

# Hello, cello: It's good to be Bach

A musical prodigy returns for an explosive Sydney Festival debut, writes Chantal Nguyen.

Classical music prodigy Benjamin Skepper, who returns to Australia for his Sydney Festival debut this week, is an eclectic genre defier.

"I wasn't hired to play safe," he grins. "That's the kind of sport that classical music is. I have the playing injuries to prove it!"

Heralded as "classical music's nice answer to Johnny Depp", Skepper is part consummate artist (he is a cello, piano, and harpsichord prodigy) and part innovator, fusing music with art installations, technology, and fashion. His performances are so striking he has been headhunted for corporate events involving the likes of Fiat, Gucci, Electrolux, royalty, the United Nations museum and almost every major Australian gallery.

"I've played in palaces ... and in a squat!" he jokes. "My entire practice is about pushing the boundaries of what art can and should be, but breaking barriers, so everyone can access music."

For the festival he co-curates *Temperament*, a week-long homage to legendary composer Johann Sebastian Bach, with festival director Olivia Ansell. It features *Praeludium y Fuga*, Skepper's high-octane Bach-inspired composition for electric cello.

A child prodigy, Skepper played Bach before he was out of nappies. Born in Melbourne to a working-class hairdresser family, he began piano aged one. By eight, he was headlining harpsichord concerts. Aged 11, he completed his first international tour.

Skepper's parents worked long hours in the salon to afford music lessons, reminding their children "that we were fortunate to have the training we did, and that we had every possibility to go out and be amazing in the world". If Skepper and his sisters played well, "we got a free cut and colour," he laughs.

"We grew up in Clifton Hill when it was a real working-class suburb," the 43-year-old performer said. "My parents really pushed the classical and private school education on us, and then I ended up at Melbourne High School which was a public selective school that was life changing. Everyone was there because they were clever, be it academic, sporty or musical."

His younger sisters have followed in his footsteps: one, Jessica, is a dancer/visual artist/florist and the youngest sister Rachel is a fine jeweller and milliner - she makes the hats for his performances and the two have worked together on Milan Fashion Week.

Despite his talent, Skepper's



Musician Benjamin Skepper with his electric cello is curating and playing in a Bach program for Sydney Festival. Photos: Jessica Hromas

journey wasn't pain-free. From primary school, he endured cruel racism for his part-Japanese heritage. "I was bullied - a lot. Bashed up. They sang this song: 'Cheap J-- crap - you can't get that - get back to your own country.' It went all the way through high school and into university."

Skepper moved overseas, making a pilgrimage to Hiroshima where he discovered that his grandmother was part of the

revered Mori Samurai clan.

Burnt out from classical music, Skepper joined a trip hop band (a fusion of hip hop and electronica) and studied law at the University of Melbourne. Though law was "brutal" he persevered, becoming passionate about human rights under the mentorship of his lecturer Dr Gillian Triggs, Australia's former human rights commissioner.

"But I realised that since legal

change was incrementally slow, maybe I should start thinking about art and culture as a more relatable way of breaking barriers."

A stint in a Tokyo law firm - "like *Ally McBeal!*" - led to a meeting with fashion icon Yohji Yamamoto. Standing six foot two with chiselled Eurasian features, Skepper was soon walking fashion runways as Yamamoto's model, and being mentored on creating an artistic legacy. Inspired by this experience, he began designing accessible arts events and developing his unique electric cello technique, "exploring the boundaries of what a cello was".

Like Skepper's technique, *Temperament* helps people experience a spectrum of sound using classical music as an entry point.

"Benjamin was [perfect] to collaborate with, creating a week-long program that celebrates and deconstructs [baroque music]," Sydney Festival director Ansell says. "Bach was a harmonic and mathematical genius who informed and inspired countless generations of composers."

Skepper adds: "There's a spiritual, mathematical, symmetrical, sacred element to [Bach]. It feels natural in a way. But there was a lot going on [then] in terms of mathematics, cosmology, theosophy, and how we relate to the sky and planets - the Music of the Spheres - and Neoplatonian concepts, which I loved."

"His music is an amazing frame for human history and connection. Like a bookend ... to reflect how sound, performance, and composition have evolved. *Temperament* is really about creative

evolution, opening people's minds to music [from all eras]."

Audiences can choose from 14 concerts, performed by cutting-edge ensembles ranging from Bach Akademie - Ansell calls them a "glorious" team of historic music specialists - "to Swingle Singers-style choral".

"Ensemble Apex are clearing out the seats. There'll be beanbags, yoga mats - you lie down in low-lighting and immerse yourself in sound," Skepper says. "Then the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra is bringing in a French ex-ballet dancer, improvising and painting. There's something for everybody sonically!"

*Temperament's* venue is The Thirsty Mile, a festival pop-up of bars and art spaces at Walsh Bay. Skepper wants audiences to feel included in non-elitist venues.

"High-art composers can really alienate people. People of colour, young people, people who feel they can't afford [live music]. *Temperament* is about people feeling like they can take a punt on any of those shows without feeling threatened."

Skepper empathises that most people, like his parents, are "just trying to put food on the table, pay bills, and deal with the cost of living. Always the mundane [grind]. So coming into the festival, [you] take all that away from your mind for even two hours and be in this esoteric, beautiful, creative, wild environment. You know ... be free again."

Benjamin Skepper performs *Praeludium y Fuga* January 27-28 at The Neilson. *Temperament* runs January 23-28 at The Thirsty Mile, Walsh Bay.

