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**Olaf Tarenskeen** was trained in classical and Jazz music at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague, Netherlands. He studied at the Banff Center of Arts in Alberta, Canada. He made his solo television debut in the early 80s, followed by several performances with contemporary classical and improvised music ensembles. Olaf won the Dutch Wessel Ilcken Prize for his ability to blend notated and improvised music naturally. He has performed at several international venues modern music festivals with Dutch contemporary-music ensembles as the Schonberg/Asko ensemble, Ebony Band, Quatuor Danel String 4tet, Dutch Wind Ensemble, Gavin Bryers, and Morton Feldman. He has also toured with all-star jazz groups.

He has also performed as a jazz musician at several international venues in Scotland, France, Germany, and Belgium. He has performed solo performances at the Issoudun Festival in France, Newtownards Guitar Festival in Ireland, and the International Guitarfest in Banja Lukua Bosnie-Herzegovina. As an educator, he focuses on Jazz and fingerstyle Jazz Guitar in The Hague area.

**Where do you currently live, and where did you grow up?**

I live in The Hague, Netherlands. I was born and grew up here as well.

**What was your early musical training?**

I went to the conservatory at the relatively young age of thirteen. Before that, I had a private teacher and was surrounded by a musical family wherein I was exposed to classical music. My father was an amateur musician who had a great ear for four-part harmony.

**Please tell me a bit about your family background if you don't mind.**

I am the second-generation Netherlands-Indië's people: Dutch people in Indonesia before WWII

who had to leave Indonesia. Back then, Indonesia was called Netherlands-Indie)

**I understand that you studied classical and jazz music at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague; which came first?**

I first studied classical guitar during my high school years and three more years later. Since I started my education at the conservatory early, I had some years left to study Jazz Guitar. Actually, before that, I studied jazz drumming for a year.

**Would you please tell me about your studies in the conservatory's Jazz and classical programs?**

Antonio Pereira Arias, a guitarist from Montevideo, Uruguay, trained me in my classical guitar years. In his teens, he was a student of Segovia. He took me through the classical program of etudes from the Pujol guitar method, Abel Carlevaro scale and arpeggios etudes, Brower and Villa-Lobos etudes, and the concert pieces of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

During the last period of my classical study, I joined a contemporary music ensemble to play a few concerts in Los Angeles and Santa Barbara, California. We played the Serenade op. 24 of Arnold Schonberg. This was the beginning of a long period of thirty-five years of playing contemporary ensemble music on acoustic and electric guitar. I played the music of forty different modern composers.

The Jazz program at The Hague Conservatory was a revelation for me due to the informal but artistically serious music-making. It was a Bebop-oriented program, and the interaction between musicians was all based on improvisation.

I started out playing an archtop jazz guitar, although my jazz guitar teacher Peter Nieuwerf, asked me to experiment playing Jazz on a classical guitar. On the classical guitar, I mainly

arranged tunes. The improvisation came much later.

### **Did you find Jazz or classical studies to be the most challenging?**

In my teens and early twenties, my interest and goals were more in solo concert performing music of the 20th-century solo repertoire. I missed the Afro-American improvisational element of playing in a jazz band. And improvising chord solos. Which I was far away from during that time.

In a sense, I had to start all over again when getting into jazz music, so Jazz was the challenge. But even up to this day, the challenge for me is blending contemporary music and Jazz on classical/nylon string guitar.

### **Most classically trained musicians cannot improvise. What advice would you give classical musicians who would like to develop their improvisational skills?**

In the case of professionally or advanced trained classical musicians, one should think about which concept of improvising one prefers. There are quite a few: harmonic Jazz, modal, non-tonal, sound improvisation.

I like them all! In the Netherlands from the '70s, there were two streams: improvisation based on Bebop, which is harmonic, following the chords, the stream is improvisation as instant composing. Classical musicians seemed to take up the last concept, which is more related to free Jazz.

For Harmonic or Modal Jazz, I would advise just to get going. Study the basic 7<sup>th</sup> chord forms, get an experienced teacher who can teach how to accompany a chord progression or a tune to get the feel of rhythm, timing, timbre, and dynamics (how to 'hit' the strings with the right hand). Then, if you want to do some soloing, learn a few

scale forms from the 'CAGED' system and try on a melodic plane/level to apply what you have been hearing while building up the classical repertoire. Also, listen to the jazz legends.

I teach and have taught some professionally trained classical guitarists. Most of them already have a history of listening to Jazz artists such as Bill Evans, Joe Pass, and Jobim.

