

Interview with Jason - Part Four Transcript

Cam:

So we come to the fourth part of my chat with Jason, where he shares his final choice of music with us. Then he goes on to talk with me about how he got into electronic music and got into the production and performance of modular music in particular, and how he found himself going down the path of making modular instruments himself.

So that leads us to the fifth selection?

Jason:

The fifth one? Yeah, so the fifth one's a short one. I discovered this through Igor. So I think this was like a previous project of the guitar player from the band. So I think it's one of his older projects. This band's called "Whourkr," I think. W-H-O-U-R-K-R. Don't know how to pronounce it. It's more aggressive than Igor. It's more like Black Metal meets Apex Twin. It's mad. So this particular album isn't on Spotify anymore. I've not found it on Bandcamp. There are a couple of uploads. I think there's upload by the producer on YouTube. So there's a cut, that's the full album, but there's a timestamp in it. So this is a 2012 album, and there's a track that is a little over, is maybe like two thirds of the way through. It's a shorter one, so it's only a couple of minutes maybe. So yeah, it's less than two minutes. It starts off with what sounds like a really cheesy nice sax line, and then just descends into absolute chaos. It's noise. It's just brutal processed glitch noise, but it's so beautifully orchestrated.

Yeah, it's a noise piece, but it's just so well crafted. It's something that I just wrote. I come back to this track from time to time, just because it's so mental. But it reminds me a lot of... There was a show that I went to in New York years ago. It was an artist called Chris Goudreau, who... New York based artist who does a lot of noise stuff, and... Lovely guy. We're still in touch today. So yeah, this track reminds me of a set that I saw Chris play. So he was playing some of it, like a reworking of some of his older stuff, which he used to go by sickness as his artist name, and it's just some of the most aggressive noise distortion, just mess, but it's so well arranged. Like there's... It's funny. It's the sort of stuff that I've let... I think I'll let Emma hear... Because I found a recording from that exact gig that I went to, so I'll let Emma hear a burst of it at one point, and she was not impressed. Because, like "it's just noise. I could do that" - I was like, "I would love to hear that". Yeah, like it, because it's... there's definitely... There's an art form to noise music. Yeah.

Cam:

That's the beauty of relationships, you appreciate different things. And that's something I've discussed in the show, is... you know, who decides what's noise and what's music, and at what stage does noise become music? ...or vice-versa?

Jason:

Exactly. I think there's such a... Because there's such a history of contemporary

music, of John Cage, of so many composers that really did things differently. And it's... It completely asks that question of like, where's the line? What is music, and what is just sound? So four minutes, 30 seconds. Like the sound is... It's rest, but the sound is the audience reaction and the ambience.

Cam:

Exactly. And the creaks of the chairs and the...

Jason:

Yeah.

Cam:

...listening to the person next to you breathing or coughing. That is the performance, it's brilliant.

Jason:

And like with modern electronics that goes into the noise genre, it's weird. Because like, you know, I've heard some noise music or noise compositions, and like it doesn't do it for me. And I don't know if it's... Some of it's a bit context, I think. I think it's like, if you're seeing it live, it's a very different experience than just putting on a record of it. The track that I've listed here, the track name is "Maximum Speed Limit Monotone Snare Audition". Yeah, I think it's the shortest track on this album, but it's just brutal. But as I say, I think it's just meticulously constructed and highly entertaining.

Cam:

Well, with that introduction, I think we should listen to Jason's fifth choice of music to share with us today. And it's "Maximum Speed Limit Monotone Snare Audition" by Whourkr from "4247 Snare Drums" released in 2012.

[**Music:** "Maximum Speed Limit Monotone Snare Audition" by Whourkr from "4247 Snare Drums" (2012)]

Jason:

So much like noise pieces, like it's that, it's playing with just volume, sounds, texture, timbre, and silence. I think seeing Sickness play live, seeing Chris play live, like there's a narrative, there's an arc, like he's playing with silence in amongst the carnage. I mean, it's so intense, like seeing it performed as well, because it was a Eurorack System he was playing on, but it was a combination of that and playback. And I think he had like a, he was holding a box that had some sort of like contact mic in it, but it was just like, it was like really dynamic controllable feedback and just distortion. And it was brilliant. But sonically, this track kind of, it scratches that same itch for me, is that level of intensity of performance.

Cam:

You are tuned in to the big note on 97.1 FM3MDR, and I've been talking with

Jason Lim from Scotland. He's a multi-instrumentalist. He's a dog lover. He's a composer. He's an educator. And he is a musical instrument maker and much more. He's been kindly sharing some music and stories with us.

You talking about these tracks has given me a little bit of an insight into some of your live performances that I've seen. You've got a few YouTube videos and I encourage anyone who wants to see some really great stuff to look at Jason Lim from Instruō's live performances. There's some up there and I'll put a link on the socials when I put the song list up for the show. Yeah, you get...You can get pretty noisy. (Laughs)

Jason:

Yeah, I like to play with dynamics. I think that's Signal Sounds one, that was a piece that I had the idea for. I knew I wanted to have this arc of start really tonal, get into more dissonance and then just completely let it keep going and not stop this ramp up.

Cam:

It was a great arc. Because it took you on a journey.

Jason:

That was a particularly fun one to work on and write. But I had the idea for just the general arc of knowing where I want to start, not in terms of notes until I started improvising and recording stuff down and just seeing where things settled. I recorded some stuff, played it in and then realised that I created a foundation to start improvising and trying to come up with harmonic progression stuff from it. But I nudged the playback speed of the looper so it pitched it down a bit. For the actual thing, I'd written this thing out in terms of getting the... So I started from this recording and then I built up the synth voice around it. So I built up the actual chords through the harmonaig, through Saich with other oscillators in the bass register and realised that I'd tuned it all to this detuned looper. So everything was flat by almost a full tone. So I ended up having to detune my violin so my violin was down there. So I wasn't having to essentially play in a...

