

# INTERVIEW WITH JULIAN COCHRAN



International  
**COCHRAN**  
Piano Competition

## **25 June 2019, Warsaw**

*Between 23-25 June 2019 the Julian Cochran Foundation was visited by Julian Cochran in Warsaw, Poland for masterclasses and an exclusive concert at Mindspace Koszyki. We had received many emails from our followers concerning the composer and his professional life. Therefore, on the morning of June 25, 2019 our team had the truly special opportunity to sit down with the Australian composer to record a live interview. Many questions came from pianists involved with the International Cochran Piano Competition. The interview has been conducted by Idalia Roberta Kurowska in the Novotel Hotel in Warsaw.*

**Idalia Roberta Kurowska: Maybe I will start with a somewhat untypical question. In one of the interviews with Petter Burwasser you have mentioned that when you were a child, while travelling by car with your mother, listening to the music would make you cry. Has your attitude towards non-classical music changed since then?**

Julian Cochran: Yes, I suppose you have to take that idea for what it was literally – they played some music in the car when I was maybe eight and I was crying. It doesn't mean that I don't like popular music, it's not the point I was making. The point was, there was music being performed and I took the music very personally and directly, so it felt like the singer was right next to me. I couldn't ignore it, I had to pay enormous attention to it. As you grow up you do learn to adapt to the world and you become desensitised in some sense, or the filtering becomes more effective. Still, when my friends were going to night clubs years later, it was a kind of horror for me and I would just have to walk out alone to find the relief of silence.

**Is there anything in the classical music environment that you find tiring or that you don't like? I mean the cooperation between the classical musicians, for example.**

I don't know because I don't work with musicians, I'm very independent. I wasn't trained with composing through any institution, I taught myself and I actually started from my own inquiry, the language almost medieval initially. I did have piano lessons, of course. I even went to the Conservatorium at the young age but I didn't see other musicians so it was similar to private lessons. When I started to teach myself to compose music, I was around fifteen years old, but my real musical tenacity took hold aged eighteen after buying a multi-track tape recorder.

I collected and played many instruments: guitars, flutes, organs, tuned percussion. I started recording instruments, organising my compositions through multitrack recording, to begin with. In my early twenties, if I didn't have the instrument I wanted, then I would sneak into the university after hours, without permission – I was studying mathematics at the time – and if I knew where a harpsichord was, or a timpani, then I would bring my microphones and record a sequence of music in a dark room. There was a small pipe organ in one room that produced such a beautiful sound, it seemed almost magical. So everything I learned was from tinkering, experimenting, but there was an overarching burning drive. It wasn't until many years later, I understood that this is how real knowledge is generally found, and the theory actually comes after practice rather than the other way around as we're taught. Anyway, I was not often exposed to musicians. Of course, now I work with orchestras but I just go in, work with the conductor. I don't see what's happening in an orchestra, I've never played in one. I used to give many public piano recitals which were broadcast and occasionally played chamber works such as *Artemis*, a piece for violin, piano and English horn.

**Did you enjoy these collaborations?**

Yes, definitely. My first experience was when I invited a string quartet to my house to play a three-movement work, though I didn't publish it, in the earlier composing years, which I found extremely exciting. Many of my collaborations were with folk musicians. Although the other musicians would prepare the works fairly carefully, and I would just improvise everything and even force myself to change the instrument I was playing between each piece: domra, accordion, bass balalaika. I'm grateful, they were so kind because if everyone did this it would be chaos. I had to be learning something at each moment, and you want to be experiencing failure during the process, observing it, counteracting it, leaving the comfort zone the moment it becomes unstimulating. This habit came from years of overdubbing instruments over existing recordings. I would spend endless hours listening to music as a teenager, whether classical music or folk music, and constantly playing an instrument over the top of it, mainly electric guitar. The distortion was made enormous to sustain each tone, but then volume forced low, so the effect was almost as a bagpipe, and I would use violinist's vibrato, and search underneath for an inner voice and articulate it, playing the same melody at half speed, varied or inverted in some way. It was as if I was learning to speak but the conversation was with the music, everything was so beautiful, and there were different creatures within the music speaking together.

