

As a part of my research into the relationships between composed and improvised music, I conducted an interview with a composer-performer, improviser, visual artist, media artist and teaching artist Charlotte Hug. I asked her about her journey towards combining visual arts with music, *Son-Icons* and what role does improvisation play in her practice. An interview was taken on 24<sup>th</sup> of May 2022 via zoom call.

**Viktória Šinkorová:** Last time we spoke in London you mentioned that you did your degree in both music and visual arts, so I would like to ask when did you get this idea to combine the two artforms?

**Charlotte Hug:** Actually, I grew up with them both. My grandfather was a violin player in the opera house in Zürich and my mother was a professional artist, so very often I heard my grandfather practising, and my mother was always drawing. For me, the two artforms were like two other mother tongues. Of course, I thought it was super normal that these two arts are the ways in which you can express yourself. When I was a child, I played the viola, sung and did drawings outside. I realize that what I'm doing now is pretty much the same, but of course with completely different background and knowledge. I feel that this is a very natural way of communication; as a child it was very natural, but it wasn't always clear to me to do both.

When I was doing my Bachelor's degree, I could actually do both and that was paradise for me. After that, I stood before a very difficult question. I had to decide which one to pursue—music or visual arts—and I just couldn't. It was impossible! I could study for three years to become a teacher, so I thought maybe then I can combine music and visual arts. I finished that course, and while it's great to work with kids and teenagers, I felt that this was not my path.

After that I was living in France. I auditioned to work with a professional orchestra and they took me without the diploma, which was possible at the time. So, I said to myself, 'Okay, music is like my mother tongue, I can do it; but I feel I should start studying visual arts.' At the time I had a feeling that visual arts would be more challenging for me. When I started with my studies in visual arts, I realized that I could deepen my knowledge. A year later, I started doing a degree in Viola performance, and I'm very glad I started. During my studies, the music degree was kind of backwards-orientated, and visual art was very forward-orientated. This brought a very fruitful tension and helped me to form my own vision as a contemporary person. These two areas were absolutely important for my artistic development, even if it was very intense. Now, you can study both (music and visual arts) at the same university, and that's great, but at the time it wasn't possible. During my studies the two art forms weren't connected. On one hand, I studied my music and repertoire; and on the other, I did crazy stuff with visual art. At the end of my studies I made a scenic creation at the University of the Arts in Zürich. This was an interdisciplinary course and I worked with actors and dancers. I participated as a visual artist, and they told me: 'bring your viola, you're also a musician,' and this was actually the first time I was asked from an institution to be who I am and to express who I am. The second time was that I could collaborate with actors and dancers, and move while I was playing or drawing. It is the movement that connects both and it all happens in space. The two art forms came together

in an interdisciplinary context, and the voice came as an artistic expression. So that was the start of my interdisciplinary work as a more mature young artist.

**V.Š:** It sounds like it happened by accident. Obviously from this interdisciplinary approach you created the *Son-Icons*. So, could you explain what *Son-Icons* actually are?

**Ch.H:** Well, as I said, the movement; being able to dance with the music. As a viola player you use both hands in a synchronized way but with the drawing, you're much freer, you can dance and you can draw. While I did the drawings, I felt that I could learn other qualities about the music when looking at the drawings. At the beginning, I used to go to many concerts and I drew while I was listening to the music. For instance, I was in the tube in London and I did drawings about the noises, rhythms and polyrhythms in the tube. Later on, the initial impulse changed so, the drawings became more independent in a way of not just visualising of what I heard, but visualising what my acoustic vision might be.

These drawings visualised my imagination of music and also the energy of music. With a drawing you can create the energy in a very direct way. I felt that I could actually touch the music in another way, in a much freer way. Then I started to draw on half-transparent paper. This came out of my curiosity of being able to look at the drawings in different ways. The drawings brought feedback to my music and inspired the music again. [Here, Hug is referring to looking at the drawings from the back of the transparent paper, giving rise to visual elements akin to seeing a scale in inversion or retrograde; hence her reference to Bach and Serialism]. I also discovered that Johann Sebastian Bach made something similar in his compositions, and then I studied the Second Viennese School. So, this was sensually, intellectually and even historically building up like a universe, which inspired me. I had a residency in London for six months, and my *Son-Icons* were all around my studio. Basically, I made the *Son-Icons* only for me, for *my* inspiration, *my* artistic research. John Edwards, the double bass player, visited me there and initially we wanted to play a duo. Once he sat down and started playing, he was looking at the *Son-Icons*, and after more than 45 minutes he stopped and said: 'Oh! Excuse me, I was overwhelmed by your drawings; they were so inspiring for me.' So, this was another impulse and I realized that other people could be inspired by the *Son-Icons* as well.

