

Hannah Catharine Jones: Sonic Healing and Repair

Hannah Catherine Jones, Reece Cox

http://admin.thecontemporaryjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/INFO-NC-HJC_TCJ.mp3

Transcript

Reece Cox: Greetings and welcome to another episode of INFO Unltd. My name is Reece Cox and today's programme is the final in a series of interviews produced in collaboration with Nottingham Contemporary and Cashmere Radio. I'm very excited to share a conversation with artist, composer, DJ, researcher, Hannah Catherine Jones. Hannah's practice is quite broad and encompasses numerous medias, but at the core is an interest in community, inclusivity, and decolonization, exploring histories and future visions of diasporic peoples, queerness through an expanded composerly practice. In today's show, we're going to discuss the Peckham Chamber Orchestra, or PCO, which Hannah founded in 2013, a community-based orchestra which was grown directly within Peckham where Hannah lives, and outside of any pre-existing music institution. While composing and conducting

for PCO, she developed a compositional style based on research and sampling from a wide range of composers and producers, resulting in concerts, which began to lean towards DJ sets, orchestral essays, or collages.

Next, we'll talk about Hannah's ongoing sampling and performance series, also the subject of her doctoral research entitled, *The Oweds*, where Hannah composes rigorous research of diasporic histories as a form of sonic reparation, ritual, and healing, using combinations of voice, theremin, string instruments and visuals. *The Oweds* take on many forms, such as live performance, video works, and broadcasts on NTS radio with her resident, 'The Opera Show'. They deal with vast amounts of information woven into nonlinear compositions, which are compelling at every moment of listening, yet never culminate into a single reducible narrative. These are works about multiplicity and dispersion, which is best experienced through first-hand listening, so I've included a few slightly longer clips to give you a sense of what I mean. Hannah, I want to ask you about the Peckham Chamber Orchestra as an entry point to your background and to your current relationship to composing and conducting. It also strikes me as significant that you became a conductor not of a pre-existing orchestra, but one which you established right in your community and outside of any music institution. Can you talk about the backstory of founding PCO, as well as your motivations for doing so?

Hannah Catherine Jones: In 2013, I found myself not knowing what I was doing in my life. I had just finished my master's degree, I had played regularly in Goldsmiths' orchestra, and I had the wonderful experience as a player in The Multi-Story Orchestra, which was started by Kate Whitley and Christopher Stark, in 2011. We'd done concerts in an operating car park doubling as art space in Peckham, called Bold

Tendencies. This last experience was transformative but would happen, at that point, once a summer, so I thought ‘wow, there needs to be something like this present in Peckham all the time.’ It was ground-breaking in that you had all these trains coming by that would factor into the sound of the music while, conversely, the sound would bleed out of the car park. It’s this porous energy of the orchestra, which you don’t normally get with the closed off concert hall. I was absorbing all that experience and realising its lack in Peckham, I put an A4 poster up with an advertisement for an orchestra, made myself a good logo, and got responses from the poster to my email address.

I advertised for players for the orchestra and then realised there was no conductor. So, then I put a poster out saying, ‘conductor needed.’ I realised then that whilst I’d never conducted before, I have played in orchestras from a young age and have watched many conductors, so I offered myself for the position. Our first concert felt like an act of resistance, of embracing the idea of amateurism, of doing something just for the love of it. Often, if I’m going into a classical situation, say, an orchestra I’ve never played with, I get a sense that the directors will look at me with judgement, as if ‘you’re not meant to be here’. I feel this bias is thankfully changing but there’s still a long way to go. Mental health has also played a huge role in PCO because I know for a fact how much it’s impacted so many people’s lives positively, including my own. You get to escape the day to day into something that feels spectacular.

Pre-pandemic, the PCO felt like the ultimate kind of sonic democracy, whereby different conductors conduct different works within the same concert: the baton literally became a relay baton. It was important for me as a queer black woman that the PCO was encouraging other femmes, women, non-binary, queer, and any combinations of people who aren’t the

overwhelming majority of conductors. Three diasporic women conducted the last concert we did live. This is the kind of representation, skill, talent, variety, and the harmony of it all, that makes PCO unusual. At the core of any combination of sounds and people, I believe, is this idea of harmony, of balance. I increasingly think of equalisation, not only of what are the sounds that are there, what are the balances of volume, but who’s in the room, who’s in the position of power?

