
Zubin Kanga

Piano

Manchester Collective/ Laurence Osborn commission (world premiere) RNCM (October 2024)

"The inspiration for Laurence Osborn's newest concerto for keyboards (piano and MIDI keyboard) and string orchestra, *Schiller's Piano*, co-commissioned by Zubin Kanga and Manchester Collective, has an intriguing origin. The title refers to a story about Buchenwald concentration camp inmates who were forced by the Nazis to create a replica of Friedrich Schiller's historic piano. The real piano was hidden, while the replica – an empty shell – was displayed. The piece featured a panoply of fine musical ideas, from field recordings of birdsong and samples of the piano's physical components – wood, brass, felt, and wire – to virtuosic keyboard passages and gentle singing. Yet, something felt off, lacking the cohesive force needed to gel its individual elements together. Despite this, the combined efforts of conductor Aaron Holloway-Nahum, pianist Kanga and the Collective were impressive. Particularly exciting was Kanga's virtuosic handling of both the piano and keyboard, especially in the more rhythmically challenging sections, as well as his intimate performance of *Das Buchenwaldlied*, a song composed in 1938 for the concentration camp."
- Marat Ingeldeev, *BachTrack*

"*Schiller's Piano*, by Laurence Osborn, a concerto in which the soloist, Zubin Kanga, had a second, electronic keyboard (for sampled sounds) atop his piano [*see picture*], and the composer supervised the electronic effects from the sound desk at the rear of the stalls seats, while Aaron Holloway-Nahum conducted the acoustic musicians. There is a detailed allusive story behind the title, as Osborn tells us he was moved by the story of how inmates of the Buchenwald concentration camp were made by the Nazis to construct a counterfeit of an historical piano that once belonged to the great poet-dramatist Friedrich Schiller, so that the real one could be hidden away. Only it wasn't a piano at all, just an empty shell to be put on display instead.

The piece has seven sections, the inner five titled after materials that go into piano-making – wood, brass, felt, wire – and using sampled sounds based on working with those elements. There is also much electronic "ambience" comprised of field recordings. I have to say it helps to have the section titles to identify the materials used in the sampled sounds: scraping, whining, scrubbing and something almost like tap-dancing were the impressions of them purely as aural effects. The rustles, rumbles and birdsong from the field recordings seemed far more prominent, and, since the piano is given much to do also, the complications of the resulting mixes and blendings were considerable. The best impressions (for me) came when the purely musical elements of the composition shone most clearly, through string instruments alone or single-note lines, and as the pianist becomes singer in the quiet and utterly moving contribution of the 1938-written *Das Buchenwaldlied*, which enters in the next-to-last section. The concert's title, "Fever Dreams" was an apt reflection of this."
- Robert Beale, *The Arts Desk*

Cyborg Pianist (CD) NMC (September 2023)

"The Australian-born pianist and composer Zubin Kanga's current research project, *Cyborg Soloists*, explores technology-driven keyboard music. A stunning piano virtuoso, he uses multiple types of keyboards, capable of playing microtones and seamless glissandi, plus new forms of interaction, including wearables. His Sept. 30 concert at Kings Place, in London, launched his new album and featured four world premieres and two pieces he premiered last year; most are based on reimagining standard piano figuration or music of the past. ...

Zubin Kanga

Piano

Many instrument builders and music technologists have explored ways of expanding the capabilities of the piano, but their ideas have been forgotten, or at best confined to a museum display, because no repertoire was created. Without composers writing for new technology, it will not survive. By collaborating with many composers of our time, Kanga is doing everything possible to create exciting repertoire for himself, and a lasting legacy for his research."

