is, it's a Jewish musical style from Central and Eastern Europe. I love it despite my family not being Jewish and not being from that area of Europe.)

Although I'm the only musician in my family, including my relatives, my parents' influence played a vital part in my musical development. My father, rather than being a music lover, was a Beatles and Rolling Stones lover. (It sounds funny, I know, but those are the only music groups he listens to!) The little English he knows comes from the titles of their songs. So if he wants to ask you to come over, he will shout, "Come together!" And if he wants to ask you if you like the food you're eating, he will ask, "Satisfaction?" It's very embarrassing when he tells my female friends, "Let's spend the night together."

Mom, however, took me to dance shows and live music acts all around Mirano, which is very close to Venice. She started taking me to concerts at a young age—maybe ten years old, though I can recall even as young as eight. She never pushed

me to learn an instrument, but when I was ten, we had to pick a school I would attend for junior high, and she asked me, “Do you want to go to a music school?” I said yes, and then I took a general music class and chose the violin as my main instrument for after-class activities. The flute was the mandatory instrument for everyone, and I used to carry it with me everywhere, attempting to play along to songs on the radio. (This said a lot about how much I was into music!) But at fourteen years old, in the first year of high school, I'd never had an ambition for doing public performances.

A substantial number of musicians start early in life, but I was a late bloomer! I bought a digital audio workstation (DAW) at age fourteen, which represents a bit of my “nerdiness” about gears and machines. I also made hip-hop mix-tapes for friends. Using my father’s analog cassette reader, I would create cool compilations and do all the tricks, like fading one song into the next, making collages of different songs, reversing and even pitching down stuff, or creating long, rumbling effects like explosions to finish a song. Later in life, I bought an AKAI sampler, expecting to make hip-hop beats with it. I ended up using it more as a keyboard, and it actually didn’t lead to anything good—but I would definitely make great use of it today if I still had it!

Once I began to learn melodies and riffs, my stimulation for making original sounds began. For instance, hip-hop beats became an immediate love for me, and they still are today. This choice of genre and my choice of instrument (violin) were not exactly compatible. However, I made sure that my love for progressive rock carried over to what I did with the violin. It was very messy at that time! During the 1990s, I was hanging out with three groups of people: the friends of “the road,” the

hip-hop crew, and the progressive rock “nerds.” With some people from the third group, I started making music and playing gigs with them when I was about seventeen years old. My first band was a trio inspired by Alice in Wonderland called (in English) The Mad Hatter. I played the violin, and the other two members played the electric bass and the saxophone. My original violin melodies came in handy with this group!

Here’s something that may interest you: I put down the violin when I became exhausted by all the exercises and tests. This was around age twelve or thirteen, when I was starting high school and transitioning from adolescence to young adulthood. My intention was to never play that instrument again! For about five months, I completely despised the idea of playing the violin—or any kind of music. But something that pushed me to resume playing was the desire to learn solos from rock and metal bands such as Metallica and Guns N’ Roses. This was how I discovered the fun of playing and my aptitude for improvising.

There was also a period during my adolescence when I would improvise during any kind of music I was listening to, creating spontaneous new melodies and solos. I considered klezmer music as my favorite genre for improvisation. I even remember when my mom took me to a show to see the Italian klezmer music artist Moni Ovadia. (Actually, she took me to see him twice!) The way the violinist played during his shows really impressed me. It was as if the violin was spontaneously reacting to the main melody.

Are you surprised that I love hip-hop, classic progressive rock, and klezmer at the same time? Well, I’m Gianluca. And now you’ve met the real me.

Believe it or not, despite resuming teaching myself to play the violin, I eventually took lessons again to do my parts in The Mad Hatter's performances well. This is because my period of extreme anarchy made me a musician who had not only ideas and improvisation skills, but also a bad posture, leading to a "bad" sound. My new instructor tried to help me a lot with this. (His hair turned white because of this, without a doubt!) However, I have always kept a certain "improper" technique. That led to an edgier sound that, honestly, was well-appreciated in the modern music I was doing.

This all led to me being appreciated by the bands I performed in.

With The Mad Hatter, we had our first gig at the high school Christmas concert, where we played thirty minutes of cover songs. After that, we decided that we enjoyed playing original songs a lot more. At first, the bass player was the engine for the creative process, thanks to his amazing ideas. He wasn't good at developing them, though. So the first Mad Hatter song was a Frankenstein of great riffs. It was called "Cheshire Cat," because it made no sense in a way. Since that first song honestly wasn't my style, I participated more actively in the composition process afterward, taking the loops the bass player made and developing them into more organized musical content. You could say this was my first touchstone in knowing the value of good arrangements and (more importantly) structure.

