

Interview accompanying the
Jason Kahn / Philip Julian CD
"Valentines" (2014)
Confront Recordings
Interviewed by John Macedo

<http://confrontrecordings.com>

John Macedo:

How did the collaboration arise?

Jason Kahn:

I met Phil for the first time in December 2008 when I played at Cafe Oto in London. I'd written to him before about a release of his on the Homophoni net label which I'd liked very much.

Philip Julian:

We stayed in touch and then I released Jason's collaboration with Francisco Meirino "Music For An Empty Cinema" on my Authorised Version label . We thought Jason tour the UK in February 2012 would be a nice opportunity to try and record an improvised session.

John Macedo:

How did you approach the collaboration?

Philip Julian:

There wasn't really any major discussion beforehand. We know each other's work and it seemed like it could be an interesting situation.

Jason Kahn:

I think the idea was to just go into the studio and record. We would then have this pool of material to work with. After the first take in the studio, however, it became clear to both of us that the improvisations would pretty much stand on their own, and that these recordings wouldn't necessarily have to be used as basis material for further composition.

John Macedo:

I'm interested to know what it means to you to release a recording of a 'live improvisation', like this one. Something that was only existed in a particular time and space, and is created out of momentary occurrences and interactions, is captured and presented as a fixed work. I guess it touches on certain notions of purity and faithfulness to the 'original' performance vs. the freedom of the studio. What are your thoughts on this process?

Philip Julian:

In general, I prefer to leave things as-they-happened but there's no hard and fast rules really.

There is a theory that releasing improvised works is rather pointless as they only truly exist in-the-moment but I'm interested in documentation, particularly of situations containing unique events.

Jason Kahn:

The documentation of a "live" improvisation—music performed spontaneously before an audience—is an object: a representation of an event. It is in no means meant to be a way of replacing the actual experience of having been witness to this event. For me the whole component of space is so important to a musical event—and this is totally divorced from the fixed work. I'm not saying one is better than the other, only that they are fundamentally different in nature, and the idea of being "faithful" is a bit misguided, in my opinion. As soon as you record this performance you are being "unfaithful," for the only way to experience this event was to be there—anything else is an abstraction. I do find it especially interesting to have experienced a musical performance in person and then to re-experience it later in the form of a recording. I'm fascinated by the space of memory and how this impinges on the fixed work, and how the fixed work in turn forces us to re-interpret our memories of the event. Or it could even be that the recording has been re-worked in some way, this creates a whole new set of loci to perceive the original performance from. I feel the documentation of a performance is an open system with many different possible outcomes. A puristic approach presents an unnecessary limitation to the many directions a fixed work could go in.

John Macedo:

What for both of you are the important aspects of collaboration that you can't achieve performing or composing solo? Why collaborate at all?

Philip Julian:

Collaborating with other people forces me to think in a different way. I can fall into little "safe" areas and comfort zones quite quickly if I work solely on my own. Having to work quickly in an improvised context, with or against someone else's decisions, always forces me into a different way of thinking. I always come away from these situations with a new set of ideas and fresh perspectives.

Jason Kahn:

When I play with another person what they are doing inevitably pushes me in other directions than if I were only playing alone. This leads me to new performative and sonic discoveries which I wouldn't have been able to achieve by myself. I also really appreciate the social aspect of collaboration. Music is so much more than just being about sound for me, whether we perform before an audience or together in a studio there is always a social component which steers the music in another direction. On top of all this, in this age of the internet where so many people now seem to collaborate by trading sound files over servers, I feel it is really important to keep

face-to-face collaboration alive—taking the effort to meet someone and spend time with them adds a depth to collaboration which for me can't be replaced by other ways of working together. I get asked from time to time about collaborating with people over the internet but this just doesn't interest me at all— the whole social component is missing.

John Macedo:

What would you say are both your biggest non-musical influences and inspiration? Certain concepts, ideas, or experiences that made an impact on you?

Philip Julian:

I've always had an admiration for recordings that manage to sidestep anything remotely connected to traditional musical forms and remain interesting in some way. I think anything that presented a "why not?" or DIY attitude, be it in art, film, music or literature was pretty key early on. Slightly hand in hand with this attitude was the idea of creation via destruction which was a fascinating concept. You're taught early on not to break things as a child, so it comes as a bit of a surprise later that the broken version could well be far more interesting than what you started with.

Jason Kahn:

In general, I derive a lot of inspiration from environmental sound. I'm interested in observing the aleatory nature of environmental sound events and thinking how I can re- contextualize this in the space of a musical work, be it a composition or collaboration. Sometimes the greatest music I can imagine occurs just outside the door to my house.

