

PROFILE — JESSIE MARINO



Thomas R. Moore

Jessie Marino is a composer, performer and media artist from Long Island, New York, where she was born in 1984. She studied experimental music and composition at Wesleyan University with Alvin Lucier and Ronald Kuivila and earned a DMA in musical composition from Stanford University, working with sound artist Paul DeMarinis.

In Marino's work sound, video, physical movements, lighting and staging are placed within organised temporal structures, fractured narratives and musical frameworks. Much of Marino's interdisciplinary compositional work eschews conventional instrumentation, with scores that ask performers to use their bodies – using precisely articulated gestures, facial expressions and quotidian physical movements – both as an alternative and a complement to musical sounds. Her work maps out the way humans communicate with their bodies on a performative timeframe, revealing the musicality hidden within everyday gesticulations, signs and demonstrations, transmitted both consciously and unconsciously. Marino finds humour and profundity in personal interactions and the way humans navigate physical space – an improvisational act that can invoke a ballet, a dinner party or a demolition derby. She transcends the conventional materials of composition to help audiences locate music in the most commonplace activities and relations.

Marino's work has been commissioned by many of the major European and American festivals, including Borealis, the Darmstädter Ferienkurse für neue Musik, the Donaueschingen Musik Tage, Look/Listen (New York), Transit (Leuven) and Ultima (Oslo). Her interest in expanding compositional practice beyond sound now extends into educational activity. In 2021–22 she taught Experimental Performance Practice at the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst in Stuttgart. She has also taught and

given guest lectures at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, University of Chicago and the Hochschule für Musik und Tanz in Köln, as well as co-teaching for the Chicago chapter of TECHNE, a non-profit organisation devoted to introducing female-identified youth to the rudiments of technology-focused art-making, musical improvisation and community collaboration. In 2020 Marino received the Fromm Composition Prize from Harvard University, and in 2018 she received the Rome Prize for musical composition at the American Academy in Rome. She has been an artist in residence at the Villa Sträuli, Headlands Center for the Arts (CA), Avaloch Farm Music Institute (NH) and the Albatross Artists Residency Program. She has performed internationally as a solo artist and was co-artistic director and a member of Ensemble Pamplemousse from 2006 to 2019.

Jessie Marino and I had met several times via video calls and traded many emails discussing future projects together, but this was our first meeting face to face. On 19 November 2019, a cold evening in Berlin, Jessie welcomed me into her apartment, where we sat down at her kitchen table for a pre-dinner chat. She was bursting with cool, extravagant stories and ideas; before I had even begun to ask her my prepared questions we had disappeared down a rabbit hole to talk about hypermodern earbuds and what may be considered anti-social behaviour in clubs.¹

Jessie Marino: I worked for a tech company when I lived in San Francisco. They were making earbuds that were supposed to be filters, allowing you to choose the sounds in your environment that you wanted to listen to. They had presets where you could tune out a baby crying, train noise and men's voices, for example. But it also would always allow notifications from the transport system, like 'this is the next stop'. My job was to go out and basically do very long field recordings by just simply riding the metro or being at a cafe. That way they had lots of examples to teach the machine what to listen to and what to filter out. I got the job not because I was qualified at all – I was not – but because I was going to be taking a lot of flights. They needed people who were going to be on flights and able to make recordings. A touring musician was the perfect person.

Thomas R. Moore: Did it work? Were they able to make the earbuds?

JM: They made the whole system and it turned out no one wanted to pay the amount of money they were asking. They were really expensive: something like two or three thousand dollars for these earbuds. The app itself was also expensive. They also had a function that was for dance clubs. So you could go to a club and basically remix the DJ's mix by EQing things differently. I actually have kind of a problem with that.

TRM: Really? From an artistic standpoint, I think that's kind of fantastic.

JM: For you – the audience as an artist – it's a great possibility. But, of course, the DJ has no idea that people are going to be able to do that. On the other hand, I do think it's a really cool idea to just be constantly

¹ This is an edited version of the interview, correcting minor grammar errors and irrelevant material. I am grateful to Jessie Marino for her approval of the text as it is published here.

messing with those sorts of balances, knowing that people on the other end are going to be adjusting as well. That's an interesting thought.

TRM: Everybody is creating his or her own acoustic space anyway. I did it on the way here by wearing headphones. So why not do that actively in a club where someone else is trying to create a community acoustic space? That seems like an interesting balance.

