

STANDING

WAVES

VOLUME 1

dedicated to the memory of Jed Speare

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In 2015, Jed Speare and I began discussing the possibility of a concert series at Mobius, which at the time was in Central Square, Cambridge. He was beginning to feel better after what seemed like months of surgery and illness and I was happy to oblige and work with him to bring a new series to life. We eventually landed on the concept for 'Standing Waves' that we have today:

Standing Waves is a monthly music, sound, and artists talk series with a concentration on one artist in the performance of and presentation about their work. Standing Waves is given over to a single artist for each event that allows for the performance and auditioning of their work as well as a presentation to the audience about it that makes for an intimate as well as a rigorous experience, with the integrity and intention of the artist and work aligned and revealed. A distinguishing element of the series will also be a document in the form of a book that includes critical writings and photographs from the events. This comprehensive approach will elucidate the music, sound art and practices that overlap and comprise the artists' works.

I have found that there is a distinct lack in the communication of our ideas, critiques, concepts, personal philosophies and work amongst the 'experimental music' scene (at least in New England). The goal then was to devise a series that emphasized that which was lacking; to encourage an artist to communicate their processes and also engage with the community in the

form of presentation, feedback and query. That which is most important in this music is that which is I find most important in living; to will myself into a place of consideration, empathy and critique.

(The series will be modeled after an ideal: gathering a diverse community who converses, supports and feels comfortable with one another in deep consideration and critique of our practices. This model is one that I imagine is possible in our consideration of everyday life.)

The artists represented in the first season of 'Standing Waves' in 2016 form a coherent network of connected ideas, while also maintaining their individual streams; each of them offers lucid points of revelation in the presentation of their work. The writings included in this book offer windows into the much deeper processes that these artists consider. Laura Cetilia offers insight and reflection on her practice of composing and improvising with overtones, beating patterns and electronics. Jake Meginsky, in conversation with Susanna Bolle, elaborates on his concepts of polyrhythm and his experiences as a percussionist. Vic Rawlings reflects on his personal connections to J.S. Bach and his process of composing with a Bach piece as source material. And, finally, Sarah Hennies elaborates on the commonality between percussionists and queer/trans identities.

Whichever way we choose to consider the artists represented in this first series of 'Standing Waves', it is clear that they each offer a unique perspective on the artistic process and the production of sound, while concurrently being connected into a web of mutual ideas and considerations. I see the connection of ideas in this series and our created community as a way of pulling us back together and remembering the network that we create together. This series is, amongst other things, a place for us to try to

understand one another, ourselves and to find common ground in our considered lives. With this series, my hope is to trace the lines of our small community and continue to map the potential differences and connections we create.

It wasn't until I was at the most recent 'Standing Waves' concert—held at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts Library—that it occurred to me where the idea for the 'Standing Waves' series had stemmed from. In March 2012, I attended a 'Library Sounds' concert at the SMFA Library that featured Jed Speare as the lone artist on the program. Jed presented two pieces of work and gave a talk on his work between the sets; the same format of 'Standing Waves'. Now, it seems fitting that the series continue not only in honor of Jed's memory, but also as a remembrance of his work and—especially—the impact his work has had on me.

Morgan Evans-Weiler (March 2017)



Photo by Susanna Bolle

JAKE MEGINSKY

April 17, 2016
7pm

Jake Meginsky has collaborated and performed with such artists as Milford Graves, Alvin Lucier, Joan LaBarbara, Vic Rawlings, Greg Kelley, Bhub Rainey, Joe McPhee, Thurston Moore, William Parker, Paul Flaherty, Arthur Brooks, Bill Nace, and John Truscinski.

Definitions of rhythm
(as collected by the artist)

- the one indispensable element of all music
- is the highest and most autonomous expression of time consciousness
- it is the most perceptible but most tangible
- repeating patterns
- things to do it and get done to
- the space between events
- energy with tempo
- relationship between durations of sound and silence
- placement of events in time that may suggest a pattern or logic
- stressed and unstressed sounds put together to form some metrical duration often repeated
- if it can anticipate the future without knowing what's coming
- an attempt to organize time so that sense might be made of it without sacrificing its mysterious qualities
- an organization of time that enhances its awe-inspiring qualities, usually with a dip
- events perceived relatively to their relation to each other in time
- the beat in music
- interrelated cycles
- points used to describe the tidal patterns of pulse, which can never be perceived completely on its own, but is manifested by these points, areas, pools of time and their interrelations
- movement perceived
- separation, difference, distance
- a return to center