John Macedo:

It's interesting that you mention influence from real world sound events, Jason. Because I feel both your works do touch on that uncanny, ambiguous area between acoustic sound and electronic sound. It kind of boils sound down to pure movement and colours. Other composers have mentioned nature as the highest influence (Cage, Messiaen, Ligeti etc) of art etc. Why do you think this is?

Philip Julian:

I think if you're involved in the creation of music or sound in some way that you perhaps start to listen to things differently, and the sheer wealth of detail and the complex structures present in "everyday sounds" can't help but act as an influence. I'd be slightly sceptical of anyone who said it wasn't present in their work in some way.

Jason Kahn:

What I've noticed over the years is that a musical practice can really sensitize one to sound in general—so much so that when I leave the house I am hearing everything in a "musical" manner. Which means for me, I'm imparting some kind of musical order, if only on a very meta-level, to

seemingly random sound events in the environment. Perhaps without all my musical training and listening and thinking about sound and music these environmental sounds wouldn't sound "musical" to me at all. But after all these years, I can't imagine how I would perceive these sounds otherwise. I think that at this point I am always literally hearing "music," wherever I go.

Philip Julian:

The other thing to mention here is architecture and naturally occurring structures. I often find that a particularly interesting or unusual building can act as a starting point or a kind of physical score for a piece of music... it's shape, size in relation to its surroundings, the construction details or lack of and so on can all be recontextualised for a piece of music.

John Macedo:

I'd like to talk to you about improvisation, as it's an important part of both of your creative processes. The act of free improvisation is a chaotic system of sorts. There can be feedback between the players that is sensitive and can go in any direction. I think this chaos or non-linearity is evident on multiple levels of each of your work and in this collaboration. What interests you about the performance dynamic of improvisation?

Jason Kahn:

I think the intuitive aspect of improvisation is one of its components which interests me most—the unspoken formation of a piece of music. And my hope is to be surprised “whether pleased or irritated—by the process. I'm especially glad when the process puts me in a situation which I find difficult to navigate in, where I have to create a way into the music happening. If the musical dialogue becomes too easy I tend to miss some of the rigor involved in moving between the different layers of material involved: sound, perception of these sounds and their exchange, the social component of collaborating with another person(s), the relationship to my instrument, etc—just to name a few.

Philip Julian:

For me, it's the subtleties of the exchange and the fact that rarely are two situations the same. The most rewarding for me are where the players treat each situation on its own merits. I've played with people who seemingly have a very fixed mindset - "I never do this, or I always do this". The best situations are always a free exchange of some sort. It doesn't have to be comfortable; it can be combative but it needs to be in the moment, based on events rather than trying to fit into someone else's fixed/closed system.

John Macedo:

Chaotic dynamics and feedback is also present in the way you patch your modular synthesizers. The synthesizers kind of develop an autonomy and mind of their own. What interests you about working with electronics in this way? How important is this uncertainty or

lack of control to you as performers?

Jason Kahn:

By emphasizing the chaotic in my instrumentation I'm able to add another layer of unpredictability to the process of improvising. This random factor can push the work to unexpected turns and place the players in a position of instability where they have to rely less on learned procedures and techniques and find new ways to navigate a situation which will not always react according to intuitive or conscious attempts to form the music.

Philip Julian:

Using the synthesiser as a completely interlinked system, rather than an A-to-B set of connected parts, each with one purpose, opens up a completely new set of sounds and ways of controlling them (or not). You have to accept a certain percentage lack of control. In this way, I always think of it as adding another player. So, an instrument that answers back occasionally and can throw you into some unexpected areas. It goes some way towards forcing you to accept that there are no inherently "bad" sounds, it's what you do with them once they've arisen that counts.

Jason Kahn:

Without adding this extra level of uncertainty I often find the music can slip into a "comfort zone", where perhaps the performers concentrate too much on making "good music" (i.e., a musical outcome which on the surface might satisfy standard expectations from listeners in terms of form, dialog, excitement, tension, etc) as opposed to focusing on the practice of working together through a process which is constantly shifting and where the very act of Improvising is actual material of this exchange—not the sound, which I feel is just one of many means of investigating the act of improvisation.

John Macedo:

You both mentioned 'good' and 'bad' sounds/music (in inverted commas), I'm always interested in hearing where artists' rules of good/bad or right/wrong lie. For example, a classically trained musicians' rules are going to be very different to free improvisers'. I guess it touches on one's own creative belief system, prejudices, and notions of perfection, failure, expectation, acceptance etc. How do you feel about this kind of binary thinking when it comes to your own practice and music/art in general?

