

## “Tech Treasure: How iTunes Paid for a Twitter Queen's Castle”

Cellist Zoë Keating is a digitally enterprising string player who has prospered online

By Rory Williams - June 2010



Photo by Kirstie Shanley

**Name:** Zoë Keating

**Hometown:** Guelph, Ontario, Canada

**Instrument:** Cello

**Website:** [zoekeating.com](http://zoekeating.com)

**Quote:** ‘I like performing at the craziest events—those things that were always the most unusual have benefited me the most.’

Having a Web presence is no longer a cute way to stay connected to fans. It has become the way a musician can feed, clothe, and shelter herself. Case in point: the “happily unsigned and



866 531-2172  
[www.skylineonline.com](http://www.skylineonline.com)  
Andrea Sabata  
[andrea@skylineonline.com](mailto:andrea@skylineonline.com)

independent” avant cellist Zoë Keating. “I bought my house with iTunes,” she told an audience last December at the SF MusicTech Summit.

The conference in San Francisco brought together artists and established Web developers from Twitter, Google, and Facebook, as well as other independents and start-ups, to not only gauge the online music experience, but to shape its future. At a time when the major music labels bemoan what’s become of the industry, this conference was brimming with optimism. “This is why I love technology conferences,” Keating says. “At other music conferences, they’re holding onto the crumbs of the past.

“I say, ‘Get out of your music ghetto.’”

At the conference, Keating—tall, fair, and hip with pink dreadlocks—sat on a panel that discussed how musicians can achieve online popularity. Her self-produced *One Cello x 16: Natoma* has spent time on iTunes as both No. 1 on the classical chart and No. 2 on the electronica chart. Counting nearly 1.3 million followers on Twitter, Keating hasn’t just earned her seat on the panel, she’s leading the techie congregation. Her Web popularity has led to interviews with National Public Radio, the San Francisco Chronicle, Wired magazine, and NBC, and opened up a wealth of collaborative opportunities with leading artists, including electronic-music icon Imogen Heap.

In short, Keating is what every independent string player needs to be—digitally enterprising. “As an independent musician, you have to do as much as possible in as many spheres as possible,” Keating says.

The Canadian-born, classically trained Keating began sphere hopping as soon as she left Sarah Lawrence College. Armed with a liberal arts degree with a concentration in music, she moved to San Francisco, where she picked up a job in the software industry during the dot-com bubble. “I had never turned on a computer before I came to San Francisco,” Keating says. “It was an industry that allowed liberal arts majors to have a job. I fit in along with everyone else—it was like a second education.”

At night, Keating performed in alternative-venue spaces—her favorite being a warehouse—plugging in and experimenting with different looping techniques. She also played for rock cello trio *Rasputina*, which she found online through the Internet Cello Society. Then Heap, after hearing Keating’s music on MySpace and ordering a CD, hired Keating as the opening act and accompanist during Heap’s international tour, which has since turned into five tours.

“For string players, we’re in a really great position,” Keating says. “Rock ’n’ roll and pop acts want string artists with them. String players can cover a lot of musical ground. You can add so



866 531-2172  
www.skylineonline.com  
Andrea Sabata  
andrea@skylineonline.com

much—a richness to the solo performer like [Heap]. It's a rewarding thing to be doing because if you've been classically trained, it's not hard to figure out."

A few "strategically free" gigs, which didn't offer money, also have paid off for Keating: the oddball concert in the desert that was picked up by NPR for a feature story, for instance, or a tech conference that included executives along with developers. "People at a tech conference may have never seen a live performance," Keating says. "Corporate gigs [such as banquets] are pretty lucrative. And those people are going to be exposed to you because of that conference, and they're going to be able to picture you in their environment."

That was certainly the case in December, when the San Francisco tech panel ended—Keating found herself surrounded by members of the audience and swamped with offers.

### **Zoë Keating's Do's & Don'ts for the Digitally Enterprising Musician**

**Do:** Get personal on your website and cloud accounts. Keating's younger fans love when she divulges personal information. "They want to buy my records five times just to support me because of that."

**Do:** Think beyond traditional gigs. Keating has made it a point to play at technology conferences. She doesn't know who featured her on Twitter and iTunes, but it's possible they watched her perform at one those events. "I've become the tech cellist" she says.

**Do:** Take control of your publicity. "It's important for me to always be authentic. It's me on those websites. If I were to use my Twitter account just to publicize things, it wouldn't be authentic."

**Don't:** Have the inaccessible rock-star attitude in person or on the Internet. After Keating's concerts, she mixes it up with fans offstage and online. "You're there to play a concert, but the meet-and-greet is a part of the event."



866 531-2172  
www.skylineonline.com  
Andrea Sabata  
andrea@skylineonline.com