

Your music blends jazz improvisation with classical elements and world music influences. What inspired you to create such a distinctive fusion of genres, and how do you approach composing for such diverse instrumentation?

Ha! I'd like to take credit for what you call a distinctive fusion of genres, but I really can't. We live in a time when we can all access music from all over the world, and from down through the ages, in our earbuds, any time we want. To a lot of musicians, there just are no stylistic boundaries anymore. We grew up on rock'n'roll, then the Beatles opened our ears to Indian music, then we discovered African and Indonesian and other musics on vinyl. All the sounds that interest me filter into my compositions somehow. You wouldn't necessarily say, "that sounds like Indonesian gamelan music, but the influence is occasionally there. The Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev said: "Hybrid music is all there is." If I had to pick a genre for my music, I'd call it chamber jazz – but I don't have to pick a genre!

You're known for performing entirely acoustic, organic sets without amplification or microphones. How does this choice shape the experience for both you as a performer and the audience?

We live in such a noisy world. You can't even pump gas without digital music blasting out of a little TV. Digital music is blasting in stores, restaurants, from the car next to you at the stop light. If you hear a string quartet play live, you can *feel* every nuance of the music - without amplifiers. I don't accept the idea that we need microphones to play our music. The sounds of brass, reeds, strings, wood, and metal are warm and natural. I think of it as organic health food music. We try to create a *sound world* for an hour or so, that we can all take part in together. A journalist once described my music as "quiet music in a noisy world". I like that a lot. Confession: sometimes we have to use a *little bit* of amplification for the bass and cello, so you can hear them better.

Some of your compositions feature long-form structures and minimalist influences. How do you balance structure with improvisation in your works, and what is your process for guiding your ensemble through these dynamic shifts?

I spent very little time in music school, and I never formally studied composition. I'm a self-taught, trial-and-error composer who just happens to play an instrument. My longer pieces are more like collages - I tend to string together little movements, so we start somewhere and end up somewhere else. The Higher Octave is by far the best group I've ever assembled. My compositions are sketches, and they improvise absolutely amazing variations. I just go along for the ride.

The press has praised your music for being fresh, glistening, and filled with surprises. How do you keep your compositions evolving and exciting while maintaining a cohesive sound across different performances?

I first started writing for a quintet that was saxophone-centric. Then I wrote for a 10-piece group with more complex, written-out charts for violin, cello, French horn, bassoon, etc. Then, during the pandemic I began hearing an ensemble sound that has become The Higher Octave. Saxophones are still in the mix, but the clarinet family is more prominent – a softer sound. And Ben Kono's oboe and English horn lend even more interesting colors to the wind section. With cello and bass, there's a low string section, too, along with two keyboards, piano and vibraphone. Back to that "chamber jazz" concept: I played and recorded for many years without drums or percussion. Then I saw Brian Melick play, the most *joyous* drummer, and I changed my mind. His presence is part of the evolution.

You've worked across jazz, classical, and folk traditions, often drawing on international influences. How do global musical traditions impact your compositional voice, and are there specific cultures or styles that resonate deeply with you?

There's a German record label that you may be familiar with, ECM Records, which came to prominence in the 1970's and 80's, and introduced us to a whole new world of European "jazz", which has been alive for many decades. People talk about "the ECM sound". Their music doesn't grow out of the American blues/jazz tradition, but out of a different sensibility, and Scandinavian and other European folk traditions. This was the music I listened to the most in my formative years and the ECM catalog is still as my greatest inspiration. It's the music of composer/improvisers. No other label required. That's my tradition.