

SPOTLIGHT / MUSIC

The intuitive self takes the lead

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Toodyay-based violinist Rupert Guenther discusses recording the Moxbournienna Sonatas with the late Melvyn Cann in a single, unedited take – and explains how deep listening, philosophical inquiry and trust in intuition shape their spontaneous musical dialogue.



Cover Image: Rupert Guenther, Image by Photo Peter Davin © ESTA

European-trained violinist, composer, improviser and educator Rupert Guenther creates site-specific concerts that bring together music, place and wellbeing. A former member of the Vienna Chamber Opera, he has worked with artists including Sir George Martin, Olivia Newton-John and John Farnham, and collaborated across classical, world, ambient, blues, folk and multimedia projects. Since 2003 he has independently released more than 35 albums, including five collections commissioned and recorded by ABC Classic FM. Guenther also teaches violin, improvisation and holistic professional development internationally, drawing on more than two decades as a meditation teacher to advocate for self-care, self-esteem and humanistic values in music and the arts.

Q: The *Moxbournienna Sonatas* were recorded at the ABC's Iwaki Auditorium in a single, unedited take, without overdubs or retakes. Given the scale of Sonata No. 1 – three extended movements – how did you and Melvyn Cann negotiate its architecture, harmonic direction and thematic development in real time, without predetermined structures?

A: That is the beauty of the vast universe of intuitive music: it is not managed by the left brain. Concepts such as formal architecture, harmonic direction and thematic development are not the central agents dictating how the music unfolds. Intuitive feeling is central. Those structural elements do come into play, but as a consequence of that feeling. The intuitive self knows when enough is enough – when to change direction, tempo, tonality or harmony. Every musician has an intuitive self, but many are afraid to entrust the music to it. That is why the *Moxbournienna Sonatas*, and the other ABC Classic recordings of my works, are so distinctive in the history of Western classical music – they demonstrate the playful yet highly capable intelligence of the intuitive self. Imagine the possibilities if every musician or ensemble worked this way, each with their own unique flavour.

Q: The title *Moxbournienna* combines the musical lineages of Melbourne, Oxford and Vienna. How do your Viennese orchestral roots and Cann's Oxford academic and chamber background emerge in your collaborative dialogue, and how does this geographic synthesis shape your shared vocabulary?

A: In my case, the Viennese style of string playing is a unique musical culture with direct links to Haydn, Beethoven and Mozart. Vienna sits close to the heart of what was once called Bohemia, so Eastern European, Romani and folk influences are never far from the music. It is a tradition with an almost magical quality. Its tonal nuance and expressive subtlety continue through time, even now. We played in the halls and churches where Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven had performed, so living, studying and working in Vienna's orchestras and opera houses gave me the opportunity to absorb those influences.

For Melvyn, a deep understanding of philosophy was integral to his sense of self – great philosophy was, for him, an expression of our higher human capacities. The same was true of his music-making: the humane and altruistic nature of humanity, as he put it, is the very sound of the human soul. We do not need to look outside ourselves to find it. We shared that outlook, so it is hardly surprising that our music was so congruent, even without prior discussion or planning. What you hear on the recordings is exactly how we converse musically – just as we would in spoken discussion.

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Will Yeoman was literary editor at The West Australian before moving into arts and travel. A former CEO of Writing WA and artistic director of York Festival, he was previously artistic director of New Norcia Writers Festival and Perth Festival Writers Week. As well as continuing to contribute to The West's travel pages, he is a regular music critic for *Limelight* and *Gramophone* magazines.

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The Moxbournienna Sonatas: Sonata 1. Image Supplied.

Q: Melvyn Cann is both a classical string player and a philosopher. How does his philosophical outlook influence the conversation between violin and piano in Sonata No. 1, particularly in the transition from the introspective *Largo spirituosso* to the heightened momentum of the *Andante agitato*?

A: Fundamentally, it is about being good listeners. Melvyn and I are both deep listeners – a prerequisite for this kind of music-making. The relationship between violin and piano – the piano being Cann's equal-first instrument throughout his life – is highly conversational, yet it can also powerfully articulate a clearly defined series of ideas and ideals, especially in the *Largo spirituosso*. Each movement shows how the intuitive self communicates: it has direction but can collaborate; it is responsive but knows when an idea has run its course; it can be delicate while keeping life's harsher experiences in view. The contrasts between ideas and movements reflect our deeply human desire for change and variation.

Q: You have described these recordings as a statement about how classical musicians can forge their own humanistic pathways through extended improvisation. How does this approach challenge the rigid divide between interpretation and creation in mainstream classical concert culture?

A: I see it less as a challenge than as a complementary approach to the tradition of composed classical music in which Melvyn and I were nurtured. After all, the great composers we admire were musicians who both composed and performed. That is essentially what we are doing. In many ways, we are returning to the source of the richness and individuality people value in the classical composers – artists making their own art, not acting as copyists, but speaking and creating in distinctive voices.



Rupert Guenther. Image by Hank Kordas.

Q: Your practice often draws on analogies with visual art – treating sound as pigment applied to a blank canvas. Without a written score, how do you use colour, timbre and extended violin techniques to create vivid narrative arcs across movements lasting nine to 15 minutes?

A: It is a useful analogy, which is why I return to it. A painter places expressions of the world – or interpretations drawn from the imagination – onto a blank canvas. Music is no different. When imagination, intuition or inspiration moves us, we can sense when the tone or nuance of the conversation needs to turn. Some painters work within a rigid, preconceived structure, and some improvisers do too. We do not. We prefer to let faint voices from the street, or a bird passing the window, shape the conversation – allowing ideas to end and the music to move on. The ebb and flow within and between movements is therefore quite organic.

Q: Your broader ethos connects spontaneous musical creation with mindfulness, character development and holistic wellbeing. How might the heightened presence required for deep, unscripted musical dialogue translate into the listener's inner experience? And what role can classical improvisation play in fostering empathy and connection in contemporary society?

A: High philosophical ideals and great music do not come from nowhere – they arise from a highly developed capacity within the artist. I call it the intuitive self. Choosing to connect with this part of ourselves as artists takes work and time, just as developing the physical skills required to play an instrument does. This connection is cultivated through feeling rather than thought. Rational thought alone cannot create something genuinely new, transformative or moving for the soul; otherwise, we would have no need for the arts. In the same way, if we feel nothing when we play, our audience is unlikely to feel anything either. As in the martial arts, meditative practices can help us access and nurture our intuitive, feeling and sensing capacities as artists. For me, the intuitive self is the creative self – the source through which art's previously unknown wonders enter the world.

For more information on Rupert and his recordings, see [here](#).

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