Then the *Son-Icons* made a big jump in necessity and importance in my work. I started making the *Son-Icons* for other musicians. They were on half-transparent paper; they were bigger so that the musician could walk around and look at them like room scores. Almost at the same time, I made the first exhibition in Sankt Gallen where the topic was 'expose score'. So, I made an exhibition with my *Son-Icons* and the gallerist from Bern, Dorothe Freiburghaus visited the exhibition. Later she phoned me and said: 'This is art! I want to make an exhibition with *Son-Icons*!'

Early on, it was very important for me to work with *Son-Icons*—the art was always a kind of a twin of the music. But gradually *Son-Icons* became autonomous art works; I slowly accepted them as art works. This exhibition was very important, some people didn't even know I was also a musician; and to see the *Son-Icons* communicate something to people was very motivating. So, I discovered that *Son-Icons* are not only visual music but also hybrids

between visual art and music. They can be autonomous visual art and they can be scores. *Son-Icons* can even exist without music but they can still express music. It was a process.

Now, I'm very much focused on *Son-Icons* projects I did in China, South Africa and Russia (but especially China and South Africa). I feel that the *Son-Icons* can transport something intercultural. Of course, composers like Bach and those of the Second Viennese School were all born in Europe, and I feel I'm a very European artist as well. But *Son-Icons* can build bridges. In China, at the Chinese Academy of Art, I explored another potential of *Son-Icons* because this culture is very connected with calligraphy and it has a very special visual intelligence. While I have been working with dancers, musicians, philosophers and even with musical anthropologists, I have realized the importance of visuals in music. When I organized the symposium where lots of disciplines came together and we exchanged ideas, I was really amazed how fruitful *Son-Icons* can be and how they inspire people in so many different ways. At the same time, I cultivate compositions with *Son-Icons*, and I'm also doing coaching in which artists can read *Son-Icons*.

**V.Š:** Yes. This brings me to one question which really interests me: some of your *Son-Icons* are black and white, which is something we as musicians are used to because the notation is black and white. But sometimes you bring in the colour and what I have noticed, maybe it's just my impression, that the colour is really carefully chosen for a specific *Son-Icon*. I wonder, have you noticed an impact on how musicians interpret the work comparing it to the black and white *Son-Icons*. I understand the gesture, movement and the intensity of the work but I believe there is some relationship between our perception of colour that brings so many different elements into play.

**Ch.H:** Yes. I got in touch with colours and the necessity of colours in the practice of *Son-Icons* during the collaboration with the dance company - Forgotten Angle Theatre Collaborative in South Africa called SIYABA. This was another intercontinental collaboration. When we met for the first time, I brought the *Son-Icons* in black and white, some charcoal and some ink. The work was inspired by spring, continental drifts and it was made for them. After seeing my *Son-Icons* they said: 'We love your *Son-Icons*, but actually we need some colours.' We visited some places in South Africa and I became aware of colours. Of course! colours are super important. I worked on colours and it was quite an intuitive approach to what colours I was going to use. When I brought the colours to the *Son-Icons* it really changed our collaboration and the energy of it.

When I got a commission from the Ensemble Horizonte from Germany where the topic was: 'each rotation makes a sound.' I thought, how am I going to use colours in European context with 4 European musicians? To explain the topic: Max Planck Institute made some research into the sonification of movements of the planets. The result of the sonification of the Earth is a note G, the Moon is G sharp and the Earth around the Sun is C sharp. If you put these sounds into octaves the waves become colours in physics. So, I ended up with very specific colours: Earth was a kind of orange, moon was kind of yellow and the Earth around the Sun was dark blue. I did the *Son-Icons* with these three colours. Obviously, this was a very logical choice of colours.

Now I do a lot of site-specific works where time becomes more and more important. For example, this is the reason why I work with different materials. Let's take an oil painting as an example, if you make one layer it needs 6 weeks to dry until you can add another layer. So, through the substance of the colour I got into a completely different dimension of time. You know drawing is a time-based art which is almost simultaneous to the act of playing. Working with colours gave me a completely different feedback from my music, which was the first-time colours and music got into a relationship and I was listening to the colours which created resonance space between sounds and colours.

**V.Š:** That brought another dimension to the music.

**Ch.H:** Absolutely!

**V.Š:** So, the entire interdisciplinary approach, this search for in-betweenness in art. I would like to ask how would you explain this to someone? How are you trying to grasp this notion of in-betweenness in your art or even in the life itself, because there are always certain gaps which we're naturally trying to bring closer together.