[Peckham Chamber Orchestra (live) plays]

Everything to do with composing, means putting together. Classical music is a narrow period and, pretty much, a history of white European composers. For instance, I love the music of Bach, as do so many people, which is why it became important to explore my love and understanding of this amazing composer, as a conductor, as a viola player, as a pianist, in different ways. When conducting, you must imagine what you are going to put next to him in the programme. From the beginning, we would include at least one wildcard, which is a piece that is new and composed today, preferably by a female, diasporic composer. I found myself writing them because it’s harder to access living composers’ work without pay, which is fair enough, but makes it difficult to include these works in the programme of a little orchestra like ours without funding.

I began to write things to fill in the gap, copying, pouring something into a different container. The first composition of that nature I did was one called *Romelle Rhapsody*, which was a Dr. Dre medley. I was leaning in and researching samples from ‘2001’ (1999), which is a significant album of my youth. I loved the samples, so the writing began by listening to these tracks, going back, finding where they came from, and then bringing out a version that we could play. People recognised it, which was followed by moments of joy, for instance, when

oboes were playing the bap bap, bap, bap, bap, bap, bap, bap.

[Dr. Dre ft. Snoop Dogg, 'Next Episode' plays]

Bach and everything that had come before and after it allowed for a crescendo of joy, because you don't normally feel that you can laugh in classical settings. I was beaming from ear to ear as I was conducting it because I was having the time of my life meshing Bach and Dr. Dre.

[Peckham Chamber Orchestra, 'Next Episode (live cover)' plays]

This understanding of sampling and etymologies is what I like to do on 'The Opera Show': Jessye Norman singing Mahler next to Erykah Badu singing *Out My Mind Just In Time*. What's the difference between a kind of vocal labour that is trained in one way, and one that's trained in another? Why do we have to differentiate between emotional intensities in terms of a class system? I'm trying to level out those playing fields and enjoy the process.

RC: Sampling was a major part of your writing process when you were composing for the Peckham Chamber Orchestra and has become a more central fixture in your practice in the last few years. I'm referring to *The Oweds*, which are works that take the form of concerts, radio programmes, and video works. These can be described as immersive compositions, where you weave together numerous narrative threads at once, speaking of themes of Black and diasporic peoples in histories, healing, queerness, colonialism, musical histories, among other subjects. *The Oweds* were a major part of your PhD research, which you recently completed and an ongoing series on your NTS broadcast, 'The Opera Show' which you referred to earlier. They suggest a musical tradition, the most famous example being Beethoven's *Ode to joy*, the final movement of his Ninth Symphony, that is O-D-E to joy. But you spelled your Oweds with a W that's O-W-E-

D-S. With this play on words the musical tradition is still there, but there's also the suggestion of an indebtedness. I want to know more about the latter and how it first arose for you.

HJ: As part of PCO's concert programmes, I'd always ask the players to give three words to have next to their names, for character. We were going to make a composition of these three words. One year, my good friend, Rose, a cellist conductor, put Ode to Joy, like in Beethoven, and I asked 'why don't you spell it O-W-E-D because it's in debt to joy, isn't it?' It made sense to me because an ode is the epic praise of something that is worthy of that praise.

[Ludwig van Beethoven, '9th Symphony - Ode to Joy' plays]

While it became a pinnacle of European monoculture, the ode is on a fundamental level the idea of singing praises to an epic thing in an epic way. As I moved through my PhD studies, which I started in 2014, I began to realise that I wasn't getting access to any diasporic histories in higher education, stories that have the same presence, reverence, or even just existence within the wider curriculum. I realized that I need to honour the diasporic histories I know are out there, and so 'Owed' became a methodology, a way of punning, which is extremely important to me. Never trust language, it can move many ways on you. For me, everything's a pun, everything has multiple viewpoints. Here decolonization is key, and *The Oweds*, ended up being, somewhat playfully, a form of cultural reparation. I also owed it to myself in my increasing position of privilege, moving through institutions and getting a PhD, to amplify underrepresented, suppressed, oppressed histories, voices, in tandem with my own journey of realising the imbalance that the education system runs on. Similarly with the orchestra, I was playing

Black composers, finding out about them...