- flicker
- emptiness, mass, event, non-event, propulsion, exclusion, blood, iron, breath, contradiction, positive, negative, light, dark, expanding, contracting, to the point, meandering,
- 1, 0 repeat with or without variation
- any recognizable pattern

Plato – an order of movement

Bacchios the elder – a measuring of time by means of some kind of movement

Phaedrus – some measured thesis of syllables placed together in certain ways

Arastoxenus – times divided by any of those things that are capable of being rhythmized

Nicomachus – well marked movement of times

Theophrastis – putting together of times in due proportion considered with regard to symmetry amongst them

Didymos – a schematic arrangement of sounds

Harvard Dictionary of Music – a patterned configuration of attack

The following interview was conducted by **Susanna Bolle** in early 2017 via email.

You started your talk with crowdsourced definitions of rhythm, followed by a list of more classical definitions. Were there any of these in particular that resonated with you?

I think I was most fascinated by the sheer range and the lack of duplication in the way people defined the word. I think it is often assumed that technical terms regarding music theory like rhythm, harmony, or melody have definitive, static meanings, but in reality it is much more subjective, and can often illuminate unique rela-

tionships that people have with music.

That being said, the definitions that were most resonant for me were the ones that defined rhythm in mysterious, non-linear, or circular ways, such as:

- enhances its awe-inspiring qualities, usually with a dip
- interrelated cycles
- points used to describe the tidal patterns of pulse, which can never be perceived completely on its own, but is manifested by these points, areas, pools of time and their interrelations

When did you start making and then studying music? Who were some of the early drum teachers who have influenced your work?

I came up in a musical family. My dad is a classical bassist and also a multi-instrumentalist. Lots of instruments everywhere. I began studying cello at around 7 or 8. I also played trumpet as a kid. I switched to drums at about 11 because I realized my father, who was proficient on most instruments, didn't really seem to be interested in percussion. I wanted to get good at something that he wasn't so good at. At around 12, I started studying with Michael Karz, a friend of my dad's who played percussion in the symphony. He was great. Would stand over me while I played, smoking cigarettes in his tiny apartment filled with vibes and marimbas and timpani. He also encouraged me to compose at a very young age, giving me assignments to write myself solos. Then, at around 13, I studied with a great Springfield jazz drummer named Billy Arnold. He had two kits set up mirroring each other in his Mason Square attic and we would just improvise and play. Both experiences were very formative for me, as they both allowed me to think of myself as someone who could create something original with the instrument, rather than simply interpret other people's music or support a song by providing a tempo and embellishing

it every now and then.

What inspired you to start working with and composing with electronics?

I focused mostly on percussion until about 10 years ago when Bill Nace asked me to make a solo tape. I decided to start and experiment with tape loops, a sampler, some synths, and combine all that with timpani, gongs and other amplified drums. The tape was released under the title "Stemtape". After that I lost my studio for playing drums and started to make music with headphones in my basement. It took me a while to develop a language on pure electronics, there was a lot of trial and error. Eventually I made my 1st solo LP under my own name, "l'appel du vide". The use of sine waves on that record was extremely influenced by my work with Milford Graves, who was at the time, using sine and square waves to sonify heartbeat, circulatory, and other human biological sounds using an electronic stethoscope and a computer program for engineers called LabView, which was designed to analyze low frequency audio such as bridge vibration.

Could you talk about how you started working with Milford Graves and how that collaboration/association has evolved over the years?

I saw Milford Graves play solo at UMASS in 2003. His music and his immense physical presence made a huge impact on me. As the concert ended, I made a conscious decision that I would figure out a way to study with him. Basically, I drove to Bennington College, where he was teaching, and sat outside his office till he showed up. When he arrived, I stood up and told him I had come up to Vermont specifically to work with him. He kinda looked me up and down and said "we will see what the story is". He let me sit in on his classes and this evolved over time into an



Photo by Peter Gumaskas

assistantship. Eventually I received an MFA in music from Bennington, studying everything from percussion to martial arts to electronic music with the Professor. After I graduated, I stayed up at Bennington, teaching and working alongside Milford in his lab. In 2013, I performed with him at Roulette, triggering sine wave sonification of heart beat recordings and live mixing video. When he retired, I left the college as well, but I continue to work with him at his house in Queens, where I spend a lot of time filming, recording, and organizing his digital archive.

I was really struck by your discussion linking the clavé theory that you'd studied as a percussionist and what I assume is your very unusual use of ducking as a compositional tool. Could you talk a bit that relationship?

