

# On building your own tools for creativity



Musicians and instrument designers Koma and Passepartout Duo discuss expanding the idea of community, creating your own tools, and deep collaboration.

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As told to Nick Yulman, 2924 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Design](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#).

**Nico and Chris, you talk about your schedule as a “near-continuous world tour,” and you don’t have an official home base. How does this constant state of travel shape your creative approach and the work you make?**

**Chris:** On a practical level, it means that we are a bit immaterial with our approach. We have a lot of gratitude for the fact that we’re musicians instead of painters or something where the physical material is the central focus. We just have a suitcase and a couple of backpacks that have our instruments in them. And we organize artist residencies and concert tours. We try to have everything scheduled a couple of years in advance. The first opportunities we had as a duo were these residencies that put people from all sorts of different artistic backgrounds together in the same space. It was like a second education for us because we were around people from different disciplines doing totally different things. You can’t help but to be influenced by them. So it transformed our approach from being classical musicians, interpreting composers’ works, to being more creative in the literal sense of really making our own work for ourselves in a certain way.

We’ve just become kind of addicted to that. Every time we go to a new place or we have a new opportunity, we just stretch ourselves a tiny bit in this direction or in that direction. Sometimes it’s backwards, sometimes it’s forwards. But we try to make sure we’re not staying in the same spot, both physically and artistically.

**Nico:** We don’t belong to one community in a normal sense, like in a city or in a neighborhood. We enter and exit these temporary communities that are created within the residencies. It gives us a certain outlook into the local society, local geography of wherever we are. Everybody in the world lives in a system. Because we can step outside of the system we are in, we can have a different perspective on what we just left or where we are going. Overall we are surprised that the world lets us do that, but we’re also always ready for the world to not let us do it anymore.

**Chris:** We definitely don’t take it for granted. Every year we’re like, “is it going to work another year?” And then it does.

**Is there a specific example of a project or piece that came about because you were in a certain place or because you met a certain group of people?**

**Chris:** The last album we did. A few years ago, we got really interested in this Japanese environmental music. It’s not completely random. There were a lot of these reissues and a lot of energy around bringing back this work from the 1980s. We had been traveling in Japan and that music became a backdrop for our experience there.

Nico was like, "Why don't we just contact these people? They're not inaccessible." One group named Inoyamaland—we just absolutely fell in love with their music. They're also a duo. And they've been working with synthesizers as long as synthesizers have been a thing pretty much, which is a really cool perspective to have. We would have never contacted them if it wasn't for the traveling and the whole approach. It wouldn't have felt possible. But it worked out really well. We had a kind of improvisation session with them in one of the duo's hometown where he's been recording for decades. It was impressive to me how much deeper their approach was. In just this five hour session, I feel like I totally transformed as a musician. Not to exaggerate, but they have such a different approach from us. And it was so clear from playing with them that it was like a switch.

**Nico:** It was about using music as a language and feeling the energy in the room because they don't speak much English. And they're at an age where they don't really use technology. So even if we say, "Oh, technology can connect us across the world," in this case, it's not that relevant. So it was possible only because we were traveling there and made this happen.

**Christian, I visited the KOMA office in Berlin a while ago and remember it feeling like an electronic sound laboratory where you were making all these wonderful devices—but also like a community space, where people could come check out what you're doing and hang out. How have you thought about shaping your workspace?**

**Christian:** I think it has changed a lot over the years but one thread that runs through the space where I am able to create: no one does anything by themselves, even if they think to do. Everybody builds upon the work of other people. So I think it's very important to gather a group of people that you feel comfortable with and you can bounce ideas off. Hang out, talk about stuff, exchange experiences. We opened a community space called Common Ground. Unfortunately we had to shut it down during Corona because of the restriction rules. But the four years that Common Ground was open were the best ever. We had events and workshops—at least one or two things every week. It was such a joyful, good time. It's like what the duo described—a constant influx of ideas, experiences, new concepts. It's just deeply, humanly enjoyable to live within a community that is good-willed and enjoy each other's company. It's a very big part of my world and my work to constantly connect with other people and see what comes out of it.