[The Opera Show – The Oweds Special, ‘Owed to Survivance’ plays]

Ben Patterson, for instance, was a composer and artist in the Fluxus movement I’d never heard of. Or Bussa, who led a rebellion in 1816 in Barbados, on Bailey’s plantation, a significant rebellion that along with ones in Jamaica and Demerara, helped the cause of abolition. I recorded my screen when I was doing this research, so there’s screen recordings of me searching. Out of this multi-window video searches, I’d noticed resonances, like Kendrick Lamar’s 2016 Grammy performance, where he enters the stage as a prisoner with his bandmates, and they all shuffle on with shackles until they come off. The lights then change, and a neon light makes their blue jumpsuits shine out what looks like an indigenous pattern. It was an amazing performance. I used bits of that footage in and layered it.

[Kendrick Lamar, ‘We Gonna Be Alright (live)’ plays]

Layering up all these fractions of history allows to find resonances between them. It’s a way of making work whilst making work – research as practice. The soundtrack came out of improvising with the theremin and singing, ‘Bussa’, breathing life into that name, knowing how it felt in my mouth. It came out as a lament, as if I was in a ritual and that’s what it needed to be.

RC: *The Oweds* are packed with information with many narratives and sounds weaving through each other at once but as a listening or viewing experience they can be quite compelling, even meditative at times. How do you approach time as a material when you’re conceiving of and producing these works?

H CJ: Time as material makes me think about

timbre. In one *Owed* I used archival footage of the Brixton 1981 riots and from Carnival the same year, when you listen to the dub drum kit, the dub plates, the synthesiser, you realise timbres can take you to the 1980s. I use synths, keys, all different kinds of textures that add to it: slipping in Kendrick Lamar’s baseline from *Alright*, ba dum ba dum ba dum dum, and adding synthy stuff here and there. Timbre plays with time pulling it in different directions. With the theremin, I can select almost any timbre, so I intentionally use ancient modalities and scales. For example, the Phrygian mode, it’s got history of allegedly driving people mad through the writings of Pythagoras. That mode does something, especially when you put it in an extremely bassy tone and then you add a more ethereal tone over the top. When the ancient modality is combined with the futuristic theremin it pulls you, as if going to the extremes. Timbre combined with tonality does so much in terms of making you feel that you don’t really know when you are: I think there’s potential in that. With the theremin you search in space for a sound you can’t ever touch it. It’s similar to doing the research about these histories, they are always just out of touch but are a full body experience. Just like playing the theremin, their vibrations flow through me.

There’s a lot of healing that goes on while I’m making the work because it’s so much about ritual. I’ve organised as far as I can, in my head, what sounds I’d like to make; I’ve got all the instruments set up, and from that first go I record it, and that’s usually where that composition is born. That initial run through or whatever expression of it, is then the score that I will never get back to, but however I perform it, I know that there’s a template to that. Then I end up with multiple versions of the same *Owed*. This kind of chaotic, slightly disorganised way I have of creating somehow functioned into reinforcing the thing that I’m trying to say, which is there’s never really one

version of anything. Destabilising the idea of 'his-tory'. I also have multiple looping systems operating simultaneously, different devices, some are analogue, some are digital. This allows me to replicate celestial music, the rhythms of the turnings of the spheres and how they align at certain times to form eclipses or retrogrades

[Hannah Cathrine Jones, 'Owed to Humana (2.0)' plays]

The multiple loopings and layerings of sound, and the multiple loopings and layerings of image, are the only way I can try and show what is an extremely complicated multi-layered 'our-story'. Timbre and time, material, and sound, they all collapse into tonality, paradoxes, tensions, and antagonisms.

RC: Healing is an important thread in this work, both how it translates personally in your own practice, but then also, for your community, or the audience. I'm curious about the ritual aspect as being something that extends beyond you?

