On connecting your work to what came before you

Musician and composer Sarah Davachi on taking the time to understand the history of your tools, juggling touring with a Ph.D. program, the importance of cold calls, and working at night.

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As told to Max Mertens, 3658 words.

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You first started working on this album, *Cantus, Descant*, in 2017 and recorded in a bunch of different cities over the past few years. Tell me a little about your organizational process and how you edited all these recordings into what became the album.

It was a lot of work. I had the idea in late 2016 to do a record that was mostly organ because I was doing a lot of organ shows at that time, and when I was doing my Master's degree at Mills [College], I did my thesis piece for pipe organ and electronics. My life in 2017 was a little chaotic because I was moving around a lot and traveling a lot. I had left Vancouver, which is where I was living, but it was nine months before I could move to LA, so I was in this limbo zone. The first recordings I did were a week before I moved to LA. The last thing I did when I was living in Canada was some of the recordings in Montreal and Vancouver.

Initially, at that time, it was sitting down for the first time to think about it from an album perspective—what I would do and a recording perspective. The organ is a weird instrument, it's very much connected to space and it's very much connected to this acoustic presence, which can be taken away part of when you try to record it. In 2018, I had a bunch of organ shows lined up, so I thought I'd just use those as ways of figuring it out and working out different iterations of the things that I'd been thinking about. I'd do a show and think "Okay I liked how that sounded, I like that thing that I did," and I'm taking it into the next performance, I'm building from that.

In early 2019, when I felt like I had things sounding the way that I wanted them, I went into the recording process. Some of it was scheduled sessions, where I would go and be alone and just be recording, some of them I had to work around touring. There was one that I just recorded my soundcheck when I was playing in Copenhagen. I had my little field recorder, and I was just recording my soundcheck and ended up using parts of that.

It's kind of always the way that I work with any record. Regardless of what the material is, I spend a long time getting hours and hours of recordings, and then I go in and edit it for weeks and then start the process of putting things together or doing overdubs. Which is probably the part I like most actually. I think that's where things come together, and that's where you start to get a sense of how an album's actually going to sound when you start doing that detailed work.

Some of the organs you used on the album date back a number of centuries. I imagine they can be somewhat cantankerous or difficult to work with. How much room are you leaving for mechanical error or accidents in the recordings?

The work that I'm doing my Ph.D. on right now in LA is specifically about musical instruments, and this is a thing that comes up in the history of instruments. There's always this assumption that modern stuff is somehow better or easier to work with and older stuff is more complicated. I think that's true for a lot of that technology, but the way that I see it is the older stuff, all of the imperfections, all of the difficulties, or whatever you want to call them that come up in them, are just part of the personality of the instrument. It sounds cheesy, but I think of instruments as people almost, especially things like that where it's this specific thing that exists on its own and there's nothing else quite like it. You have to spend time getting to know them, and you get to know the good things and the bad things, but you learn how to work around all of that.

There are two older organs that I used, one from the 1800s and one from the 1400s, that were my favorite ones to work with actually precisely because of that, fallibility, I guess, of the instrument. Maybe fragility is a better word. That's what makes it more interesting and I think that's what makes it more of like a dialogue when you're actually playing the instrument. You're getting to know what the instrument's capable of, and not necessarily just looking at what it's supposed to do, and seeing those imperfections as things you can work around and actually use in a creative way. There's definitely a lot of that on the album, just letting those instruments be what they are, and having that be part of the music.

This is the first time you've sang on a record, what made you feel that the timing was right?

I love songs. I listen to pop music all the time and it's something that I've always wanted to do. I think songwriting is a really interesting thing. I don't know if people think about the different processes in certain ways of how it is to make an ambient piece of music versus how it is to write a song; there's obvious overlaps between them because you're working with sound, but they're very different forms. Songwriting's always been an interesting thing to me that I've never had an outlet to do, so yeah, there was a lot going on conceptually in the record and it just felt like the right time to be able to stick those in there to see what happens.

One of the songs we released as a single and it's been pretty well-received, so I feel better about it now, but up until the day before we released it, I didn't sleep. I was super nervous. It's fine now that I'm over that initial hump of wondering how people are going to react, but it's definitely different. Although, I think with recording there's a level in which you can hide behind the recording a little bit or you can work on it until it's perfect, however long that takes. I feel more comfortable in a recorded sense. I would never perform those live. I can't imagine performing anything like that live.

I read an interview with you around the time [2018's] *Gave in Rest* came out that you prefer to work at night. Is that still the case or has the pandemic shifted your habits in any way?

I've always been very night-oriented. I think since the pandemic it's been a little bit different because I'm at home all the time, and my boyfriend's home all the time, and he's a very morning-oriented person. He works a day job so he has to get up at certain hours. Just being around him more than usual I tend to adopt his schedule a little bit, which has been kind of nice, to go to bed at normal hours and wake up at normal hours. Even in those cases, I'm making notes on my phone at night about things or reading or thinking about things at odd hours.