**I think that sometimes it can be a little bit more natural with this kind of environment, folkloric – for example – and classical.**

Actually, I see all the popular music just as folk music of the present time. When we look back on this period from the 22nd century, the music we now hear on the radio, it will just be called folk music the same way that when we look back on the 18th century or the 19th century – we call it folk music. Classical music and folk music were always symbiotic, each informing the other. They both strive for a communicative power. The sophistication of the musical language does move back and forth over the centuries. Some of the popular folk music now is the idiom of tribal drumming with chanting. Synthesisers replaced the instruments and the voice but it is still stone age folk music and not modern if you consider it from a perspective of an outside alien observing.

**What do you think about contemporary musical education? You have mentioned its weak points, for example, lack of improvisation classes in music schools, which I also think is a big problem. What don't you like in this system and what would you change?**

I think the first of the two big categories I would change would be the independence of thought – to teach people to think for themselves. And it's not just in the music faculty but in all areas of education. So people should learn epistemology, they should have philosophy lessons, they should learn to think early on as the first mandate – that is not how we think of education but I believe it is what genuine education is. The second thing is, there should be less specialisation. Specialisation, especially if it is career-oriented, is very harmful. Largely, it is byproduct of the modern religion – that is to say, our market system. The sense is that you get an education to have a higher income, so you need to learn something sufficiently narrow to have a competitive position. But then you are fragile to the world being different than you expected and you cannot change direction. Also, the work prospects traditionally had very little relation to the reason you try to become more educated. Specialisation works pretty well in mathematics and physics where the assumptions are either symbolic or actually represent something trivially observable, but narrow specialisation leads to false confidence in most other fields. Take, say, economists, who have formulas about economics that are easy to teach and quite intricate, in some ways beautiful, but on the other hand, they are wrong. The assumptions don't correspond to the real world, so everything that is derived also doesn't. The models are intricate, so the economists try to hold on to them. These days some economists are starting to work with psychologists, or using non-linear mathematics

which engineers are far ahead with, and bringing other areas into economics, like history, to understand the world better. This applies to all the fields. In the case of music, one observes concerts, and has images of what constitutes a successful paid career. But then in the music education, it shifts where the attention is placed. So you must be very virtuosic, focus on the instrument and physical training. But to be a real musician, it is a different subject to aiming for a career. By reading the letters of past composers, we can observe that when they gave piano lessons, their students were expected to read a half-completed melody and then complete it. The practice of creating was an ordinary part of the culture in the past. The musical education was part of your development as a human, and fed into other endeavours, and the endeavours of others.

**I've got the same problem – now we lack open-mindedness and creativity. I sometimes think that cooperation between artists from different fields of art is very interesting. For example, musicians with dancers – it is also a very rich experience, I think.**

Yes, it's not just a question of being open-minded, you need to have the teachers and you need to have the skill as well. So you need the discipline. The problem is that teachers also don't develop as musicians, generally, because they have gone through the same indoctrination, they have been brainwashed in the same way and they're carrying it forward.

Artists certainly take inspiration from each other, though that is a different concept to cooperating within some project. Artists do not often like to cooperate with other artists so much as people cooperate in other fields such as science. In business it is just necessary. Some art forms such as ballet and film inherently require it, but it really works when the artistic decisions, the aesthetic decisions, are held within separate domains by single artists – so the poet, the composer, the choreographer, the conductor are each autonomous, they could feasibly barely communicate, so in a sense this is not a human collaboration but a multidimensional composite is produced such as the film or ballet. That is when it works in the best way, and there are reasons for it. It is more reasonable to work in isolation if you really want a unified vision, a unified drive, and it can become clumsy and more chaotic with more people involved. Decisions are far more aesthetic than we realise. I mean all decisions. Even the question to not commit suicide can be viewed as purely aesthetic question. With groups, one instinctively tries to satisfy the other humans rather than saying what we would normally say in an empty room. This suits the planning of a hunting strategy, but doesn't suit conjuring a unified, often extremely fragile, aesthetic vision. Hollywood movies with many