One of the problems, in my view, to overcome is the physical input of classical guitar technique relating to the focus on articulation, which guitarist Derek Bailey named: Pavlovian exactitude). Another thing is that the classical guitar method books consist of scale and pattern learning anchored on the first beat of the bar.

Students can experiment with beginning the scale on the upbeat. Try to accent the notes on the upbeat to make your motor movements compatible with those of popular music. Some guitarist students turn to the electric archtop jazz guitar to get the feel, which isn't a bad thing. I did the same. Then the translation comes, but this could take some time.

### **In the time of Mozart, it was common for classical musicians to improvise on themes. Do you ever improvise on classical music themes or the harmony in a classical piece?**

It was obligatory to analyze sonatas mainly of 1<sup>st</sup> Vienna School during my classical study. We made harmonic reductions to see the harmonic framework and how the harmonic development worked.

We studied approach notes of Chopin and Bach's guide tones in the jazz program. Coming to think of it, I did once in a program use the Schubert Lied "In Wunderschönen Monat Mai" because it reminded me of Keith Jarrett! And as an intro for "I Hear a Rhapsody." I used "Barcarolle" by Tchaikovsky because it was used as a Leitmotif in the X-Files TV show! But in general, I do not

improvise on 1<sup>st</sup> Vienna School classical music themes, but it is good study material.

**Since jazz musicians look at music as a set of chord changes and a melody, has your jazz study influenced how you see or think of the harmony in classical music?**

I think I am more aware of harmony and how to apply it in Jazz. The big difference for a jazz player is that the theory becomes practice. You have to think about and memorize chord scale relationships, reflect on the inner voicing and harmonic rhythm, to name a few things.

Then there is the harmony of Debussy and Bartok with triad combinations, which for application, I listened to Ralph Towner, Herbie Hancock, and Joe Zawinul.

Then I played a lot of music by 20<sup>th</sup>-century composers like Schonberg, Reich, John Adams, Morton Feldman, and many young generation contemporary composers. Some of the music gave me ideas for texture or unexpected twists and turns.

**Who are some of the classical guitarists you admire?**

I have always admired the classical guitarists who were icons while I was in my twenties, guitarists such as Julian Bream, John Williams, Manuel Barrueco, and the early recordings of Andres Segovia. His 1959 performance of Bach's Chaconne is still striking in his tone, power, and use of rubato. I saw his Ramirez and Hauser guitars in the Met in New York. It was beyond my expectations, almost like a relic experience.

I also admire players from the younger generation, such as Ana Vidovic, for their capabilities, perseverance, precision, and dedication. There are many of them nowadays.

**Who are the jazz musicians you admire?**

It would be hard for me to name just a few from the old school, let alone one. My favorite pianist at the moment is Vijay Iyer. In the field of Jazz played on a classical guitar, I would have to mention Ralph Towner for his characteristic harmonic idiom in his compositions.

For someone studying Jazz in the '80s you cannot circumvent Pat Metheny, Keith Jarrett, Charlie Haden, or Egberto Gismonti, to name a few. I was quite engaged listening to the ECM artists.

**You formerly taught at Codarts Rotterdam, University of the Arts. How long did you teach there, and what were your duties at the school?**

I taught there for three years in a new program of Music Therapy. I helped build up the improvisation module. It is a Master's program for students to be Music therapists. I mainly trained classical music students how to improvise on an accessible level with sounds, one-key modes, and rhythms focusing on interaction, following, and leading.

**Your solo playing of jazz standards is fantastic. I know that you improvise at least some of the elements in these. Would you say that the improvising is mainly in the single line playing, or is it also in harmony?**

Thanks for the compliment! When I do an unaccompanied solo performance, the harmony is mostly arranged, however, in common chord progression, for instance, II V progressions or I VI V progressions, I have some chops. Also, I'll use open bass strings as pedal tones and improvise using triads on the upper strings. When I play in a trio, and I am very familiar with the tune, I'll take some liberties, but paradoxically, I prepare improvising a lot in studying hours, making prepared material flexible.

**I understand you had the opportunity to study with the great saxophonist Steve Coleman**

**and guitarist Kevin Eubanks, bassist Dave Holland and composer/ trumpeter Kenny Wheeler at the Banff Institute of Arts. Would you please tell me about this experience?**

I was in my late twenties and had just finished my jazz studies. My ears and skills were not yet capable of what was offered. I played in an ensemble directed by Roscoe Mitchell, performing one of his graphic notation scores. I think all the students were part of a group community exploring other ways to play Jazz harmonically or melodically and in the form. We played standards but also a lot of open form or episodic form pieces.

