

“Make it fresh every time”:
A conversation with India Gailey
by Keith Stratton

India Gailey is an American-Canadian cellist, improviser, composer, and multidisciplinary artist who draws from many eras and genres, most often creating in the realms of classical and experimental music. She performs as a solo artist, chamber musician, interdisciplinary collaborator, and member of the environmental quartet New Hermitage.



photograph by Dario Lozano-Thornton

I first met India when we studied together at Acadia University in Wolfville, NS, from 2012 to 2016. I've always felt a kinship to India, perhaps from our shared Maritime experiences, as well as our shared interests in different musical styles. She has recently released her second album, To You Through, on Redshift Music, and finished a tour performing with New Hermitage, among other projects that she has on the go. I caught up with India over a video call on July 11, 2022.

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“I think there’s just a spaciousness here”

Atlantic Canada

Keith Stratton: *When you think about being an Atlantic Canadian musician, what does that mean to you, in any particular way? How do you find that comes into your music?*

India Gailey: That’s not something that I intentionally try to channel in my work, but it probably impacts me a lot, just because of the communities that I’m surrounded by, and the general vibe of this place. Nova Scotia is pretty isolated compared to somewhere like Toronto, and I think that there’s a spaciousness here that is so much different from what I feel in central Canada. That probably impacts the way that I create a lot.

KS: *Do you think that with spaciousness and geographical isolation, time is perceived differently?*

IG: Oh, for sure. I feel kind of rushed in more central areas of Canada, sometimes. I feel stressed.

KS: *It’s good that in Nova Scotia you feel less stressed. I find there’s an ‘East coast sound’ sometimes, certainly in traditional fiddle music, and kind of in pop music, but when I think of classical or crossover styles of music, it gets a bit more abstract to me. Do you find that you hear an East coast sound?*

IG: That’s such a good question. I have no idea! It just feels like we’re all so tapped into music from all over the place. It’s pretty hard to parse apart how it bleeds into everyone’s work here. Just because the communities here are so much smaller, there’s perhaps a distinct flavour to the aesthetic here. With a smaller group, it’s easier to sense the general ‘colour’ of things, compared to a bigger city.

“It shouldn’t cost money for there to be a cultural exchange”

America

KS: *You’ve also got ties to the States. How do you feel about being an American musician versus a Canadian musician at this point in your career?*

IG: When I was a kid, my link to America was mostly just visiting relatives, but at this point, I've got a lot of colleagues and artists who I follow in the States, so it feels like I'm much more intermingling in between the two countries artistically. I draw a lot of inspiration from the New York scene. I'm lucky that I'm able to visit there kind of often. In terms of being an American right now, it seems like a terrible time to be proud of that in any way, obviously. It's like America is just *on fire* right now, which is really unfortunate. But I've never really been into patriotism in any form, so maybe that part doesn't matter so much.

KS: *One thing that I've heard coming up for people too, is access as a performer, to go between America and Canada. Do you hold dual citizenship?*

IG: Yeah! I'm super lucky that way! For a Canadian without dual citizenship, I believe that it costs thousands of dollars to perform in the States, which is just ridiculous. It shouldn't cost money for there to be a cultural exchange between these two countries. We share so much in common, with even our land intersecting.

KS: *Right, and I've heard it's kind of a one-way street too, because for Americans wanting to perform in Canada...*

IG: They can come up here no problem!

KS: *I know. So then it's like, paying a thousand dollars to travel to a... two hundred dollar gig it's like... we're gonna lose eight hundred dollars on the deal, even though it could be an amazing opportunity. But that's great that you're able to have that flexibility, that could give you a really unique perspective. Do you have any favourite places that you've been to in the States? I know you've mentioned New York.*

IG: There's this place in Virginia that I got to spend a month at a few years ago called the Garth Newel Music Center. It's in the middle of nowhere in the mountains in rural Virginia, and they converted this old horse barn to a concert hall. It's just so beautiful, and the community is so supportive there, it just feels really special. I'd really like to go back there someday for sure.

