

Feature

# Cutting Edge: Music, maths and healing

Avant-garde multi-instrumentalist Benjamin Skepper talks about his desire to bring science and technology into his art practice.

*by Benjamin Skepper on 22 May, 2023*

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I consider the rich history of music, not only through the Western classical canon in which I am theoretically trained, but as a reflection of all the world's cultures, with a deep knowing that all music possesses an inherent power to transform our human experience.

Over four decades as a musician, composer and performer, I've worked and travelled extensively across Australia and abroad, deeply aware of the role music and art play in facilitating tangible social change, inclusion and healing.



Benjamin Skepper. Photo © Janarbek Amankulov

I grew up in Naarm/Melbourne, deeply embedded within my diverse linguistic and cultural background. My Australian-Japanese heritage has very much influenced my love for many different forms of art and music, from First Nations, local and diaspora artists.

This curiosity led me to travel the world to immerse myself in the sounds of other cultures, as I branched away from two decades in the classical music system and set out on a path of self-discovery and independent practice as a self-sustaining conceptual artist.

While recognised as an avant-garde cellist, I am a multi-instrumentalist, having performed concertos on the piano and harpsichord. An avid proponent of the electro-acoustic genre, I enjoy free improvisation and exploring non-classical structures. Operating at the intersection of the analog-digital divide for the last two decades, I have harnessed my classical instruments, seeking to expand the boundaries of how they may be considered as sonic devices, and beyond their traditional conception.

I am deeply fascinated by technology and how these innovations can be applied within the context of my own arts practice. The desire to balance technology with human processes (the making and playing) drives my creative output.

In 2007, I left Naarm for Tokyo, and after a year working as an international lawyer, founded my studio “contrapuntal”.

Through this creative enterprise, I've been commissioned to produce and create performances, site-specific installations and audiovisual artworks for an array of clients around the world, constantly seeking to build new audiences for my work, and most importantly situate myself within creative communities who share similar visions for the future. From my base in Japan, I worked extensively throughout Europe and Russia – though performing for thousands of farmers and shamans in the desert lands of Kazakhstan remains a career standout.

On the topic of the connective and healing power of music, I've always been fascinated by geometry and the relationship between music and mathematics. Born with perfect

pitch, as a child I became aware of the anomaly within the Pythagorean algorithm which has defined Western musical tuning systems for millennia (a fact I came to know when tuning the harpsichord as an eight-year-old).

My interest in tuning temperaments, symmetry and physics led to my appointment as Australia's first Research Fellow at the Moscow State Conservatory, in the groundbreaking field of music and genetics. Genetic music is a revolutionary new system of music derived from the molecular structure of human DNA (a topic for another article, though research findings were [recently published by MIT](#), the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2020).



Benjamin Skepper. Photo © Bruno van Mossevelde

Last year, I relocated my studio practice and “contrapuntal” back home. I believe Australia is in an exciting period of cultural transformation, and as we enter this new cycle, I am keen to contribute to a more creatively robust, socially just, culturally safe and truly inclusive landscape for all artists working towards positive social change and

sustainability within the arts. My studio remains committed to research-driven experimentation, multidisciplinary collaboration and harnessing novel technologies and innovations in the sciences, to engage and expose audiences to new and exciting ideas.

After a sold-out performance at Melbourne Recital Centre in February, I am very excited to be performing new works at [Phoenix Central Park](#) in Sydney this month.

I also applaud the Neilson family for its significant cultural contribution, as Australia needs more high-spec, well-resourced performance spaces, equally open to platforming new and experimental forms of creative expression. So, I am taking this opportunity to compose for piano and electronics, as I continue my work with the cello, field recordings, soundscape composition and exploring the human body as a musical instrument (my heartbeat recordings). I think my sounds will resonate beautifully with the stunning architecture of Phoenix, and within the bodies of the audiences lucky enough to gain free entry to the venue via its novel lottery system.

In collaboration with Phoenix, we will also be shooting a new music video in situ, featuring the piano; a reflection on a new creative direction in my career which I cannot wait to share with audiences. These works will touch on modern classical, cinematic, ambient, electronic and natural landscapes, expressing my love for the piano, which I started playing when I was just two years old.

I thank my mother, Jeanette Igawa Brown, who worked multiple jobs to acquire the late-1800s Berlin-made Schwechten upright, on which I am currently writing these new songs. There is something otherworldly about playing century-old, hand-made instruments, and this piano is imbued with a deep spiritual significance.