

Motoko Honda
Beyond Piano/Sound Explorer
Pianist-Composer-Improviser
(Japan/U.S./Switzerland)

<https://www.motokohonda.com>



FULL Biography

Motoko Honda is a critically acclaimed, boundary-defying Japanese pianist, composer, and sonic explorer who transforms the piano into a world of unexpected textures, blending improvisation, contemporary music, and experimental sound.

“Imagine Radiohead teaching Franz Liszt how to rock a Kaoss Pad; or John Cage facing off with Bud Powell over prepared piano.”

—Matthew Duersten, stompbeast.com

Described as a “keyboard alchemist” by the Los Angeles Times, Honda has built an international career spanning concert halls, experimental venues, and interdisciplinary spaces. Since 1997, she has performed throughout the United States, Europe, Japan, and North Africa, appearing at festivals and venues including Angel City Jazz Festival, Piano City Milano Festival, Spark Festival of Electronic Music, Hammer Museum, REDCAT at Walt Disney Concert Hall, Ford Amphitheater, SF Music Day, Montalvo Arts Center, The Stone in New York, and Herbst Theatre in San Francisco. Her work moves fluidly across contemporary classical, experimental music, jazz, and interdisciplinary performance, connecting diverse artistic communities across cultures and continents.

Her performances and compositions aim not only to be heard but to be felt—resonating in the listener’s skin, organs, and mind, creating immersive sonic experiences that linger long after the music ends. She has collaborated with visionary artists from a wide range of genres, including Wadada Leo Smith, Elliott Sharp, Nels Cline, Mike Watt, Petra Haden, Lucas Ligeti, Vinny Golia, Larry Ochs, Theresa Wong, William Winant, Van-Anh Vo, dancer Oguri, and projection artist Jesse Gilbert, among others.

“Motoko Honda is a truly gifted and versatile artist. Her solo performance last year at the South Pasadena Music Center was truly one of the most stirring, beautiful, and eloquent things I have heard in years.”

—Nels Cline (Wilco, The Nels Cline Singers)

Honda’s connection to music began in early childhood. At age four, she began rigorous dictation training alongside piano lessons, developing the ability to translate any sound

into musical notation. She improvised constantly, turning emotions, daily observations, and everyday sounds—waves, water drops, rustling trees—into music. Transcribing folk and pop songs for school choirs, arranging music for brass bands, and composing scores for musical theater productions soon became central to her early musical life.

However, early acceptance into one of the most rigorous concert pianist training programs left little room for improvisation, creative exploration, or life beyond the solo repertoire. Torn between her love for music and the life that is its source, **she made the momentous decision at age eighteen to stop playing altogether, vowing never to return, and emigrated alone to the United States.**

Without music, life in a world far from everything she had known meant starting over completely. The breaking apart of her former self brought heartbreak, but also unexpected joy, opening a doorway to a life lived differently. **Reclaiming her musical voice became a journey that unfolded over two decades—rediscovering her love for music, confronting the weight of absence, and seeking the freedom and right to live as a professional musician as a first-generation immigrant.** The journey culminated in 2016 with her recognition in the United States as an Alien of Extraordinary Ability in Music. This path of loss, reinvention, and transformation now informs everything she creates.

Although her career as a classical pianist began early, performing as a soloist and chamber musician in Europe, **Honda considers herself a later bloomer. During her master’s program at the California Institute of the Arts, she was finally able to fully embrace her identity as a composer-improviser,** formally studying improvisation, jazz, composition, electronic music, and world traditions including Indian, African, Latin, and Indonesian music. It was there that she first developed her distinctive electro-acoustic piano performance techniques.

As a specialist in structured improvisation, extended piano techniques, interdisciplinary performance, and electro-acoustic music, Honda has also been invited to present lectures and performances at universities and institutions internationally, including UC Santa Cruz, Rice University (Houston), the University of Illinois, California State University Fullerton, Idyllwild Arts Academy, Tokyo Zokei University, the University of Tokyo, and Chukyo University in Nagoya, Japan.

In recent years, she has expanded her international presence while remaining deeply rooted in the United States and the West Coast/Bay Area creative music community. Current projects include the immersive solo program **Emergent Piano**, showcasing a wide range of extended and prepared piano techniques, and the **Simple Excesses Quartet**, a modern chamber jazz group fearlessly pushing the musical limits of form and improvisation. She also continues to develop **interdisciplinary collaborations, including visual–audio experiential works** with projection artist Jesse Gilbert. **Through these evolving projects, Honda continues to transform the piano into a living laboratory of sound—inviting audiences into a world of curiosity, wonder, and the profound beauty of unpredictability.**

Artist Statement

I believe music is like life itself—unpredictable, often surprising, and at its best when breathing freely and carving its own path. Creating and experiencing music can reveal our true nature, sharing flaws, wonders, torments, and joys, and can connect us across cultures, languages, and experiences.

My artistic voice began in childhood, when I constantly invented songs about everything I felt. I sang and improvised all day long—much to the amusement and exhaustion of my family. During long car rides, they had little escape from my endless stream of improvised songs, a memory they still fondly recall today.

These playful explorations carried over to the piano, where I began improvising deeply personal and emotional music. Yet early training often dismissed improvisation as “incorrect,” and **over time I gradually lost both the freedom and ability to create spontaneously.**

Reclaiming that voice became a transformative journey. After years of intense practice, I realized I had lost touch with the very source of music—life itself—and the joy of living. I could no longer find the music inside myself and felt that the very thing I loved was causing so much pain for myself and others. I had to stop playing the piano entirely and swore I would never play again. Finding my way back required years of personal searching and a leap across the world—from Japan to the United States. **Through this process, I slowly reconnected with the freedom that first drew me to music and eventually found the courage to share my own musical language with others.**

Today, that freedom lies at the heart of my artistic mission. **Through my music, I seek to honor individuality, embrace difference, and encourage others to trust their own voices.** Simply living the life of creating and performing my own music has become my artistic statement, strengthened by the many times I was told such a life would not be possible.

I embrace the piano while continually challenging its limits, often using nontraditional techniques—not for experimentation alone, but to **fully express my inner world and invite myself and others to explore beyond expectations. Through improvisation, sound exploration, and spontaneous composition, I strive to create musical environments where audiences can enter a space of curiosity, freedom, and shared discovery.**

Through sound, I search for freedom, connection, and the courage to truly be ourselves.