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"Make it fresh every time"

Stylistic diversity and historical performance

KS: *A general question for you about stylistic diversity in your career. When it comes to being a cellist working in all these different worlds, and it comes back down to learning a piece, or even learning some very 'traditional' music, do you find that having a diversity of style informs you as a player?*

IG: Totally. Yeah! Every different style that I've even spent a brief moment in has taught me so much. It impacts me unconsciously, in ways that I'm not even aware of. Consciously as well. I can remember learning the Ligeti solo cello sonata, and picking up right away, 'oh, this whole section has got to be inspired by gamelan music, like these scales are so gamelan-y!' And it turned out it was, so sometimes I can pick up on these idioms that have made their way into a different genre, and that's really fun.

Sometimes I can use techniques from different idioms. I did a tour with a fiddle player one time where I was playing choppy beats to accompany the fiddle tune. When it comes to techniques, I could do a beatbox-y thing, or I could be a percussion section, in a way. I guess the genres that I spend the most time in are contemporary classical and improvised music. Traditional classical too. I end up thinking the most about how those two worlds intersect. When playing improvised music, I think about the compositional structure of what's happening, and I notice if some of the material might resemble things I've heard before. Or, formally, how might it be related to something else.

If I'm playing composed music, I'm trying to listen and explore as if it's improvised, and to allow that spontaneity and freshness to come through something that's already predetermined. Especially with ensemble playing, I find it really interesting to try and listen to it as if it's an improvised piece. To make it fresh every time.

KS: *Yeah, I think the word 'fresh' comes to mind for me when I think of your playing.*

IG: Oh thanks!

KS: *I love traditional classical music, but maybe, a slightly cynical perspective for me is that, when people are playing the same traditional classical pieces for a long time, you can get sort of lost in, you know, trying to better a previous performer's version, or trying to emulate a certain performer. It's a similar thing, I think, with old jazz pieces. As a performer, if it's less about making it in the moment, making it your own, and it's more about, "ah, I have to do better than that recording of that one artist from 1987", then I find it can be less engaging, and maybe less satisfying for the musician. What I'm hearing from you is like, approaching things from a different headspace. Or approaching Bach, as if it was like a Radiohead piece, or playing a Radiohead piece as if Bach had written it, or, any other combination, really.*

IG: Yeah! I've always had this inner debate about the historical performance movement, kind of related to what you were just saying. It's really interesting that classical music has this lineage, and also that there are people who do all this research to imagine how something might have been performed. There's this chain of people building upon each other's work and playing the same piece so many times over so many years. That's got so much richness to it, but also there's a lot that can be lost through that. Feeling like you have to adhere to the way that something was done before can be dangerous. Approaching Bach like it was written yesterday is such an interesting exercise. What about it is revolutionary, even though it's hundreds of years old now? It was really funky at some point.

KS: *(laughs)* Yeah, we gotta get back to that funky point.

IG: Yeah! In a way, we don't know so many composers' intentions - the ones who are dead. There's actually no way. Composers throughout different periods have had such different attitudes to their intentions and the importance placed upon that. It used to be so much more, a collaborative process, with less individualism. The raising up of the composer as the ultimate authority is a fairly recent phenomenon.

KS: *Yeah, that's interesting. But it is a debate, right? 'Cause it's not like, 'throw a historical legacy out the window'. At the end of the day, you could take it or leave it, but it's sort of about what engages you, I think, as a player.*

IG: We all have to find our own answers. How to wade through these opposing poles of opinion, in regards to this matter. There are merits to both extremes.

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"I start off with some improvisation, and then I codify it into structure"

To You Through

KS: *So moving from playing old music to playing new music now, and to speak about your new album, To You Through. On this album you act as a performer, obviously, on all the pieces. You've composed one, and then you've also put the whole thing together as a package. I love albums as a form. Do you see this album like that? It's made up of individual pieces, but do you see yourself acting as a curator, like 'this is how I want it to flow, from here, to here, to here, and it's a whole experience'?*

IG: Oh, for sure. Selecting what I wanted to include on the album was a long, contemplative process. I switched up the order several times. I settled on an order based on the way that each piece had an overlapping element with the next, so I wanted there to be a logical flow in that way.

KS: *When it came to commissioning each of these pieces, were any of them created for the album, or did they come in different times, and you collected them afterward?*

IG: Yaz Lancaster's piece was written for the album, basically. I wasn't totally certain until it was completed that it was going to be on the album, but once it was, I was definitely sure that it belonged there. I really love that piece! They did such an amazing job. I really admire their work a lot. They're a New York-based composer, and violinist, and steelpan player, and poet, and organizer... and superhuman!

