

As told to
C. Spencer
Yeh



Moving around while performing is still kind of new to me—I started exploring this approach over the last four or five years. I'm sick of sitting in front while everyone is looking at me. There's always that wall or barrier, and you just assume that it's there, which is fine, but sometimes I get bored with it. Then when the sound source becomes really spatial, you don't only see where the instrument is, but you also hear where it is. So I want to play with that idea more. I don't have any of these scientific ideas though, like some people who go and measure the room and calculate—I don't know how to do that. But for me, a musical instrument is something physical, you have to be physical with it. It's a physical object in a physical space and that's all I can work with at the moment.

Lots of times people are scared or react too carefully to my movement, to be honest. If I'm walking around playing and I get closer, most people step back because they're respectful and they

want to give me space so I can play. But sometimes I'm trying to get closer to them as if to say, "Hey, this is how it actually feels to me when I play." When I'm sitting right behind the instrument, I hear it a different way because the cello is against my body. I feel the resonance through my body. So maybe you can feel it too, when I get really close, to the point that the cello actually touches your body? Then maybe you can experience the music in a different way?

I think the problem with this is that it can be gimmicky and get old fast, so I have to be clear—that that's not why I'm doing it, just to show off. It's just that I got bored that I'm in the fucking chair with everyone looking, you know? I don't mean to denounce that situation. But I think the original question was, "Why is everybody looking rather than listening?"

I think most people, including me, are more responsive to the visual than the aural element to begin with. Most of the time in

a concert I have my eyes closed, otherwise I can't concentrate on listening or playing. There was a time I tried to eliminate the possibility of people looking by playing in a really dark place or having my back to the audience. But that just became another visual element, so I was like, OK, if I cannot really escape from this, why not emphasize it? How do I use these ideas and make them a part of the performance and not simply the by-product of the performance?

I wanted to find a way to connect with the audience and my collaborators, while exploring that idea. So when I started performing with choreographer and dancer Michelle Boulé, it came to me naturally that I also should move and develop a piece that was really integrated while playing the space. ISSUE Project Room was the first place we performed together when I was an Artist in Residence about 5 years ago. That's when they moved to their downtown Brooklyn location; they hadn't done any soundproofing and it was a really resonant place, like playing in a cave. I wanted to take advantage of this. I mean, not just the amazing reverb—I wanted to play with distances. If I'm playing far away from you, you can hear it differently than if you move really close. Those things all just came together, and I was like, OK that's kind of fun: Let's keep doing it! So far we've done 5 pieces together that were site specific and it's been hugely rewarding.

My friend Christian Marclay invited me to write music that's incorporated into his show at White Cube in London later this month. It's written for members of London Sinfonietta, for violin, cello, clarinet, and percussion players, and I'm planning on writing two different pieces for the last two weekends of March. Christian is recording the music right there, and will cut and press the vinyl in the gallery. Thurston Moore performed, and Mica Levi, who did the music for *Under the Skin*, was also invited.

Christian's project, *Pub Crawl*, is based on these empty glasses and beer bottles he found in the street early in the morning hours. Along with other works, he has a bare room surrounded by these beer and wine glasses along the walls and that's where the pieces will be performed. I want to do something that's more performance-oriented than just music. When I saw other people perform in that room in January, the stage was set in the middle or off to the side, but I want to find a way to open it up. We'll see. Some people might find it interesting. Or maybe it's something they've seen so many times that they think it's bullshit. But it will be interesting because it's the first time I'm asking other people to move, not just me. I wonder if it's going to work? I heard the people from London Sinfonietta are actually quite comfortable with extended techniques and quite keen on bringing in these elements. I want to make it into a bit more of collaboration so that they can bring in some of their personal ideas. It's tricky to ask other cello players to move and play at the same time, because it's not really comfortable.

