

Younee about Improvisation

"I enter a state of pure instinct."



Younee Interview Image by Stefan Wagner

Part 1

Name: Younee

Nationality: South Korean

Occupation: Composer, improviser, pianist, vocalist

Recent release: Younee's new album *Improvisations Live in Germany* is out via Fulminantmusic.

Recommendations:

Books: *Musical Elaboration* by Edward Said, *Metamorphosis* by Kafka, *Analects* by Confucius

Art: Henri Matisse's *Piano Lesson*, Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night*

Music: "Dragon Attack" by Queen, "Back to Where We Never Left" by George Duke, Ravel's "Piano Concerto in G Major, M. 83, Second Movement: Adagio Assai.

If you enjoyed this Younee interview and would like to stay up to date with her music, releases, and live dates, visit her [official homepage](#). She is also on [Instagram](#), and [Facebook](#).

Do you think that some of your earliest musical experiences planted a seed for your interest in improvisation?

Improvisation is just composition. The only difference is that improvisation captures the voice of the heart in real-time.

The first time I thought, "I want to create beautiful melodies like that," was when I heard a pop melody on the car radio at the age of four. From that moment, I was curious why some melodies stick in people's memories while others do not. I dreamed of creating music that could move people's hearts.

As a child, I experimented with melodies on a melodica, and I believe that if someone observes that process and shares it with others, that's what improvisation is. It's where the concepts of creation and performance happen simultaneously. Similarly, I used to play a game where I would randomly pick piano sheets and play them as if I already knew the music, imagining that someone was watching me.

This idea of composing, as if it were a piece I had already created, evolved from that playful imagination.

When did you first consciously start getting interested in musical improvisation? Which artists, teachers, albums or performances involving prominent use of improvisation captured your imagination in the beginning?

Most of the time, when we think of improvisation, it's based on existing melodies and harmonies. However, I often compose in performance as if I'm creating a new painting on a blank canvas.

I once had an experience during a school concert when I was playing Chopin's Ballade No. 2. I suddenly forgot the next section and got stuck repeating the same part. Since I couldn't stop, I improvised to finish it and smoothly transitioned to the next section. No one, including my teacher and friends, noticed. That was my first experience with improvisation.

My teachers often told me to focus on the sheet music, but when I looked at scores by Bach or Mozart, I was filled with curiosity. I would wonder how they created their music and how they might have composed differently if they lived in today's world.

Although classical musicians like Friedrich Gulda, Murray Perahia, or Keith Jarrett may have influenced me, the most significant impact on my improvisation comes from my audience. In a beautiful quarry in Trebgast, Germany, I played an encore where I freely improvised, and many people encouraged me to open up more, which led me to publicly share my solo improvisational rituals.

Tell me about your instrument and/or tools, please. What made you seek it out, what makes it “your” instrument, and what are some of the most important aspects of playing it?

For me, music is not the piano. The piano is merely a tool for expressing the ideas in my mind and the sounds I hear in my heart.

Instruments like the flute or violin, which primarily play melodies, always require accompaniment, making the piano my natural choice. When I play solo, I can perform melodies, harmonies, and bass lines all at once, like a one-man band.

There was a piano in my kindergarten, and I wanted to recreate the sounds I heard at home, but I only had a melodica. Playing what I heard on the piano was exhilarating, but using the melodica was frustrating. I even drew keys on long paper and colored them to practice.

Eventually, I begged my parents for a piano, and it became my closest friend. I learned the flute as well, but I lost it when I accidentally left it on the school bus, solidifying the piano as my instrument.

How would you describe your own relationship with your instrument – is it an extension of your self/body, a partner and companion, a creative catalyst, a challenge to be overcome, something else entirely?

It is a medium that allows me to visualize the sounds of my soul or heart.

When my fingers touch the keys, I feel at ease, as if the piano understands me best. It allows me to express my feelings moment by moment, much like writing a diary.