I think partly my weird schedule of the past is due to the fact that I travel so much, and especially when I was overseas, I would adopt this attitude of just do things when you're awake. So if I happened to be wide awake at four o'clock in the morning, I don't see anything wrong with just waking up and working on music, and then sleeping at two o'clock in the afternoon or something if I can do that kind of thing.

As you mentioned, you're doing a Ph.D.—in musicology at UCLA. Is that work separate from your solo music or do they intertwine in any way?

I don't write about my own work for my Ph.D. I think in composition departments, programs, and things like that, it is more important to be able to be critical of your own work, I don't do that specifically. Part of the reason why I'm doing the Ph.D. is so that I can look at things that are a little bit distant from my own work, because I have that opportunity to look at other things that I don't necessarily deal with in my own music. I write mostly about musical instruments or I study musical instruments, and my music has always been informed by this approach

to timbre, texture, and I work with different instruments in my own music, too. So there's very much the things that I'm interested in in my music; the things that drive my music, are the same types of the things that drive me to think about instruments and write about them in that way. There's some discussion of experimental music in my Ph.D., but it's not just that, it's any type of music.

I just recently advanced candidacy so I'm finished with everything except the dissertation itself. When I was working on that you have to jump through all these hoops of formalities about your methodology, and I was thinking "I don't really have it in my plan to go to this museum or that museum and this collection and that collection," but I realized it's because I worked for 10 years at the National Music Centre in Calgary and that was such an education. That's the reason why I'm interested in instruments, that's the reason why I gravitated towards that academically, because that's where that firsthand understanding of how instruments function and how you can have this dialogue with an instrument came about. I feel like I already did a lot of that work.

How does that academic scheduling compare to the scheduling of releasing music?

It's crazy. When I think about the last three years—which is how long I've been doing a Ph.D. for—it's completely crazy. I can't believe I lived like that for so many years because I was taking all these courses. My touring schedule is not normal in the sense like a normal album cycle has the album and then you do all this touring in chunks around it to support the album. I kind of just tour whenever, it doesn't usually align with an album. And, of course, for me it's always quieter in the summer, I think unless you're a DJ or something and you're doing festivals, then summer is usually a pretty quiet time and fall and spring are super busy. I would always overlap and I would be taking classes and writing papers while I was on tour and it was kind of horrible, like reading on flights when I'm supposed to be getting sleep, doing the thing where "I'm wide awake and it's five o'clock in the morning so I guess I'll just write this paper that's due tomorrow before I go to my soundcheck at three o'clock." I wouldn't recommend it.

Who was your last important teacher and what's something you learned from them?

I worked with a lot of cool people at UCLA. I had one professor in particular, she teaches all the Medieval seminars and early music stuff, her name is Elizabeth Upton. She's equally interested in early music and modern music like pop music, specifically she wrote about pop music and recording. Seeing that trajectory has been inspiring. I heard a story that she decided to pursue post-secondary because when she was a teenager, she was really into the Grateful Dead and she had an epiphany at one time where she was like "Oh, these vocal harmonies are very similar to Medieval vocal harmonies."

The pandemic has forced artists to rethink how they release music and their relationship with streaming services, whether it be Bandcamp, Spotify, etc. What are some positive changes that you're seeing happening in the industry right now as a result?

It's complicated because there is a time and a place for streaming. Streaming in itself is not a bad thing, being able to hear music and hear what you like is not the bad part of what Spotify does. But it's weird, it's been so strange to try to tell people how evil something like Spotify is and have them completely not understand why Spotify is destructive to artists like me, people who aren't touring, Taylor Swift, or whatever. Just the idea that what musicians do is work and what they produce is labor, and that they deserve to be paid a livable wage, and their work needs to be valued in a certain way. That's always been kind of disheartening to try to explain that theory, but I feel like what the pandemic has definitely enlightened a lot of people who—not that they didn't realize—but I think didn't understand the way that the music industry works, the back side of things works, and how people got paid and how money flows. People understanding that it's not just the musicians who are being affected, it's their teams, it's their agents, their managers, the venues, promoters, service industry people who work at the venues, all of these people being affected by it. So that was an interesting thing to see people wake up to.

I remember early on in the pandemic, I was reading about refunded tickets and there was one venue that was like "if you don't need the money that you spent on that ticket maybe you could put it toward the venue or the artist who just lost income." I remember reading all these comments where people were like "Why would I do that, I paid

for something and I want my money back, if they want money for free, they can go panhandle on the street" I was like "What?" How can you be that disconnected from how things work?

Why did you decide to start your own label in 2020?

It kind of started, I wouldn't say as a joke, but it started as a lofty idea that I had in 2017. I was giving a keynote speech at an organ conference in Amsterdam and I had this idea during the conference like "Oh, it would be cool to do a label where you just do a bunch of releases of older instruments, but new music written on them." I've always found it interesting the connection between early music and experimental music, and as kind of a joke my boyfriend came up with the name Late Music, because it's not early music, it's late music. It's this weird play on early music in a modern era, but I liked it a lot.

