



Sophie Min, performing at Banff International Workshop in Jazz and Creative Music, Canada (photograph Jessica Wittman).

ERIC MYERS' INTERVIEW SERIES (15): Sophie Min, Brisbane-based pianist, composer & improviser

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This interview is the fifteenth in a series of interviews with a number of Australia's most distinguished jazz artists. These interviews are designed to be brief, relevant and informative, allowing those artists to reveal hitherto unknown information about their musical careers, and giving them an opportunity to express their views on the Australian music scene. All artists in this series are asked similar questions about their experiences as a music maker, plus other questions which may arise during the interview process. They are based on the ten questions used by pianist Chris Cody in his celebrated 10 x 10 series of interviews, published in "Loudmouth" between August, 2021 and May, 2022. We express our appreciation that Chris has given us permission to use his questions, which facilitated such interesting interviews in his 10 x 10 series.

BIOGRAPHY

Sophie Min is a Brisbane-based pianist, composer, and improviser whose work shows a distinctive personal aesthetic. She is now considered one of the most outstanding young jazz musicians in Australia.

Her international activities have been substantial over the years. In 2015 she was a member of the JM Jazz World Orchestra, an international big band made up of the world's top young jazz musicians, which performed across Croatia, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium and The Netherlands, before returning to Grožnjan, Croatia. The same year she participated in the Centrum Jazz Port Townsend Workshop in Washington, USA, where the artistic director was the American bassist John Clayton.



Sophie Min pictured here in Brussels, Belgium in 2015, when the JM Jazz World Orchestra played at the Brosella Festival.

For three weeks in 2018, she was resident at the Banff International Workshop in Jazz and Creative Music, Canada.

In 2020 she was awarded by APRA-AMCOS an Emerging Composer Mentorship which enabled her to work with Barney McAll, leading to her commissioned work *Pomegranate Seeds* which was performed by the all-woman ten-piece orchestra Pharos at the 2021 Sydney International Women's Jazz festival.



Barney McAll and Sophie Min

Sophie was one of five musicians included in the ABC Jazz article “Five Artists to Watch in 2021”. In the same year she was nominated for a Bell Award for Young Australian Jazz Artist of the Year.

She has been a regular candidate in the Queensland Music Awards (known as the QMusicAwards), as a finalist in 2020 (duo project with guitarist James Sherlock) and as a finalist in both 2021 and 2023 (Sophie Min Orchestra).

In 2022 she was part of the Perth International Jazz Festival’s *We Made a Thing* project, whereby several Australian jazz composers were commissioned to write works for a nonet of Perth-based musicians to perform at the festival. The result was Sophie’s work *Intertwined Trees* which was premiered there. The same year she performed at the Wangaratta Festival of Jazz & Blues, and once again at the Sydney International Women’s Jazz festival.

In 2022 the Australian Art Orchestra provided Sophie with three mentorship sessions with the trumpeter Scott Tinkler. In the same year Tinkler nominated her for the Freedman Jazz Fellowship. Had she won the Fellowship, she intended to create a collaborative project called ‘Australians in The Korean War’, an album and film work that was designed to document the experiences of Australian veterans of the Korean war, soundtracking interviews with an original score.



After being mentored by Scott Tinkler (pictured above) in 2022, Sophie was nominated by him in the same year for the Music Trust's Freedman Fellowship (photograph Laki Sidaris).

In 2023 she was a finalist in the Improvised Music category of the APRA Art Music Awards. Her latest project, Sophie Min Orchestra (SMO), is a groundbreaking chamber jazz ensemble which takes Sophie's musical vision to a daring new place, combining choreography, strings, percussion, visuals and improvisation. The SMO has released two albums, *Bellwether* in 2020, and *Your Wings* in 2022.



Cover of the first of two albums released so far by the Sophie Min Orchestra: "Bellwether" (2020).

Sophie is a fierce solo performer whose improvisations are based on sound resonance, harmonic facilities, and rhythmic intricacy. Alongside her solo work, she is also a significant collaborator, releasing music as part of original bands such as Shamin and Forage. Shamin is a duo including Sophie and the drummer Ben Shannon; Forage is a sextet playing the compositions of saxophonist Martin Kay. It includes Sophie on keyboards, Ben Shannon (drums), Kay and Andrew Saragossi (saxophones), plus Helen Svoboda and Zac Sakrewski (basses).

Sophie began her Master's thesis in 2020. Entitled 'Narrative Driven Practice: the Process of Arranging and Composing Music through Piano Improvisations', it is currently being examined at the Queensland Conservatorium. This paper details the development of four compositions for a large orchestra, aiming "to expand on one-minute piano improvisations into larger ensemble pieces, using a practice-led research method focused on experimentation, self-recording, and reflective composition."

