



## **Bespoke Artist Professional Development Program**

### **Information Session Transcript — 25 March 2026**

*Speak Percussion (online, via Zoom)*

*Participants: Biddy Connor (Special Projects Producer), Ashley Dyer (CEO and Executive Producer), Meg Cohen (prospective applicant), Angelita Biscotti (prospective applicant)*

*Note: This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity. It was recorded with the consent of all participants.*

### **Introductions**

**Biddy Connor:** Are you both okay if I record this? We want to make it available for other people.

**Angelita Biscotti:** Yeah.

**Ashley Dyer:** Maybe Biddy, we introduce ourselves first before we do anything, and then ask them who they are — so we can tailor it a little to who we know they are.

**Biddy Connor:** Sure. I'm Biddy, I'm the Special Projects Producer at Speak Percussion.

**Ashley Dyer:** And I'm Ashley. I'm the CEO and Executive Producer at Speak Percussion. Together we run this program — we ran it last time, and we both have a lot of experience working on supportive projects for emerging, mid-career, and senior artists.

**Biddy Connor:** Do you want to give a quick introduction?

**Meg Cohen:** I'm Meg. I play violin. I'm a freelancer living in Melbourne. I'm mid-career — though maybe forever emerging, I'm not quite sure!

**Angelita Biscotti:** Hey, thanks. I'm Angelita. I'm a Naarm-based sound artist.

### **Acknowledgement of Country**

**Biddy Connor:** Before we get started, I want to begin with an Acknowledgement of Country. I'm joining this evening from the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation, the sovereign custodians of this place we call Melbourne, Naarm, and the country that holds us all. I pay deep respects to their Elders past, present, and emerging, and I acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded. This always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land. Speak Percussion holds a commitment to cultural safety at the heart of everything we do. We believe that art and creativity flourish when we honour the people and the country that sustain us, and we're very grateful to be here.

## About Speak Percussion

**Biddy Connor:** Speak Percussion is a Melbourne-based contemporary music company. For 25 years we've been shaping the sound of 21st century Australian music through ambitious, boundary-pushing projects — commissioning new works, collaborating with artists across disciplines, and nurturing the next generation of music makers. The Bespoke program is one of the ways that we invest in artists over the long term. It's not a one-off workshop or a short course; it's a genuine, sustained commitment to the people doing the creative work. The program was a 2025 Art Music Award finalist for Excellence in Music Education, and that's a recognition we are incredibly proud of — a reflection of the artists who've come through the program.

## What is the Bespoke Program?

**Ashley Dyer:** Even though it was shortlisted for an education award, it's not actually a course. We're not going to teach you anything in that conventional sense — we're going to support you to learn on your own terms and help facilitate your own growth in whatever way you'd like.

**Biddy Connor:** At its core, Bespoke is a two-year professional development program for independent, early-to-mid-career composers, musicians, sound artists, and performance artists. It's focused on career sustainability — helping artists build the skills, knowledge, networks, and confidence to sustain a long creative life. It's not a course, but a support structure for you to do your own inquiry.

### The program runs in two stages:

**Stage One** (this year, running into early next year) centres on peer-to-peer sharing, masterclasses, and workshops with music and arts industry leaders. You'll develop alongside a cohort of fellow artists, and that peer network becomes one of the most valuable things you take away.

**Stage Two** (the following year) sees participants working towards developing their own projects, with hands-on support from Speak's team to help realise ideas and open up opportunities.

## Guiding Philosophy

**Biddy Connor:** What makes Bespoke distinctive is its guiding philosophy. It's guided by four principles:

**Responsibility:** You drive your own experience and decide what you need.

**Self-determination:** You set your goals. This is not an assessed program.

**Practising Practice:** The focus is on your artistic process, not products.

**Building Networks of Support:** Speak's team, mentors, and your peers are all here to support your path.

Underpinning all of it is a commitment to cultural safety — a space that respects and embraces all identities.