The relationship between clavé and the way I use sidechain compression or "ducking" in my music isn't really straightforward. Like many of my interests, when I unpack it, the influence seems more metaphorical or mysterious, I can see it out of the corner of

my eye but it doesn't dictate what I do.

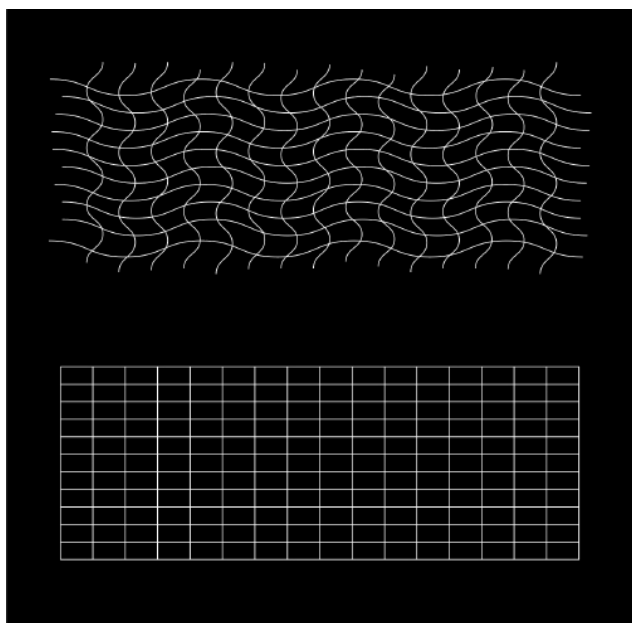
The concept of clavé I am most interested in is the idea that an unheard pattern is applied onto the heard music, a set of intervallic rhythmic relationships that offer tension and release inside a cycle. Master drummers inside drum culture exploit and illuminate these foundational patterns through composition and improvisation - exploring the nooks and crannies of the specific relationships in the system. The clavé is the key, just like in tonal music. A system that dictates the boundaries of tension and release in the heard music. In a lot of polyrhythmic music from drum culture, it is the silence between intervals in a clavé pattern that offer the soloist the space to make a statement. Silence as infinite potential. Thus the music is about the space between intervals, rather than about the discrete points in the pattern.

I use "ducking" to create felt rhythmic patterns, in which the listener does not hear the sound causing the volume to drop on the "ducked" track. This creates an organic sense of pulse even when applied to a sustained tone. I am interested in ways of using an amplitude drop, or silence, to create a rich and fluid rhythmic content. In my music, I may have three or four silent tracks, all operating in polyrhythmic patterns, driving the sidechain compressors on one single track. Very simple elements can create a lot of complexity this way.

Do you think of your work with percussion and electronics as radically distinct from each other? They seem quite intertwined.

Even inside the orchestra, the percussion section is given the most freedom, in regards to timbre especially. The classical percussionist usually gets to choose his own mallets and sticks. The undefined pitches of cymbals and snare drum are often left up to the player. It is the space of the orchestra where noise is allowed.

So I think, more than other western-trained musicians, percussionists often learn early how to think timbrally and then develop an ear for organizing sounds outside of sets of discrete pitches. This lends itself to a disposition towards the world of electronic music, where any sound can become part of a composition. My work with percussion has sort of a synergistic looping relationship to my work with electronics. When I'm working with acoustic percussion, I'm often thinking of electronic musical and sound processing elements like sidechain compression, filtering, reverb, echo, oscillators, knobs, patches and phasing. When I'm performing with electronics, I find myself imagining ways to make the sound more physical, thinking of the PA itself like a drum membrane.



LAURA CETILIA

May 8, 2016
7pm

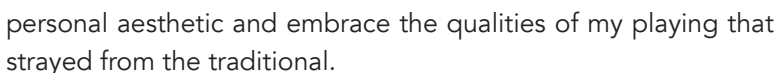
As a daughter of mixed heritage, Mexican-American cellist, Laura Cetilia is at home with in-betweenness, straddling the worlds of performer/composer, teacher/artist, acoustic/electronic and traditional/experimental sound practices. Her music has been described as "unorthodox loveliness" and hailed as "alternately penetrating and atmospheric."

Prologue

I am a small and soft spoken woman. Growing up, I often felt unheard and overlooked. As I developed as a performer, I came to enjoy playing my cello very quietly, sometimes just skimming the surface of sound, forcing people to listen intently and focus only on what is happening in front of them. To me, each sound I create is precious (currently a vilified word) and each improvisation is a thoughtfully sculpted moment. I believe that through performance, one can intimately connect with strangers, an occurrence that is a rarity these days.

