

On finding the courage to do your own thing



Musician JIJI on following an unexpected path, the things she's learned from teaching, and embracing what you love without fear.

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As told to Vanessa Ague, 2002 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Education](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Collaboration](#), [Mental health](#).

I know you travel a lot and you've been to a lot of places. What have you learned from that?

I learned there's ways to get better at traveling. After the pandemic, I got rusty with the traveling; I was just losing stuff and forgetting to bring some of the gear. It's a thing that you need to practice and really think about. Also, going to places I've met so many amazing people. I feel like that's been really special to me, if I get to stay a little bit longer, really getting into the community.

You've been making so much music lately. I was wondering if we could talk about your collaboration with [Hillary \[Purrrington\]](#). How did you two first meet?

Hilary and I met in 2015. We were housemates. We'd moved in without knowing each other, though. We responded to this Craigslist thing for an eight bedroom house, and we've been having this amazing friendship and this collaborative friendship since. I have hundred percent trust in her. It's an amazing thing to have in a friendship, and then also in collaboration.

There's two projects we're working on now. She won a competition, so she got to write an orchestra piece, [Harp of Nerves](#), for [American Composers Orchestra](#). And I commissioned a solo piece from her last year, too.

The commissioned project is for an album that you're working on to come in the future, right? Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

The album is called *UNBOUND*. I commissioned eight composers to each write solo virtuosic guitar music to explore what 21st century virtuosity would sound like on guitar. They're from all over the world, and they all happen to be my friends, too, which has been really cool. I feel like I always work with people that I have a personal connection with. I'm putting a lot into these pieces and it's a lot of empathy and connection.

This word "virtuosity" is weird. It's a term that has really followed me around, a term that I had struggled with. As a soloist, it's always been like, "Oh, you need to be a virtuoso. You need to play things that are flashy and virtuosic." I always struggled with the term.

I wanted to do it on my own, with people that have amazing voices, and with their scope of the world and their perspective, to see what they thought virtuosity meant. One composer thought rhythmic complexity was a form of virtuosity, and somebody wanted to use this guitar resonance technique called campanella style as a form of virtuosity. Everyone has such a different take on it. You give them one word and everyone's so different.

How has your interpretation of virtuosity for yourself changed through working on these pieces?

I've learned a lot. Even my technique changed. Some [of the] composers are not guitarists, so I had to learn my guitar in a new way to make certain passages work. In doing so, that's another form of virtuosity, figuring things out that haven't been done before. I love challenges. I love working on something and doing it every day. This work of discipline. It has been incredibly rewarding when something works if it's something I hadn't been able to do a month ago.

Do you have a practice routine that you follow?

Yes, I always do my fingerings first whenever I get a piece. What fingers am I going to use on my left hand and my right hand? And I make a path. And then I swear by this practice technique that was taught by my former teacher Jason Vieaux. It's bracket practice. You start a passage that's incredibly difficult—let's say there's a 20-note scale that's ridiculous. I start with a three note cell, and then if you do it at tempo and you do it seven times in a row, but with breaks between, and if you don't make a mistake, you can add one more note. While doing so, if you make a mistake, you have to do it all over again. So then you start over, and you do it until you get it seven times in a row.

So now you have a, let's say, seven note cell that you've been doing perfectly seven times in a row. Now you're going to start a new cell from the fourth note, and then you're going to start a three note cell from the fourth note, and you're going to keep doing these little brackets. At the end of the practice, you have these crazy brackets that you've made, and that you've built on this 20 note passage. And then you try to play from the beginning, and if you've been practicing really well, you should be able to have finished learning it within 10, 15 minutes.

It's really efficient practicing, and it's one of the things that feels like totally Zen, meditative work. I actually have videos of me doing it, so I can show to my students how to practice this way. Sometimes I feel like they [put it off] and think, "Oh, this is too hard, I'm going to practice it later." So, I was like, "Think about it. It's like a monster in your closet. Are you going to be scared of it all night? Or do you want to open the door and make sure there's no monster?" You have to fight your fear.

How has it been teaching?

