

Madalyn Merkey on sound as material



November 16, 2017 -

As told to Elliott Cost, 2922 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Technology](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#).

Many musicians and DJs accumulate extensive collections. Is collecting important to you?

In relation to music I collect a number of things. Definitely PDFs. I'm always trying to collect historical documents relating to the history of electronic music in an academic setting. I always like reading about festivals and symposiums from the 80's. I find those are a great source of inspiration. I don't collect too many samples since what I do is mostly real-time synthesis where everything is generated on the spot. I definitely collect a lot of historical literature relating to electronic music. I also collect cacti.



Aloiampelos tenuior hybrid or *Alôe rupestris*.

Do you have any daily rituals?

I do a classical music [radio show](#) every week that I don't really relate to my personal music. It causes me to be more humble and also to be more prepared. I meet the public and interact with them. I have to take calls and criticism very early on Sunday morning. I also interview performing artists who have a real presence in their field. It feeds into my daily ritual and I'm always thinking about what classical pieces I'm going to play. I'm constantly in this other world.

In my own practice, listening everyday to sounds that are around me is crucial. Listening to the bus coming or sonically seeking out spaces. I feel like that is certainly a continuation of my own creative practice because I'm always considering different levels of sound and how I react to them personally.

What types of spaces do you work in best?

It's nice to have a quiet place. Sometimes when I'm working on a sound I don't even listen to it until the final step. I keep it very theoretical, like I just need to get my numbers right before I indulge in the environment that I'm creating. If I'm not sure of what I want to achieve, then I will likely be satisfied with whatever sound comes out of my computer. So silence and thinking more theoretically is one state of working.

When I'm listening to sounds I like to be by myself. The ideal space is listening on nice speakers at home. Also the performance space is so important, that's where the magic happens. You're out with a bunch of people and sounds emerge that I've never heard before. It's a unique experience because my volume never really gets that loud when I'm at home. When I'm with a bunch of people their energy is definitely crucial to the creative mood and me trying to introduce people to what I do.

I was looking at a PDF of one of your compositions. There's such a structure. It reads like a concrete poem. I was curious how precise your scripts are? Do you ever specify certain parameters of the space where the piece will be played?

In an ideal situation, I want to be familiar with the architecture, or at least know the dimensions of the space. You can't get too caught up on theorizing acoustics, but it definitely helps. If you're in a very reverberant space you might want to change the durations of the individual sounds or add more silence between them to fully decay. As far as the composition or scripting part goes, it's not necessarily a finished score; I'm just designing little tools that I can use inside of my own performance world.

I like to be structurally precise in some regards. For me, being an electronic music composer, I still have a need to communicate my ideas, not always in a traditional form on paper, but in a way that I could possibly explain to someone else, or mainly as a starting point for further mutations. I think an idea that was important to me starting out in electronic music was that I'm in a world where I can't necessarily recreate the sounds that I've made previously. Writing it out gives me some confidence that I will be able to make it happen again, but I think more so writing helps me realize what I've done previously.

So you are constantly writing?

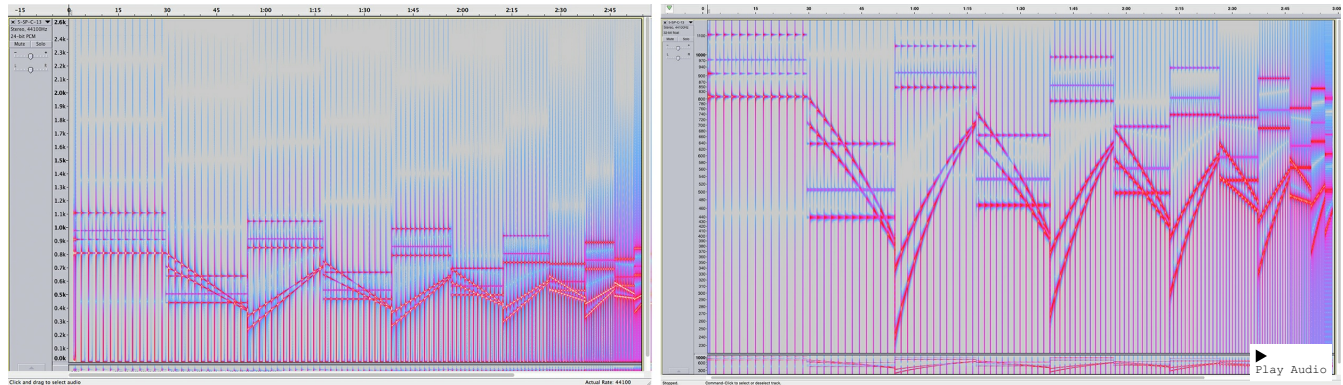
I always start out by writing the parameters, like what's the highest and lowest frequencies that I'll be using, the file names, etcetera. From there I add more complexity and modulation. I'm not always writing but rather drawings small graphs for ideas of how I want certain sounds to be introduced to create a cluster of sounds over time. This form of