**Ch.H:** In music, and in life as well the resonance is a crucial topic, the sociologist Hartmut Rosa says: 'resonance is not a feeling but a mode of relation.' So, in relation there is always a space in-between. When you have a string, you have to hold it on both sides until that string can resonate. So, this space in between, in my artistic biography, is a lot in between the disciplines – visual arts and music. I just realized that this space in between is never-ending discovery and of course it also happens between people. I mean, I play music for people and that's a way of communication or collaboration with them. Hartmut Rosa also says 'resonance can only happen if you listen to the other's voice and answer with your own voice.' For me this became very simple but crucial attitude in life, in art and also in thought; that even when you think there are two voices and they listen to each other. Almost everywhere in my life, especially in my artistic life I find this setting of at least TWO communicating with each other. It can be complex network of communication but this space in-between is not one space but a lot of spaces and also spaces between cultures and continents. It never stops!

**V.Š:** Was what you've just explained above also an impulse for you to develop *the intra action notation*? Trying to create those two voices which communicate? Or what was the basis for the *intra action notation*.

**Ch.H:** The *intra action notation* is also based on the idea that interaction is super important, even if you decide not to interact it is also an interaction in a very large sense. Interact with each other, with space, with echoes, with climate, with topics and intellectual topics. It can be really broad. To connect is crucial. Another thing is that the more I travelled I realized that *Son-icons* are really inter-continental but very often the staff notation isn't. So, I thought how could I find an interface where there is a video art, the musician from another country with their own notation, dancers, filmmakers etc. How can they collaborate on equal terms? Using *intra-action notation*, you can incorporate everything from staff notation, *Son-Icons*, videos or also scenic movements or settings of listening, gathering,

being dispersed in a landscape or being autonomous but still kind of connected. All these qualities are hard to notate in the staff notation. But these are not obvious to notate in *Son-Icons* either. So, I saw this intra-action notation as a map or an interface to combine different ways of thinking, of disciplines, of getting inspired. So yeah, that's mainly the impetus of that.

**V.Š:** Another question I'd like to ask is that you as an artist collaborate quite often with someone completely outside of the artistic world. What does it bring to your practice or what is the reason for doing this artistic research?

**Ch.H:** Art has its own circle in a way, I mean it's very universal but I'm often very interested in specific topics. I was very pleased to work with a sleep researcher on the insomnia and the latest work I did was with scientists at the symposium. It was a reunion of scientists from all over the world with the topic of carbon dioxide and environment. I did a work in a Rhône glacier from 1998 until 2008 and this was very important for me. It was purely artistic work and sometimes I exchanged ideas with glaciologist but I wanted to delve deeper into the climate topic. It was also one of the first times when I didn't only work with the *Son-Icons* but I worked with scientific curves of the heat measurement from the beginning of the industrial revolution until 2020- this was my visual impulse. I got these lines and the explanation. In science the visualisation is also very important, so it was another way of getting information and translate it into music and doing *Son-Icons* about the music. In another words, it is translating scientific data into music, into *Son-Icons* and again into music. I like to work with the real world, that's why I'm also doing site specific work and I like the artistic interpretation of it. This gives me the possibility to connect with the world around us in another way. I also experienced that the audience can get another entrance into my work if the original impulse is actually scientific curve or the question about the environment. This is one think that the interdisciplinary art is really good at.

**V.Š:** That's brilliant! My last question would be and that's how we met is Where improvisation fits into all this? What's the role of improvisation in all your art?

**Ch.H:** Oh! improvisation is really my language. This is how I connect with people, with birds, with landscapes. I am an improviser and I'm also a composer but if I offer *Son-Icons* to a musician I'm always stimulating the fact that they don't have to interpret them in exactly the same way. I'm interested to see how can you develop it, how can you play if you do different concerts with the *Son-Icons*. What is the music you do and you really feel in the moment? Even if you practice a lot and even if you have a lot of rehearsals my approach even in composition is, that it's the moment and the inspiration of the moment and the creation in the moment. Improvisation is dwelling my art and this is what I love the most. For me improvisation is a kind of a life time practice. I improvise every day. So, that is the nourishing flow. I don't compose every day but I improvise every day and I believe in practicing every day. So, I think my musical pathway is very much the improvisation and maybe the improvisation alone is the reason I like improvising with *Son-Icons*, because it's nice to communicate even when you're alone. Improvisation is always a communication and an absolute bonus is, of course, to play with others. Improvisation is a very special art. I mean notated music is quite young, so I really feel that improvisation and this way of music creation is so rooted in a very long history of making music. It's being re-discovered and it

can flourish now and I'm very happy to live now. I think it's a huge musical horizon in improvisation and I feel very connected with it.