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## The Piano Guys: A piano, a cello & a dream

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*YouTube moguls The Piano Guys are giving pop music a Beethoven-approved facelift with their classical renditions of chart-topping hits.*

Normally, the owner of a piano store would balk at the idea of airlifting a never-used Yamaha grand piano onto a 1,000-foot cliff, but Paul Anderson has a predilection for whimsy and has long envisioned "putting pianos in crazy places."

Thus was the set for their YouTube video featuring an African-inspired cover of Coldplay's 'Paradise' retitled 'Peponi' which means the same thing in Swahili.

The music incorporated agogo bells, *djembe* drums and a rain stick alongside the piano, cello and the guest vocals of Swahili singer Alex Boye, set against the craggy rock faces and plunging ravines of Utah.

The Piano Guys are five middle-aged fathers hailing from Utah, who became Internet sensations out of a simple wish to mesh beautiful music with natural scenery: mystical groves, sandy shores, leafy clearings stippled with shifting sunlight.

"That's where the emotion comes from," said cellist Steven Sharp Nelson in a phone interview with *The Jakarta Post*. "Using these amazing accomplishments of mankind and the amazing beauty of God's nature and then you put it together with music that is also very emotive and you've got this wonderful combination."

Nelson hopes to film someday at the Great Wall of China.

The band had no intentions of stardom when they established their YouTube channel in 2007. Pianist Paul Anderson was searching for low-cost options to advertise his piano store based in St. George, Utah. The store was called The Piano Guys.

Anderson called the most famous pianist he could find, Jon Schmidt, who had been performing for 20 years around Utah and had garnered some local celebrity. Schmidt agreed to perform in a few YouTube videos to help promote the store.

But subscribership skyrocketed after cellist Steven Sharp Nelson came on board, whose technical prowess includes self-taught percussive and pizzicato (playing a string instrument by plucking).

"Music is who I am. If you were to dissect Steven Sharp Nelson, you'd find that I'm mostly music inside," Nelson jokes.

When not filming outdoors they chose opulent interiors: chandelier-illuminated auditoriums and hotel ballrooms, the music seeming to flow in and around the crystalline glassware with videographer Tel Stewart's expert camera-wielding.

Producer Al van der Beek, who first befriended Nelson when he moved to the suburbs of Sandy Providence, had his own recording studio and the production and sound engineering know-how that the musicians lacked.

Some 130 million views later on YouTube, stardom came knocking in the form of a phone call from David Simone, a former record executive. His wife, Shelley Ross, a former producer for Good Morning America, had seen The Piano Guys on YouTube and told her husband: "You have got to sign these guys."

Initially, the five friends had misgivings.

"We didn't know what we were doing, we didn't know if we wanted a manager or a record deal or all that," said Nelson. "We just wanted to be ourselves."

But then Simone said the magic words. "He said, 'Look, all I want to do is help you take your music to more people.' That's really what it's about for us: reaching people through music and just brightening their day if that's what we can do," explained Nelson.

Simone organized a concert at the Red Butte Garden Amphitheatre, Utah, in September 2012. The performance was broadcast nationally by PBS, and just two months later the group released their self-titled debut album through Sony Masterworks.

The album featured covers of Christina Perri's 'A Thousand Years,' Adele's 'Rolling in the Deep' and tracks that would be traditionally deemed non-conducive to classical adaptation such as DJ David Guetta's 'Titanium' and Irish boyband One Direction's catchy 'What Makes You Beautiful. But in the hands of Jon Schmidt and cellist Steven Sharp Nelson, the teenybopper ode to first love raises veritable goosebumps.

Although about to delve into an Asia tour in September and a 24-city USA tour in October, with a third album due for release at year's end, Nelson said they still want to create YouTube videos.

"YouTube has dramatically changed the face of the music industry," Nelson says, adding that record labels would traditionally overlook "middle-aged guys playing classical instruments in a natural setting."

The band now has 1.8 million followers on YouTube. With a soon-to-be-released cover of Swedish House Mafia's 'Don't You Worry Child,' featuring Bollywood singer Shweta Subram, and over 240 million views on YouTube, The Piano Guys look set to be enduring internet sensations.

**- Photos courtesy of SONY Music Indonesia**