drawing is definitely crucial to me, but I'm not as organized as I wish I was because I find notes everywhere.

You studied visual arts in school. Was there a catalyst that pushed your work into the auditory?

I don't know why I stopped drawing. I think it wasn't difficult anymore. I was also piling up all these material possessions. I had to think about storing them and I moved towards sound because it had a complexity and an instantaneousness. I didn't need to draft something all day to make a sound happen. I could just record it and it was out there. This communicated my idea, however raw, instantaneously. But I think it was also the level of complexity that I was able to achieve and its ability to fill an entire room. I could just bring my laptop and fill a whole entire space with sound—even the little cracks in the walls. It appealed to me because it didn't actually take up any room. I didn't have to cart it off to a storage facility.

Also with sound you get the experience of time. With a visual image you get all the information at once. You then have to look in at the little parts, but with sound you get more of a reveal over time where you don't have all the information immediately. This is exciting as an artist. There's a different kind of control.



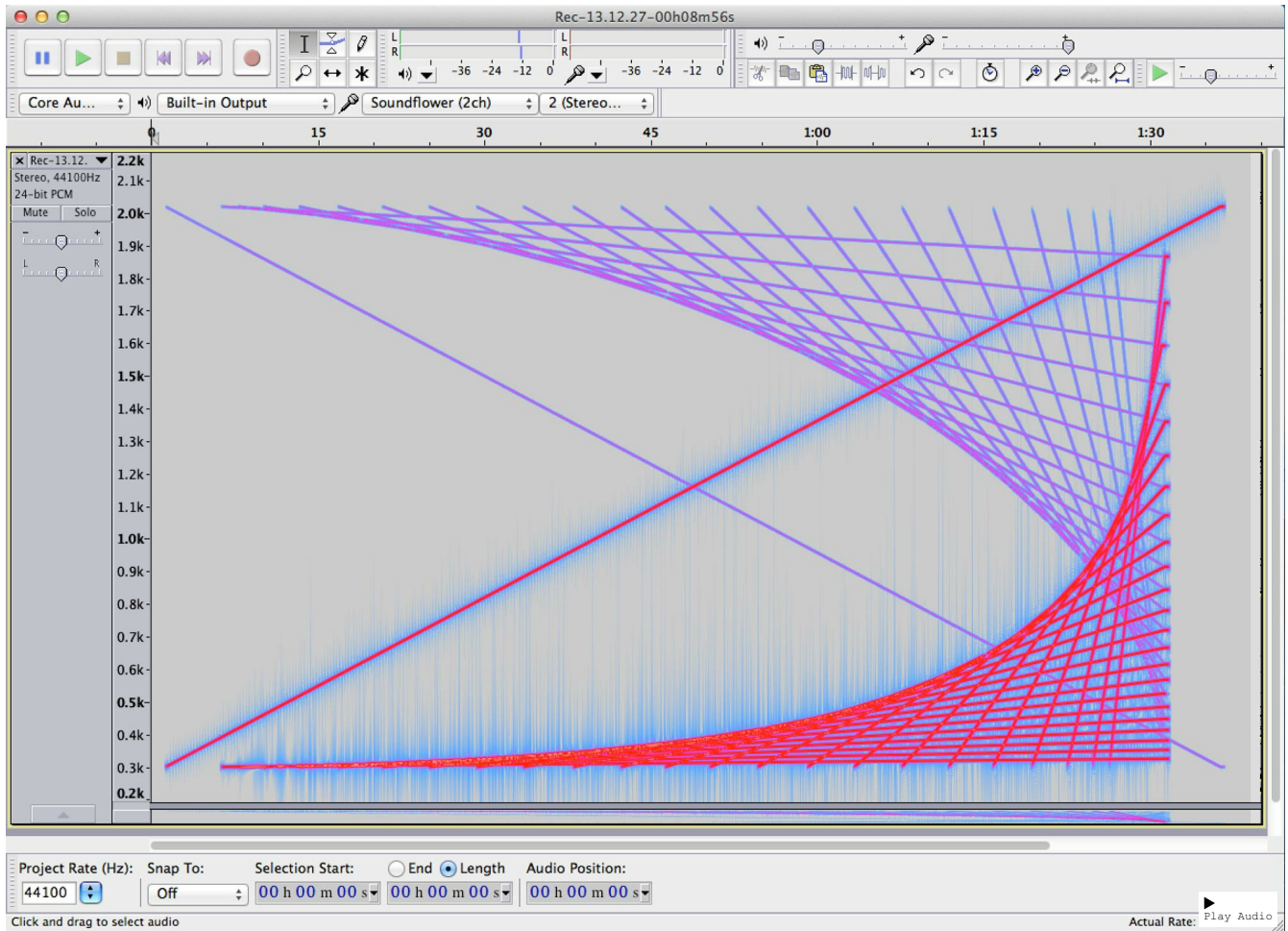
Spectrogram of *SP/C/13* in Audacity.