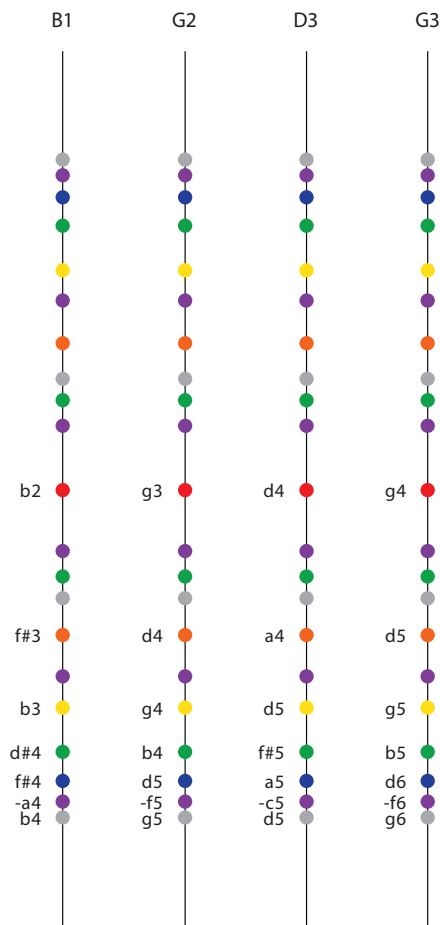
Growing up in the East Los Angeles area from a racially mixed family (Mexican/Caucasian), I couldn't help but be different. LA was, and continues to be, a segregated city. If you live there long enough, you come to know where specific ethnic groups have settled. I usually ended up being the only mixed race person among my peers, so I was never able to completely assimilate with those around me.

That I didn't quite fit in as a musician either became evident when I went to formally study cello performance at a renowned university in a small town in the midwest. The stark contrast between myself, having started cello "late" at the age of 10 in the now-defunct public school orchestral program, and sons and daughters of conductors or other professional musicians, some of whom already had management and six-figure-valued instruments, was disheartening. I didn't realize (or accept) that I was on a different trajectory until after getting my Masters, when I moved back to LA and discovered the experimental music scene there. I was introduced to "lowercase" sound (through performances by Steve Roden and others) and met André Cormier, a recent graduate of CalArts. I began to perform experimental composed music and improvise in my electroacoustic duo, Mem1, with Mark Cetilia, and over the years developed a technique unique to my own



Solo improvisation for Standing Waves #2

I decided to open the evening with a 20-minute structured improvisation for solo acoustic cello. At this moment in my artistic practice, I was grappling with my own perceived dependency on the use of electronics to create sonic complexity. I wanted to be able to achieve a broad sonic palette with only my acoustic instrument. I also wanted to challenge myself technically by limiting myself to using mostly open strings, their harmonics (especially in the higher partials), and special bowing techniques to bring out specific overtones. I built in some surprises for myself by tuning my instrument to different intervals instead of the traditional



fifths. In this case, the lowest string was tuned down a half-step to B, instead of C, and the A string was tuned down a whole-step to G. The middle strings, D and G, remained the same. This specific scordatura allowed me access to intervals and chords not usually attainable with the traditional tuning method, and I could make use of imperfect intervals of the strings' overtones inherent

in this set up. I had more thirds, sixths, sevenths, and seconds to work with, allowing me to create beating patterns in unexpected places on the instrument. I also made use of my voice to amplify specific overtones at key moments in the improvisation. In order to avoid a dynamically static drone throughout the piece, I tried to include some space in my playing, adding moments of sparse pizzicati and extremely light bowing techniques to make way for near silence.

Fails Gracefully [2012] for acoustic cello and electronics

As part of my Standing Waves presentation, I wanted to include an older piece in which I used sine tones, so I chose to play a recording of *Fails Gracefully*. The title of this piece is taken from a phrase used in programming to describe systems that can function under compromised conditions. I was attracted to the con-



tradictions inherent in this phrase, which call to mind my approach to cello playing, as it is full of what some would consider "errors." When improvising on my cello, I am not concerned with creating a typically rich and beautiful sound, but prefer the nasal tones of ponticello and enjoy languishing in harsh dissonances. I also focus on harmonics and the higher, unstable overtones of the instrument, using non-standard

techniques to my advantage, attempting to control these ephemeral and precarious sounds. Throughout *Fails Gracefully*, my cello playing is contrasted with a warm and steady stream of electronic tones; there are also some very satisfying moments of complete synchronicity in which the divide between human/acoustic and electronic melts away entirely.