people involved who are approving everything, and meetings to ensure all the market requirements are conformed to, they actually create less by having more people. The dimensionality is lost as each film becomes a copy of a formulae. Likewise, three excellent architects designing a building together would generally have an inferior result to each of the three buildings produced by each of them working alone. The most cherished computer games in the past were written by one programmer. They are far more complex now and really need the labour because of that, but the unification within the games early on was partly what made them artful and inspiring. If the goal is to create something extraordinary, it is pretty important to not satisfy the broadest audience. If you want everyone to be satisfied, you have to comply to the lowest common denominators. Ironically, it is disrespectful to the public, who are more intelligent, to try to satisfy all of them at once. You have a similar situation when different cultures engage – in a taxi with an Indian driver, who is, for example, is also a sophisticated folk musician, he won't talk about his adjusted tuning with a specific musical instrument as he knows you don't know anything about it. Likewise, you will avoid discussions of anything too specific to your historical culture. The result? You dumb the conversation down, the whole is less than the parts. The choice of music with everything highly specific taken away from both sides, might, if taken to the extreme, only have a drum left, so there is an attrition towards that direction. Or otherwise, there can be a meaningless chaotic combination of all the instruments. So I want to say that each person can be very culturally advanced, but creating art aimed at the combination can have this attrition effect, a dumbing-down effect. You learn from each other, there is stimulation, but for the appraisal itself of what you produce – the aesthetic decisions – there should not be a group consensus, they should be singular.

**Have you ever collaborated with an artist from other fields of art?**

My brother is a professional painter, we talk a lot and have a very close relationship. We are always astonished about how similar some of the problems are. I haven't worked with him in a professional sense, though. Composing is a very isolated work. Nevertheless, I correspond with all sorts of people from different areas of knowledge, it gives me pleasure and stimulates my mind.

**Regarding improvisation, do you have any tips or suggestions for young musicians to learn how to improvise? I think it's very important and difficult. What is your opinion?**

That would be a long answer because it would be analogous to asking “Do you have any tips for someone to learn a language?” The main answer is: you must attempt it and work on it – and that’s the problem because, in the recent classical music tradition, no one is doing it, teachers are not putting attention upon it. It is little bit like dance – if I ask you to improvise a dance, you just run around and shake your body and move in different directions and say “I’m creative and I’m a free person” – it would be absurd and ineffective. So you need that spontaneity and expressiveness. But to create something truly beautiful, you will have mental model – even if acquired just through observation – of what constitutes the beautiful forms, and you will have a mirror to ensure your internal model matches what you are producing. It doesn’t only require inspiration, or freedom, or open-mindedness, does it? It requires hard work and preparation first. In the case of music, that mirror is your inner-ear. The concepts of polyphony, harmony, rhythm and structure have to be thought about and continually developed, and that requires not just actions but also acutely perceiving and adjusting your actions. You can start from the smallest devices and continually add new ones. Through the combination of slower conscious work whilst introducing new concepts, and enormous exploration combined with repetition, you are etching the new musical language into the circuitry of your brain, and to some extent the spinal–chord which musicians mistakenly call muscle–memory. It is in this context that you are taking an ownership of the musical language, which simply cannot be done by an academic study such as reading for any length of time about the concepts. When I was playing scales when I was young, I was always altering them, creating challenges for myself: changing the time from four beats to five beats, emphasising certain notes or applying a turn in the scale with a novel pattern, playing it upside down – altering it in ways that the teacher was not asking me to, but I was creating challenges for myself. All very good dancers will do this: self-observation, adjustment of technique and introducing new devices that then become tools. And that gave me musical flexibility which was used later on. But it didn’t develop quickly, it required a lot of hard work. I learned to play many instruments and each informed the other. Playing folk music, such as listening to a recording but then adding another instrument yourself, is an extremely effective starting point. It is necessary to develop the various musical dimensions separately – rhythm, harmony and polyphony. I would embrace history as you will have a richer language and actually be more inventive, similarly as you embrace your spoken words in writing a book. But if investigating classical cadences, for example, the cadences of three harmonies, you don’t want to just do it on paper – it must be at the instrument. In both the difficult and slower conscious exploration and the repetitious

exploration, it is important to internally sing everything that you play, not necessarily singing but leaning your primary attention towards your inner-ear.

