

As a part of my research into the relationships between composed and improvised music, I conducted an interview with a composer, performer, lecturer and music technologist Jenn Kirby. We spoke about where does Jenn see herself as an artist, what are the challenges of performing with music instruments she builds and what is the role of improvisation in her practice.

**Viktória Šinkorová:** Within this post-modern era the genres started blending and the separation is not so obvious, as someone being just a composer or just a performer. So, what is your understanding of a performer and composer and where do you think you fit within the fields of composition and performance?

**Jenn Kirby:** I think there is even a third one in there, that it's composer, performer and improviser. I think about what I do as a pie chart; divided into a different slice of the pie, and over time (let's say in 6-month windows), sometimes I'm doing a little bit more composition, sometimes I'm doing more performance, sometimes it's more improvisation. I tend to get a little stuck when saying I do x, y or z because sometimes what I'm doing is just music technology, and sometimes that can be a more appropriate way to describe it. I'm quite happy to move between a lot of those different ways of working and more ways of working, not worry too much about what it is that I'm doing. I quite like the freedom to be a composer one day and a performer another day, to perform someone else's work or to be composing and performing my own work, or to be thinking about how much this is improvised, how much of this is composed. I see those as interesting creative experiences and creative challenges. It's only if I think about that externally, as to how I represent myself to others appropriately, that's when it becomes a challenge. For me just working, it never feels like it's a problem, it only potentially could feel like a problem when you're trying to present what you do to other people. You know we have a tendency to try and pigeonhole people, to say this person does x, this person does y, and that makes it really easy to understand. What I usually find out is that the more you talk to someone the more you realize the different things that they do anyway. Maybe the idea that we compartmentalize or pigeonhole people in the first place is probably worth challenging, more than challenging the labels that we need to put on ourselves.

**VŠ:** When you're composing for someone else how does your approach differ? Because you mentioned in couple of other interviews that when you're composing for yourself it's more improvisation and movement led then listening led. So how does your approach differ when you're composing for someone else and composing for yourself?

**JK:** It's really quite different because it's such a cyclical process if you're composing for yourself, because you can compose, try it out and go back and forth, and actually there isn't many clear lines between one of those processes and the other because you could be performing and composing through that performance. However, if you're doing it with someone else, what I found is that I've been drawn more to the physicality of instruments through maybe by doing performance in the first place. I found myself really wanting to understand the instrument in the physical way rather than just a technical way in order to write for it. That ends up leading to having an expensive habit, which is buying instruments and trying to learn really basic ways of navigating that instrument in order to write for it, and that has really helped me compose. It's such a different way of engaging with it. I think I would write something totally different if I could understand the instrument physically other than just understand it technically. So, it influenced the way I work in that way.

**VŠ:** There are couple of interviews where people are asking about the movement that you're making with those two strings. You said that you see yourself rather as a composer/performer and not the movement artist, which I translated for myself as: your improvisation is not really rationally led but [neither] are you letting it go in terms of your body movement. So, I just wanted to ask whether you personally see that you're sometimes controlling it too much rationally or whether its genuinely just movement led, and what are the results when the body controls the movement, when you let go. Do you see any difference when you're performing?

**JK:** That's a really interesting question. It often depends on the instrument that I've designed because what I'm always trying to aim for—this is certainly my research focus over the last few years—that there's two main strands to it when I am designing anything. It's about the performer agency, so you don't have to think about the instrument in a really technical way. You've got just a lot more agency over it. And the other one is audience reception. So, it's designing an instrument with those two things in mind and trying to achieve as high results in those areas that I can. That means that the visual performance translates to the audience, so they can understand some aspect of what they see and what they hear. I really feel that if there isn't a way of engaging with it—(and it doesn't have to be on a technical level, it doesn't have to be even in a way that can be expressed in words)—but if there's some element that they can engage with, then you can engage with it as though it is a musical performance, as oppose to a technical exploration. And that's when it feels a little bit sad to me, as if it feels like a technical exploration. It can when I'm thinking about the numbers or if people are only interested in the technology, it depends. Other people would have different views on that, but that's kind of what I'm focused on. I'm trying to design something that, I can...in the same way that if I'm playing a different instrument and I move my hand in a different way, I know what sound is going to be produced through that movement. It's the same thing if I'm designing an electronic instrument; I want to know what sound is going to be produced when I make a certain movement. When you have that, it gives you a bit more room to actually express through your own bodily movement in your own performance as well. So, that has a lot of musical expression that translates to the audience as well rather than purely playing things in just a technical way. We add expression because it adds meaning.