I've always kind of jumped from label to label. I've worked with a bunch of different labels, which has been good, but my manager Forest [Juziuk] and I always felt it would be nice to have my own place where I didn't have to worry about the label side of things. He got the gears working with Warp because they run a few different imprints; Jon Hassell has an imprint, so it's a similar thing to that. Between Forest and [Warps Records'] Matthew Jones, throughout 2019 they went back and forth working on getting the imprint going. I think the main thing is it's a home for me to release my music, but we have a lot of ideas about reissues we'd like to do, or just a big series similar to what I was talking about with the instrument series. I think we're all kind of thinking about it long term where it can grow into a really niche thing.

One of the things that I like about your music is you're able to take these old instruments or traditions of playing and put a contemporary spin on it. Who were the artists that inspired you or showed you it was possible to do that when you were starting out your career?

When I was doing a residency at the Banff Centre back in 2012, there were these two musicians—who are both friends of mine now—doing a residency there who both live in Montreal, Katelyn Clark and Terri Hron. Terri played on *Gave in Rest*, she plays recorder, and Katelyn Clark's a harpsichordist. I remember we had a hangout and they just started jamming. It got me thinking about this idea that early musicians are not necessarily tied to performing early music, and even this idea which is something that I write about now with early music instruments, that early music is a modern construct in itself, that the way we approach it is always from this modern lens. Seeing performances like that and starting to get into this world, which I think exists both in Montreal and Vancouver of early musicians who are both equally interested in early music and also experimental and modern music, has been really interesting to me.

Another musician in Montreal who I think does this is Pierre Yves-Martel, who I did a piece with in 2016. He plays the viola da gamba so I wrote a piece for organ and gamba, which we played in Montreal together. It's odd, I noticed it more in Canada than I noticed it in the US, there's this interest among early musicians and experimental music. Once I noticed it, it makes perfect sense that people who are working on this music that is inherently open-ended and experimental in itself would be interested in how it functions today.

You've been fortunate to do a number of residencies in different countries. What advice would you give artists seeking out and applying for these opportunities?

To be honest, I don't know if I can give advice to anything in the US, because I don't think I've done a residency in the US. I know people who have, but the infrastructure in the US is really different than anywhere else I've seen. Specifically to Canadian musicians, there's so much funding opportunities that are available for you, the Canadian Council, all of the different provincial ones. I think that's true in Europe from what I understand of it, the granting process is pretty straightforward. I think that the main thing would be to look into grants, apply for everything, and don't be discouraged if you don't get them. I don't get every grant I apply for either, but be really clear about the things that you want to do in those grant applications.

In terms of residencies, I'm kind of a proponent of the cold call approach. I think people don't do that enough and people seem to think it's in poor taste or something to cold call places. So many of the ones I've done have been reaching out and being like "Hey can I come and do a residency?" and following up with them and staying on

it. I think in Europe there are ones, sometimes it's just a matter of applying for it and if you can get yourself there, they welcome you to come and do it. A mix of looking for grants to be able to afford going to those places and spending the time doing it, and staying on the people who run those centers and trying to get a foot in the door.

Sarah Davachi Recommends:

1. Be kind to yourself. If you need time off, if you don't feel creative, just rest and take care of yourself. Sleep, read, watch movies, cook, exercise, see friends, sit and think, pursue a hobby, whatever. This is especially true if you're a touring musician—your time outside of the gig is yours and you should use it however you need. Rainer Maria Rilke - *Sonnets to Orpheus*.
2. Learn when and how to say no. Take advantage of the opportunities you're given as they won't always be there, but learn what your time and labor are worth. If you're not interested or it doesn't feel right, you can say no and it will be alright. Carlo Ginzburg - *The Cheese and The Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century-Miller*.
3. Listen to your instinct and know when to stop. If something isn't working creatively, you'll know it. Don't force it—just stop and try something new. Maybe you'll come back to it and figure it out, maybe you won't and nothing will come of it and that's okay. On the other side, if you feel strongly about something then follow it through even if others can't see it working. You're not going to please everyone and if you don't make the art that you want/need, you'll feel the emotional repercussions. Thomas Prendergast and Stephanie Triggs - *Affective Medievalism: Love, Abjection, and Discontent*.
4. Listen to music. A lot of writers say that the best way to learn how to write is to read other books, I think that's true with music, too. If you're a composer or musician, listen to as many different types of music as you can and think of yourself as a fly on the wall in the process. William James - *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.
5. Ask for what you want. Don't be afraid to ask for the things that you want or need in order to feel fulfilled. Whether it's in the context of composing and recording or whether it's in the context of touring, don't settle long term for something that doesn't feel good. You'll probably find that a lot of things are done out of convenience, but they aren't set in stone and can change if you try. Bell Hooks - *All About Love: New Visions*.

Name
Sarah Davachi

Vocation
Musician, Composer

Sean McCann