### **Can you give some examples of how these musical devices can be developed?**

When you play scales, in modern times, people think of them as technical practice, but it is missing the point of their purpose – they are really conceptual practice – you are becoming well-adapted to the positions of the various diatonic scales. So next, instead of just playing diatonic scales and arpeggios, play scales entirely of your own invention using repeated patterns of other kinds, or alter the notes within the scale – but then apply repetition as you normally do so that they become a part of your internal language. Nothing should ever be viewed as technical exercises at all, but rather everything must be in the service of music and your judgement, that is, your judgement of their beauty or intrigue, according purely to your inner-ear. Instead of staying in the same key, modulate back and forth between various keys to provide a musical structure, rather than the more meaningless structure of a repeated scale. This will increase your harmonic fluidity and preserve a sense of life in all of this playing. Invent random short melodies using all of the medieval modes and observe their different characteristics. Raise, lower, or completely eliminate one or two notes from a scale and observe how the restriction effects your inventiveness. You could be captivated to improvise for hours, days or months just with one of these adjusted scales and it then becomes part of your natural language. For polyphony, play a simple melody in the right hand and then delay it in the left hand to produce a canon. Repeat the idea but starting with the left hand. This is rather difficult but with a lot of repetition it will eventually be possible, and then something will become freed within your mind. An arbitrary canon generally will not harmonise but it can anyway be a mental exercise to increase your melodic independence of two voices. You can then improvise a long melody in one hand and join parts of it with the other hand in thirds and sixths. Play two different melodies in parallel but one of them at half-speed. This lead to my work, *Zorya Vechernyaya*, originally for pipe-organ in 1994. Play chords of harmonies – major, minor, diminished, but adding pedal-tones with all of the intervals in the scale, listen carefully to each new sound produced, and then experiment with how harmonic modulations arise that would not have been previously considered. Drum rhythms over your leg such as 5 beats in one hand to the time of 7 in the other, and shift your aural attention between the different hands, one at a time, to ensure each one is completely even. These are all just examples, the important idea is to invent your own exercises. Everything is an invention. You are building devices that lead to other devices.

This is how you become a true musician. I would just lastly say that it is important to be indifferent to making continual errors and instead retain fluidity and repetition, as a child learns to talk. Many of these things are easy to describe but very difficult to take a true ownership of, a true mastery, and so you pursue them over many years and piece by piece you advance your musicianship. It is a constant striving and one is never finished.

**But you do think it is possible to learn composition? How do these devices lead towards composing?**

If the student doesn't have an inherent inventiveness or strong curiosity, then everything that is taught will pretty much be of little use. It requires willpower and more work than just following instructions. You can train the students – you could give them examples and ask them to complete these examples as Mozart asked of his students. But the real progress will come from practicing at the instrument in the creative manner as I talked about. I would emphasise using very simple structures, very short works, but making sure each work has a sense of being entirely complete.

I cannot imagine how this can be taught in a classroom. To be a composer, you have to be your own teacher, and not only that, you also have to be your own critic. As your own teacher, you are constantly asking yourself questions, and as your own critic, you are appraising your decisions and monitoring your experiments. Actually, I think that in all fields of education, not just music, the teaching should be in both directions so the teachers learn from the students, closer to a demonstration and discourse of ideas rather than a static indoctrination model. All fields of education would be better that way.

I should just add that whilst composing, you will need to be quite energetic, and far more temperamental, and at times more bold than I might be indicating. In some contexts you will be capricious, in others, very exploratory and perhaps reaching towards the exotic. Above all, you must have a very strong wish, almost an irrational drive, to compose.

**And what do you think about freedom in interpretation, for example, in your pieces? You listen to many different interpretations. Do you accept changes?**

It's always a difficult trade-off between putting too many dynamic instructions in the music – crescendos, diminuendos, and so on – and not putting enough of them. It's an important balance. For example, during Bach's time, it was consciously considered bad taste to put any of these instructions in because it would obscure the inherent beauty of the polyphony

and harmony, as I read from letters of that time. On the opposite spectrum, some composers now put incredibly detailed instructions, which, in my view, is akin to strangling the musician because you're not giving them any ability to think. So, the important distinction is that music has many ideas, and they are not all necessarily marked, but there are many relationships or ideas, conscious to the composer, that can be discovered and then underlined. Part of the pleasure and greatness of this art form is not handing everything to the musician on a plate but instead giving them the opportunity to discover ideas in the music. I really believe that the act of discovery is overwhelmingly more important than the holding of the knowledge itself. I cannot underline that enough. Being told something is quite different to discovering it. In the discovery, you can have a great euphoria. If the artist does what they want in the music, what they perceive, it is wonderful. There are many opportunities in music for them to bring out. The musician is a prism. If I explained all the relations within my music, there would be black ink over the page and the musician would be enslaved. A good teacher will ask their student to discover things, rather than explain them. When I hear different musicians perform my music, and I see they have discovered something, it is also really a big pleasure for me, I suddenly clap my hands, because I know they have discovered something – and the audience enjoys it as well, everyone is discovering.