I've learned a lot as a teacher. The younger generations, they're really asking the right questions and they're very strong and they're very aware and sensitive. I've had a lot of deep conversations with them. You know, what's going on in the classical music world, and what they think they need for their education. I had this one student who's like, "Oh, it's a lot of Western classical, European men. What can we do? Is there anything that we can do to have more inclusive repertoire in our repertoire class?" And I was like, "Yes." I totally revamp my curriculum every year. These conversations that I have with my students have helped me grow as a person.

What in particular have you loved about teaching recently?

Recently we've been doing a Women's History Month annual concert that started from last year. I find the repertoire for them, but the really cool thing was that they bring their own music they want to learn. So they were the initiating these projects, or they were initiating to find these composers. It was so different from when I was a student. Just seeing that shift, that change, has been really rewarding to me.

What was it like for you when you were a student?

You were just told what to do. I had to always rebel a little bit. When I was a student, you just did it, you didn't really ask questions. You didn't even really think. You just played, like, "What are these competition pieces? What are the audition pieces?" That was it.

Things have changed so much recently, especially in classical. I feel like people are much more open to being

more creative. And including other voices. Not just, you know, Bach.

Exactly. Everyone's been interested in finding their own voice. That's the shift that I'm seeing, finding your own voice and being sensitive.

In your own playing journey, how have you been able to find your voice?

Basically my biggest thing was, growing up, I wanted to play in a band. I was not trying to do the whole classical thing. I was seeing Prince, seeing PJ Harvey, and seeing Jimi Hendrix. That was my dream. I wanted to play in a band. And my parents got me an acoustic guitar and they were like, "This is on sale, this is what you're going to do, and maybe we'll buy you an electric," which never happened. So growing up, I was always listening to bands. I was listening to Radiohead or Björk or Muse. And punk. One of my favorite Korean punk bands was called Cherry Filter. And that was my thing.

I always felt like you needed to compartmentalize your liking of classical music. You couldn't embrace all these different genres of music if you're trying to be a classical guitarist or a classical musician. And one year, it totally changed my life, and that was 2014, going to Bang on a Can Summer Festival. You didn't have to separate those passions. That was huge for me.

So, I've been doing classical and electric guitar recitals, which has been super fun. And I've been calling them my mixtapes. I want to show you the scope of my world, the music that I like. This is the music that I listen to every day. So I start with super crazy arrangement from like 400 years ago by this really amazing Renaissance female composer named Claudia Sessa. I start with that and I do the commission pieces, and I end, always, with my own electric guitar pieces, and they're very influenced by doom metal and Midwest emo. That's been my jam now. I was just like, "This is it. This is who I am. Take it or leave it. I don't care." It's been so great. I have a lot of musicians come up to me and say, "Oh my gosh, I love that you embrace all this different music, because that's how I feel, too."

I see so many more people doing really different things with their solo recitals. I've been just finding that voice and not being scared anymore. That voice, right? It's like, "Oh, I should be playing this kind of thing," or "I should be doing that." And then I was like, "Well, no. There is no such thing as 'I should be.' It's more: 'I want to do this. And I want to show what I'm doing and what I love.'" That's been the big shift for me. Finding that kind of courage and going forward with that has been life changing.

How did it feel once you started going along this path you wanted to be on, where you're blending lots of genres and just doing what you want to do?

First I was terrified. I was like, "Oh my god, everything that I'm doing is terrible. Everyone's going to hate it." But I've been [getting] such great feedback. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying everyone loves it, but the people who love it, they love it. And, I'd rather be either loved or hated than get a lukewarm response.

How do you balance all of your projects?

It's therapy and working out. I feel like people are shy about that kind of thing, but I am aware that I can just go go go go go go. I have experienced bad burnout. I definitely felt the burnout in December. I had this big project, and I was so done. I was so burned out. I'm trying to pace myself to slow down a little bit more and also talking to a therapist and taking care of my health has been important for me.

If you could go back in time, what's one big of advice that you would give your younger self?

I used to be more a people pleaser. I always knew what I liked, but I was always afraid. I was like, "Oh, people are not going to like this." If I could give any advice, it's this: It's okay not to be loved by everyone and the people who really love you exactly for who you are matter the most. Don't be afraid.

JIJI Recommends:

Fairytale Embrace - "Remi Goode" (single)

Yeule - Glitch Princess (album)

Stray (video game)

Kaitlyn Aurelia Smith - Ears (album)

Pauline Oliveros - Sonic Meditations (score)

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Vocation

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