

The Musical Universe According To Younee

By Lawrence Peryer, November 1, 2024



“

If you deliberately try to cross a line, it becomes a boundary. But if you approach everything in an integrated way, those boundaries naturally disappear, and something new and unique to you emerges.

—Younee

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At a concert in [Nuremberg](#), surrounded by vintage automobiles, someone in the audience shouted "Cuba!" when Younee asked for a theme to improvise upon. Though she had never visited [Havana](#), the South Korean pianist spun a groove from the classic cars around her, channeling an imagined scene of sunlit streets and chrome bumpers. Such moments of pure musical reaction fill her performances.

Her double album, *Improvisations Live in Germany* (Fulminantmusic, 2024), captures these bursts of creation in concert halls and jazz clubs across the country. Through close microphone placement and precise recording techniques, listeners hear the piano as Younee does, each note immediate and raw.

The Genesis Of "Free Classic & Jazz"

"Classical music provides me with techniques, intricate dynamics, various touches and solid musical structures, while jazz brings freedom, rich harmonies and groove," Younee says. She never set out to blend genres. Instead, the music flows from whatever moves her in the moment. The term "Free Classic & Jazz" emerged

in conversation with a German newspaper when standard labels fell short. Early in her career, journalists struggled to categorize her sound and terms such as "crossover" and "neoclassical" missed the mark. The German interview led her to consider how she brought jazz's freedom to her classical foundations.

She finds hidden rhythms across centuries of music. "I can feel the rock energy and dance-like groove in Beethoven or Dvořák symphonies," she notes. "In jazz, like [Bill Evans](#)' music, I can find classical qualities similar to Chopin, and I sense classical elements in rock bands like [Emerson, Lake & Palmer](#)." She points out how Rachmaninoff's melodies wind through [Frank Sinatra](#)'s songs, threading connections between disparate musical worlds.

The Path To Musical Freedom

Collaborations with UK jazz players including [Richard Niles](#), Derek Watkins, and [Gary Husband](#) pushed Younee's music in new directions. These sessions, she says, "helped me break free from the stiffness in my groove and attitude, allowing me to open up and express myself more freely."

Even injuries spark creation. When her right hand seized up at the [Palatia Jazz Festival](#), she worked with the natural reverb of the venue to create what she calls "left-hand Improvisation," finding a groove in the space between notes. She later learned that Alexander Scriabin, the early 20th-century Russian composer known for his mystical approach to harmony and innovative piano works, had written for left hand alone under similar circumstances.

The Audience As Collaborator

For Younee, the audience shapes each performance. "Without the audience, a performance has no meaning," she insists. This belief drives her approach to both recording and live shows where listener suggestions spark new pieces.

Rather than exhaustive rehearsal, she prepares by absorbing each venue's character. "I focus on tuning into the people, the atmosphere, the air, the special qualities of that location, the local dialect, the food, the piano, the sound of the hall and everything that has happened that day," she explains. At [Elbphilharmonie Hamburg](#), the city's architectural marvel known for its pristine acoustics, this method birthed the album track "Frühling (Spring)." Blending classical motifs with

improvisational freedom, the piece grew from an audience member's suggestion and the hall's crystalline sound.

From Pop Star To Piano Pioneer

After success in South Korean pop music, Younee found her way to instrumental improvisation. Her years in pop taught her "to convey a complete story to people within the span of just three to four minutes," a skill that now shapes her spontaneous compositions. The experience convinced her that labels like "classical" and "pop" matter less than music's basic power to connect.

She tells other musicians: "If you deliberately try to cross a line, it becomes a boundary. But if you approach everything in an integrated way, those boundaries naturally disappear, and something new and unique to you emerges." It's not just talk -every performance proves her point.

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