From the Concert Hall to the Guildhall: Leia Zhu, 19, Receives the Freedom of the City of London

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Believed to be the first classical musician nominated through the Worshipful Company of International Bankers — and among the youngest ever to receive the distinction

London, 20 April 2026 — British violinist Leia Zhu, 19, has today been awarded the Freedom of the City of London — one of the United Kingdom's oldest and most distinguished civic honours, conferred by the City of London Corporation at Guildhall.

The honour marks a historic first: Leia is believed to be the first classical musician to be nominated for the Freedom of the City of London through the Worshipful Company of International Bankers, and, at just 19, she is among the youngest recipients in recent memory. The Worshipful Company of International Bankers (WCIB) is the City of London livery company representing international banking and financial services, supporting excellence, stewardship and civic life in the Square Mile. Membership is open to those working in or studying financial services — a qualification Leia meets through her formal financial education, holding the Diploma for Financial Advisers (DipFA, LIBF) and Associate Membership of the Chartered Institute for Securities & Investment (CISI).

The Freedom of the City dates to 1237. It is not given lightly. That it comes to Leia through a financial livery company, while she remains one of the most active young soloists performing internationally today — says something about what she represents: a new kind of leadership that refuses the false choice between the arts and finance.

WHY FINANCE — A PATH BORN FROM NECESSITY

Leia's engagement with finance was not a career pivot. It was a response to a crisis she witnessed first-hand.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, widespread concert cancellations exposed the acute financial vulnerability of professional musicians — including many of her peers. Watching established artists face sudden economic precarity made clear to her that creative excellence alone offers no protection.

That conviction drove a decision to pursue formal financial education alongside her performance career. At 17, she became one of the youngest holders of the Diploma for Financial Advisers (DipFA, LIBF). She holds Associate Membership of the Chartered Institute for Securities & Investment (CISI) and is currently working towards the organisation's highest professional qualification. The Worshipful Company of International Bankers, in its Winter 2026 feature in The International Banker, noted her particular interest in how financial discipline, ethical governance and long-term planning enable cultural organisations to endure, serve communities effectively and earn public trust.

As far as is known, she is one of the youngest individuals in the UK to hold the DipFA and CISI Associate Membership simultaneously with an active international performance career. Her ambition is to help cultural institutions build the financial foundations that allow creative work to survive, and to make the case that the arts and finance are not opposing forces, but complementary ones.

AN EXCEPTIONAL PERFORMING CAREER

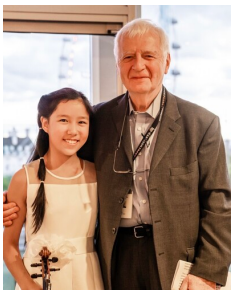
Leia's musical career is distinguished by both its scale and its velocity. She became the youngest artist ever signed by HarrisonParrott — one of the world's pre-eminent classical music agencies — aged 12. Since then she has performed across more than 20 countries, including at the BBC Proms at the Royal Albert Hall, with the London Symphony Orchestra under Sir Simon Rattle, and with the Tonhalle Orchestra Zürich under Paavo Järvi.

She is the recipient of the OPUS Klassik Young Talent of the Year 2025 award — one of classical music's most prestigious international recognitions. She has been named to Classic FM's 30 Under 30 and recognised as a Rising Star by BBC Music Magazine. She serves as Education Ambassador for the London Mozart Players and Patron of the HarrisonParrott Foundation.

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CITY RECOGNITION AND CIVIC LEADERSHIP

Beyond the Freedom, Leia is a Freeman of the Worshipful Company of International Bankers and a member of its wider civic network. She has contributed to events supporting the Lord Mayor's Appeal, veterans' charities, children's charities and healthcare organisations. The ceremony at Guildhall on 20 April 2026 was attended by representatives from both the cultural and financial sectors.

QUOTES

Leia Zhu said:

'To receive the Freedom of the City of London is a profound honour, and one that I see as a responsibility as much as a recognition. To thrive sustainably, culture must be supported by strong financial understanding, thoughtful governance and long-term thinking. This honour strengthens my commitment to contributing to that conversation and to the belief that culture and finance are not opposing forces, but complementary ones. Culture needs capital; capital needs soul. I intend to be that bridge.' ***— Leia Zhu***

Tim Skeet, Master of the Worshipful Company of International Bankers said:

'The Worshipful Company of International Bankers is proud to have nominated Leia Zhu for the Freedom of the City of London. At 19, she represents exactly the kind of leader the City needs — one who brings together artistic excellence, financial rigour and a genuine commitment to civic life. This honour is richly deserved.'

— Tim Skeet, Master of the Worshipful Company of International Bankers

Jasper Parrott, Executive Chairman, HarrisonParrott Group, said:

'It has been a privilege to have supported Leia in her inspirational journey as violinist, artist and spokesperson for the vital importance of the creative arts in a healthy and well-balanced society, and this honour is most fitting and deserved for her engagement with so many causes in the fields of education, advocacy of inclusion and the growth of opportunities for all gifted and motivated young persons. The Freedom of the City of London will no doubt further empower her in all of her aspirations.'

— Jasper Parrott, Executive Chairman, HarrisonParrott Group

George Littlejohn, Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of International Bankers, and Senior Adviser to the Chartered Institute for Securities & Investment, said:

'Leia Zhu ACSI embodies many of the qualities the Worshipful Company of International Bankers seeks to encourage in the next generation – integrity, discipline, curiosity and a strong sense of responsibility to the wider community. Her work reflects a broader perspective that brings together artistic discipline, financial understanding and civic engagement - an approach closely aligned with the values of stewardship, continuity and public service associated with the City of London, its livery companies and its professional bodies.'

— George Littlejohn, Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of International Bankers, and Senior Adviser to the Chartered Institute for Securities & Investment

ACHIEVEMENT HIGHLIGHTS

- Freedom of the City of London, April 2026 — aged 19, among the youngest recipients in recent memory
- OPUS KLASSIK Young Talent of the Year 2025 — aged 18
- BBC Proms, Royal Albert Hall — aged 17; London Symphony Orchestra under Sir Simon Rattle — aged 14; Tonhalle Orchestra Zürich under Paavo Järvi — aged 16; performed across more than 20 countries
- Classic FM 30 Under 30 (aged 15); BBC Music Magazine Rising Star (aged 16)

- Artist-in-Residence, London Mozart Players — aged 14
- Youngest artist ever signed by HarrisonParrott — aged 12
- Diploma for Financial Advisers (DipFA, LIBF) — aged 17, one of the youngest holders in the UK
- Associate Member, Chartered Institute for Securities & Investment (CISI)
- Freeman of the Worshipful Company of International Bankers
- Education Ambassador, London Mozart Players; Patron, HarrisonParrott Foundation
- Published author — *Bows, Strings and Dreams*, aged 16

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