

Mimi Xu's a DJ, composer and sound artist and on their feet.

Tuning Up the Heat

Many of us grew up glued to the television or roughin’ it up on playgrounds but for sound artist Mimi Xu, her childhood was spent attending experimental or classical music concerts and studying piano at conservatories. Raised between Paris, Shanghai and Copenhagen, her late father was an acclaimed acoustic architect who built opera houses, auditoriums and museums like the Louvre in Paris. “I grew up understanding space, proportions and sound,” Xu shared. “This is why visual aesthetics has a very important role in my work.” Today, she applies this multidisciplinary approach to her music that blends genres and crosses industries. Now splitting her time between Paris, Brussels and London, Xu deejays under the moniker Misty Rabbit, produces as well as scores films and art installations. Additionally, she serves theatrics via Awkward Moments, a performance collab with multi-instrumentalist and lead vocalist Maguire. Yet, the multi-faceted creative is perhaps best known for her work in fashion. She commands the dance floor at the hottest industry parties and scores tracks for the runways of brands like Acne Studios, Sportmax, Dunhill and Rejina Pyo. “The music, set and collection work together,” Xu shared. “A good fashion soundtrack can make a bad show. A bad fashion soundtrack can kill a good show.” Touching on her now decade-long collaboration with Zimmermann, Xu recalled the Australian label’s Paris Fashion Week debut in 2022. The collection, inspired by Nicky and Simone Zimmermann’s childhood memories, prompted the music director to recruit Aussie icons such as Kylie Minogue, Rose Byrne, Naomi Watts

and Sophie Lee, to share their own stories from life Down Under. Using their voice recordings, Xu composed an uplifting track with ambient electronic beats. “It’s very emotional for designers,” she shared. “Every season, they put their heart and soul into 10 minutes. You have to take that emotion on board and try to translate the vision of the designer. It has to be on point.” And as you might expect, Xu is busier than the average Joe. After a jam-packed fashion week schedule in London and Paris, the dynamic Xu was in Los Angeles for a gig at the Prada Double Club. She then flew to Brussels where she caught up with us on video call during a rare day off. How does she stay grounded with so much on her plate? The answer, to our surprise, had nothing to do with a self-care routine or any mention of the need to unwind. “Always being outside my comfort zone grounds me,” Xu shared. “With music, you can never know it all. I never go, ‘Oh this is great.’ It’s always, ‘This is not good enough.’ That keeps me humble.” What’s the next big thing on her agenda? The determined Xu is about to compose a symphony for a concert in Taiwan. “I’ve never written a symphony before,” she admitted. “But it is really interesting because it challenges me. I can always take things a step further.”

Text /
MADELEINE MAK
Photos /
MIMI XU

who knows how to get the fashion industry up



MIMI XU



MANIFESTO: Did you know that music was what you wanted to do from an early age?

MIMI XU: I had no idea, I was force fed as a kid! I had to go to these long concerts and not fall asleep, I visualised narratives from the music that I was listening to. So I started having *synesthesia* where one sense triggers the other. When I hear music, I see visuals. When I see visuals, I can hear music. That is the genesis of what I do today. I am able to put sound to something that I see whether it is a collection, film or an installation. That's also why I do Awkward Moments.

M What visuals do you see?

MX It depends on what I am listening to. If I listen to Tchaikovsky's *Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 35*, I can see the grandeur of nature. It's a very emotional piece. It also depends on what state I am in. What I saw when I was 10 is different from when I was aged 12 and 30.

M How did you get into DJing?

MX DJing came quite naturally. I have a record collection, I love music and I started playing a lot in clubs. But at one point, I started being a lot more selective about the gigs I took to focus on making music. You can't do both well. You have to choose. I find it a lot more intellectually satisfying to make my own music than play other people's music. I've done it, it's challenge done. And because I have ADHD, I have to keep myself excited. I have to push my boundaries further and see where it takes me.

M Tell us more about your work with music for runway shows.