## Q&A: Career Sustainability

**Meg Cohen:** Career sustainability is such a massive term. I'm really curious — how do you define a sustainable career?

**Ashley Dyer:** Great question. For us, for this program, it's about vocational learning rather than necessarily financial opportunities. We'll definitely equip you with skills associated with the business side of arts-making if that's what you're interested in — but it's more than that. It's about how do you stay interested? How do you stay engaged? How do you set yourself up with the questions that make you want to keep doing this when you're 85? A lot of the real focus is around that. It's a lifelong pursuit, we hope. The way we approach it is that you'll hopefully develop networks and colleagues that you'll work with for long periods of time afterwards. What are the conditions that allow you to do whatever you want to do, including the personal resources you might need? That's what we mean by career sustainability.

## Stage One in Detail

**Ashley Dyer:** On the first day of the initiative — once we've chosen the group — we have a conversation about what you want to get out of the first year and who we might engage. We'll then bring some of those people in to run moments with you, whether that's an hour-long talk, a workshop, or a masterclass. We'll draw on our own team and our broader networks to do that.

In that first year, each person will have opportunities to share what they're interested in. That will be engaged with by the group — on your terms — and you'll be given moments to share material or ideas and have those challenged. You'll also have one-on-one sessions with our team to talk about where you're at with your arts practice and where you want to go. A lot of the mentoring and pastoral care will be led by you as individuals. We'll be guided by that.

This iteration is a little different in that we know we're working towards a potential Stage Two outcome. Not everyone will want to continue and that's completely fine. If they do, we'll talk about it with everyone at around the midpoint. For anyone who's really ambitious, having an 18-to-20-month lead-up time with an organisation like us behind you is a real advantage if you want to try to secure extra funding. But there's no requirement for anyone to put in grant applications. If someone wants to work towards a product-based outcome in two years, we can support that. If someone just wants to work out a part of their practice in detail, we can support that too. It's flexible.

## Q&A: Do I need a project proposal to apply?

**Angelita Biscotti:** Are we required to have a project proposal when we apply? I'm just looking at the application form.

**Biddy Connor:** No — there's no requirement for a project proposal. That can be something you work on during the first year, or come to a conclusion on during the first year.

**Ashley Dyer:** You might just want to focus on a certain type of skill, or you might be researching something across the full two years, and that's completely fine. We're more interested in understanding what makes you excited about making work. We're not interested in a product, show, or outcome at the outset. That doesn't mean you can't include one in your application if you want to — but it's not what we're looking

for. It's also important to mention: we're not a massive organisation. We only have five staff members, and there are limits to what we can offer. We give a lot to people who participate in terms of our time, but we can't give you everything. We'll just try.

## Who is the Program For?

**Biddy Connor:** The program is for you if you're a self-motivated, self-directed artist who wants to grow their perspective and skills in artistic practice and the business side of arts — a practising musician, composer, or sound/performance artist with experience in contemporary or creative music who is interested in creating your own work, and someone who is eager to develop your networks through peer learning and professional development.

A few things we often get asked about: you don't need to be a percussionist, and you don't need a traditional music education. We welcome artists from diverse cultural and training backgrounds. You also don't need to be a performer — composers and sound designers are absolutely welcome. Practice Sharing sessions can involve all sorts of things: scores, recordings, works in progress. If you work across disciplines — for example, you're a dancer but also make music — that's a strength. We'd love you to tell us how music and sound fit into your practice.

**Ashley Dyer:** It doesn't mean you have to have a hybrid practice — just being a musician who's really obsessed with sine tones is completely fine.

## Program Dates

**Biddy Connor:** The program is free to participate in — there are no costs. Here's what your year would look like if you're selected. The compulsory dates for Stage One are:

**Planning Day:** Sunday 10 May 2026, 10am–4pm, Darebin Arts Centre. This is where we launch the program together, set goals, and shape the year as a cohort.

**Practice Sharing #1:** Friday 21 & Saturday 22 August 2026. You're only expected to attend a minimum of one of the two days.