While at the Banff Institute of Arts, I wish I could have spent more time with Muhal Richard Abrams, one of the founders of the AACM organization (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians).

**Do you remember any particular advice that influenced you or comments from any of the instructors at the Banff experience?**

One time we were in a morning meeting with all the students, and Muhal Abrams asked me and another guitarist, Pierre Cote, from Montreal to open the session. We could play anything we wanted, but it had to have style changes: jazz swing to Bossa to free Jazz to open form to a vamp, as much as we could. We had no time to prepare or arrange. It made me aware that one has to have this flexibility. You never know the circumstances that will make you aware of the intentions of the other musicians, whether you're following or leading. At least this is my interpretation now looking back.

Steve Coleman made me aware of odd meters and liberating the four or two-measure units from phrases accordingly. For example, play groupings of five notes over four-beat bars. I am still studying this.

Kevin Eubanks was the first jazz guitarist I saw in person playing fingerstyle. He advised me to play fingerstyle because I was still in between playing jazz fingerstyle or with a pick. Also, he pointed me out to 'root down' my soloing with the thumb. (playing solo lines with the thumb, middle, and index but using the thumb to stress the groove) He showed me idiosyncratic voicings to not play the standard 7<sup>th</sup> minor, major, and dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chord, leaving out some of the notes, which is common now for the young generation. He taught me one of his complex compositions by heart, which we performed as a duo during a session.

**When you play with an upright bass player, does that change your approach to what you play or don't play in the lower range of the guitar?**

Yeah, that is sometimes a problem because I want a full sound in the upper strings. I have a split saddle pick-up on my classical guitar in 4 -2, Controlling the E, B, G, and D strings with one EQ and the A and E strings with another. Usually, that means a little boost between 110 -150 hertz (between A and D string), and then you clash with the bass. Otherwise, avoid voicings with bass notes lower than A on the 5<sup>th</sup> string, but I can carefully do that with this technical adjustment.

**What recordings do you have available, and where can they be purchased?**

I have a Trio album called *Missing Link*, a quartet album called *One with Everything*, and three solo recordings titled *Decisions*, *Human Download* and *Gathered Time*. You can purchase them on TuneCore or iTunes.

**What are you currently working on?**

I am finishing a duo project with Dutch singer Yvonne Smeets consisting of ten tunes that we created in collaboration. The compositions are

played on classical or a nylon-string (Godin) with an octave lower on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> strings. Four pieces, both the music and the lyrics, are from her. Most of the compositions have arranged guitar parts that are sometimes contrapuntal, interlocking to the voice part. There are two compositions in which we have layered parts using guitar and synth sounds with overdubs for an ensemble, ambient sound. In this collection, we recorded "Alone Together" from the American Song Book to demonstrate alternative changes and arranging for classical guitar addressing improvisation. Most of the guitar part in this tune is fully arranged and could be performed solo.

**Musically speaking, do you have any goals or a vision of where you'd like to be in the future?**

I have entered the last phase of my career, and I am trying to integrate, if possible, the different musical styles I have been doing for over four decades. For example, I am working on integrating a small unit of notes, which appears in one of the Leo Brouwer pieces called "Elogio de la Danza" and the cluster sounds of "Espiral Eterna" to apply them in rhythm changes! And how I can use this in different styles because I like to play the harmonic-based jazz standard and modern experimental improvised music, in the ideal situation, a mix between both. That is the accidental result of being raised with popular music and playing the Brouwer etudes from my early teens.

This is part of my research on the classical guitar in contemporary Jazz, on how this resolves in a (my) cohesive style. One of the related aspects of the study is to design improvisational material based on efficiency in movement and relaxation of the left hand without reducing the lines to simplicity.

Doing this results in avoiding stretching the hand by stepwise horizontal movement. (e.g.,

the Db7alt run in bar 37 of the "Tenderly" arrangement is based on this principle: sounds complex but isn't hard to play: it's more right-hand execution). Although the guitar neck at the top is 48mm wide, it is still an acoustic nylon string guitar. This research is for extending the years of playing, especially for senior guitarists!

There are a few interesting writings on the subject of crossover, written explicitly by Andrew Jurik (2016), Ken Hatfield, Stephen Brew, and Balasz Alpar.

I try to incorporate experience and knowledge from all the teaching I did over the years on all levels and ages in my playing. Teachings that made me aware of the elements to cross genres.

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Photo by Marjolein van Rotterdam