KS: *Was that piece one where you were using your voice as well?*

IG: Yeah, that's the one with lyrical material.

KS: *Right, that was great, it came in as a kind of surprise. Did Yaz ask you if you could do some voice work on this or was that something that you offered from your side of the collaboration?*

IG: I offered. I said, 'well it could be just solo cello, or there could be voice and/or electronics, whatever you want! What do you wanna do?' And yeah, that's what they chose to do.

KS: *What was your process for the piece that you composed, "Ghost"?*

IG: It mostly started off as an improvisation. When I create pieces that I consider a composition, I start off with some improvisation, and then I codify it into structure. Usually, there are a lot of sections that aren't strictly prescribed notes, it's more like a style, a set of pitches, or different colours. There's a textural vibe that I go through. And then other sections are consistent from performance to performance.

KS: *Okay cool, so for live performances of "Ghost", no two would be the same?*

IG: Yeah, it probably would sound the same to most people, but if you were to transcribe it, it would be a little bit different.

KS: *Nice, and you've got like, India - heads, like the Grateful Dead has like, Dead-heads, that go concert to concert, like, bootlegging every performance, and being like, "oh it's the 2012 version that's better" or "nah, it's the 2014, you gotta listen to that crescendo, like..." (laughs)*

IG: (laughs)

KS: *Is there a finalized score for “Ghost” or is it all in your head? Or is it somewhere in between?*

IG: Somewhere in between. I have a little chart. In the beginning and the ending, there are some chords outlined, but it’s mostly a kind of flowchart. I don’t know if somebody else would be able to play the piece by looking at it. It’s a little bit graphic.

KS: *Maybe that’s a good challenge.*

IG: (laughs) Yeah! It doesn’t give any indication of time, the time is all internal.

KS: *Right. So if you hand it off to someone else, and it’s gonna run for hours for them or something, yeah.*

IG: Yeah it could.

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“We’re on a hiking trail that they know, way better than I do”

Musical scores and composing

KS: *When you’re getting scores from other composers, do you have a preference of more traditional staff notation, or do you like written instructions? Is there a method of score-making in composing that you find yourself responding to the most whether it’s graphics, written instructions, or more traditional scores?*

IG: I’m up for all of that, and it just depends on what we want to create together. I gravitate and respond a little bit more towards ideas that are specifically notated. If it’s too vague, then I don’t know if I have enough to go on to include them as an equal partner in what we’re creating. I feel like I’m just doing my own thing, as I usually would by myself. I love it when a composer is really aware of what I sound like, what I’m capable of and where I tend to go, and I love it when they take me somewhere different and show me something new, and give me opportunities to, I don’t know, look at certain trees. But we’re on a hiking trail that they know, way better than I do. Does that make sense?

KS: *Yeah for sure, like it’s going both ways. They are fitting their ideas within your grid of what you can do but then also they’re like, hey, you can add this onto what you can do, maybe, if that works? So it’s like a two-way street. Sounds like you see it as a very collaborative process overall, with a lot of feedback. It’s kind of a line to draw. I mean there’s the extremes of like, “I’ve written you a piece - here’s the finished*

score, I don't want to talk about it - see you at the premiere". Which kind of sounds cold, certainly not collaborative. Also, it could be a good strategy for the right people in the right music.

IG: Yeah, I've also done that, and that can be fun in its own ways. It's like, "here's your surprise gift, here you go!", and then I get to give a little surprise gift back. Then we get to enjoy what each of us created for each other.

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"Music is basically my religion!"
Emotional responses and the pandemic

KS: *Another piece that I really liked on the album is "Light is Calling" by Michael Gordon, which kind of caught me off guard, and it brought tears to my eyes. When's the last time you felt that about either your own music, or someone else's?*

IG: I don't know if I've ever cried at my own music, but I cried at a lot of people's music this spring. Especially in March. I was in Montréal, and it was around the time when things were just opening up after the winter's lockdown. I went to a few shows and I found the entire atmosphere each time incredibly touching. I think the first show I went to when I arrived was at Sala Rossa, it was Thanya Iyer and her band playing. I was very moved, and then Pompey was playing at Ursa. Pompey sings these incredibly intimate, quiet songs, with very light strumming. You can just feel the vulnerability of every word, while being packed in a room with people after being alone all winter. It was so beautiful.