**Practice Sharing #2:** Friday 6 & Saturday 7 November 2026. Same arrangement — minimum of one day.

**Practice Sharing #3:** Friday 12 & Saturday 13 February 2027. Minimum of one day.

**Debrief Day:** Saturday 13 March 2027, to finish up Stage One and begin planning for Stage Two.

**Biddy Connor:** We've structured the Practice Sharings across Fridays and Saturdays deliberately, because we know artists have varied working commitments and we want to make it as accessible as possible. Those Practice Sharing dates also serve as natural goalposts — they help you work out what you do in the time in between at home in your own practice.

## Optional Activities

**Ashley Dyer:** In the past, for example, we might have two artists come to Speak's office to do a masterclass conversation, and then an extra hour with you about something you're specifically interested in. We've had artists like Maddie and Tim —

who've been working together as a duo for 50 years making large-scale sound-based installations that tour internationally — come in for something like that.

**Biddy Connor:** Some of the other in-person sessions last year included three artists who work in electro-acoustic music coming in to talk about their practice. Online sessions have included things like publicity, marketing, and pitching your work to organisations.

**Ashley Dyer:** There's also been one on grant writing and creating ideas that resonate for audiences. They're quite varied, and the content will be shaped by what the cohort is interested in — we'll canvas that from you on the Planning Day. Some masterclasses can be very targeted at specific skills; others are broader — like one year in another program context where we had an artist from Belgium talk about what it means to live on an artist's living wage, because everyone was curious about how you survive as an artist in that system.

Other options include arts tax, copyright and arts law, and workshops tied to specific Speak Percussion projects — for instance, we're making a work at a squash centre later in the year and there'll be a two-day workshop around performing in that context. There are also internship opportunities where you can sit in on the rehearsal process for one of our major projects.

Finally, we set aside dedicated slots for one-on-one or small group sessions. You can book in with Biddy, me, or anyone else on our team for a half-hour conversation — to ask questions, get feedback on grant applications, or just check in on where you're at. We found that having structured booking times works much better than ad-hoc requests at the last minute.

## Participant Interests

**Ashley Dyer:** What are you both interested in right now? Why were you drawn to this initiative?

**Meg Cohen:** I'm definitely interested in making contacts and seeing what other people are up to. I'm very collaborative — probably less focused on my own individual practice in isolation. I like curating and bringing people together and creating projects around that. I'm also exploring lots of different styles of playing at the moment, so I'm in a real learning space, seeing where I can take things.

**Angelita Biscotti:** I feel like I'm kind of the opposite — I'm very much a solo practitioner, although I do love collaborations when they're with the right people. I feel like I haven't found my people yet, and this could be a place to do that, which would be amazing.

I've done a few similar professional development things before — I did something with Midsummer a couple of years ago and the MESS PD in 2024, which was incredible. What I'm really interested in is bringing together my many different interests. I work as an astrologer — that's one of my creative practices — and I've always been trying to work out how to create some kind of astrologically-themed musical composition, possibly using Max MSP. I want to find the focus, guidance, and structure to really get into that and marry my different disciplinary interests. It sounds like there's going to be some structure and people to check in with — is that right?

**Ashley Dyer:** Possibly — and what I mean by that is it'll be up to you to set up how you want us to engage. If you want us to be a coach, if you want us to crack the whip a little, then you set that up with us and we do it. But not everyone will want that. If you do want a clear structure that we can hold you to account on, we can support that. But it'll be for you and us to determine that together — it's not the focus of the activity because some people won't want it at all. That's why it's flexible.

I can't be completely across what MESS or Midsummer have done, but I imagine their initiatives are shorter and less personalised — most organisations don't have the capacity to do this type of thing properly, because it takes a lot of time and energy. What we find is that the more someone puts into this, the more they get out. And the more they learn how to approach us, ask questions, and demand things of us, the more we can meet them on their terms. We'll help you work out your direction and then help you hold yourself to account — or if you want us to literally call you every week and ask 'Have you done that thing?' — that's what we'll do.