"Sophie Min may seem unassuming but when she writes music you witness a lion roar and you hear and feel a very evolved spirit expressing deep knowledge, passion and the mystery of our human condition." Barney McAll

"Sophie Min is the truth." Vijay Iyer

QUESTIONS

Eric Myers: What do you think of being an artist in Australia, and how have you been able to build your career so far?

Sophie Min: Being an artist in Australia has been an incredibly enriching experience for me. I moved to Brisbane from Seoul, Korea, when I was 20 years old, and since then, I have been fortunate enough to work with some genuinely talented musicians in this loving and supportive community. Brisbane has embraced my musicality and diverse background, allowing me to flourish both personally and professionally. Collaborating with creative musicians here has been a major highlight of my career as a performer. One of the great advantages of being an Australian-based artist is the flexibility to initiate tours to Europe or Korea whenever I choose. There are also quite a few funding opportunities available if your music is solid and ready, which has been a significant boost for my projects. Additionally, being based in Brisbane, rather than a larger city, has its perks. It allows me to stand out more in the local scene, which has been advantageous for my career.



Sophie Min, performing in Brisbane on International Jazz Day, 2022: being based in Brisbane, rather than a larger city, has its perks (Facebook).

How do your experiences in Australia compare to your experiences elsewhere?

I feel my experiences are a blend of internal growth and external influences. Australia is my home, so travelling overseas provides me with inspiration, stimulation, and opportunities to explore aspects I might not focus on while I'm at home. When I step outside of my comfort zone, I encounter diverse and fresh experiences through my relationships with others, and through what I see, hear,

taste, and feel. If these experiences can be genuinely reflected in my music, I would be incredibly grateful.

A few years ago, I had the American dream and I still respect music from the US – I wanted to be there, to fit in, and to succeed. But now, I believe that if I can excel and make beautiful music where I am, I can make a strong and resonant impact no matter where I go. So, while I continue to work hard, travel, and engage in vibrant activities, I also strive to appreciate and nurture my strengths deeply and consistently. I believe that this balanced approach will allow me to have a long and successful career as a musician.

Have you found that the various forms of social media have been helpful in advancing your career? If so, in what ways have they been helpful?

In many ways, social media has been incredibly helpful for my career. It's essential for promoting gigs, announcing album releases, global marketing, and networking. Without social media, it would be challenging to share what I'm doing and reach more listeners with my music. Since public speaking is not my best talent, recording videos, or writing posts helps me communicate more effectively, and social media has significantly amplified my efforts. Of course, social media should be like a passenger car on the train of my career, not the engine room where I'm the conductor, steering the direction.



Sophie's playing "After The Rain" from John Coltrane (pictured above), to a student enabled him to fully grasp her teaching approach and internalise it (photograph YouTube.)

What is the main thing that nourishes your music?

When asked what nourishes my music, it feels like being asked what nourishes my life. The richness of my music comes from learning and experiencing every

aspect of my life. For instance, today I played John Coltrane's *After the Rain* with a student. This student generally lacks the importance of diligent practice, such as scale exercises and fundamental training. But the moment he fully grasped my teaching approach and internalised it, he demonstrated himself completely differently. Witnessing this made me feel incredibly proud and fulfilled. Building strong relationships and growing within my music community, even without rushing, is a process that I believe enriches my music. Additionally, I learn so much about life from watching my one-year-old baby Teo. Seeing him babble and express his thoughts, gradually learning language, and seeing how he can throw tantrums when hungry, but then burst into laughter and perform all sorts of adorable antics when fed... All these moments teach me about growing and maturing as a person.



Sophie says, "I learn so much about life from watching my one-year-old baby Teo. The most challenging part of my life is finding balance between my own personal space and raising my son" (photograph Instagram).

List three things you would introduce to Australia to improve or enhance the music scene here.

1/ A venue that is not just a space, but a hub for musical growth and critical artistic discourse.

2/ Ample funding for those managing and organising festivals, ensuring they have the resources needed to support the arts.

3/ Legal measures and policies to ensure fair wages and compensation for musicians and artists.

What projects are you working on at the moment?

Solo Piano Recording Project: A home-produced album reflecting my new life as a parent, accompanied by video content and blog posts. New upright piano and home recording setup. Check my socials.

Shamin Single Album Release and Tour: Releasing a new single and touring with Shamin (featuring Benjamin Shannon on drums and me on piano). We'll be performing at Monday Night Confessions in Sydney on the 9th of September.



Shamin in performance, with Sophie on keyboards in the foreground, and drummer Ben Shannon in the background. Sophie considers their performance at the 2022 Wangaratta Jazz Festival to be one of their best.