Cam:

Transpose?

Jason:

Yeah. So first time detuning a violin specifically for a piece which is, quite interesting. I played that set twice actually. The Signal Sounds one, I think that's the better performance of it. But I did the same set previously in Glasgow, as well at Noisebox at one of the... I think it was the Attack Release night. So there are two versions of that piece. And I think that being able to do that is... That become one of my goals of when I'm working with Modular and doing a... writing a set is I'll write an actual transcription, I'll write a score. That is what I follow in terms of arrangement and...

Cam:

I've got a couple of your scores printed up actually, some of the transcripts that you've shared. They're quite artistic. I haven't even started talking to you about your journey into Modular and making Modular yet. Are you okay to talk for another 10 minutes?

Jason:

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

Cam:

Oh, fantastic. Thank you. So you went from learning and becoming quite an accomplished musician that you are, to manufacturing musical instruments. How did you go from playing physical instruments to thinking about electronic music making devices?

Jason:

I discovered the Music Production and Engineering department at Berkeley. So that was... I think that was the first semester was rebranded from Music Synthesis. But that's kind of been the... I think at the time... I can't remember how many majors there were. Maybe eight majors. So you could do songwriting or music education or performance, music production and engineering. So MP&E, that's like the main studio work focus thing. But then Music Production and Engineering was the department I ended up in, which kind of covers everything it describes. So it was... You go through electronic music production techniques, but then the faculty that was in that department was incredible. They were pioneers of music technology and sound design synthesis. I learned synthesis on a couple of vintage ARP 2600s, taught by Michael Brigida, who is retired now. He taught all the foundation modular functions and signal flow and then advanced sound design classes. He worked for ARP in the 70s. So he was working with Alan Pearlman and actually part of the team to design. He was actually a Juilliard trained classical piano player turned sound designer, synthesist. So the way that he taught is very much the way that I now teach synthesis when I'm teaching the sound design course periodically here. And it was a combination of... I mean, I kind of think of it as I think that opportunity to learn in that way from these figures. It's as close as it comes to being a classical training in synthesis because it's such a modern instrument compared to orchestral instruments.

Yeah, that there's not a proper way. There's not a legacy method of how you teach.

Cam:

There's not an established pedagogy of um...

Jason:

Subtractive synthesis or signal flow. Yeah, exactly. But I think Mike created one. The way that he taught, it just clicked. It made sense. So it was taught partly

through ear training and part through transcription signal flow patching. So every patch would be notatable. So the way that I transcribe or like take patch notes in conjunction with my scores for like the actual musical composition, but I need to transcribe the patch so that I know where things are. That way of doing patch notation is a further development of how Mike taught to conceptualise synthesis. So if you're starting with a subtractive patch of oscillators and filter into VCA with envelopes controlling it, there was a signal flow. You're drawing out your audio signal path. You're annotating with oscillators being, okay, I've got two oscillators, both sawtooth waves, detuned by two to three cents. And then that's going into low pass filter, so you've got your audio signal path to the filter, then from the filter to the VCA. And just little notes of it's a 12dB per octave low pass filter with resonance up, you know, maybe 12% or something like that. And then, and then you're drawing your envelope shapes. And it was a way of coming up with a patch, notating it so that you could then apply that to any synthesiser, doesn't matter if it's an SH-101 or a 2600 or a Eurorack system. So long as you've got the right number of oscillators and filters and VCA's, then you can, the patch is transferable. And the way that he would like do midterm exams, stuff like, I was, I would say to a case of, "Okay, I'm going to play these, I'm going to play some sounds. You need to describe what the waveform is, what sort of modulation there is, what sort of like timbral things, it was ear training. It was recognition of the different sounds and stuff. And that was, it was just, it was incredible. Like that level of detail, and it stuck with me. Like I think like that his style of teaching just resonated with how I like to learn. So that was me like thrown into the deep end. So, OK you're learning synthesis and it just, it just made sense and I was like, "This is, this is great."

And it kind of just, you know, when I learned of Eurorack, it was like, "Okay, I want to start building a system... Fuck, this is expensive." So it just, you know, it like, it got to a point is, "Okay, I can, I can stretch to buying a case." So I've got a Doepfer A100. I've sort of got the case somewhere, so it's actually filled with Doepfer modules, built the Doepfer system of it eventually. But for the longest time I had that case, I had the first module I was prototyping. I had a Pittsburgh LFO and a Doepfer ADSR, which I think was broken. I ended up not using it. I just had the LFO, so I was like, "Okay, well, I've got a modulation source. I can patch that in and make sure, you know, I've got the prototype working so it can receive CV and map that to parameters and stuff." So the longest time I just, I had like those three modules in my rack. And that was, that was it for a long time until just designing more modules. So it kind of just snowballed from there.

Cam:

So you started making modules for a need for you, for yourself, to make more music and hence the, "I make sounds with the things that I make to make sounds with."

Jason:

That's it. Yeah. So I came up with that when I first presented at Super Booth in Berlin. So that will have been 2016, I think it must have been. I was a late, late

applicant because, like, I didn't have a brand. I think that was the year that I launched the Harmonaig.

So I emailed them short notice. I managed to get, like, a late-booked spot. So I went along, and they were like, "Okay, we need your brand, we need your logo, we need, like, a description of your company." So, ahhh... "I make sounds with the things that I make to make sounds with."

So that was there, and that ended up just being, like, stuck in my account for that. So subsequent years, I was like, "Oh, that's still there." So I changed it to "We make sounds with the things that we make to make sounds with." So that's the company motto, yeah.

Cam: What a journey. And you do make wonderful modules that make sounds.