KS: *That's definitely a context that I've felt, coming back making music, attending music again after lockdown, there's like this sense of gratitude?*

IG: So precious, yeah. I cried at my friend Ellen Gibling's album release too. That might have been the first show I went to that was happening in the spring. She released a Celtic harp album. It's like, music is basically my religion! That's what I was feeling after each one of those shows, I was like, 'this is such an intense spiritual experience', and, 'this is what unites us!'

KS: *Right! Now on the other side of the coin is humour. I think you're very funny, and you've actually done things in music that are very funny as well. Do you find that humour belongs in music?*

IG: Oh, for sure! I guess it's rare. Music can be a serious art form a lot of the time. But we need more joy and humour in the world. I think it's natural for it to be in music.

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“I wanted the album to have a home”

Record labels

KS: *Your album has been released by Redshift Music. I thought it was interesting that you're working with a record label. Did they get a hold of you, or did you get a hold of them?*

IG: I reached out to them. I was aware of them as a label in Canada with a catalogue of contemporary classical music, and they were supporting a lot of minimalist and post-minimalist albums. It seemed like it could be potentially a good fit. There were really only a handful of labels that I was considering working with, and they expressed interest. It seemed like a good home for it.

KS: *What was the main drive for you behind thinking, 'okay, it's time for me to get a label'? Was it 'gosh, I'd love help with overall artistic management', or was it a collaboration? What was the impulse to be like, 'label time'?*

IG: It's just nice to be in a catalogue. I think that different labels, depending on the scale of their operation, can do quite a range of things for artists, or with artists. But Redshift is pretty hands-off. I could do whatever I wanted for the album artwork, and they don't do much in terms of publicity or management, or anything like that.

I wanted the album to have a home, and I think the value of being part of a record label is directing the flow of your audience. It gives people an inkling of what kind of world an album is in, to know what group it's a part of. Also, to be alongside some really fantastic artists. It's nice to be associated with them. I don't think that anyone necessarily needs a record label anymore. It's such a weird time in the industry. But it can be a really nice thing to be a part of. It's like this music is part of this community.

KS: *I think it's really beautiful to hear you describe it as a community. A place to align yourself.*

IG: Thank you! There are definitely some things where having the name of a label really helps. The BBC follows Redshift, so that's how my work got on the BBC, and I don't think that would have happened if I weren't on that label. For other opportunities, I'm sure, it can make a difference to have their name behind mine, or in front of mine, or whatever.

“I try to focus on the projects that are already rolling”

Career paths

KS: *When you look at where you are in your career, do you think about long-term goals? Or do you think, 'take it as it comes, whatever is happening right now is happening right now, I'm gonna stay in the moment and take the opportunities'?*

IG: It's a combination of both. I don't really have my life planned more than a year in advance. But I definitely have ideas floating in the air of different albums I want to make, different places I would love to tour someday, and none of that's really made it into concrete steps yet. I try to focus on the projects that are already rolling, take on as much as is reasonable, and try to roll with it. Then when there's space for me to start a new big project, I get that going.

KS: *I mean, a year in advance seems reasonable, because with the logistics of performance and scheduling and booking and instruments and complicated pieces, you're always gonna want to think at least months ahead. But at the same time, you've had some great opportunities lately, and I have no doubt you're going to continue to find them, especially with that sort of flexibility of being able to grab onto things.*

IG: Totally! Right now I'm here in Nova Scotia, so I'm trying to take on as much as I can that's here that I wouldn't be able to do somewhere else. Not that I'm planning to leave right now, but I just have no idea.

KS: *That's great. You have no idea, and you have lots of ideas.*

IG: *Laughs*

KS: *And that's just the place to be, right?*

IG: Yeah, that's my philosophy of life!

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"Is there ever really an arrival?"

Being an artist

KS: *When we met in music school, I remember seeing you, and the way you were performing, but also the way you were going about your business - it felt like you were already on the move with your career. Or, it felt like you showed up already as an arrived artist. Whereas at that time I was like, 'eh, I'm a student'. At that time, I was waiting for someone else to call me an artist. Eventually I realized that I could be waiting forever, you know? I can't depend on someone else to give me that validation. It's a validation you can only give yourself. My question for you is, does this resonate with you? Have there been moments in*

your career where you've had a lightbulb moment of, 'this is what I wanna do, this is how I'm gonna make it a priority'?