**On that subject, how did you all come together to work on developing this new instrument, the Chromaplane?**

**Christian:** Nico and Chris approached me and they were casually doing a business pitch, saying that they invented this instrument that they use a lot and think that other people could be interested in it, too. So they were looking for a partner for manufacturing and selling it. They sent me a couple of links to their work, and it just immediately grabbed my attention. It was very organic growth from there. It's just a really cool exchange of three human beings working together on a project they all love.

**Nico:** We see you and KOMA as one of the pillars of this vision of what DIY electronics and this kind of world is today. We have learned from it and we are excited to be part of it. It was not the first instrument that we built. We usually build just for ourselves. But with the Chromaplane, which I think the first prototype was in September 2021.

**Chris:** Yeah, it was the first time we made an instrument where we just had this longing to see other people use it.

**Nico:** But it was not just our feelings because we were using it and sharing it with people in very informal situations like studios and concerts. There was feedback from people we had never seen before.

**Chris:** I would describe it as this curiosity vortex. It's like there was nothing we could do as performers or musicians to detract attention away from this thing. For some reason, people would always ask about this instrument. And so it made us more curious about it. And they were like, it would be great if other people played it. And you know, before that, when we were making instruments, I would describe them as more sculptural.

**Nico:** Because these instruments were born in the artistic research residencies. So there was no need to think about a product or to take them outside of that.

**Chris:** When you make something that has this intended artistic purpose, kind of made just for us in the beginning, then all of these other design questions come up when you're considering it now as a product.

**I'd like to hear more about the role that building your own instruments plays in your music. You talked about being trained classical musicians on traditional instruments. What does building a new instrument that you have to invent new ways of playing offer as a starting point for creating music?**

**Chris:** Well, I'm a percussionist originally, and Nico is a pianist. I think as a percussionist, you kind of already have this conception that anything can be an instrument. Anything you can hit, it's percussion now. You learn to see the world through what objects sound like when you hit them. A lot of times in the contemporary classical percussion world, you're tasked with making your own instruments or creating your own setup. A composer will ask you to have a setup of five metal sounds or five wooden sounds or something like that.

And for us, as the duo, we want to take this from-scratch approach to our music. Start from the instrument creation all the way through to recording. By touching every part of the process, it imbues this creative energy into the work that is really important to us. So when we go to make music, we first think about the instrument. And then we think, "What kind of music does this instrument want to make?" That's where the musical concepts come from.

**Nico:** I have a similar discourse around piano, because of how it's been treated in the 20th century: prepared piano and then transferring to other kinds of keyboards and so on. What is very tiring in the long run with the piano is the keyboard interface. So it's not uncommon that I take on a more percussionist-like role in our music. That's been really interesting for me, because it makes me focus more on other kinds of skills, rhythmical skills and other things.

Then, because it's always the two of us, when we do live sets and we are touring constantly, the instruments become a sort of third presence on stage, a sort of third performer. They become like scenography, or they collaborate with us in creating this world in the concert.

**Christian, it seems like there's a little bit of that same ethos in what you're trying to do with a lot of KOMA's products. I think of the Field Kit, which is like a building block for musicians to explore the sounds around them and design their own instruments.**

**Christian:** Starting the company came out of the need to make something custom for me. Back in the day, it was effects pedals and this type of stuff, but it went in the direction of making more manufacturable or sellable products, with which of course you have to make compromises. And you're right, I think the Field Kit is a golden example of that. Even the enclosure itself—it comes in a wooden box—is a design decision because you can use the box as part of the instrument itself with the contact microphones, the solenoids, the springs to sort of create your own little playground to make experimental sounds.

I think it's very important to make an instrument your own. If you look at my synthesizers, for example, it's almost like a book. When you look at books of mine, there are coffee stains and little folds and stuff. I think if something looks slick and new, it's probably not being used a lot. And this is one of the reasons why I like the design of the Chromaplane that I think not everybody favors, because it's a really clean, plain—for some people boring—surface. But I like it, because, at least if it was mine, I would personalize it immediately. And some people have expressed that they're looking forward to making it their own. If you use a tool or you use a musical instrument, it sort of becomes this extension of your brain and of your body, of your nervous system.

