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Feature

## Cutting Edge: Improvisation should be a democracy

Don't be scared; when musicians say there are no limits and embrace the adventure, they will feel free, says Keyna Wilkins.

by Keyna Wilkins on 19 April, 2021



Improvisation can be scary, especially for classically trained musicians. It can be shunned as a lesser form of practice, and is often misunderstood as something lacking in structure, function or cause. But improvisation is a fundamental human drive. It shouldn't be treated like a precious commodity.

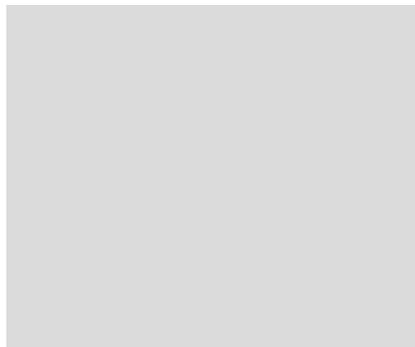


Keyna Wilkins. Photo © Tawfik Elgazzar

I started as a classically trained flutist and pianist, with a light sprinkle of jazz. My institutions were the old guard: Sydney Conservatorium, Bristol and Bath Spa Universities in the UK, and the University of Hildesheim in Germany. I mostly stuck to the rules but dabbled in the shadows of free expression during these years, often as a tool to generate ideas for my compositions.

When I was 19, I saw a performance in a little hut by a Tibetan Buddhist monk, Tenzin Choegyal, playing a bamboo flute. It was so powerful, intuitive, deep and moving, I approached him after the show and asked to take lessons. He agreed on the condition that they were free. Those short lessons changed my life. He taught me to see improvisation as a bridge to the Vipassanā state – the insight meditation where the focus is on the breath, and the breath represents exploration. Musically, this means to start with one note and build gradually. He told me it doesn't matter which notes you use. All that matters is the intention, the feeling and the energy you put into it. I had previously thought of improvisation as all "jazz", but of course traditional jazz has its own strict set of rules, which can be quite limiting. When you open that door right up and say there are no limits whatsoever, and embrace the adventure, it's quite thrilling.

We need to ask ourselves, what are the hang-ups, exactly what is the resistance? Why don't we allow ourselves to create while we learn? Fear is the biggest hang-up I encounter with my students – of not being perfect, of the unfamiliar, of the unstructured. Yes, you may not like everything that you play to start with, but I guarantee you will feel free.



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This fear of not being perfect is the same fear we have in many parts of our lives. People have an innate need to feel in control. I find much of the parenting effort with my own children goes toward helping them come to terms with the imperfections of the world. The important thing is to create a safe space mentally and physically where the student feels they can make mistakes and won't be judged. It does involve taking risks.

Risk-taking is not bad. Recklessness is bad. I find small risks in a performance, taken in steps where the audience is receptive and you can build a set of winning gestures, allows your risks to be calculated. When we build up such a set of winning experiences, the improvisational world shifts from being a place of hazards to being a place of play. The trick is to find or make the right environments where it is safe to play in whatever style or culture you are engaged with.

After the lessons with the Tibetan monk, I allowed myself to create something new and different, first within the guardrails of the structures I knew, then outside and around, as I performed in more live situations. I threw myself into the depths of a new style by joining a regular flamenco troupe at the Spanish Club, Sydney in 2011 involving lots of flamenco improvisation for three hours every Thursday night.

After the flamenco troupe, I began to explore new ensembles and new ways of performing. Eventually I formed the Ephemera Ensemble with double bassist Elsen Price and trumpeter Will Gilbert, and the more recent addition of violist Carl St Jacques. Our regular shows are semi-structured with intentional improvised sections against images of outer space and real space sounds.

The fact that improvising is a big part of my skill set now as a musician has meant that I can very easily work with musicians from different backgrounds that may not read music at all, and indeed understand music in a completely different way to the notation-oriented Western approach. The most exciting of these in recent times has been my duo Yulugi with leading Indigenous didgeridoo player Gumaroy Newman. The entire show is improvised, with a broad structure based on the keys of his three didgeridoos, using traditional song lines and sounds of the outback.

Last year, I had the privilege of being commissioned by The Metropolitan Orchestra to write Celestial Emu a 20-minute didgeridoo concerto which made its debut days before the COVID lockdown in 2020. I wrote it in close consultation/collaboration with the soloist Gumaroy Newman, which depended on me understanding his improvisation style. We are currently writing another piece together, which will be performed by The Metropolitan Orchestra on 7 November at Petersham Town Hall in Sydney.

While I have a deep respect for good technique and attention to detail, and knowledge of the canon of repertoire for the instrument, I think what is missing from many musicians' toolkits is the ready willingness to freely improvise. I teach improvisation to my students from the very first lesson – even the four year olds. Seeing the sense of fun, joy, engagement, and ultimately musical understanding that arises naturally when you create these conditions means I can no longer see it as an optional component of practice. In other disciplines the capacity for creativity and lateral thinking is considered key to building the workforce of the future. Perhaps we don't emphasise improvisation in our formal syllabuses because of the nature of the artform. There are always experimenters in popular media, and then there are the fringe-dwellers like me who simply need to be who they are. I hope the "soft skills" revolution makes another pass through musical pedagogy so that everyone can learn that mastery and play are complementary attributes for any great musician.

Follow Keyna Wilkins on social media or her [website](#)

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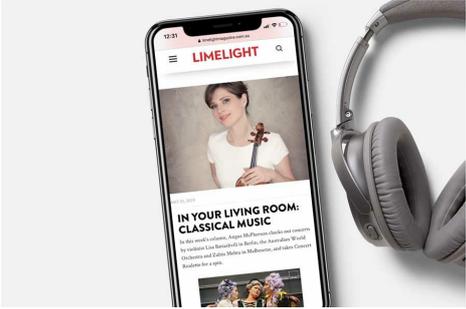
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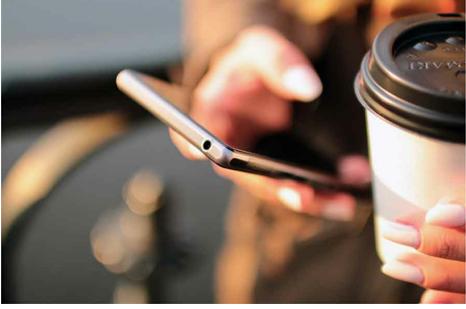
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