Celeste and Two Clarinets [2016]

When I was asked to prepare a piece for the Standing Waves series with instrumentation of my own choosing, I immediately thought of using two clarinets. As a string player, I've always been envious of the clarinet's close resemblance of a sine tone. There's not much that I enjoy more than hearing two sine tones rub up against one another. Having already composed some pieces that relied heavily on sine tones, I wanted to recreate their pure and clean sonorities with something other than electronics, hence the clarinets. The celeste was the cherry on top, providing an almost cloyingly sweet addition to the mix.

In *Celeste and Two Clarinets*, and throughout most of my compositions / improvisations, I aim to achieve complex sounds created through simple means. In the first half of the piece, the clarinets slowly climb up a C Major scale but are always tuned slightly off from each other. Jarring interjections of simple major and minor chords by the celeste add a quirky twist to the already rich texture of beating patterns in the clarinets. The silent spaces between the notes clear the air and divert the listener from latching onto any perceived pattern. In the second half of the piece, the clarinets descend down the same C Major scale with long glissandos preceding the arrival notes. The celeste delicately tumbles down the scale with the same chords as before, but this time, slowly arpeggiating them. In a way, the last half of the piece is a subtle deconstruction of what was built just moments before.

VIC RAWLINGS

June 5, 2016
7pm

Vic Rawlings is a musician (improviser/composer/performer), electroacoustic instrument builder, filmmaker, sound installation artist, and freelance teacher based in Easthampton, Massachusetts.

"...the sense of danger, the awareness that the music is poised permanently on the edge of disintegration and collapse. Despite its refusal to make the slightest concession to the listener, the music draws you in and doesn't let you go." *The Wire*

When I was a kid in suburban Ohio, I used the radio stations advertised on city buses to learn about music. At this time my aunt was in Switzerland studying the Bach Cello Suites with Pierre Fournier. As a 10-year old I saw her do an improvised set with her artist boyfriend, who used overhead projectors with paint and thumbtacks and other objects. Of course, there was a dancer too. I was sitting with my grandparents who were mostly containing their laughter. It was all new to us, and some of it seemed dumb to me too at the time, but I absolutely trusted her at the beginning and at the end. It was a singular, confounding, and formative experience for me. She was an inspiration—she had music, and she took risks.

In the intervening years I have built electronic and electroacoustic instruments and played a lot of improvised music. I have taught some of how I approach improvised music (as well as some of the music I learned about from the ads on the busses). During a recent teaching residency, I had a group of grade-school string players doing collective improvisation with contact microphones on their violins and cellos. This was at Community Music Works of Providence, an adventurous music school generally focused on straight music as well as improvised and relevant composed music.

They also produce an annual Bach Marathon: 12 hours of performances, running through the night in a chapel on the Brown University campus. Some performers play Bach straight—Partitas as Partitas on the instrument they were written for, played at the proper tempo, on the stage, without outlandish costumes or lighting. Proper and professional. Some of those performances are excellent. The unifying structure for the event, barely articulated, is that all the sets have “something to do with Bach.” Meaning that it doesn’t need to actually be Bach; something that uses ideas/methods or borrows inspiration from Bach is fair

game. The programmers also invite people from the noise scene to participate. If that last sentence didn't stun you, please read this paragraph again.

When I was asked to participate, I was terrified. J.S. Bach is a guy many people, myself included, will acknowledge as being at the center of something. Other than playing some pieces by Cage/Lucier/Wolff/Pisaro/Stockhausen etc., I haven't performed anything in recent memory that directly references another musician or composer. I wanted to take it seriously.



Photo by Jane Wang

I've enjoyed Bach. I like the music. I've enjoyed playing Bach compositions, but some things are best left at home. A man's got to know his limitations.

Many of the ways this could go wrong became real to me as I cycled through horrible ideas for days on end, even attempting

to flesh out a few of them. Of course I could 'conceptually' drop books of Bach pieces on a table and amplify it, or I could take a Bach excerpt and play it on electric guitar in the arena rock style, or there was always the option of just improvising while vaguely, ostensibly, thinking of Bach. Then there were the more inane, museum-ish, NPR-friendly ideas, such as taking a drawing of Bach and using a computer to convert it into some sort of data that could be interpreted as directions for making sound, or I suppose, using the letters B-A-C-H to reference something else entirely—a cheeky linguistic trick. I absolutely hate that shit. I decided on no easy answers, not even a parody of easy answers.