Jason Kahn:

I find it difficult to think in these terms, unless I'm feeling really lazy and don't want to take the trouble to express myself in a more rigorous fashion! Words are just place holders for multiple meanings, and the more meanings a word might have then the less valuable it becomes in actually conveying any information—in communication theory parlance: no signal, lots of noise. So, "bad," as opposed to what? This just doesn't mean anything, in my opinion. As soon as we

pull words like this out of the hat we should be ready to do a lot of explaining—perhaps much more than if we had started with a sensible attempt to say what we meant in the first place! In the question above I answer with a reference to "good music", but only in the context of what many people—according to my experience as a musician—might regard as "good music." I don't ascribe to this definition, of course.

Philip Julian:

For me, it differs depending on the context; for example within improvisation and specifically where you're working with a chaotic or unstable system you have to accept that some sounds that you would remove from a composition could well be present. Therefore it becomes necessary to understand the system well enough to be able to remodel continuously and make an instinctively "bad sound" interesting in some way. There are no rules to this and it rather falls to a personal intuitive grasp of the material and what sits well at a given moment. This is not to say that binary thinking in a musical context can never work, but I think it suits naturally with composition rather than improvisation.

John Macedo:

What role for both of you does the audience or listener play in a performance of improvised music?

Philip Julian:

It sounds a bit of a cliché but I don't tend to give too much thought to audience experience. It's nigh on impossible with improvisation anyway; no guarantees of a successful outcome for performer or audience. Hopefully the process is interesting for all concerned. When it works, it's unique and exhilarating but it's a pretty fragile situation all in all.

Jason Kahn:

Like Phil, I guess that I'm not actively trying to create any experience for listeners—I'm more concentrating on the challenges at hand by working with another person in the context of an unstable system, and my hopes are that by being witness to this exchange listeners will also experience the surprise (or boredom, or whatever arises) of the musicians. In fact, the listeners are participating in this as well: without their presence the music could not unfold as it does. Their presence lends a completely different energy to the situation and puts the performers in a different space than if they were playing privately somewhere. I sense the presence of the other players and of the audience. I feel the energy in the room—be it that of expectation, disinterest, hostility, etc. I feel the music simultaneously being guided by my actions and re-actions but also being torn from my grip by factors beyond my control: how the other player reacts, how the acoustical space reacts, how the audience reacts, how the unpredictability of my own instrumentation inserts its presence in the proceedings.

John Macedo:

Both of you perform live and compose studio works. Is there a relationship between your recorded work and live work? What is the interplay between these two mediums for you?

Jason Kahn:

For me, there is always an overlap in practically all my creative practices, be it writing, composing, performing, installations or graphical design. Often playing live creates a situation where I can discover new sounds, new playing strategies, new ways of listening. And I take these experiences with me when I sit down to compose a new piece, be this on paper or on computer. The live experience directly informs any other work I do. Likewise, composing—thinking about forms and structures, the placement of sounds, etc—will allow me to approach an improvisation in a more rigorous way. Before I even start to perform I've already worked through many considerations pertaining to composition which I might also—either consciously or intuitively—apply to a spontaneous piece of music.

Philip Julian:

I went for quite a few years working on composed pieces in a fairly tightly controlled way. Lots of edits and small sections combined to make a final piece. These days, I don't find this a particularly satisfying way to work. I need to be able to work more quickly in order to keep the results fresh and interesting... Some of the earlier work has most of any spontaneity edited out of it. So there's much more of a crossover now between improvised and composed works than a few years ago. I prefer to work with a small number of improvised takes which can then be left as-is or edited into a longer piece.

John Macedo:

In your own works and in this collaboration you seem to strike an interesting balance between freedom and control. What does musical freedom and control mean to both of you?

Philip Julian:

It represents a fairly difficult balancing act, more often than not. Some situations only really require one or the other and I'd be the first to admit to enjoying (possibly a little too much) the visceral thrills of going hell-for-leather with disregard to "control" as such. Most of the time however, the best results are in finding that balance point between freedom and control.

Jason Kahn:

Musical freedom would mean for me being open to whatever happens in a collaboration. When one frees oneself from any preconceived notions or expectations, then the work enters a space where the only walls are our imagination. Prejudice and taboo only serve to inhibit our creative impulses. Control means paradoxically for me "out of control," which is to say moving out of and beyond the notion of control. For we are only in control when we can deal with a situation that slips from our grip, especially as this situation often yields the most interesting results. If I were

to try to control everything in the generally accepted sense of the word I would be stifling many possible outcomes to a collaboration—and the more possible outcomes the richer the work. I don't think we should be afraid of being "out of control." In fact, I don't think we should think in these terms at all: the whole idea of control should just be sidestepped. We can move away from these concepts and enter a boundless space where ideas and feelings become the determinate factors.