

PROFILE: ZUBIN KANGA

Zubin Kanga is a pianist, composer, improviser and technologist. Over the last decade he has established his reputation in Europe and Australia as a leading innovator of new approaches to the piano. His work in recent years has focused on new models of interaction between a live musician and new technologies, using film, AI, motion capture, 3D modelling, animation and virtual reality. A Masters and PhD graduate of the Royal Academy of Music, London, Zubin recently finished a post as post-doctoral researcher at the University of Nice and IRCAM, Paris, and he is currently the Leverhulme Research Fellow at Royal Holloway, University of London, writing a book on musician–technology interactions.



Zubin Kanga by Raphael Neal

Zubin has performed at many festivals and venues including the BBC Proms, London Contemporary Music Festival, Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival (UK), Melbourne Festival, Sydney Festival, Manifeste Festival (France), Klang Festival (Denmark), Darmstadt, Graz and the Borealis Festival (Norway). He has performed several concerti under their composer's baton, including Thomas Adès with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and Beat Furrer with the London Sinfonietta. He is a member of Ensemble Offspring and has performed duos with Brett Dean, Rolf Hind, Thomas Adés and Jack Liebeck.

He has collaborated with many composers including Michael Finnissy, George Benjamin, Nicole Lizée, Steve Reich and Liza Lim and has premiered more than 100 new works. His collaboration with Alexander Schubert on WIKI-PIANO.NET is being performed in a 25-city international tour and has attracted extensive media coverage.

You have commissioned a repertoire which extends the theatre of the piano recital, using electronics, theatre, film projection. What convinced you that this was an interesting direction?

For some years previous to this direction, I'd been commissioning a lot of works that expanded the possibilities of the piano by going into and around the instrument, exploring new extended techniques, and new approaches to theatre and gesture at the instrument in works: among the most notable were *collector* by Charlie Sdraulig, *Studies in Resonance II* by Elo Masing, *Orfordne* by David Gorton, and *Not Music Yet* by David Young.

In 2013, I started planning and commissioning a touring programme that focused on electronics and video, partly out of curiosity to see what was possible, and partly as a challenge to get over my fear of performing with a lot of tech. In creating and performing the resulting touring programme, *Dark Twin*, I realised the huge potential for

expanding what was possible in a solo performance. It personally clicked with a lot of my interests in cinema, internet culture and sci-fi, and facilitated works that could speak to contemporary cultural and political issues in much more striking and powerful ways than I thought was possible with just a piano.

There are now many composers working in this expanding interdisciplinary field, and many of their collaborations with me have broken new ground. Alexander Schubert's *WIKI-PIANO.NET* has been a particular success, with 18 performances so far across five countries. It uses a website-based score, with notation, images, video and text all editable by anyone on the internet, resulting in completely different content for every performance. Nicole Lizée's *Scorsese Etudes* continues her excellent series of works exploring the cinematic signature of auteur directors. Claudia Molitor created a beautiful dialogue between her hands on screen and my actions on and inside the piano. Jon Rose and Patrick Nunn have both created pieces with me using 3D motion sensors. In several works, Ben Carey has pushed the boundaries of interactive sound and visuals, approaching the possibilities of an autonomous electronic chamber partner. Scott McLaughlin has conjured new sounds from the piano using 3D-printed e-bows and magnetic resonator. Adam de la Cour and Christopher Fox have found many ways for me to dialogue with my on-screen doppelganger. And Neil Luck continues to push the boundaries of what music can be, combining theatre, video art, comedy and poetry in increasingly ambitious works for me.

How do you feel about creating works in which the solo pianist effectively shares the audience's attention with these other elements?

Most pianists grow up surrounded by the cult of the virtuoso, and with the ego-trip that comes with showing off on stage, and I was no different. It's a long tradition that stretches back through Liszt to the keyboard prowess of Bach and Rameau, and is still very much alive in contemporary music, with many new ultra-virtuosic works being written for the piano every year. Although this inclination hasn't completely receded for me (Xenakis' *Eonta* is still high on my wish list) I'm now less concerned with machismo feats of virtuosic prowess, and more interested in facilitating new, previously unimagined ideas from composers and giving them voice on stage. Being just one component of many on stage allows the totality of these elements to be so much bigger and more varied than I could be on my own.

What drew you into devoting so much of your career to new music?