Derek Bailey defined improvising as the search for material which is endlessly transformable. What kind of materials have turned to be particularly transformable and stimulating for you?

In classical music, small themes are often developed into symphonies or sonatas, so the way Beethoven’s works begin with just four notes and evolve into grand pieces resonates deeply with me. When I improvise based on other pieces, I love transforming those beautiful classical melodies or motifs.

However, I believe that true improvisation, like in this album, is about capturing the sound of my heart and sharing that moment with the audience. The experiences of the day, the touch and timbre of the piano, the inspiration from the audience, my feelings, the sound of the performance space—all these elements serve as themes and inspiration for my compositions.

Thus, I seek inspiration more outside of music. I strive to empathize deeply with the stories and emotions of others, and I question everything happening in the world or in the news, aiming to develop my own perspective. Transforming that

into sound and emotion is my improvisation.

Do you feel as though there are at least elements of composition and improvisation which are entirely unique to each? Based on your own work or maybe performances or recordings by other artists, do you feel that there are results which could only have happened through one of them?

I believe that coincidence does not exist. Therefore, I take all elements that seem coincidental as my inspiration, deliberately encouraging them to become part of my creation.

For example, many of the tracks on my album would not have come to life without an audience. I often ask my audience for suggestions when I'm trying to compose something new, wanting to share the process with them rather than relying on already famous pieces. In Hamburg, an audience member shouted "Spring!" right as March approached, just before the COVID outbreak, a time when everyone felt the arrival of spring. Naturally, it felt inevitable to compose a piece about spring.

In Nuremberg, another audience member called out "Cuba!" When I asked why, they explained that it was because the venue featured many classic cars, which reminded them of Cuba. Although I have never been there, I thought it was a brilliant idea. In that moment, we could embark on an imaginative journey to Cuba through music. If that audience member hadn't attended my concert, that moment wouldn't have happened.

I often view all connections and coincidences as inevitable, which is why I frequently seek input from my audience. I strive to maintain an open mind so I am not solely immersed in the inspirations that arise within my own head. The tracks on this album were all born from both chance and necessity. The people who inspire me the most in my music are my audience, more than any artist.

When you're improvising, does it actually feel like you're inventing something on the spot – or are you inventively re-arranging patterns from preparations, practise or previous performances? What balance is there between forgetting and remembering in your work?

In daily life, I find it difficult to choose between pizza or pasta, often telling friends, "You order pizza; I'll get pasta," because making decisions can be tough.

However, in the moment of improvisation, something miraculous happens: even with many people watching, I enter a state of pure instinct where there is no buffering or delay in my decision-making. If others analyze the musical results of my improvisation, they might say that the musical elements and harmonies already stored within me have combined. But in that moment, I feel as if my soul is open, and sounds flow through me without my conscious effort.

It's not so much that I'm actively creating music; rather, it feels like the sounds are

emerging through me. Since this is a moment where my thoughts and deeply felt emotions naturally arise, I transition into a state of unconsciousness, regardless of how much I think about or listen to music in my everyday life.

Part 2

Are you acting out parts of your personality in your improvisations which you couldn't or wouldn't through other musical approaches? If so, which are these? What, would you say, are the key ideas behind your approach to improvisation?

While improvisation often takes avant-garde forms, I believe that improvisation is also composition.

Even when I compose spontaneously, I aim to effectively express narratives and themes that resonate with many people in my own unique style. I don't just play whatever comes to mind; rather, like storytelling, when we want to convey something effectively, we consider themes, variations, developments, and climaxes, which makes improvisation a story-like concept that captures moments instead of being abstract and hard to grasp.

In terms of your personal expression and the experience of performance, how does playing solo compare to group improvisations?

In a group, it's essential to listen well to others and not dominate the conversation, knowing when to step back.

However, when I am solo, I need to complete the narrative myself, which feels like standing naked. All dynamics, nuances, and details become more pronounced, allowing me to delve deeper and concentrate, free from any rules

In your best improvisations, do you feel a strong sense of personal presence or do you (or your ego) "disappear"?