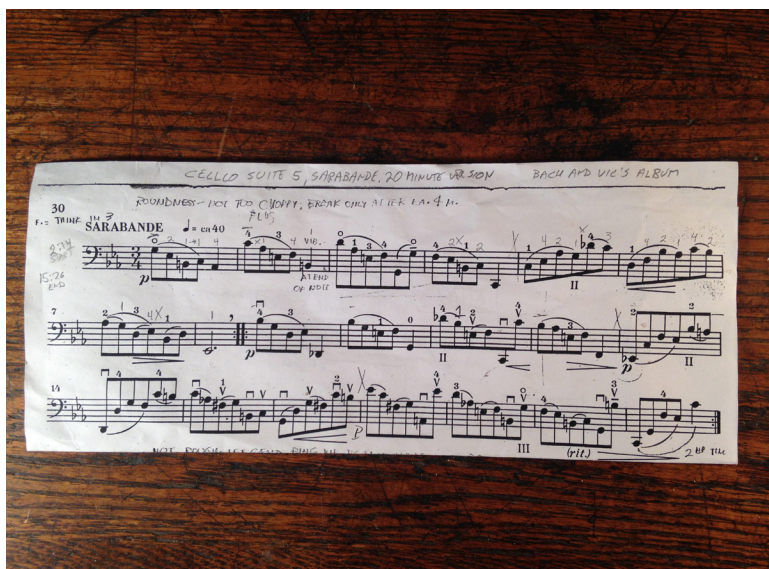
The Cello Suites were my obvious starting place—I do own a cello. Around the time of my aunt's funeral, I'd made photocopies of her scores of the Cello Suites.

A few years ago I began seeking out and listening to every recording of the Cello Suites that I could find at the library, new ones and old ones. Many recordings from the recent past were, to varying degrees, rushed, syrupy, and smeared with reverb. I routinely gave up on them before a single movement was complete; some got the boot after 6 notes. It turned out that Pierre Fournier's 1961 recordings are my favorites. The Casals (late 30s) and Starker (early 60s) recordings occupy opposite ends of a spectrum, with Fournier bringing a perfect balance of Casals's lyricism and Starker's mathematical purity. There is a YouTube of Fournier playing the Sarabande from the third Suite [search for: Pierre Fournier plays Bach (vaimusic.com)]. Austere. Mature.

I chose to work directly with the Sarabande from the fifth Suite, because it's as good as any other thing that is good. Each phrase begins with a series of generally evenly-spaced notes followed by a sustained note, followed by a brief pause to mark the space between phrases—simple. The phrases are of varying lengths, but

there is a cohesion of form. Fournier's remark on my aunt's score: *Roundness—not too choppy. Break only after each 4 measures.* Melodically, the Sarabande is blindingly beautiful; no doubt discussions of it occupy chapters of books. As a music teacher myself I know it's far too easy to talk about melody and harmony—there's math involved. I'm not the first to say that time (phrasing) is where the beauty is—Bach did his part. When this music is played poorly that beauty is corrupted in obvious ways. Fournier's reading contains no loitering and yet is never rushed or cold. It's neither sentimental nor falsely distant. There is no frontal reverb, only modest vibrato, and not a trace of gratuitous emoting. As a listener I am left wanting more, and I like it that way. The starkness at the end of Fournier's phrases—that emptiness—that was what I wanted.

I became certain that if I could retain some aspect of time as Bach and Fournier constructed it, that I would have an interesting piece. I used my photocopy of the score, complete with Fourni-



er's edits (as well as my memory of the recording) as my guide. In the first drafts of my adaptation, sound was present and varied as it was marked on the page, substituting abstracted sounds for Bach's notated pitches. When Bach indicated a new pitch, I interpreted that as a direction to change to a different speaker. One speaker following another, following a strict reading of the melodic lines. Silences were read as silences. Durations were those of Bach and Fournier.

This idea for using the 5 speaker switch embedded in my electronic setup as a replacement for the cellist's left hand (pitch) came long before having anything good to put out of the speakers. I thought of and tried a few things, but none was rigorous enough; there was an aspect of undirected improvisation and arbitrary sound involved when I used the signal from my feedback electronics. Plain white noise was momentarily interesting, but also, a predictable ploy and far too plain; the set was to be 20 minutes. Forced austerity is a meaningless tedium. My usual 5 distressed speaker elements placed on the floor forced the melody into a pentatonic scale. Things sounded horrible for a few more hours.