Control seems to be an important part of your performances. When I've heard your performances, it's almost like you are sculpting each individual sound. Do you think of each note in a composition as having its own identity or personality?

An important element that I think about when working with sound is that it's atmospheric and not necessarily musical. To me the individual sounds are alive and changing. Even though I try to control the shapes of the sounds I like to also use my computer to make surprising things happen or have them constantly changing because that's not something any instrument you buy off the shelf can do. I like using computer music over a modular system just because I can pile on as much as I want. Again it's not a physical burden on me because it's all on my computer and not pounds and pounds of metal.

Would you say that rigor is part of the reason you create music?

Yes, I think so. I think that keeps me interested and is part of the reason I make art. I never thought I really cared about being part of a historical dialogue, like, here I am in the line of history, but I feel that with experimental music there is a lot of territory that isn't charted. There's so much complexity you can achieve. One example would be sound phenomena.



Spectrogram in Audacity.

It's really exciting and puzzling because rigor doesn't always come naturally unless you continue to practice. The difficulty is definitely fuel. For me if it's not difficult it's not going to be interesting or worthwhile for very long.

Mills College is known for many esteemed composers. When you were studying there was it important for you to mold your identity as a musician?

I worked at the paper archive at Mills so I got to read a lot of documents and correspondence between people like [Morton Subotnick](#) and different art foundations. I got to see different scores, circuit diagrams, and programs. That was really helpful just to understand the history on a one-to-one basis through the documentation.

Something that challenged me was working with other performers, especially acoustic musicians, because when I came to Mills I was very much inside my electronics, happy making sounds that never touched the air. Working with musicians is something I do more regularly now. I collaborate with a pianist, Julie Moon, every Tuesday morning. It's helpful in expanding my own knowledge of music and performance habits.