It feels like I disappear. The moment thoughts or consciousness intrude, the surprise within me fades, and if I'm not amazed, the excitement dissipates.

So, while musically it might seem straightforward, the most thrilling improvisation occurs when unexpected ideas emerge from within me, leading to a feeling of having vanished.

In a live situation, decisions between creatives often work without words. From your experience and current projects, what does this process feel like and how does it work?

This project is an album where I perform solo improvisations on stage, so the only

entities involved are me, the piano, and the audience. The audience is incorporated into the creative elements of the music at my discretion, because without an audience, a live performance is impossible. Typically, performances showcase pre-composed works, but I wanted to create an experience where the performance itself becomes the process and result of my creation.

Although it wasn't intentional, each performance had its own remarkable moments, and I collected these wonderful instances to create this album.

Stewart Copeland said: “Listening is where the cool stuff comes from. And that listening thing, magically, turns all of your chops into gold.” What do you listen for?

I have no biases against any music in the world and listen to everything. Classical, pop, jazz, old jazz, funk, rock, lounge music, house music, schlager—there is something interesting in every genre, and they all have the power to move people. When many influences are absorbed, new things naturally emerge from me.

The jazz pianists I listen to the most include great female artists like Marian McPartland and Nina Simone, as well as the incredible humor and technique of Michel Petrucciani. I enjoy works by Bach, Chopin, Dvořák Symphony, Daft Punk, Lenny Kravitz, Aerosmith, Black Sabbath, Deep Purple, Marcus Miller, The Rolling Stones, Ramsey Lewis, Bad Company, Miles Davis, Jeff Beck, Julie London, Keith Jarrett, The Beatles, Lyle Mays, George Duke, Rammstein, The Who, and Zero 7.

There can be surprising moments during improvisations – from one of the performers not playing a single note to another shaking up a quiet section with an outburst of noise. Have you been part of similar situations and how did they impact the performance from your point of view?

Just as we can be surprised in conversations when the other person communicates in a way that deviates from the level of thought or emotion we expected, similar moments happen when playing with other musicians.

Naturally, when such moments arise, there's a sense of surprise from the unexpected reaction. I enjoy those moments, and in the heat of the moment, I also adapt my response to match the other person's tension. If they get excited, I might get excited with them, but sometimes, if they are too excited, I might calm them down.

Everything is relative, and that's what makes communicating in a group setting different and more enjoyable compared to playing alone.

I have always been fascinated by the many facets of improvisation but sometimes found it hard to follow them as a listener. Do you have some recommendations for “how to listen” in this regard?

Just as with painting, music can feel difficult, but sometimes the answer lies in simply listening or seeing as it is. Artists may have their intentions, but music resonates differently with listeners, just as paintings touch viewers in unique ways, which is the charm of art.

Therefore, I always save art and music that resonates with me in my playlist, aiming to share the emotional points and connections I feel with others.

In a way, improvisations remind us of the transitory nature of life. When an improvisation ends, is it really gone, just like a cup of coffee? Or does it live on in some form?

It's a pity that we cannot hear the improvisations of masters like Beethoven, Mozart, or Liszt. If recording technology had existed in Beethoven's time, we might have experienced remarkable bootleg albums even more astonishing than their hit songs.

I feel that improvisation is not ephemeral but is instead the most genuine and meaningful form of expression. Music is the art of sound and the art of time. The essence of sound is that it fades away simultaneously with time. While paintings can endure over time since they exist on canvas, the essence of sound fades with time, which is a challenge. Therefore, I believe that the closest form to this essence of music is improvisation—an art of experience that is created and disappears at the same moment and it can be true in the moment.

However, we have recording technology, which allows us to capture these moments like a painting, enabling us to share those wonderful experiences with many people who could not attend the performance. How wonderful is that!

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