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Radically different



Younee will perform in the context of the Ingolstadt Jazz Days on November 7, 2020 in Kulturzentrum nine (Photo: Na Young Lee)

Younee, composer and singer-songwriter from South Korea, regularly delights her audience with her unique and virtuoso piano playing. In November she will play on the Schanz as part of the Ingolstadt Jazz Days. Born and raised in Seoul, with a short stopover in London, Younee finally found her home near Ansbach. Vibrant big city flair vs. contemplative Bavaria: how does that affect your music? Why did she have to play a concert with one hand? What is your talent for improvisation all about? espresso asks for an interview!

Younee, when you moved to London in 2008, your musical career in South Korea was well advanced. You were a professor of music at the College of Culture and Art in Seoul, wrote pop songs for other Korean artists, the very successful title song of a television series and released your debut album. Did you find the step to Europe difficult? What made the difference?

Although I have worked very successfully as a musician in Korea, I was always looking for “my” personal music style. I was trained in classical music and this music, as well as pop songs that I wrote back then, are of course also a part of me. Still, I wanted to find out what my authentic music really sounds like.

To find the answer to this question, I went on a musical journey. During the time when I was very concerned with this profound question, I fortunately met many great musicians from England, released a jazz-pop crossover album in England and went on tour.

So I was able to constantly expand my musical horizons and get to know new things. In Europe I always felt deeply connected to the people through music and felt a great freedom and joy in the creative process. The curiosity about my own musical journey and the joy of finding freedom in music was greater than my homesickness and fear of the new world. And here I was able to create my own style: "Free Classic & Jazz".

First Seoul, then London, and finally in 2010 the move to the vicinity of Ansbach. From two million metropolises to a tranquil Bavarian town: doesn't that turn your own way of life radically upside down? How did you deal with it?

Yes, this is a radical turn. But it has a very positive effect on me. I grew up in Seoul and was always surrounded by lots of people, lots of skyscrapers, lots of traffic and lots of advertising. Now I live in a small town in Franconia and have a different lifestyle. Here I see a lot of nature, the horizon, and I can hear the chirping of birds every day - I feel very peaceful and can concentrate on my music.

And when I feel a little lonely and I want to spend time with my family and Korean friends, then I just fly to Korea and so take in the energy from my hometown. I see positive aspects in both lifestyles and take them with me.



Photo: Na Young Lee

Do you think that your move has radically changed your music too? To put it another way: do you think that you write the same music in a pulsating metropolis as you do in a rural Bavarian area? Or does that not matter because the music arises from your innermost self - completely independent of the environment?

On the one hand the environment influenced my music and on the other hand it didn't. When I lived in Seoul, I met a lot of different people, so the outside influence was definitely greater. But now I live in a smaller rural area and the calm nature gives me a different creative energy and a free musical head.

Since I've been living in Europe, I've had the feeling that I can try everything in music and I feel a lot of joy thanks to this freedom. It gives me more courage to try something new and helps me to be more authentic. I think that's mainly because of the people, not just the city or the country in which I live. Europeans are more open to something new: they always appreciate it when artists, even newcomers, try something new. That impressed me very much.

However, if it is a commissioned work, for example if I am writing a piano waltz for a scene in a German television series, then it does not matter where I am while working on it. It doesn't affect my music.

On November 7th, Ingolstadt can look forward to your concert as part of the Jazz Days. What can the audience expect?

You can of course expect many titles from my two albums, for example songs from my debut album "Art Nouveau" with famous classical themes (such as Beethoven's Schicksal Symphony), interpreted in my own style, as well as my own compositions from my second album "My Piano". I don't plan all the songs for a concert though, I always decide shortly beforehand what exactly I want to play, depending on how I feel that day.

In addition, a large part of my concert happens spontaneously on stage, so I often don't know myself what will happen that evening. I like to make music with the audience and to complete my setlist. I am therefore always happy when you visit my concert with an open heart.



Photo: Rüdiger Schestag

Younee is by the way not an artist name, but the first name of the exceptional pianist. The first syllable means something like "beautiful sound", the second "pleasant smell".

Your concerts are particularly characterized by live improvisation. The audience calls out terms to you, which you then spontaneously implement musically. Is that an integral part of your concerts? How did you come up with this idea?

This type of improvisation is not a must. But in almost every concert I ask the audience for ideas and then improvise. It all started at a concert on my “Art Nouveau” tour in Germany, where I played a real-time composition on stage for the first time: I asked the audience for a nice topic and then made a song out of it. The audience liked it and I was asked more and more often at other concerts. Sometimes I even changed my entire setlist and incorporated more free improvisations. Most important to me is that I improvise consistently so that people can follow my music well. Everyone in the hall must always be able to feel the topic. *So it's always like an adventure. I enjoy using these special elements and it's the most fascinating moment of the concert for me. That's why I record every concert. Because in this way these newly born pieces don't disappear but can even become part of my new album.*

You also had to improvise last year when you could only move one hand to a limited extent due to pinched nerves and therefore played some concerts with one hand - at least you can find it on the Internet. Is this story true and how was the experience of playing a concert with one hand?

Yes. It is actually true! This video comes from the PALATIA JAZZ Festival. At the time, I suffered from very severe hand pain with many symptoms such as tendonitis, trigger finger, and wrist pain. That day, the pain in my right wrist was very severe. At first I had played normally but more relaxed, but had the feeling that the pain only got worse. So I mainly played with my left hand and my right hand sometimes helped a little. The venue was an old church, so I could use the great acoustics for support and play more gently than usual. It was a challenging situation for me that I had never experienced before, so I'm glad that I spontaneously shared my idea improvising with the left hand.

I found out later that I wasn't the only one doing something like this. Scriabin also composed left-handed pieces, depending on his right hand pain. Fortunately, I'm better now. Since then, I've also been much more conscious of my hands.



Photo: Na Young Lee

Music aside, what else does your heart beat for?

Everything that is creative, innovative or different from the previous is always interesting to me. Art, fashion or dancing, for example, are my favorite subjects. But also politics or philosophy, because you learn a lot about different points of view. My mother is also very creative and has lots of ideas about fashion and style. For example, I designed my stage costumes together with my mother and a Korean designer. From the blank sheet to the collection of ideas to the finished result: it's the same process as composing music. I found that really very exciting.

In the Süddeutsche Zeitung one can read about you that you have a "shoe craze". How many shoes do you own?

I haven't counted how many I actually own. I think every color and style is represented. All the things I wear - including the shoes - can inspire and influence my mood and I like that. If I wear high heels, for example, then I can breathe a completely different air, so to speak. Or when I wear sneakers, I feel more sporty. My grandfather always said: "Shoes complete the outfit and the impression."

The reason I have so many different shoes is certainly not to show off my shoes, but to express how I feel.

What job would you have if you had never found music?

When I was four years old, I knew that I wanted to be a musician. I never imagined anything else. There was and always is music for me, so this question is difficult to answer. Of course, there were other things that I was interested in as a kid, such as dancing, painting, figure skating, writing, debating and so on. If I had to choose another job, I might have chosen a dancer, fashion designer, journalist, politician or painter ... Who knows!

Thank you for the interview.