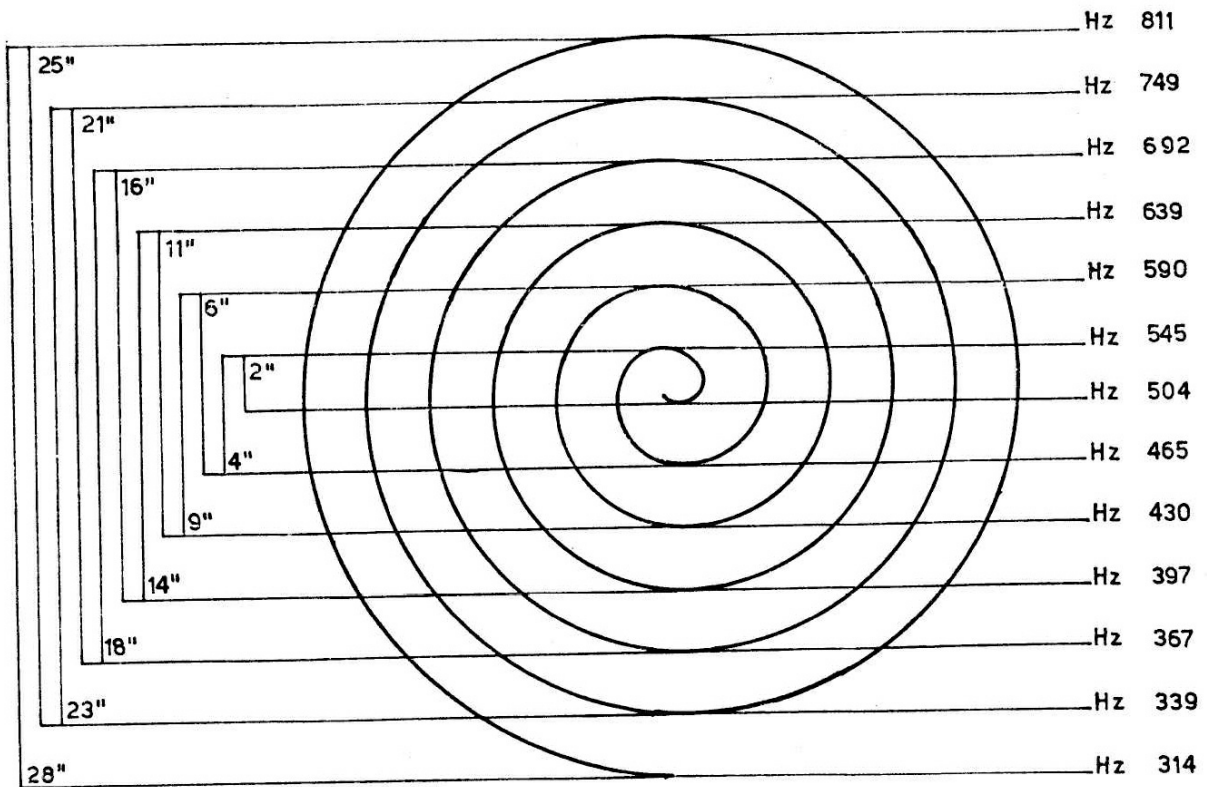


Tavola V - Progetto: SP/C/13 (spirale curva).