**Biddy Connor:** And having those Practice Sharing dates spread over such a long period definitely serves as those goalposts — things to work towards.

## The Selection Process

**Ashley Dyer:** We don't really reject people in this program — what happens is we pick the group that makes sense together. We try to curate a group that has a diversity of talents but also enough shared interests that it's easier to program for everyone. I've found in the past that if the age ranges or life stages are too far apart, it can be harder to create group cohesion. That said, it's not that we'd pick a whole group of 20-year-olds or a whole group of 30-year-olds — it's just about finding a group that can mesh. If there's a deciding factor, it'll be about how the group plays out, not about what you individually bring. If you have friends who might also be interested, encourage them to apply — micro-communities within the broader group can create a lot of momentum and energy, and really help with that sense of it being worthwhile.

## Application Form Walkthrough

**Biddy Connor:** Questions 1 to 6 are personal details. We do ask for your age — this is for our records and won't affect eligibility. We welcome artists at different age and career stages.

There are two written questions, each with a 300-word maximum — these are really the bulk of the application for us.

**Question 8:** Describe your artistic experience and practice. This is an opportunity to introduce yourself as an artist — tell us what you make, how you make it, what traditions or approaches you draw from, and where your practice sits right now. You don't need to have a polished career; we're just interested in where you are and what you're working on.

**Ashley Dyer:** A helpful tip: if you don't yet have a large body of work, reference the artists you want to be like, or the kind of work you want to make. That's a really useful way for someone reading these applications to get a sense of where you're at. It can be future-looking as much as it is about who you are now.

**Question 9:** Why are you interested in this opportunity now? What do you hope to gain from the program? We're looking for genuine self-reflection — why Bespoke, and why at this point in your career? What specifically are you hoping to develop? We want to understand what's happening in your practice that makes this moment right for you.

**Question 10:** Web links to your work — a website, SoundCloud, Bandcamp, Vimeo, YouTube, anything that gives us a sense of what you make. If your work isn't easily available online, share what you can and explain the context.

**Questions 11–14:** Two referees — a name and contact email or phone number. They should be people who can speak to your artistic practice: a collaborator, teacher, producer, or presenter. They don't need to write anything at this stage; we'll reach out if your application progresses.

**Ashley Dyer:** Referees can really help if we have no way of knowing who you are. If we're splitting between two applicants, a reference that sheds light on your work and personality can be the deciding factor.

**Question 15** is a confirmation about the compulsory dates. If you have a date conflict, please reach out to us before submitting and include those details in your application — we'd rather have a conversation about it than dismiss your application on that basis. Because the questions are only 300 words, we'd encourage you to write your responses somewhere else first and then paste them in.

## Key Deadlines

**Biddy Connor:** EOIs close on Sunday 12 April 2026 at 5:00pm. All outcomes will be communicated by Monday 20 April 2026.

## Q&A: Date Conflicts in the Application

**Meg Cohen:** We've emailed a little about my availability for some of the compulsory dates — I'm still keen to apply. Where should I describe those commitments in the application form?

**Ashley Dyer:** The most frustrating scenario is someone like you — who's done the right thing and told us in advance — being dismissed, while someone else joins the program and simply doesn't show up. We want to validate and honour the fact that you've been organised enough to tell us. At the same time, if availability becomes a deciding factor once we have the full group, that's where it might come in.

**Biddy Connor:** I'll go back into the form and add a section at the bottom for date conflicts so it's easier for us to keep track. Thanks for raising that, Meg.

## Closing

**Biddy Connor:** I also want to check — because the intention is to make this recording available online — are you both okay with the sections where you're talking about your practice being up there? I think it'll be helpful for other people to hear your questions, particularly as they relate to your own practice.

**Meg Cohen:** That's fine.

**Angelita Biscotti:** Yeah, it's all good.