The Mad Hatter continued to play together after high school, doing gigs. Live performances had been an amazing experience, providing opportunities for us to drive outside of

Mirano. When our ideas eventually dried up and the three of us were tired of everything, the band split up.

In my second band, Terrerare, the bass player and I remained and replaced the saxophone player with an acoustic guitarist-songwriter who was also a dear friend. We still kept an acoustic sound, but the change was big because the main soul of our tracks was now the guitar and vocals. We also toned down the wackiness of the former band's style. Terrerare has been a very important band to me since then, mostly because the first album I ever recorded and mixed as an engineer was with them. (I'm jumping forward in time here, aren't I? Sorry!)

Also, at one point, I played drums for a few months with a third progressive rock band and considered it my second instrument. My bass player had a drum set, and he taught me some techniques.

After high school, I went to university to study electronic engineering, since I was good at math and loved physics. It was an amazing experience, something that taught me a lot and that I was proud of. During that period, I did many gigs with an acoustic blues quartet, improvising a lot over the classic blues covers. (And guess who was the bass player? Of course! The same bassist from The Mad Hatter and Terrerare.)

Following my university degree, I came up with the idea to combine it with my passion for music, which resulted in me getting a graduate certificate from the SAE Institute of Technology in New York in 2008. Originally, during my time at university, I'd had a dream of becoming a composer, like for movies. But then I fell in love with engineering while I was at SAE, so I chose to pursue that instead.

My decision to study sound engineering in New York led me to meet my future wife, Chieko Seki. I met her in English class while I was studying for the dreaded TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), which was required to enter the school. (This was about one year before I took the production course.) Chieko was in New York for an experience abroad after university. We were best friends at first, hanging out all the time. (She also saw me do some stuff that wasn't romantic, like vomiting after partying hard!)

While I was at SAE, Chieko went back to Japan. That year was essential for us, though, since we realized how much we meant to each other. She visited me in New York three times, and I lived in Tokyo for a good part of 2009 right after school to meet her parents and get closer to her amazing culture. Because of this, I had to turn down an internship at a recording studio in New York, an opportunity that could've taken me on an easier path in my music career. But not for a moment have I regretted that decision, especially considering what I received from it: a long, solid marriage, and an amazing daughter. In other words, a new family.

Chieko and I moved to Italy at the end of 2009 for a few reasons. First, in Japan, it was nearly impossible for me to work (even for free) at a studio. While I was there, I studied Japanese and got to know an amazing culture, cuisine, and country, I taught Italian to Japanese people (mostly opera singers), made some music for the sporting goods company Diadora Japan, and recorded a guitar-and-vocal project for a young and talented Korean singer. (Both of us were talking in broken Japanese!)

Living in Japan was one of the greatest experiences of my life. But after a few months, I felt like I couldn't grow as an engineer there. I needed to work in a studio, but language and legal documents were blocking me.

Fortunately, Chieko hated her job and wanted to quit. She even decided to switch her career—from the stock market to fashion.

Then came my mother's offer to work in her clothing shop in Italy. It wasn't a surprise, and the two women clicked since the moment they first met.

In Italy, close to Venice, Chieko and I got married. She learned Italian so fast that I can't explain how—and I mean good Italian, with gestures and all. She started working with my mom, doing a great job (and she still is today); and I officially started working in the music business.

Here's a funny side note: Essentially, I "stole" the princess, like Super Mario did. (Hopefully, you understand the joke!)

Back to Italy now: Chieko and I were almost officially married when I started working in Irko's studio. (I mentioned Irko earlier, when I was talking about the apprenticeship I interviewed for.) A lot of major life changes were happening at the same time.

Right before I met with Irko, though, I had an appointment at another nice studio in the area. When I was rejected for the apprenticeship there, I cried. (I still feel embarrassed about this today.)

The studio rejected me because my schooling was from SAE in New York and not SAE in Milan (this time with the letter I), despite New York's school having a better reputation than any Italian music engineering institute. I thought I had chosen the best school, but that rejection caused me to doubt all my decisions, making me feel lost.

But everything worked out for the best. A few days later, once I felt like I had hit rock bottom, I met with Maurizio "Irko" Sera at the Magister Recording Area, more precisely at StudioBeat2.