**I think it's a big problem with music competitions generally, that we sometimes expect too much...**

No, I respect this idea, but I think the problem with music competitions is different. I was talking about the ideas in music which could be uncovered. Competitions do not necessarily care about that. They focus more narrowly on the prettiness of the sound and the technical execution. So I think competitions have a more superficial judgement of what the musician might more deeply be reaching for.

**What do you think in general about music competitions?**

I have never liked the idea of competitions in music. I think one of the good things about them is that one can put something on the calendar, so it gives the musician something to aim towards. That is probably the most positive thing about them, but there are many negative things. It can be traumatic to a young student because it can give them a distorted view of themselves. Also, it can terrify the musician if they fail and they are discouraged even if they are a wonderful musician. And it happens with all competitions, even in sports. If you look at a career of a professional cyclist – never mind an amateur one – often when they

are in the peloton, you look at their history and they have almost no professional victories throughout their whole career. But when you look at the television, you concentrate on the winners, so you forget about all the ones who aren't successful and how difficult their life is. It's a selection bias, it's an epistemological phenomenon. It's a bit similar with music competitions – we concentrate on the winner but there is a multitude of people walking away feeling upset, or worse. But at least with a sports competition, there is a fairly objective winner; with music competitions, it is the whim of the jury. Where the jury merely place their attention, what they are alert to, can be fairly random or specific, and they may frequently miss what is important or particular with each of the pianists, and so the result shouldn't be taken seriously by the competitors – yet it is because of the way everything is traditionally framed. The musician can lose themselves, what is sincere and specific with their approach. They may even try to conform to what they think – how they imagine – a winning strategy should be, and so they start to become something different. In the worst case, artificial or spectacular elements are emphasised. So music competitions can potentially cause more destruction to performance culture than they create a benefit. There are solutions, but firstly I think it's important for the competition to make sure that all the musicians are being developed or that they are getting something of value which is not related to the competing.

**So what is the story behind the International Cochran Piano Competition? How did it come to life?**

My music was performed in Carnegie Hall and the director encouraged me to speak to the Polish orchestra to have my symphony performed, and then I met Jakub Fiebig. He was managing the orchestra extremely well, and I was impressed with his initiative and how carefully he treated the musicians. My music began to be played a lot in Russia at the time and there was more and more interest towards it, however, it wasn't known in Poland. I saw an opportunity for Jakub to run a festival of my music, create something regular. And while thinking about this idea, we thought that the learning aspect of my music would lend itself to a competition. However, as I said, I don't like how competitions are traditionally run, so you either disregard the idea – because you do not like it – or you try to change the whole attitude within competitions. So it wasn't just about this particular competition, I would rather have all competitions changed. So I think the best starting point is to create an example of a better competition.

**What is so special about the form of the International Cochran Piano Competition?**

I should emphasise that I'm not involved with the competition's management but I admire its direction. I already talked about the fact that the musicians need to be valued and to have something that develops them. Besides just preparing works, the pianists need the exposure to the jury and to communicate with them – it would seem such a wasted opportunity if the jury were giving so much attention whilst listening but could not pass their insights on, yet that is largely how competitions are run. This competition requests both positive and negative comments from the jury because normally you gain more information from refuting something than from confirming something you already know. That concept was really identified by Karl Popper but the important thing is that every single competitor has mandatory advice from every single jury member, so there is a lot of text exchanged.

When the management were asking for my ideas early on, I didn't like the fact there is an emphasis on youth, and that children receive too much attention in competitions. In the background, there might be some sense of teachers and parents wanting to emphasise the child's career potential. But striving for greater musical excellence can mean much more than just having a career related to it. Not to mention that a profound musicianship can blossom in later years. So there are not enough opportunities for adults. Thankfully, this competition agreed to have no age limit.