I used to think that expression didn't really mean anything, you know I thought about it a lot when, let's say, playing the piano and you lift your hands off the keys at the end you kind of suspend your hands there because the sound is suspended. Immediately, you're naturally matching your gestures, the visual gestures with the audible gestures, and I thought maybe these things are just a performance gimmicks but I'm now more inclined to think that, actually, there's meaning in that, and it guides the listener and the audience in how they should experience it, as well as being really important for you when you're performing it. It helps you to perform when you embody those audible gestures into physical gestures. I'm thinking about borrowing so much of that from the instrumental world. But then sometimes you don't have to do that, you could do something totally different, there aren't really rules that you could decide to go against everything that I just said. But certainly, it helps me in my approach to think about it that way because I can understand my movement and the sound in that way. I'm moving because I know how it's going to sound like and I feel I'm controlling the sound in that way, whereas if you work with a movement artist, they aren't playing an instrument, they're moving and the instrument is responding to them. I know it's technically the same thing that's happening but it's how you think about it and how you drive that. So, it's not, 'this is the resulting sound, I'll move this way and then something will happen and I'll find that interesting or not'. It's that I'm trying to guide the sound and I'm being led by the

sound with my movement, as opposed to being led by a movement and hearing a resulting sound.

**VŠ:** Yeah, that explains a lot. This was the thing that when I was watching couple of videos, I was thinking that you have that box there and you're basically tied into that box. So, what would be interesting is, what would happen if you let a dancer do something like that, but this explains your musicality behind. I guess when you're a musician and you're designing those instruments you would play them differently, because dancers move differently, they don't think about music in the same way as we do.

**JK:** I have worked with dancers and I would design them a different instrument.

**VŠ:** I was wondering, are you designing new instrument every single time or sometimes you're borrowing from the old instrument or what happens?

**JK:** Yeah, I copy and paste my own stuff all the time. I'm reusing things, I probably rarely make anything 100% from scratch, to be honest. I borrow, because I'm like, oh I know I programmed that before and then I might end up re-writing it. So yes, a lot of the time it will be repurposing in a different context or designing something new, but it depends on the outcome and it can be led in different ways. So, in the most basic ways you think, 'well, what do you want control in music?' You probably control frequency or pitch, or something in some way, and you probably want to control your loudness, you know like when you think about it in a really basic way. Let's pretend that those are the things, and I would say loudness is more important, because you want to shut up sometimes, you want to be quiet sometimes, and if you can't do that you're going to be really limited. So, even when I said that I move my arm out left, because that's the way I always end up programming it that: I always put volume in my left arm across my body. That makes sense to me and I can't really tell you why, maybe the first time I programmed it I did it that way. But if you get that to someone else, they would start off with a different point of view and they would say no, no, no...volume has to be here. I think that's really interesting because you can design everything in a different way, and it's not like, 'here's a violin, this is how it works and you just take it or leave it'. You can actually take everything apart and re-configure it to how you like it, because everybody's body is different, everyone moves differently, and that can be incorporated. So, even if I design something that works in a way that I completely determined just because of the way that I move and it makes intuitive sense to me, if I give it to someone else and they haven't seen me doing it, they'll immediately interact with it in a way that I haven't considered. I think that's really exciting; I think that's really cool. I have said things like: if there's a loop going, in order to clear the loop, you have to move your right arm forward, and I normally do it in a circle. I remember giving that to someone and they jumped over the game truck to the other side, and I was thinking, 'but it has a same outcome, sonically it has the same outcome but a very different physical way of performing that.' In other times I worked with people, and a movement that I thought made perfect sense, and I'd given it to them and I thought, that looks so awkward to move that way they just don't move that way. And you start to learn really weird things about how you move. I know that I turn more on my left side than I turn on my right side; that's a weird thing to understand and it bugs me now. That's all fine if you're teaching someone to play an instrument whereas if I'm giving this to a dancer, they don't want to be a musician they want to be a dancer, or they want to be a movement artist. They can't be worried about: 'oh my left hand needs to go across my body left-right.' That means you have to design it in a different way where it is an instrument that responds to their movement, not something that they have to have a lot of accuracy with. That's the different design constrains: who are you giving it to, what do they want to do with it, and how are they going to move with it.

**VŠ:** You said that you care about the performance agency and the perception of the audience and the whole interaction with the technology, because there's so many debates around when you just see someone coding on the laptop and you hear the result is not as engaging as seeing someone to play an instrument. There's this notion of bypassing the technology but then your laptop remains on the stage, which I understand is probably necessary but to a certain extent there's some dichotomy there, so can you speak more to that and what you think about it.