The spaces there were amazing: a big live room; a smaller, "darker" sounding live room; and a bunch of control rooms. Irko was (and still is) an amazing music engineer, but he's also a great communicator. He's smart about how to handle social media and skillful at self-promotion. Since his site was attractive, he was at the top of my outreach list for becoming an apprentice at a studio with clout.

Irko, with his multiplatinum awards, was so welcoming, as if I was a potential client. He showed me every inch of the studio, explaining everything about its structure. (This inspired me to treat visitors to my own business in the same way later on.) I was surprised by how much he enjoyed the idea of having an assistant, because many engineers love to be a "lone wolf."

I worked as Irko's assistant for about a year. During the second year, Irko started to move to the United States, traveling back and forth between there and Italy. I started paying the studio's rent, using the name StudioBeat2, taking over Irko's responsibilities, and dealing with some of his Italian clients. Having the mantle passed on to me with Irko's full trust was quite an honor. (FYI: As of 2021, Irko is now building

StudioBeat3 in Los Angeles, California.)

What gave me a slight edge as a sound engineer was a combination of schooling and my observations of Irko. For starters, Irko is great with people. Add to this his solid self-organization and self-discipline, and you have a “marketing beast.”

Irko is the definition of a multitasker. I remember how he used to deal with the camera and make posts on social media, then immediately return to a client task! Also, he is a firm believer in “what you give, you get back.” Some call it karma, and I believe in that as well. But Irko takes the idea to a whole new level.

One time, the computer crashed while I was editing some music, and Irko asked me, “Are you nervous? ‘Cause that is probably the reason the computer has crashed.” Irko was serious about this, and he added, “You know, matter kind of doesn’t exist. We are mostly made of energy. So if you are nervous, maybe you can influence the machines you are using.” He also brought up how much space there is between the nucleus of an atom and the electrons spinning around it.

Irko always expressed philosophical concepts. He is nice not only with work equipment, but also with people. One of his rules is to never talk about politics. Rather than risking controversial opinions, he focuses on smooth topics like favorite foods, trips, and movies. That was astute. Even one of my New York teachers taught me never to mention politics in a studio. (This definitely applies more than ever today.)

Luckily, as a character, I tend to be calm and patient. This helped me a lot with being professional in the studio. I have

friends who still joke about the fact that I have read the Dalai Lama's book Perfecting Patience.

When I started working for Irko, I already had all the engineering basics. But the raw reality is that you don't really learn how to work until you actually do it. Watching how Irko worked helped me to avoid all the little traps that inexperienced producers fall into, like mistaken information or focusing on the wrong details during the mixing phase.

However, these are the two biggest takeaways from my experience as Irko's assistant:

Organization: Whether it's a tracking session or a mix session, I always structure it as how Irko taught me, from tidying up the rooms to setting up Pro Tools. The way I back up sessions is also one of my notes from back then.

The Importance of Quick Editing: Irko always pushed me to be as fast as a ninja, showing me the correct position of my hands and forcing me to memorize shortcuts I never learned at school. (Have you ever seen a ninja editing audio? Of course you haven't, because they are masters at camouflaging!) Sometimes when a client sees me editing, they'll say, "Wow! You sound like a hamster in the wheel!" This makes the client feel like they are in good hands—and this was exactly Irko's point. Being quick is not only beneficial for the workflow. It also delivers confidence. (So I'm not only a Dalai Lama in the studio, but also a ninja. I can be called the Dalai Ninja—or the Ninja Lama!)

Eventually, when I took over the studio, I'd send mix tests to both Irko and the client. So he would give me feedback, and

his approval of so many of my projects was a strong indicator that I was growing well—not to mention the boost of confidence this was giving me. The engineer who has worked for Jay-Z was approving my work!

Another big “presence” in the studio was (and still is) Andrea Valfrè, a well-known multi-award-winning Italian music engineer, as well as the owner of Magister Recording Area and the manager of Control Room A. Unfortunately, I have seen him at work only a few times, but he is the personification of the audio production bible. He is definitely a helpful and inspiring figure to have around.

I still remember when Andrea checked one of my first mixes. After listening to most of the track, as he was sitting in the sweet spot, he said, “The drum is not much processed.” He stood up and added, “I like it.” Another time, I had mixed the music of one band who had recorded everything alone in their rehearsal room. Andrea checked my work and said, “I could tell that the quality of the recording is not very high, but you saved their asses!”