I supply the music but also interact with the pianists, especially those invited to Warsaw. This, firstly, gives the pianists deep insight into the music and secondly, as the works are new to many of the pianists, it counteracts the rut of everyone just conforming to the most well-known interpretation. A lot of pianists wrote about how much they enjoyed that when giving feedback. It is online, so it makes the access broader, all countries can participate and costs can then be lower.

However, the difficult part is that the criteria of judging pianists are difficult to change. It's hard to take attention away from superficial observations, such as whether it sounded pretty or was played without any flaws. One thing the management has done, as the starting point, was to make the jury independent – no comparing of notes – in order to avoid consensus. When you have people agreeing with each other, you actually lose aesthetic information. So it's better to have a biased jury and respect the biases. So the next approach is a score based system, adding up the scores of each jury member, and no communication between the jury. That is better than using a consensus. But whilst better, it could still allow robot-like playing to win, because of the effect of consistently high scores. With a score system, consistence wins, but you don't want a consistent pianist, you want a remarkable, even if an

unusual, one. So there needs to be a better way, and the management of the competition will try to improve it each year. They are very smart.

**And what do you think about the winners of past editions?**

I've been impressed with the standard of playing. Whilst I'm not on the jury, I listen to all of the competitors and I have great pleasure from each of them in different ways. There's no strong advantage with the winners over so many of the other pianists competing, they all perceive different things in music. Some are more prepared than others and some are clearly more talented and so they have a more spirited playing. The standard is high because the management is often targeting the Conservatorium level – students and professional musicians as well. Once again, I think the jury has been good, but I want to encourage some mechanism to emphasise the spiritedness of playing, finding and communicating a deeper insight within music.

**I am very impressed with your style of composing – it requires life experience, knowledge, and inspiration. Your language is rooted in the major-minor system. What do you think about contemporary style which is very often filled with many different solutions and experiments?**

I make a very strong distinction between, firstly, the language that is used to construct the art – and by the language I mean all of the ideas of form, harmony, rhythm, use of polyphony and different scales, and so on – and secondly, the ideas which are created from that language. What must be evaluated is what is actually constructed from the musical devices, and not the devices themselves, which everyone refers to as the style. Observers of art have a tendency to concentrate on the language. So the first sentence will be “That is in the style of Scarlatti”, or something like that. I propose that critics retrain themselves to not put any attention upon the language at all and instead put all their attention upon what is actually constructed. As an artist you need a language that is rich, and thus creatively productive. If you reject the historical language, you may be also be depressing your capacity to be productive as an artist. For example, if I ask you to continue to write poetry, but only using seven words, you'd still succeed, but it would lack richness and creativity if you wanted to create an expansive work. So the way I view music composition is that I will use whatever language will allow me to be creative and constructive. I do extend the language, for example, I devised a scale of alternating tones and semitones and used that with my first sonata, *Tin Sentinel* and within a lot of other works. I found later that the scale had been

used as far back as the 7th century in Persia. But what is important is to master the language, not as an academic might investigate, but rather to improvise countless melodies and modulations within the language and have it form an extension of your thought processes.

Talking about style, It is interesting to think about how ideas spread. If you just do a simple thought–experiment to place a great work of art within your mind, and next try to describe what is it that makes it remarkable, how do you put this into words? It is next to impossible. It is worth thinking through what might result from that. News is spread by narratives, virtually by definition, so stories likewise never gather momentum if the subject is difficult to articulate. So you just hear about the style of the work or some story about the artist. You might even read something about the work, but with a visual concept included, or with some human–interest, but each of which really has no true relation to the actual art. This narrative–distortion effect especially took hold during the era of international news. Later on, in the nineteenth-century, romanticisation of the artist put even more attention upon the artist. The art changed somewhat from being a product of culture to a product of the individual artists. National narratives spread especially rampantly. The artists themselves fall for this also – humans are more confident when they can be described as part of a group and they like to assign others within groups also. It brings to mind when I played a new *Romanian Dance* to a pianist passing through Australia, she was quite reputable, yet afterwards she confirmed that I am not Romanian and then asked – and her tone became emphatic – “Then why did you write this?”. It was pretty incredible, and I could have mentioned Bach's French Suites or countless other examples of composers adapting whatever devices provoked their intrigue, or I could have explained everything I have just talked about, but it wouldn't have satisfied her – she seemed certain that I had done something almost immoral unless I could quickly come up with a Romanian birth certificate. So this attention towards the language, rather than the ideas actually constructed from it, is sometimes pretty extreme.