IG: That totally resonates. It's so flattering to hear that's how you saw me, I didn't realize at the time that that's how I was perceived. I struggled a lot at the beginning of my undergraduate degree on whether or not to pursue music, and whether or not I was doing the right thing for myself.

KS: *Really?*

IG: Yeah, I waffled a lot during the first couple of years. I had gotten really injured in my first year of university from having bad technique and practising too much, so I took a couple of months off, visited my boyfriend in Asia, travelled around, and almost died a few times. When I came back, I felt like, 'okay, now I've got to give a really serious go at this, I'm just going to regard it as what I'm doing, and see how that goes', and 'if I'm going to do this, I'm going to do it all the way'. And I just kept doing that.

I feel like all human beings have the capacity to be artists. All human beings who are in touch with their hearts and minds have the tools to be in touch with the world and express something that is meaningful in some way. On the path of being an artist, I don't know... is there ever really an arrival? It's this profession that's wrapped up a little bit in fame and reputation a lot of the time. It does feel like there is this danger of pursuing the applause instead of pursuing the creativity. But there is no moment, I don't think, where I felt like, 'I'm really an artist now'. (laughs)

KS: *Maybe if you had that moment, that's the moment you actually stop being an artist. (laughs)*

IG: Yeah, it's not actually something I thought a lot about, whether I identified as an artist or not. That was beside the point. The point was just to pursue creativity and collaboration and learning. No matter what tools one has, those tools can be used to make something. Of course, technique is important - the more one develops technique, the easier it is to say the thing that you want to say. But that's a lifelong journey, and it's never going to be perfect.

There's something that a mentor said to me a long time ago when I was waffling about whether or not to pursue music. He said 'you know, there's always going to be someone younger who can play faster and more beautifully, and wins all the competitions way before you've even entered them, but that shouldn't matter. That shouldn't be something that impacts your decision to pursue your art. It should be that this is something you love and you wanna spend all your time doing it.'

I think that's really good advice. Everyone has different strengths. I think a lot about Denise Djokic, who's a cellist I've always looked up to, and I've always wanted to sound more like her. Of

course, I don't think classical music should be a matter of just emulating the sound of another player, but it could definitely be inspired by them, right? Another mentor at some point said, 'The world already has a Denise Djokic! Like, we don't need another one. What the world needs is India Gailey!' (laughs) That was a tremendously kind thing to say, too. The world needs your unique voice. That doesn't have to be a cutout of something that already exists.

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"I might have to do my own experiments"
Symphonic music and looking ahead

KS: *What are you most excited about this summer, as a performer, or composer, or listener? What is the music that you're really going to dig into next?*

IG: I've been thinking a lot about this piece for Symphony Nova Scotia. I'm working myself up to getting it on paper. I'll probably be spending a lot of time over the next several weeks thinking about that, and experimenting with sounds. I've been trying to create a listening list of symphonic repertoire that has interesting textures and melodies and sounds that I find inspiring.

KS: *That's nice. Such as?*

IG: From one of the composers on my album, Anne Leilehua Lanzilotti, I just heard a String Orchestra of Brooklyn recording of her piece that was nominated for the Pulitzer, and it's so cool! I'm really inspired by a lot of the material in there. And going back to Kaija Saariaho's music, which I was obsessed with during my undergraduate degree. Also, Górecki's Symphony No. 2, I've been listening to that a lot! I really love that one.

There are a lot of sounds I'm searching for that I'm not finding in other people's work, because I'm not sure if they exist yet. I'm sure that people have tried them, but I might have to do my own experiments. Of course, that's what composing is.

KS: *Yeah, making stuff that you want to hear, like 'I've never heard that thing. I need to hear it now. Let's do it'.*

IG: Yeah. (laughs)

KS: *It's really great that you're on both sides of the collaboration. Here we are talking about how you respond to scores, and now you're going to be on that other side. Do you find that, being a composer and performer on both sides, it strengthens the other thing?*

IG: Yeah, I think so! It probably helps a lot. Especially having played in an orchestra, and writing for orchestra, it'll probably be a useful perspective.

KS: *Is there any statement you'd like to make to the world?*

IG: [to the world] You're an artist, and you are beautiful. I want to hear what you have to say.