My fine education and my experiences with Irko have defined my engineering path, for sure. But what about my production?

Well, my decision to start taking projects at their embryonic stage came naturally and gradually. My first full production work was in 2013. But it was a few years later (in 2016 or 2017) that I actually started calling myself a producer.

In many projects, the producer is the artist or a member of the band. And from an engineer’s point of view, as I was gaining experience, I often felt like I was “the last-minute producer.” A

sort of awareness was growing. Humbly and respectfully, I knew I could be helpful to artists and bands way before they arrived at the recording studio.

A friend, artist, and colleague who taught me the right mindset to have as a producer is Nicola Zanetti, a drummer and producer who now performs around the world under the stage name of Fango. I became more aware of the fact that the engineer's brain is much different from the producer's. The producer sees the black and the white, the good and the bad; and anything in the middle is a compromise—not necessarily a bad one, but still a compromise. As I mentioned earlier, sometimes an engineer is “the last-minute producer,” so they must work with what is at their disposal, and being too picky can mean infinite studio sessions. (That's no fun.) And studios are not known for being cheap, right?

Nicola used to pick on me all the time, saying, “Come on, don't always save everything. You have to admit that the song is not good enough.” (Funny, right?) For a couple of years, we worked together as ZZ Studio, offering full production services. He was the main producer, and I was the engineer. I was definitely in an exquisite position to learn from him.

I stopped managing Irko's studio at the end of 2015. A new control room was opening and growing well inside the same stable, right next to StudioBeat2. I had the chance to share it with its owners, Andrea Ghion and Matteo Ballarin—and that meant an advantageous price for the rent. Andrea is a great bassist and drummer, while Matteo plays the guitar. And as a duo, they are amazing producers. Their studio is the one I use today for tracking many of my projects.

The passage change of control rooms meant a brand change to Artigian Studio. Which leads me to tell you the two clever ideas behind how I came up with my studio's name:

- It was partly inspired by the reputation of Italian artistic craftsmanship.
- The name Artigian contains part of my name (Gian) in it, as well as the word art.

You could say I'm innovative with words: Arti-Gian. (Everyone calls me Gian, from my full name Gianluca.) It works well!

In summary, my experience of going to classical shows and theatre acts with my mother when I was a boy introduced me to the Artigian experience. I took this with me throughout my life and later became my own Artigian. Consequently, my clients get to participate in this unique perspective of my life's musical journey.

One more thing: Like I promised before, when you downloaded this PDF, I must tell you the story about the drunken singer.

The band I had to record played a gig the night before—and, apparently, they had partied a little too hard afterward. The singer arrived at the studio many hours after the rest of the band did. (Which was fine by me. I would've started with the instruments anyway.) His condition, however, was visibly tragic. Suddenly, the studio started rocking left and right, creating steep downhills that alternated with tough uphill.

Luckily, this was an illusion that happened when I watched the

singer walk by. The microphones were not moving at all.

The band and I let him rest a bit. Then, after he had collected all his energy, he placed himself in front of the mic. I arranged a bucket right next to him, because he looked like a volcano right before the eruption. (You know what I mean, right?)

There was no time to be picky with the EQ and the compressor. As soon as the levels were OK, I stopped the warm-up and started tracking.

The singer could record only two takes, but the second one was way underwhelming. So we kept the first one—which turned out to be very good! I didn't even need to call him back again.

(Also, the singer never used the bucket, so it was a win-win situation. But his liver didn't win that day! The singer crashed onto the sofa afterward and napped while I worked with the rest of the band on the editing.)

Wow! I'm impressed that you made it this far.

Now you know I'm also a world-famous author. (Ha!) But in all seriousness, did reading this make you feel connected to my engineering and production approach? More importantly, was this story a fun enough read for you to consider sharing it with other music professionals you know?

Don't worry. You have my permission to give the PDF directly to them. (They won't even have to subscribe to my email list like you did. Shhh, it will be our little secret.)

Speaking of which: If you downloaded this PDF from my email subscribe form, you're already receiving periodic emails that provide you with details on how my services can directly benefit you. (If you're not on that list yet, [click here](#).)

In this story, I hinted at how I developed a 5-step music production process I call "BPF5 Framework" (or Big Picture Framework). It's a consistent way I achieve results for my clients.

If you want to deep dive into how that process works, [click here](#).

As we say in Italy, "Ciao!"

-Gian
(a.k.a. Gianluca Zanin)