I like to keep things simple mainly because I'm lazy and ignorant. One thing I know for sure is that I don't want to make the cello sound like anything else. I like the sound I make because it doesn't sound like the cello, but it's clearly produced by the cello. So if you put it through effects, right away it could sound like a guitar, which can be fun and maybe that's something I can explore further, but so far that doesn't interest me too much. But who knows? Maybe one day I'll wake up and say, I want to be this loop cello player, with six different loops at the same time hooking up million pedals. But then it'll take some time, because I don't want to be like, hey, look how many pedals I got. That's when it gets gimmicky, and it wouldn't push me as much. If I start using all that stuff, I'd like to learn how to use it really well before playing out. But I hardly doubt it knowing how lazy I am. Meanwhile I have to compensate with my body—I'm very abusive to my arms. Sometimes I feel like my arms are falling off.

I feel like there's still so much about working with sound that I just don't know about. I wanted to try these ideas, but I just didn't know how. For example, the question is how to be here, but have sound come from that window there, across the street. How can I make it happen? Often I just don't know how so I'd find a very primitive way that works for me, like just run across the street and then come right back—a lo-fi way of doing things. Then later

someone will be like: Well, actually, you could have done this really easily...

Lots of times you stumble on something by accident and then you think, wait, what did I do just now? And it's cool. It's the same with my own so-called extended techniques. You start from something you know and just push it a bit further each time. There's a lot going on while you play, but when a particular sound jumps out that you like, then you have to understand what's creating it, where it's coming from. You have to figure it out in the moment. It's physically and mentally demanding, to keep that sound going at the same volume and energy. Then I think: If I have to change things, how do I move into this other thing from what I'm doing without dropping all the balls? That kind of process—that's how I come up with all these different ways of playing with the left and right hand. I probably use the same approach to figure out how to make the sound come from across the street, not by studying and planning it or by asking people but by doing it. Sometimes it's taking the long way around to get to a place. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.

At Berklee [College of Music], eighteen or nineteen years ago, I was mainly practicing by myself and I would just wander. I would be practicing something and I would go off into something for ten minutes and then I would think: Uhhh, I don't know what that was. That's where my improvisation began. My first so-called extended technique, I'm assuming that was the extreme harsh sound of bowing close to the bridge.

The only improvisation taught at Berklee was jazz. You were supposed to play over the changes. I tried and I didn't like it, but not because I sucked. And I did suck. But not only that—I never really liked most strings in jazz. I was never really into it. Stéphane Grappelli, Oscar Pettiford, and some of that. Pettiford was a jazz bassist, and he started to play cello because he broke his arm or something and couldn't play the bass. He took the cello and tuned it the same way as bass, in fourths, not in fifth like cello. I transcribed and learned a Pettiford solo, but I thought it sounded kind of cheesy.

I didn't get into extended techniques until I went to NEC [New England Conservatory of Music]. Until then I was just melodically improvising. At NEC I learned that there was another world of improv and extended technique and noise. It all changed even more drastically after I moved to New York City, because all of a sudden I was thrown into this circle of musicians who were feeding me all sorts of ideas.

It was more of an intuitive than systematic way of playing and I felt freer playing the cello in that way because was not restricted by this classical thing. My cello teacher back in Korea used to tell me: Not good. Do it again. Wrong. Oh my god, I cannot believe it. Do it again. Oh my god. Go home and practice. It was OK if I held the bow in a totally unorthodox way. I could just grab the bow into my fist. Those unorthodox ways of playing came out of feeling desperate that I had to do something without knowing actually how to do it but I really wanted to make it happen, dammit.

So it was nice when no one was telling me what to do. How many guitar players get into playing the guitar after they pick it up and start to play and just think it's fun. I never had that when I was learning how to play cello in Korea.

First of all, I didn't choose to play cello. I don't even remember how I learned. I started with the piano when I was three, and then switched to cello at six. I went to Catholic elementary school where everyone had to play an instrument and for some reason my mom chose the cello, which was a great thing now looking back. I guess I didn't suck at it; if I sucked my mom would have made me stop. I was always good enough to get by and I think that's why I kept going. Then, it was never about having fun; it was something I was supposed to do. But then I started to have all the fun in the world playing exactly the same instrument as I was in Korea.

It's really a luxury to be able to not only make music but to live your life doing only this. Lots of people in the world don't get that chance. How many people do you know who go to music school and then become a full time musician? Not that many, even though they started because they loved it and were really good at it. I feel extremely lucky.