European Tour 2025: Collaborating with Austrian flautist Heinrich von Kalnein for an exciting tour across Austria and Germany.

Community Development: Balancing my roles as a working mother and artist, contributing to and growing within the community.

Academic pursuits: Graduating with my Master's degree and continuing my journey towards a PhD.

Would you like to share with us your best and worst musical memory?

Honestly, I don't think I've ever been 100% satisfied with any of my personal performances. There's always something that doesn't sit right with me. However, I would consider my performance at the 2022 Wangaratta Jazz Festival with Shamin to be one of our best. It was a moment where everything clicked perfectly for me as a composer, performer, and band producer. The worst experience, on the other hand, was at a dance party gig. The space was cramped, and my keyboard was set up right next to the drums. Whether it was due to the tight space or the sheer volume of the drummer's playing, my left ear was muffled for a while afterward and it still feels uncomfortable to this day.

Can you describe your most serious challenges and how you surmount them?

My most serious challenges have been childbirth and the ongoing process of raising a child. It's not so much that I overcame them, but rather that they are rites of passage I had to go through. Dealing with postpartum depression, emotional swings, lack of experience, lack of knowledge, and time management were all part of the struggle. Nowadays, it's more manageable because my baby is more responsive and we have established a routine. I make an effort to talk with my husband about my feelings, take walks with my baby to clear my mind, and dedicate some time at night to do something just for myself. Ironically, while many people say this, I also feel that even though I wouldn't want to go through it again, I can't imagine not having my child in my life. I am constantly pondering how to incorporate these tiny and massive experiences, thoughts, and feelings into my music to communicate them effectively. I also seek advice from experienced mothers who have been in similar situations and work on building a supportive network.



Sophie: My most serious challenges have been childbirth and the ongoing process of raising a child (photograph ABC Jazz).

If you could wave a magic wand over the music community, what would you wish for?

Financial support: Increased funding and financial support for musicians, ensuring they can focus on their art without financial stress.

Sustainable careers: Improved infrastructure and support systems for musicians to have sustainable and long-term careers.

If you weren't a jazz pianist what would you do?

I've often imagined what my life would be like if I hadn't pursued jazz or had the opportunity to play the piano. In that alternate reality, I think I would have become a writer or a counsellor. In elementary school, I spent a lot of time reading books, writing book reports, and letting my imagination run wild. Writing always helped me relieve stress, and I enjoyed the process of revisiting my old writings. As for being a counsellor, I have always been interested in psychology, education, and religious studies. Reading books on these subjects made me feel confident that I could make a living in that field. Additionally, listening to my friends' problems and offering advice seemed to bring them comfort, reinforcing my belief that I could thrive as a counsellor.

Who or what are you listening to at the moment?

The music I've been playing the most this week includes The Wiggles, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Jaki Byard, Roland Hanna, Rob Van Bavel and Korean gospel songs. The music I want to listen to keeps lingering in my mind. If I had ample time to indulge in music, I would love to listen to the latest Australian jazz releases, recent works by Japanese and Korean musicians, as well as compositions by Chopin, Bach, Bartok, and Messiaen. I would likely explore a lot of this music on Bandcamp.



The music Sophie is playing most this week includes works by Japanese composer, pianist, record producer, and actor Ryuichi Sakamoto (Wikipedia).

What are your other interests outside music?

Listening to audiobooks, taking morning and afternoon walks with my baby, finding new recipes to try with the same ingredients, exploring Brisbane cafes, making to-do lists, journaling, and watching Korean variety shows.

VIEW & LISTEN

Sophie Min Orchestra, 2nd album launch, promo video

SMO 2nd Album Launch PROMO VIDEO



Heinrich Von Kalnein and Sophie Min, 'Intertwined Trees'

HEINRICH VON KALNEIN & SOPHIE MIN - INTERTWINED TREES



'Time is On', Sophie Min Orchestra at Queen St Mall (sax solo)

Time is On - SMO at Queens St Mall (clip of sax solo)



'Barefaced' by SHAMIN



INTERVIEWER



Eric Myers

Eric Myers was the inaugural jazz critic for the Sydney Morning Herald, 1980–1982, and jazz critic with The Australian, 1983–1987. He was publisher & editor of the Australian Jazz Magazine 1981–1986, and a government-funded Jazz Co-ordinator from 1983–2002. He returned to writing on jazz for The Australian in 2015. He has a website dedicated to documenting Australian jazz history at this link www.ericmyersjazz.com

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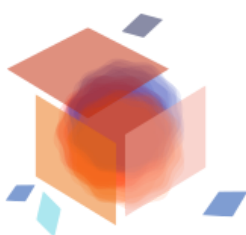
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