H CJ: Healing, etymologically comes from the word, *hal*, H-A-L, meaning wholeness. The concept of diaspora, the scattering apart, the splitting apart, I try to remediate with composition, with putting together. For instance, the *Owed to the Afro-Future* was, in my experience of putting it together for and performing with the orchestra, like constantly pressing on wounds that you're continuously healing from. Living in a white supremacist world, where proximity to whiteness is valued above anything else, there are wounds that are being pressed upon, repeatedly. In a way, wholeness is a fantasy because I don't know how any of us can fully feel whole. And to quote Gail Lewis when she's talking about Brexit as playing on a fantasy of Imperial nostalgia, there are multiple fantasies of wholeness. There are moments of togetherness, however, that we share through the absorption

of music, be that you're listening live to a radio show, and you're in the chat room, or you're with your friends, or you're at a gig, where we forget ourselves and absorb the vibrations. They change us, they change how we feel. There's a very physical nature, and whether you're performing or listening, how we absorb music, it influences us.

I realised it in full force when I got ill with depression and first discovered alternative frequencies. The world is tuned to A = 440 hertz, so every A on every piano, if the piano's been tuned, is A 440Hz. You tune your violin, A 440Hz. This international standardisation was changed several times throughout history. There are theories that Joseph Goebbels was in favour of it because it supposedly has an effect of making people anxious, as opposed to 432Hz, which is the pitch that mathematically raises from the base frequency of the earth and resonates with the human body. Essentially, composing at 432Hz means tuning everything down just a little bit. When I heard it for the first time, I felt it, and something changed then and there in terms of how I began employing these frequencies. I would play them to myself to relax my body as I was doing yoga, and then that moved into tuning things, my own tracks, and other people's tracks down, and shifting in between 440 Hz and 432 Hz on radio broadcasts in a way to kind of communicate with the body of the listener. Using frequency is a form of rhetoric, it is what I can do to communicate in the most profound way I can with my audience and heal doing so.

[Listen to Hannah Catherine Jones, '[Owed to Perpetual Healing](#)', commissioned for Nottingham Contemporary's research strand *Sonic Continuum*]

RC: I want to ask you about Sun Ra and Wagner, also prominent in your research, and both dealing with themes of world-building through sound but operating in different

paradigms. Their legacies have come to represent two very different cultures. Given the stark contrast between the two, I'm quite curious to hear what emerges for you by looking at these figures together.

HCJ: You could frame it as a paring between Afrofuturism and Gesamtkunstwerk, which was going to be at the core of my PhD, however due to the impossibility of discussing both Blackness and music through Sun Ra and Wagner within an art department, even though that was my proposal, it couldn't be internally supported. This is when I realised that I would have to shift it into survival mode within the institution. That's how I ended up getting to *The Oweds*, healing and ritualistic practice, as part of it. Returning to these two beings, Sun Ra and Wagner, they have deeply influenced me as somebody who composes, conducts or band leads. Historically, it was Wagner who turned around to face the orchestra as conductor and his back on the audience. Before Wagner, the conductor would face the audience and perform, which didn't make sense for the orchestra who would see the back. He not only flipped that but adopted the performativity behind the lights going down before a performance. Consider anytime someone walks down the aisle, Wagner's there. Every time we go to the cinema Wagner is there. His echoes and traces can be felt everywhere. Sun Ra's lectures, on the other hand, approach the total artwork without any of the bullshit and anti-semitism that Wagner was spewing.

To understand this, I listened to the *Tannhauser Overture* and realised that one of the motifs present in it is also used in *The Sound of Music*: Do Re Mi, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah. In Wagner's is De De De De De

[Richard Wagner, 'Tannhäuser' plays]

It's hectic but it's there. The 'Do Re Mi' was devised by a German Jewish woman called Trude Rittman, who fled the Nazis in the late

1930s and moved to New York. There were a couple of productions of 'Tannhauser' at the Met in 1952-53 where she was living - that's about the time she devised the 'Do Re Mi' sequence. In my mind, Trude Rittman saw 'Tannhauser', found a nice, dotted rhythm - a scale sample that would be perfect to take from Wagner - fragmented it and put it in the framework of a popular music stage show - Wagner's worst nightmare: a show that is wrapped up in Swiss nationalist, but also anti-Nazi narrative.