Fournier and Bach were leading these afternoons. I was listening to the recording repeatedly, on a loop. Eventually I tried listening to the recording through the 5 distressed speakers and started to enjoy the momentary breaks in sound that happened when no speaker was connected; this introduced another layer of phrasing that interrupted the momentum of the Sarabande. It was a meaningless and somewhat snarky improvisation on its own, but started to interest me once I began to reference the score as I activated speakers. I started with the speakers I usually use for improvising, but ultimately chose to swap out a few of them to form a group that was slightly more consistently voiced. Each speaker still contributed a distinct sound, but now closer in character so phrases weren't awkwardly punctuated by sudden dips or jumps

in volume.

I prepared a 20-minute recording with a period of amplified room sound at the beginning and end, equal in length to Fournier's performance of the Sarabande. Between these bookends was a recording of the Sarabande drawn out to over 3 times its original length but at the same pitch as the original. At this glacial pace the music made interesting listening on its own, reminding me of Dhruvad. In the Providence and Standing Waves performances, I executed the score several times at its standard tempo. The recording was interrupted as I moved the recorded sound between speakers at the standard tempo for the piece, as the score indicated. This was the first time I have used recorded sound in performance.

The direct connection between the pacing of the sound/silence heard in the room and the music present in the sound itself is the core of the structure of the piece. An old game: the materials define the form. The score removed my judgement; this was not an



improvisation. It sounded far better than any improvisation I did in the process of arriving at this concept.

This is essentially the conceit behind the sound installation I presented at Mobius and at the Bennington College Writing Seminars in 2013, in which the poet Susan Howe's recorded voice was broadcast from a 54-channel system. The phrasing of the audibility of her voice recording was determined by a second, un-synced recording of her voice. It was only in hindsight that I recognized that I was recycling the core of my installation's compositional idea in this performance of Bach 3 years later. It is a nice, tidy concept—dangerously close to those I hate, but I wouldn't have done it in either case if I didn't like the results as-heard.

SARAH HENNIES

June 19, 2016
4pm

Sarah Hennies (b. 1979, Louisville, KY) is a composer and percussionist currently residing in Ithaca NY. Her work subverts conventional wisdom about sound and identity by way of a highly-focused and often physically demanding performance practice that, "starts and ends with listening and encourages a different way of listening from its audience."

Before I left my home of 10 years in Austin, TX and moved to Ithaca, NY, a friend asked me, "Is your work influenced by your surroundings?" I replied, "I don't think so but I've lived in the same place for ten years. Ask me again in six months." It was a few months later that I visited Buttermilk Falls State Park, a relatively small but surprisingly captivating system of waterfalls near Ithaca's southern border, and immediately declared, "I must record this!" While I did find the sound of the waterfalls (barely distinct from white noise) to be powerful and compelling, I was particularly struck by the way adjacent waterfalls – some of them quite loud – were sonically discrete from one another. Each waterfall would become inaudible within a few feet of walking toward the next, making it possible to create my own spontaneous sound collage by choosing the direction and speed I walked toward and away from each subsequent waterfall. I attempted to recreate this multi-sensory experience by recording my composed walk up the gorge, with an awareness that my recording could suggest but not replicate the feeling of actually being in the park. Not long after that, I suddenly realized that I was transgender while attending an indie pop music festival in New York City.

As I worked with the Buttermilk Falls sounds, I became increasingly aware of my own presence and felt the need to respectfully but deliberately insert myself into the proceedings. A recording of nature implies that a person was in that location, which in turn implies that a field recording is actually much more than a simple audio document of a site. The park is, of course, more than just the sound of water and I am more than a hand holding a microphone. Certainly, I have chosen to hold the mic in a certain way in a certain place for a certain amount of time, and the site itself is ever-changing due to weather, time, and the eons-long process of erosion that created the park in the first place. If I'm not only recording water, what am I recording? If I am not only the one who presses the record button, what am I? Attempts to answer



Photo by Jane Wang

these seemingly simple questions quickly revealed a bewildering identity crisis as I realized that everything about this was far more complicated than it seemed.

My method of working generally involves letting the material dictate my decision making, and if I wanted to respectfully use this recording for music then I needed to figure out how to account for my own presence without, as Morton Feldman would say, “pushing the sounds around.” The way forward was to simply present the park and my self as concurrent beings, tied together only by our shared presence and the unspoken promise that we were both slowly wearing ourselves down until the day we finally vanish. I punctuated the waterfalls with the sound of my vibraphone, an instrument I have come to profoundly identify with after years of research and playing. The vibraphone’s seemingly neutral, sine-wave like tone holds in its depth a vast pool of