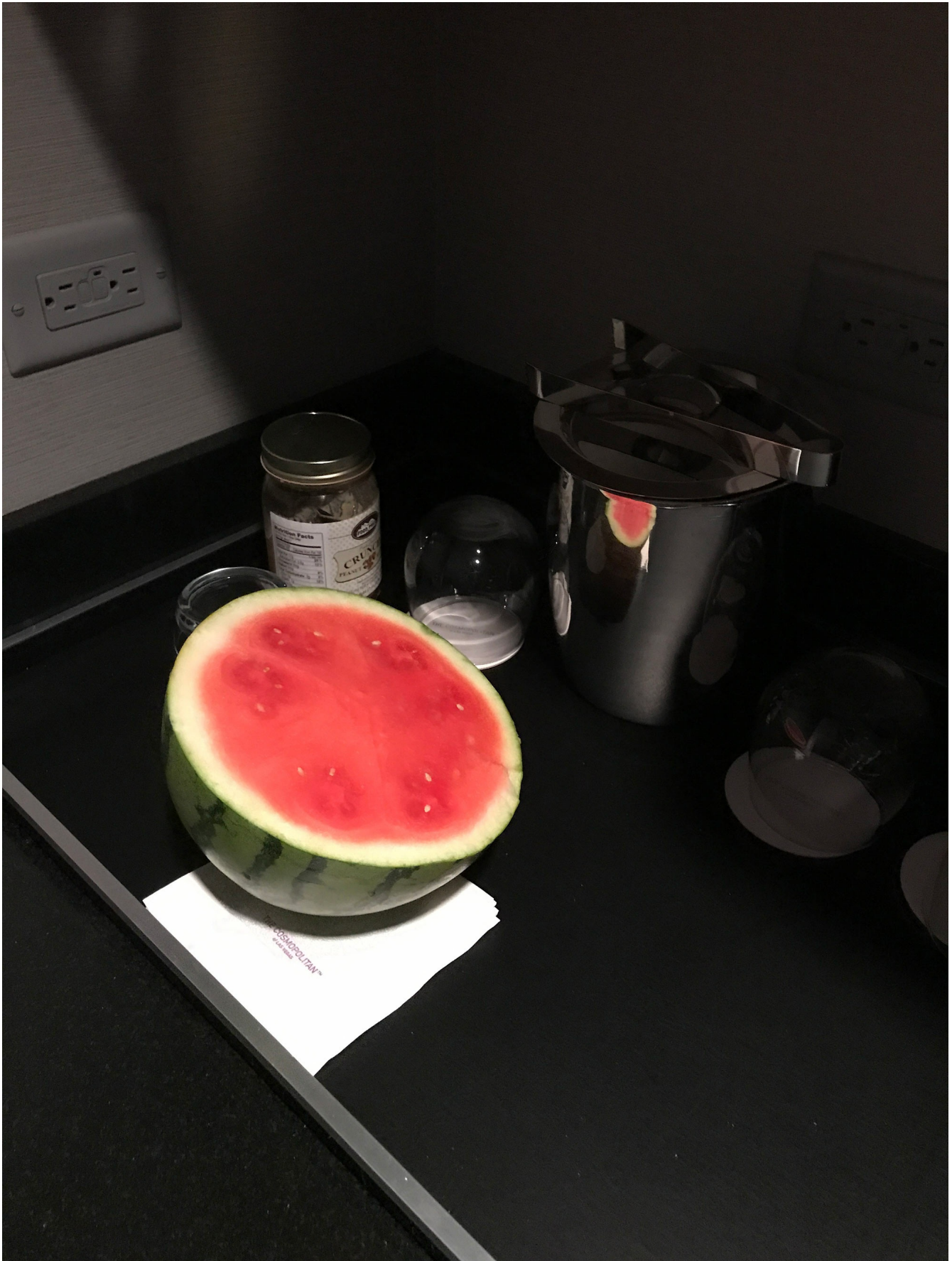
Geometric figure of project SP/C/13 from *Two Schools of Electronic Music in Italy* (1968)

While at Mills I also translated a book of Italian electronic music projects from Turin. It was written by the composer Enore Zaffiri, who founded the first electronic music course in Northern Italy that was later moved to the Music Conservatory of Turin. I got to go to the Conservatory of Florence and they helped me finalize the project. I was able to visit and listen to their archive.

Can you talk a little about collaborating when there are layers of technology and translation between your collaborator and you?

That was definitely the case before I went to Florence. I read an article by a professor who taught there, and that's how I became interested in the conservatory. Even though we had translation differences he was such a kind and open person. He was very generous.

When I was working on translating the book, even though we have a rich community of academic experimental musicians and pioneers in computer music, nobody knew who Enore Zaffiri was. They knew who Pietro Grossi was, the founder of the first course in electronic music at the Conservatory of Florence. He worked with a big IBM computer when writing his compositions. You would have to wait a day for your composition to compute so he would sleep in a cot while the computer was commuting overnight. So to find out about Zaffiri I had to reach out through the ways of cyberspace. I think it's great. It definitely gives you time to figure out exactly what you want to say and conduct all the research to make a meaningful exchange.



Taken on Madalyn Merkey's iPhone 7 Plus (iOS 10.3.2) at 10:57 AM on September 17, 2017

Which fruits and vegetables are you into right now?

Watermelon, okra, chard, pineapple.

Madalyn Merkey recommends 11 cacti:

1. [Ariocarpus fissuratus subs. lloydii cv. latus](#)
2. [Astrophytum myriostigma cv. Onzuka](#) (astrophytum deserve their own list)
3. [Avonia quinaria subs. alstonii](#)
4. [Aztekium ritteri](#)
5. [Copiapoa barquitensis](#)
6. [Copiapoa cinerea](#)
7. [Dioscorea elephantipes](#) (not a cactus, but nice plant from South Africa)
8. [Fenestraria rhopalophylla](#)
9. [Haworthia truncata](#), (any subspecies)
10. [Pseudolithos migiurtinus](#)
11. [Aloe suprafoliata](#) and [branddraaiensis](#) (aloe plants deserve their own list)

Name

Madalyn Merkey

Vocation

Computer Musician, Composer, Cacti Enthusiast





Photo: Sean Tatol