

Imagine That

Edward Jacobs

My musical compositions begin with aural fantasies. What I hear in my mind is often veiled, yet its impression vivid—closer to memories than to anything tangible. The striving to articulate these sounds often feels like grasping at wisps of smoke, or recalling the sights, sounds, or smells of long departed experiences and friends. I work with sound because aural visions demand my imagination's attention; the sounds in my mind's ear are eager to be transformed into vibrations beyond the privacy of my mind.

I cannot resist the chase to capture, or recapture, ineffable mental impressions and the lure to shape them into expressions that might become memories for others. The phases of my compositional process *seem* straightforward enough: determine how an imagined sound might be generated in a shared world; discover the world whose drama might be implied by such sounds; and devise instructions for musicians to re-create that sound world. But working with the sound objects of this imagined aural world is like searching for metaphors.

An initial image might take many forms: the sound of spoken words, the rhythm of a dancer's movements, the stillness of a fog-laden morning, the energy of a terrifying storm, or the warm voice of a loving friend. Such images arise, and then prompt a coaxing from my mind to a shareable sensory world. I transcribe what lives *in* my ear into a form that can be interpreted by performers and then experienced by others. What follows are steps continually taken and retraced: selecting sounds that might grow into larger musical stories, evaluating their generative potential, and then considering (and rejecting most) paths of possible evolution that seem dramatically inevitable. Some ideas will remain in this fantastical playground, demanding adventure; others will fade.

In this work I am trying to discover the world in which a heard idea lives; to find and describe the environs where these imagined birds sing, the context in which they live. I am trying to perceive, understand and portray a world I do not yet know, a world hinted at by the few sounds legible to me. As fertile initial ideas reveal details and suggest relationships, multiple contexts bloom, one of which will offer particularly alluring charms. From fragments of thought, memory, retelling, and re-hearing, a landscape emerges, and musical events find significance through their unique interconnections.

Composing is forming groups of sculpted sounds, sequences of events—none of which have intrinsic meaning. Composing is forming relationships between and among moments and phrases that can create cohesiveness and comprehensibility. Composing is making these events feel inevitably linked.

The result builds expectations and drama emerges from satisfying (or not satisfying) those expectations, which are born from each listener's background and approach to listening—an intriguing complication for a composer.

That each listener constructs their aural experiences differently leads to interesting possibilities. Imagine allowing the random sounds around you (e.g., traffic, or coffee shop conversations) to occupy the foreground of your mind's attention.¹ If you subsequently imply patterns, connections, and relationships among those utterly random events, have you transformed these sounds into a "piece"? Through their unique perceptions, each listener becomes a sound-organizer—a composer—in a very real sense.

Who, then, is the real organizer of events? Attentive listeners hear and shape what they are willing and able to perceive. Each hearer attends to different degrees of detail and uniquely comprehends what has occurred—regardless of a composer's instructions, or a performer's execution of those instructions. In my work as a composer, I may create patterns, but the only patterns that *truly* exist (in each hearing) are the ones perceived by listeners.

The truth, then, is that what I write isn't necessarily what you hear². I know that my work will be filtered through a broad array of sensitivities, inclinations, translations, and signifiers—no different than artists of any other medium. I compose with full knowledge and acceptance that an audience's responses—even those with a personalized extra-musical narrative—are neither controllable nor predictable. Consequently, what drives my pursuit is the desire to hear a sound vibrate in a performance space beyond my mind, and my criteria is no more than, and no less than, what works for me as a satisfying and engaging—musically, expressively, logically—momentum filled drama-in-sound³.

To compose is to construct a suggestion whose ideal forms in my mind's ear. It is to sketch the game plan for a drama that I hope performers and engaged audiences will find as enticing as I do. The game's "play"—the real interaction of ideas—is in performance and in a listener's hearing. To compose is to make a plan, cede control of its realization, revel in the variety of results, and then find another fantasy to chase.

For more about Jacobs and samples of his work, please visit www.edwardjacobs.org or soundcloud.com/edjacobs.

Notes

1. The works of John Cage are illustrative and enlightening in this regard. George Leonard writes that "when Harvard University Press called [Cage], in a 1990 book advertisement, 'without a doubt the most influential composer of the last half-century,' amazingly, that was too modest" (120).

2. Undoubtedly, a sentence with which any writer/artist, in any medium, might agree.

3. This, of course, is a luxury that comes with not relying on commercial success for a living.

Works Cited

Leonard, George J. *Into the Light of Things: The Art of the Commonplace from Wordsworth to John Cage*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995. Print.