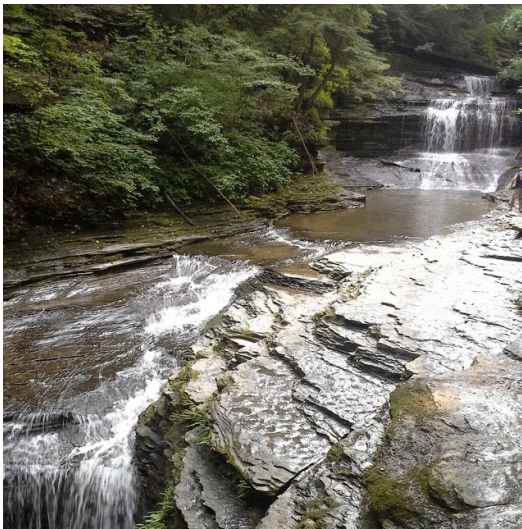
sound with startling immediacy and chaotic acoustic properties that quickly emerge with even the slightest examination. It's a fine metaphor for my own existence. Furthermore, I have been a drummer and percussionist for almost 30 years and feel intimately tied to a practice that is largely made up of strange noises and awkward, cumbersome keyboard instruments.

Percussionists are an anomaly. Steven Schick rightly points out in his book *The Percussionist's Art* that we are the only musicians who do not play, "an instrument." Due to the increasingly varied whims of composers, since the early 20th century percussionists have been required to collect manufactured (drums, cymbals, marimbas, etc.) and "non-musical" found objects (clay pots, leaves, tin cans, etc.), often having to learn entirely new "set-ups" for each new piece of music. According to Schick, a glass bottle or metal pipe lacks a standardized performance practice that perhaps burdens a pianist with the weight of history and tradition. While this is partially true, there is absolutely a codified, historical standard for playing most percussion instruments; for instance, many people spend years perfecting their snare drum roll for their orchestra audition or finding the perfect tin can for that John Cage piece. Due to widely accepted standards of tone and technique, instruments with highly anomalous acoustic properties such as the woodblock, snare drum, triangle, crotales, and so on are relegated to a single predictable and expected use (Alvin Lucier's solo for triangle is a rare pre-21st century exception). It's this standard of tone and technique that has relegated these noise-making instruments of great depth and highly unusual acoustic properties to a life of convention and predictability that ignores and obscures their full identities.

Furthermore, percussion since the 1960s and into the present day has moved far beyond the standard definition of a percussionist as, "one who strikes objects." The variety of tasks given to the

percussionist in the world of avant-garde music is so vast and varied that a percussionist can expect to play almost anything that isn't already another instrument (cello, flute, piano, etc.). If a percussionist could be called upon to play nearly any imaginable object in a piece of music – if what you can expect to find in a piece of percussion music is ANY object – then what defines a percussionist must be something more than simply the objects we play. If the role of a percussionist is clearly going far beyond, “one who strikes objects,” then what, precisely, is a percussionist? The question is deceptively complex and has no easy answer. Percussionists are unique not because we lack “an instrument,” but because we are the only instrumentalists with the freedom to define ourselves.

In this malleable space lies a commonality between percussion and queer/trans identities in that they are most easily defined by what they are not. Due to a seemingly infinite number of varied and nuanced queer identities, almost any definition of “queer” necessarily requires invoking its much simpler antithetical identity of “straight.” A queer person is not straight, a percussionist is



not a cellist, a transgender person is not cisgender. Any simple answer one might give to the question of, "Well, what is it, then?" crumbles under even the slightest examination, assuming that, "everything else," is not an acceptable answer.

What to do with the instrumentalist who has no instrument? What to do with the woman who is not accepted as a woman? One of our culture's most deeply, intensely held beliefs – that we are immutably men and women – does not apply to trans people and, in turn, society has no space for us. Interacting with the world means perpetually navigating an existence that is dependent on the highly unreliable act of others seeing us as we see ourselves, either to relieve often constant dysphoria or to avoid quite immediate questions of personal safety. Trans people are required to constantly re-assert and prove that we are what we say we are, both to the world and to ourselves. There is intense, unrelenting societal pressure to not be transgender. It is in this spirit that I am reminded of the pulsing, vibrating, screaming woodblock that says to its listener, "Look at me. I am here. I am not what you think I am."

"Gather" is the process of discovering that finding one's place in the world is both breathtakingly joyful and profoundly terrifying. It is the acceptance that feeling joy and terror is preferable to feeling neither. I now think back to the question, "is your work influenced by your surroundings?" with a laugh and a sigh.

Special thanks to Greg Stuart for informing the ideas in this essay and whose work and friendship is a continued source of inspiration.

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