I only became interested in making a career out of music because of new music. It was what hooked me as a teenager – composing it, playing it, talking about it. I had a talented and inspiring teacher from my late teens who rebuilt my technique and passed on his enthusiasm for contemporary music, as a former active new music pianist who had played many Australian premieres of significant works (including most of the works of Olivier Messiaen). I started off with ambitions to be a composer but my performing career took over, first through collaborating with composition students and staff and then by being picked up by several of the active ensembles in Australia, allowing me to learn a lot on the job from much more experienced musicians like Claire Edwardes and Roland Peelman, while still an undergrad.

Postgraduate study at the Royal Academy of Music, surrounded by an extraordinary cohort of talented pianists, only clarified this choice.

Although I studied many great canonical works (with a particular love for Bartók, Ravel, Debussy, Scriabin and Chopin) the lessons and mentorship of Rolf Hind made it clear to me that I didn't want to follow the career path of a traditional concert pianist. I'd rather be working at the artistic coal face, co-creating new music.

Do you feel your mixed heritage has played a role in the development of your life as a musician?

Yes, but it's complicated. I'm ethnically mixed – part-Parsi (Persians who came to India as refugees 1200 years ago) and part-Goan (descended from the Portuguese colonisers of India). But I'm also culturally mixed – my parents were twice immigrants – first from India to the UK in the 70s, then to Australia in the 80s. Although I grew up and began my career in Australia, I lived as a teenager for several years in Singapore, closely involved with the American and Australian communities there, as well experiencing the diverse Chinese/Malay/Indian local culture. And I have lived in London for 12 years, with a short post-doc in France, and frequent performance visits to Australia during this time. As a result of all this, the ideas of 'home' and 'heritage' are rather complicated for me, as they are for many Londoners.

My ethnic mix and unusual name have likely been a handicap in a lot of circumstances – there are very few non-white musicians in the contemporary music scenes in Australia or Europe (even whiter than the classical industry as a whole) and very few in music academia too. Like a lot of colleagues who have experienced discrimination (including sexism, homophobia, ableism), there have been a few clearly awful encounters, and a lot more situations where it's hard to tell for sure. But the range of cultural experiences has obviously been deeply enriching, making me open to new ideas and challenges, and the experience of frequently adapting to new cultural environments gives one a lot of ability to artistically shape-shift to serve the art. And, as with all artistic immigrants, being an outsider to a creative ecology can give one a fresh perspective on the assumptions and limitations that are invisible to those born inside it.

What's next? Will you carry on with the current mix of solo and ensemble playing, or do you have new ideas up your sleeve?

I'm continuing to collaborate with a range of composers, pushing the boundaries of what's possible when combining the piano with new technologies even further. I will be touring Alexander Schubert's WIKI-PIANO.NET through Europe (including the Dutch, Irish, Norwegian and Canadian premieres) and also my recent keyboard/synth-focused programme, including works by Neil Luck, Laurence Osborn and Stefan Prins. I'm performing at Kings Place, featuring Nicole Scorsese and David Lynch Etudes, alongside Tristan Coelho's video game-inspired *Rhythm City* and a new piano and film work by Oliver Leith.

Later in 2019, I'm premiering works by Michael Finnissy and Alwynne Pritchard. Finnissy is writing a 45-minute work for piano and video, exploring the towering pianism of Soviet pianist Sviatoslav Richter and his queer inner life. Pritchard's inspiration is Werner Herzog's film, *Heart of Glass* and she will create a work in which many versions of me (in different costumes, on different screens) explore the piano from every position and perspective, as though in a trance.

Further into the future, I'm planning a concert-length work with Phil Venables, using spoken text and multiple screens, a major work with live video by Laura Bowler, recording projects with Claudia Molitor and Scott McLaughlin, and new works by Juliana Hodkinson, Georgia Rodgers, Leo Chadburn, Christopher Fox, Louis d'Heudieres, Solomiya Moroz, Johannes Kreidler, Simon Steen-Anderson, and many others that are still in discussion.

Despite my focus being solo repertoire, chamber music is still an important component of my upcoming work: Ensemble Offspring is touring Europe, with concerts through Germany, Holland, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and I have several duo projects with other London-based instrumental and electronic performers in the planning.

Across all these upcoming projects, I'm also exploring new ways of presenting these performances, experimenting with new types of audience experience and new ways of filming the works for online consumption – getting away from traditional concert film techniques and towards something more unique. And finally, I'm still working on my own compositional craft, aiming towards a concert-length work for a single player with multiple keyboards and video across multiple screens.