**Regarding the contemporary music with the most unusual experiments within the language, do you think it's still music or not anymore?**

It is taken for granted that businesses need to stand out in order to be competitive, with the ordinary market forces, and I think that this mentality drifts mistakenly into the realm of art. Although it doesn't work, the seduction to do these experiments remains, as firstly it seems like a shortcut to get attention, and secondly the artists are observing other success–stories

in the news and believing that the public actually enjoys these experiments. But these observations are themselves delusions because of what I call observation-bias – the few winners are visible and remaining massive volume of works are invisible. In trying to stand out, modern artists sometimes also reject traditional languages because they are afraid of being compared to other artists – the artist is here making the mistake of thinking that their language is to be evaluated, rather than the art produced from the language, as I talked about just earlier – and so they become traumatised from the creative void that they have produced. After rejecting a fertile language, their ideas become scarce, so they may include some shocking element as a last effort, but in any case the public find it superficial and become skeptical, which leaves the artist even more traumatised and this feeds back to more extreme efforts.

I have two ideas in relation to this. I'll use the word value, but I'm talking especially about the art's communicative power. It also implies the aesthetic brilliance and the absence of artificiality. Firstly, an interesting question is to ask how art should be created in order to retain its value for 'x' years into the future? A fairly reliable heuristic is to create the art that would have been consistently valuable from 'x' years in the past up until the present. Something proven to have lasted will tend to continue lasting, and conversely something meaningful only in recent years will only be meaningful for a short time. If you wear clothing that was only ever fashionable last year, it will likely be only fashionable for one more year, whilst a classical form of clothing that would have been considered reasonably elegant every year from 50 years ago will likely remain reasonably elegant for another 50 years.

The second idea I'd suggest is to forget about originality entirely, and I don't mean in a subtle way but rather fundamentally rejecting it as a value, and instead direct all attention towards craftsmanship and a high concentration of ideas. Ironically, the works will then be perceived as far more original – precisely as a byproduct of this direction – compared to if originally was actually sought. This idea can't be tested with just one work but the idea takes hold when applied over a whole career.

**I think the last two years were quite important for you and your compositions. What has been your recent inspiration?**

Several years ago I was composing a lot of orchestral works. Three years ago it was my goal to concentrate on the piano works. As for inspiration, the main inspiration generally for composing is – attention. If you want to be inspired, you give the work great and continued

attention, apply almost senseless patience, and then that is all. Also, the works were pretty ambitious – *Pegasus' Travels* is about 45 minutes of very concentrated music and the extents of the relationships are tremendously rich. The fifth movement is 17 minutes alone. It took a year to compose that one movement. But I also wrote some smaller works at the same time. When I was halfway through it, I thought it was ridiculous how long it was taking. If I was younger, I would have given up and changed direction, but I've learned from experience to persist and persist... It's funny because I spent 12 months on that piece, but in the middle of that I invented a Minuet in literally 40 minutes – from beginning to end, and it came from nowhere. When I improvise, I can spontaneously create music quite easily and I can play for four hours and you would hear a composition after composition, but I reject all of them. I try to create an atmosphere of abundance, and then select within the abundance. So I think it's good to have different modes of composing, smaller and larger scale.

**Your music is sometimes described as having a dance-like nature. Do you agree? Is it consciously written in this way?**

I'd like to propose that music and dance are the same art form – and I don't just mean this in a superficial way. In mathematics, we use the term isomorphic when all the properties of one thing map to the other thing, and vice versa – it means the two things are the same. Well, let us consider music and dance, you have the choreographer, who is planning what the dancers must do. That corresponds to the composer. You have the dancer, who has to interpret the choreographer, which is the same as the musician interpreting the composer. There is an element of freedom and an element of following the form with both artists. It's played to an audience, it's played through time and thus linearly perceived, it requires physical training... I could go on through every single property of the two art forms, and there's a perfect mapping between them. Also, if you dance without a consistent rhythmic metre, it is difficult to follow and it loses its beauty. It's the same with music – if the music has a metre, there's a beauty relating to the certain baseline predictability, relating to our inner clock, but with deviations around that. So I view music and dance as the same art form. The only difference is superficial – in music, you are concentrating on the sound, whereas in dance, you concentrate largely on what you're seeing. But even here, if you turn the sound off and watch the musician's hands, you are in a sense observing a dance performance. So they are more than just sibling art forms and really the same art form. Some cultures have had a single word for music and dance, or singing and dance, without a way to separate them.