– **Caroline Potter, I**

Care If You Listen (ICIYL)

"It's not uncommon these days for new releases to be saddled with adjectives like groundbreaking or cutting-edge. But from time to time, as on this debut NMC solo disc by Australian pianist and composer Zubin Kanga, those adjectives are warranted. 'Cyborg Pianist' is a result of Kanga's multi-year music research project *Cyborg Soloists*, hosted at Royal Holloway, exploring technological extensions of the piano. The double-disc release features associated music by a cohort of exciting British composers, and my overall impression is of a new wave of experimentalism, very much modern British in character, influenced by the likes of Jennifer Walshe and Matthew Shlomowitz and having little to do with traditional musical Britishness.

Take Oliver Leith's outstanding *Vicentino, love you* – studies for keyboard. ... It's like Dowland mixed with Aphex Twin, with the wry humour of Satie, and, as with much else on the album, it's refreshing and youthful. ... Kanga's darting runs up the keyboard [in Osborn's *Counterfeits (Siminicã)* are compelling. ... On the British-Iranian composer Shiva Feshareki's *Whirling Dervishes*, Kanga is joined by the composer on turntable and electronics ... the electronics make the piano resplendent as Kanga moves up and down the keyboard in chromatic runs and shimmering harmonic series. ... Kanga uses MiMu sensor gloves to generate sounds through hand gestures. The gloves come on again for Kanga's composition *Hypnagogia (after Bach)* ... A wonderfully psychedelic synthesiser workout, it gives us a sense of the potential the synthesiser ... has for generating luscious, complex sounds in a concert-hall context."

– **Liam Cagney, Gramophone**

Machine Dreams (CD) nonclassical (April 2023)

"Machine Dreams is Kanga's most comprehensive work to date. ... In a sense, it's a showcase of all the ways in which contemporary technology can exist in a symbiotic relationship with art, from physical interfaces like MiMU sensor gloves to, yes, AI-generated sound sequences. But beyond the oft fascinating technical aspects and compositional ingenuity of the ten pieces featured on the record, it's their inherent humanity that renders them successful, while sparks of whimsy and authentic emotion give them an endearing sheen. ...

Listening to the music and reading about the instruments employed, one can easily imagine the sheer physicality required to perform the pieces. As a pianist, Kanga naturally relies on his whole body while playing, but his works using MiMU motion tracking gloves and similar digital and mechanical paraphernalia elevate the performative, corporeal dimension into a crucial aspect of his art. ...

As the final, scratchy notes of the cut fade out, another significance of *Machine Dreams* emerges. While the music could not have been realised without these specific technologies, it's a spark of the intangible, of human creativity,

Zubin Kanga

Piano

that brings it to life. As Holly Herndon recently remarked on Twitter, truly innovative art based on AI will not be found in repetition and echoes of past works but in "approaches we don't have words for yet". The music of Zubin Kanga has been heading there for a while."

– Antonio Poscic, *The Quietus*

"With a growing fascination bordering on mild hysteria over the disruptive intrusion of AI into our daily life, there is no better time for an album like this to be released to the general public. ...

Most pertinently, Kanga provides a rare opportunity for a diverse range of composers to test their abilities and see if they can make these tools exciting, which is an added bonus to the purely sonic realm of this album. By exploring these technologies in the hands of talented composers, we can gain a better understanding of what they have to offer. Hopefully, Kanga's Cyborg Soloist project will inspire more experimentation and creativity with these tools, but, for now, we can simply enjoy the music of *Machine Dreams* without worrying too much about what the machines themselves are dreaming of."

– Marat Ingeldeev, *All About Jazz* ****

"With his characteristically sophisticated, striking and uniquely oneiric performance, Kanga's *Machine Dreams* pushes the boundaries of what is possible with just a piano, and redefines what it means to be a performer through interactions with new technologies."

– London Daily News

Neil Luck / Whatever Weighs You Down (UK Premiere) Café Oto (October 2022)

"Zubin Kanga carries himself with style, charisma and quiet confidence. ...