**I like the description of the Chromaplane in your demo video as "an instrument for daydreaming." What does that mean to you?**

**Nico:** It's the idea that this instrument puts you in a creative state of mind, where you can imagine new things. I think that's true for any instrument, but maybe a tiny bit more because it's an instrument that looks a little bit unusual if you come from classical instruments or also from other kinds of modular synthesizers. So we really hope that it allows you to look beyond the normal reality that you work within. It's also something we try to

achieve through our music—our live sets, and so on. It's this aspect of transportation—that the sound can take you somewhere else and you can create a different world through the Chromaplane.

**Christian:** Often, when we design things, and say, "check out this new drum machine or synthesizer that I have," It's about, "Hey, can it do this? Can it do that? What's this knob? What's that? Can I change the color of this LED?" It gets very technical very quickly. But every time you sit someone down with a Chromaplane, you're like, here's a pickup. Use this. And then it's like they are gone. They immediately fall into this trance state of starting to play, and there's never any question of what can it do? People get it immediately and they start to daydream away. It's really astonishing to see that actually, that an instrument through how it is designed can actually achieve this type of state.

**I'm definitely attracted to instruments that are as much about having an experience as about producing something or getting a specific end result – things that encourage discovery.**

**Christian:** I think it should be an experience. The motto I go by when designing anything or thinking about product ideas – because of course there's a million product ideas every day – is literally just "is it fun to use or not?" Because if it's not fun to use, I'm not interested.

**Nico, in describing the Chromaplane in the Kickstarter video, you say, "you cannot do absolutely everything with this instrument, but you can do some very important things." I think that's a great framing for it. I'm curious about the important things it can do, but also about embracing what it can't do. How do limitations open up possibilities for you?**

**Chris:** Big topic for us.

**Nico:** Having worked with the Chromaplane for three years, we can say that it has a very beautiful sound. I think that's maybe the first requirement for a musical instrument. After three years, we are still exploring it and finding new sounds. So it's really like leaving some doors open for discovery. Even if on the surface, it looks simple, there's so much to look for. And I think that's what that sentence is about.

**Chris:** I'm a big fan of Ray and Charles Eames. They said design is willingly working within the constraints you're given. I really like the idea that willingness is the important thing—that you have these constraints and you're like, "OK, let's do something in this area." As a musician, that's what I love to do most. I like setting the constraints. And so the Chromaplane proposes a very deliberate and very restricted set of constraints, which is extremely unusual for this kind of instrument, because the function doesn't go there. The function goes toward as many features as possible in as small a place as possible. This is kind of on the opposite side of that.

It's an unusual thing to say, but I find the tuning concept extremely inspirational. I like the idea that I have to choose ten notes. There's this cerebral step where I'm thinking really critically about the relationship between the notes harmonically and melodically, what kind of melodic material can be played through what relationship of patterns and shapes. Then after that cerebral part is done, those constraints are set, it's just about playing.

In terms of the very important things, I love the expressivity of it. There's no sort of encoding or decoding. We're really just picking up this electromagnetic field. I find it to be really expressive and physical.

**Nico:** I think the Chromaplane is a poem instead of being a book. All the restrictions – it has to be this amount of syllables in this amount of paragraphs, but then you get some other kind of emergent expression and meaning from that.

**Recommendations:**

**Christian:**

Book: *The Creative Act: A Way of Being* by Rick Rubin. A really nice read, essentially a mixture between buddhist

teachings, poems and a thought model behind creative thinking. Probably been recommended a thousand times on this blog already, so as an alternative here is one of my favorite science fiction novels: [The Light of Other Days](#) by Stephan Baxter.

Song: [Toccata and Fugue in D minor](#), BWV 565 as arranged by Stokowski, played by the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra. Gives me the shivers every time.

Album: [Music for Zen Meditation And Other Joys](#), Tony Scott. Jazz musician goes full Zen mode in the 60s.

Video: ["Without You,"](#) Bobby Conn: Just such a weird video. Very inspiring. Everybody should watch it.

#### **Chris and Nico:**

Dieter Rams: [Ten Principles for Good Design](#)

[Reminded by the Instruments](#), by You Nakai

Zaatar bread

Don't wait to travel

Go to a live event on the opposite side of the city where you live

#### Name

Nicoletta Favari, Christopher Salvit, and Christian Zollner

#### Vocation

musicians and musical instrument designers

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Nicoletta, Christian, and Chris with the Chromaplane