[Trude Rittmann, 'Do Re Mi' plays]

I perceived an intentional form of sampling from a female composer who was always going to be obfuscated by Rodgers and Hammerstein. She sampled, she fragmented, and she accomplished something quite amazing. I then took Wagner's 'Tannhauser' Overture, up until about the ninth minute, played it as is with the largest PCO has ever been, 50 people, and at the point where the second dah, dah dah, dah sounds twice, it breaks down into *The Sound of Music*. It's the hardest thing we've ever played. The shift from the highest highs and the melodrama to the de followed by a Piccolo player whistling was the jolliest. That momentary shift could be perceived as being absurd, even pleasurable, whether the audience was aware of the history. This is one way of being in sonic solidarity with a female composer of the past: to have perceived it, researched it, worked through it with the orchestra and produced this piece was very important for me.

[Peckham Chamber Orchestra medley of 'Tannhäuser' and 'Do Re Mi' (live) plays]

Not long after, I was invited to the Wagner Museum for a talk and DJ set. The research I was doing around then led me to the original myth of Parsifal. Wagner's last opera, his holy grail. In the 13th century myth, Parsifal finds out he has a mixed-race brother, a dark skinned

brother, and that they'd been separated. The whole narrative is around the reunion of these two brothers. Wagner edited out the reunion, he cleansed the myth of any otherness. For someone with that amount of influence, even though he had ups and downs of success as a composer in his lifetime, imagine, the world would be a different place if Wagner's great end opera had dwelled on the beautiful reunion of races coming together as family.

RC: Wagner's idea of utopia, the Gesamtkunstwerk, is one is at its core exclusionary and based on segregation. So where does Sun Ra enter the conversation?

H CJ: By comparing Sun Ra and Wagner I was looking to pose a fundamental question: why are these people not considered with the same reverence? Sun Ra is present throughout the dissertation, through his music and clips of his lectures where he's playing with words. He speaks about language in an overarching way, as if the sound patterns that we're exposed to repeatedly get etched onto our brainstem.

[The Opera Show, 'The Oweds Special: Owed to Humana 2.0: Part I' plays]

For him, the collectivity is inbuilt, it's a reflection of the fact that we wouldn't be able to say or do anything without dialogue, literal conversations or otherwise, with people across time and space: Bussa meets Kendrick's baseline meets improvised synths chords meets 1980s Brixton... It's listening out for it.

[The Opera Show, 'The Oweds Special: Owed to Humana 2.0: Part III' plays]

RC: You're listening to INFO Unltd where you just heard conversation and audio from Hannah Catherine Jones. This conversation is the final in a series of collaborative episodes with INFO Unltd and Nottingham Contemporary right here on Cashmere Radio. If you'd like to read a transcription of this conversation with Hannah

or any of the conversations that were a part of this series, you can find them all at thecontemporaryjournal.org. I'd like to give a big thanks to Nottingham Contemporary for inviting INFO Unltd and Cashmere Radio to participate in this collaboration. I'd also like to give special thanks to Sofia Lemos, the curator of *Sonic Continuum* for Nottingham Contemporary.

We heard a lot of material today including multiple clips from Peckham Chamber Orchestra. We heard clips from Dr. Dre's *The Next Episode*, Kendrick Lamar's 'Alright', Trude Rittman's 'Do Re Mi', Wagner's 'Tannhauser' Overture and Beethoven's 9th Symphony 'Ode to Joy'. We also heard segments of 'Owed to Survivance', 'Owed to Humana at 1.0', 'Owed to Humana 2.0' parts one and three.

I greatly enjoyed speaking to Hannah about her work and there was much to talk about that we didn't make it to. After about an hour or two of conversation, we realised that we'd just scratched the surface. I recommend anyone who's listening to head over to NTS.live and find 'The Opera Show'. There you'll find radio versions of *The Oweds*, which anyone with an internet connection can listen to freely. These pieces are about the experience of listening, and I recommend discovering that experience for yourself.

[The Opera Show, 'The Oweds Special: Owed to Humana 2.0: Part III' continues playing]

You've just heard another episode of INFO Unltd. And as always, thank you so much for listening.

This is part of a series made in collaboration with Nottingham Contemporary and INFO Unltd for

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