The show commenced with composer Nina Whiteman's *Cybird Cybird* ... Kanga duetted with displays onscreen: Sporadic and humorous text-to-speech explored an odd stream-of-consciousness, which commenced in birdsong and culminated in 'wing-workouts' (better left unexplained). It made for a fabulous and chaotic proof-of-concept that engaged in effortless conversation with the crowd, prompting laughter and closing in joyous applause.

The elements laid bare in the first half found focus during the UK premiere of *Whatever Weights You Down* in collaboration with Neil Luck. Poetry, keys, multi-monitor video recordings ... and cyber-soloist kit worked together in a fantastic tour-de-force which filled the meaning of the term 'multi modal' to its very brim.

... I walked away from the two-part performance inspired by the depth of imagination in Kanga's collaboration. ... The show convinced me that strategic arts funding can kindle communities, new media and opportunities for performers to recontextualise their talent, with artists like Zubin Kanga putting co-creators at the heart of their work. Immersive, intense and excitingly novel, Kanga's art-form inspired curiosity and gave me faith in the future of performance capability."

– Peter Page, *The Cusp*

Zubin Kanga

Piano

Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival (2021)

"But it was impossible not to be gripped and fascinated by Zubin Kanga's *Steel on Bone*, featuring the adventurous composer-pianist all wired up with electronics, poking around in his piano's innards wearing expensive multi-sensor gloves that transfer hand movements into sound. Henry Cowell, the pioneering American piano basher famous for his cluster chords played with the forearms, would surely have loved the bravura and madness of *Steel on Bone*. I know I did."

– Geoff Brown, **The Times**

"More rewarding musically was the set from pianist Zubin Kanga, in which spacey, clangorous sounds obtained by electronically distorting a piano were often laid alongside familiar musical gestures, including (in Laurence Osborn's *Absorber*) processions of guileless common chords, sullied gradually by foreign notes – a fascinating effect."

– Ivan Hewitt, **The Telegraph** ****

Piano Ex Machina 2019

"Kanga's Piano Ex Machina is a rewarding experience, rich in possibility, infused with curiosity and playfulness, and not afraid to explore conceptual and expressive horizons well beyond the boundaries of a traditional piano recital."

– Ben Wilkie, **Limelight Magazine**

"It would be difficult to imagine a more skillful advocate, patron and practitioner of this repertoire than Kanga – from the frenetic flailing of Rose's contraption to the neo-Gnostic delicacy of McLaughlin's metastable assemblage, he is always in complete, charming command of the performance situation – a debonair cyborg emcee."

– Max Erwin, **TEMPO**

Cyborg Pianist 2016

"Zubin Kanga lifted his hands off the piano and over his shoulders, slow-motion, Matrix-style, the fading resonance of the instrument twisting and morphing through electronics... Overall Cyborg Pianist was slick and incredibly fun. Kanga is a dynamic and versatile pianist, bringing both virtuosity and a sense of play to his performances, deftly juggling the technical and dramatic requirements of the diverse works... From the sepulchral beauty of Ricketson's *The Day After Drowning* to the delightful B-movie antics of *Transplant the Movie!*, Zubin Kanga's Cyborg Pianist was a fascinating exploration of piano, theatre and technology."

– Angus McPherson, **Limelight Magazine**

Cyborg Pianist and Cage's Sonatas and Interludes Melbourne, 2016

"Kanga's interpretation was engrossing, the work's mutable rhythmic steadiness and continuous juxtaposition of pointillism with colour-washes accomplished splendidly, the performance reaching a serenely illuminating climax across the last two sonatas, where the gentle clangour generated by this gifted pianist invested the festival with a blaze of retrospective creative brilliance."

– Clive O'Connell, **The Age**

Zubin Kanga

Piano

"An exciting program of new works that were conceptually united by the idea of extension and expansion through various forms of electronically generated mirroring. Kanga is an equally exciting pianist, effortlessly virtuosic and in complete command of this (quite literally) electrifying modern repertoire." – **Lisa MacKinney, Limelight Magazine**