MX For fashion music, it's very interesting. The landscape has changed so much from even two years ago. When I started doing fashion soundtracks, you just use other people's music. This is how 95 per cent of fashion show music is still done. It's a bit like DJing but you just produce a soundtrack. But now, I just want to do an original score. That's

why it takes me at least a month because it is all composed... I don't use music that is not mine.

This aligns with the new industry direction because algorithms are starting to take uploaded [runway show] videos down for copyright reasons. With original composition, you create something unique and can use it online after that. More and more fashion houses will have to look for composers to do their show music.

M What is the typical process like when working with fashion designers?

MX The idea of scoring a fashion show is to emphasise the collection's DNA. I always have a meeting with the designer to talk about their inspiration, the collection's core elements and what the set is going to be. Then I start composing the first chunk and send it to the designer to check if I am going in the right direction. After, I proceed with the second and third chunk. It is usually 15 minutes in total.

M Can you elaborate how the set influences your composition?

MX It's about the acoustics of the space. If it has high ceilings and concrete walls, the sound bounces around and there will be a lot of reverb. So the composition should not be so busy and some frequencies need to shine more than others. If you have carpet, fabric walls and low ceilings, the acoustics will be absorbed. And if it is an intimate space, you have to create a sense of intimacy in the score.

M Designers can edit what goes on the runway until the last minute. How does this affect you?

MX When it is not an original composition, you can change it till the last minute. But when it is an original, you can't really change it. You can extend it if they have more looks or shrink it.

M You've worked with Zimmermann for a long time. Tell us about your collaboration.

MX Yes, Zimmermann are amazing friends and clients! I've been working with them since their first show in New York 10 years ago. At the time, we were just using other people's music and doing the soundtrack. After Covid-19, it became one of the first brands to commission an original score. I know the brand so well, it's about the hot girl who is feminine but a bit tough and she is a happy person. The score for each collection reflects this side of the Zimmermann girl, but at the same time, Nicky [Zimmermann] changes the theme each season. So my music evolves with her inspirations. She will send me mood boards two months ahead because it's a big job. I come up with two ideas and she will choose one. I go down one direction and I will send her three or four versions and we fine tune it till the last day.

M How has the fall-winter 2024 women's season been for you?

MX I only did three shows this season. I had Dunhill, Zimmermann and Johanna Parve. They were so different, that was so great. For Zimmermann, I was inspired by the Charles Baudelaire poem, *The One Who is Too Gay*. I came up with something very dynamic and poetic but with hip-hop in-between. For Johanna Parv, I used piano and transitioned into techno. For Dunhill, the idea was to reflect the grandeur of British tradition. I went for neoclassical and cinematic.

M Awkward Moments also performed at the Marni after-party. What was that experience like?

MX Francesco Risso is an old friend of mine. I walked in his show a few times and we always collaborate here and there when we can. He hasn't done a show in Milan for a while so he suggested to do something with Awkward Moments. I decided to do something a bit bonkers because let's face it – fashion parties are never fun. People are so busy taking photos of themselves and being conscious of where they are. Marni is a rare brand that knows how to do a party. We couldn't control the lighting and we couldn't do our projections, so we did

a hybrid live show. It was this intense and hyper-energetic performance and we had costumes. It was really fun!

M What was it like to walk for Marni?

MX Francesco knows me so well, he always put me in menswear! (*Laughs*)

M Describe your personal style.

MX A tomboy with a sprinkle of glitter! I love menswear but it really depends on my mood. It's funny because I sometimes go the other extreme. But if I'm wearing a very feminine dress, I will pair it with a men's jacket or a pair of boots. I always need that visual balance.

M What advice do you have for others trying to forge a similar path and may be facing imposter syndrome?

MX Don't be afraid, just go and try it. Study it well and keep learning how you can be better. You need to learn how to make it good and you have to do a lot of it. When it comes to imposter syndrome, we all have that. If you don't, you're not progressing.

www.instagram.com/mimixumusic