**JK:** Yeah, that's a good point. The laptop is my score most of the time. It's a visual cue that I need and I really try not to have a look at it a lot because every time I turn and look at it, I think I totally break from the audience. I feel like I temporarily disconnect with them, so I try not to, but I do have to sometimes. It's a visual cue that is important to me. You could get around it by doing something like have HDMI cable to run a little screen on the ground or something like that. There are definitely ways around it. Yeah, that's funny, I didn't really think about it that way. I don't want to sit behind the laptop and type music that way live, but I don't think that there's a problem with anyone else doing it, they can do whatever they like. A lot of people don't want to see someone move around pulling out strings; they want to sit there and close their eyes and listen to the music. I don't do what I do because I think there's anything wrong with what anyone else does in a different way. I think there's a space for everyone to do whatever they like. I'm particularly interested in how you can just design new instruments and interact in new ways, and in how much you learn just from doing that and creating a new instrument every day. Sometimes that's driven by sound, that I think I need an instrument that does that sounds like this; and then I'll think about what kind of controller would make sense and how to design it. At other times, it starts with having a controller that I haven't plugged in and thinking about the data that it produces, and thinking, 'well if it's this kind of data, then I can probably do something like this'. At other times, it starts from movement. So, for example, I hadn't got the game truck plugged in before and I was just pulling on the strings thinking: 'oh yeah wouldn't it be nice to have a virtual drumkit or something.' There's a lot of different ways that it comes about. It certainly gives me more ideas to work with that in an embodied way; and it feels so much more real-time and responsive in the same way that an acoustic instrument does. I don't get that connection if I'm just working on a laptop. However, you get more precision if you're working just on a laptop. There are some trade-offs to it.

**VŠ:** When you're composing for someone else, because obviously you also see yourself as an improviser and I totally love that, but do you feel that even with your 'fixed' compositions, do you think that there's some sort of a space where you can maybe break away a little bit from the composition go to the improvisation and then come back? Or are your compositions totally strict?

**JK:** I have mostly gone away from composing where everything is fixed. That's rare enough for me now, actually. I'm still exploring that range where how much you give someone and how much you take away. I even tried out things like I would score everything and I would get rid of it all or most of it, and think about what else can I take out, and is the essence of the piece still there? So, I started doing some compositions where I would basically write seed material, so I would write maybe a few bars and then you go wherever you want from there, and then you arrive somewhere else you could pick out any of these sections. Sometimes it could be a linear or non-linear structure. You somehow pick out one of these other sections to get to and you transition, and you could spend as long or as little time on any of those. I really like that but when you give that to someone else you have to respect how they work, so you can't ask someone who is not an improviser to do a lot of

improvisation. It's not really respectful of what they do. That's probably one of the reasons that I like writing for performers, and that I think about writing for performers more than I think about writing for instruments. Again, I think a lot of that has come from my experiences of doing things in electronics, that I've become a lot more interested in physicality of performing an instrument as well. At the moment, I'm writing a piece for solo violin and I'm thinking about the whole thing so far in shapes. And I'll have to figure out notes at some stage but at the moment, it's all about how you move, and it's all about those shapes. I think I bring a lot of improvisation into composition because I really see it as collaborative and I'm really interested in working with performers, and I'm less interested in saying just play this. Even if it's 95% or just 90% done when you bring them to the rehearsals. But it can be a weird experience to ask the performer, 'well, what do you think about that? I'm not sure how well that works, what do you think?', and they just look at you 'what? I can't tell you it doesn't work.' But I like that. Can we have that conversation? I think that's really fun and maybe because of doing more performance, performing other people's works, it's made me more self-conscious about giving my scores to other performers and thinking, 'what if they hate this?' That's also one of the drivers why I would like them to be involved in it, because 'well if you hate that, then let's change it.' I don't know if that's appropriate but that's how I think about it.

**VŠ:** Yes, I really love that idea of sharing the authorship with the performers that they're not just interpreting the piece.

**JK:** Maybe it's the perception of that when you ask someone do you improvise? They probably think free improv. Well, but there's a lot more than free improv you know. I would argue that every time you're performing a piece there's improvisation within it. There isn't much on the score: notes, dynamics, articulation. And even within a crescendo there's so many different ways you could do that crescendo, so I would argue that there's so much improvisation in there already. Once you can set the sound world and set the boundaries there's more freedom for people to move within those.