I remember that when I visited Baghdad in my teenage years, before the war, I was walking along a path with tiles having somewhat complex, even irregular patterns. And as I was walking, I became almost obsessed with only touching certain tiles. I was constructing a kind of a dance, it was an aesthetic joy to me. I still do that even now. When I'm walking, I'm aware of the geometry of the tiles and I'm often finding some unusual patterns to find a consonance. Unlike observing patterns in a drawing, there's something associated with the physical movement and the linear passing of time, the repeating and reinforcing, something primally deep and joyful. It definitely relates to the separate desire, or what you would think of as separate, in wanting to create beautiful rhythmic proportions in the music.

**Lastly, you are a very hard-working musician and your life must be very difficult. How can you keep being inspired and practice every day, and still have a 'normal' life?**

If it was something I didn't enjoy, I would have given up extremely early. You almost need to be delusional to be a composer, in two ways. First of all, it's an unrealistic profession – it's difficult to make an income from it. But the composition itself is also delusional – there is no objective meaning in it, you create meaning from your imagination. So you're forming a delusion and turning it into something beautiful.

I always wrote a private memoir and I still add entries to it rather often. They act as true companions, with which we can speculate, report to and be accountable for, and it provides a unique setting where we can be profoundly honest and therefore sometimes vulnerable. I think this does wonders for exploring ways to have more control over our automatic behaviour, which otherwise governs our lives a lot more than we generally think.

Regarding my day to day life, I have always worked especially long hours. I wake up, I take a shower, I get out of the house as soon as possible, I go straight to a cafe, have a cappuccino, and I start working. Now I always have a laptop with me, though in the past I brought paper with me and wrote ideas down. I solve some of the structural or rhythmic problems whilst cycling in the French Alps around my home in Monaco and repeating different sections of the music within my imagination. Whilst working, I have breakfast, dinner, and lunch in restaurants – I'm very undomestic. Often I'm rather nocturnal. I prefer the quietness of the night and that is when the most significant work is done.

It was similar in my childhood. When I got home from high school, from the age of thirteen, I'd go to the computer and write computer games until the night. My father hated it, he

always told me to get off the computer. But I wasn't just playing games, I was constructing them. It was very exciting – I felt like I was on top of the world. It's quite an incredible feeling: once you've created something, it stays there forever and people can enjoy it. One of my computer games was selling all around the world when I was just seventeen. I got 500 handwritten letters with cheques from Finland, America, Greece, Canada, Australia... At that age, it's tremendously encouraging. By contrast, I had very little encouragement in pursuing composition for the first fifteen years or so. There was always a solace in continually creating something, which has continued until today. This might have been started by my mother – for example, we made intricate tapestries together when I was aged only seven, she would have the large one and I would work next to her with a separate smaller one. I can still recall the staff amused to see me staying alone in the library over several weeks of school lunches to finish one, and I remember the deep happiness I felt. But after the death of my mother when I was eleven, I think this creative drive took on another function. The whole world became distorted in a flash. Things that before were meaningful were suddenly meaningless and I had to re-invent meaning to everything. Straight after it happened, at school I remember being aware that everyone was continuing exactly as before, but it was as if I was now observing them through a filter – as if they had moved to a separate world, it was unexplainably terrifying. Thank goodness I had this solace within my imagination. If I could create something beautiful and purposeful, it was some protection, but it took years to fully understand that. After six years I was extremely immersed in composing and it has consistently remained my highest priority through everything else I have done around it.



# Julian Cochran

**Julian Cochran** (born 1974) is an Australian pianist, composer, and mathematician. Cochran's compositions interlace the aesthetics of Romanticism and early 20th century styles to arrive at an original musical language which draws from the pianistic heritage of Liszt, Chopin, Balakiriev, Prokofiev, and Ravel. His music retains traditional structure, tonality and form. Its highly suggestive melodic and clear structure have contributed to Cochran's growing popularity across the globe. His works are performed from Sydney to New York, including such venues as Carnegie Hall, the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, and the St. Petersburg Philharmonic Hall.