JM: But that's where I leave the station because it actually goes somewhat against the idea of the club, that we are all in this community space. Of course, you could get really into the nitty-gritty and say that everyone's ears are different, so we all respond to sound differently. However, there are certain characteristics that allow us, from a physiological standpoint, to have an understanding about the way that people are able to process sound. A DJ's job is to ramp things up and colour things in such a way that the entire community feels the energy in a very similar way so that things can get pushed to exciting climaxes and then brought back down, ad infinitum. So when someone goes there and says, 'I'll just take out the bass because it's too much for me to handle, etc.', then you miss that moment where the DJ has purposely brought it up to drop the bass. That counteracts the community. It feels very anti-social.

TRM: Let's rewind this a little bit. How did you end up in San Francisco?

JM: I was at Stanford University doing my DMA [Doctor of Musical Arts]. My supervisor, Paul DeMarinis, was actually in the art department [and not the music department]. He's a really amazing sound artist who has been doing a lot of sculptural work throughout his whole career. His art deals with acoustic phenomena and media archaeology. For example, he has a piece called *Firebirds* (2004),² which uses Bunsen burners as speakers. It's like magic, actually.

The cool thing about being out there at Stanford was the people, the other students who were there. There were lots of really interesting people who worked in very different ways but were always willing and able to show up to the table to talk about it. I don't know too many other places that are like that. The programme had had a reputation of having a lot of Brian Ferneyhough students come through who would go there to only study with Ferneyhough and learn his aesthetics. But when I got there, that had been changing for maybe one or two years. It was all over the boards. Laura Steenberge³ was there. She writes in a highly researched medieval style and then combines it with a weird experimental American twist. There were guys who wrote new complexity. There was me. There was Alexandra Hay, who was finding her way into these weird video spaces. My collaborator Constantin Basica was also there. He's always done hyper-staged, hyper-complicated new music. His scores have video elements that have so much involved in them that they're not just a backdrop anymore. It was a very interesting cast of people who were all there at the same time.

² Paul DeMarinis, *Firebirds*, sound art installation, 2004, <http://pauldemarinis.org/Firebirds.html>.

³ <https://laurasteenberge.com>.

TRM: Did you do any teaching there?

JM: I did, but not very much. During the third year of my DMA and after the entire course work was done, I moved to Chicago. A very good friend of mine was living in Chicago at the time, so I moved to her neighbourhood. However, I didn't really do a lot in Chicago, either, except for a part-time teaching gig for half of a year. I taught a class called the Fluidity of Musical Materials. We looked at lots of different versions of how we can populate a piece of music with things that are not inherently musical, or instrument-based, or rhythm-based. We started by looking at Fluxus and at the combinations of how an evening could progress. If there's music, but there's also dance, sculpture and painting happening all in the same space, how do those things interact? The course was separated into topics of musicians who don't do music and dancers who don't do dance – looking at people who occupy these funny in-between spaces. We looked at Carolyn Chen's music, the music of Jeppe Ernst and Thierry De Mey, etc., but then also at the work of choreographers like Jérôme Bel, Jonathan Burrows and Matteo Fargion. Everyone we looked at was trained in a specific field, but the thing that they wound up making didn't have a lot of the typical notions of that field.

TRM: Did you incorporate any electronics into that or as part of your research?

JM: No, not particularly. They happen when they need to be there, but they're just tools that I've learned for specific occasions. It's not a thing that I have a big, large body of knowledge of. I have very specific weird globules that don't necessarily interrelate.

TRM: Then how did you end up with Paul DeMarinis?

JM: He was by far the most interesting thinker at Stanford, and he had a cross-appointment in the music department because he's a well-known sound artist. But for the most part, I haven't had a lot of things other than playback issues that have required electronics. My sound-world has never been in that space, but that's changing now and I'm really excited about that.

I spent so much time thinking about what we can actually put into a musical form and have it still read as music. That was the whole basis of my DMA. I made a big piece for Darmstadt⁴ a few years ago, which was a culmination of all of my favourite pieces that I had made over the previous ten years. It's called *Nice Guys Win Twice* (2018) and was in collaboration with my friend Constantin Basica.⁵ (I could not have done any of that without him.) A lot of material was in that piece as second iterations of pieces that I tried earlier, so there was a kind of 'best hits' feeling for me. And then afterwards I thought, 'I said all of the things I want to say in that particular department.'

Now what I've been really listening to or experiencing as a pleasure point is a lot of improvised and electronic music. I've now also started to develop my own kind of instruments. They're basically samplers, but I want to start taking the body out of it and get back to just

⁴ *Nice Guys Win Twice* was premiered at Central Station, Darmstadt on 17 July 2018 as part of the Darmstädter Ferienkurse für neue Musik, www.centralstation-darmstadt.de/event/359233/darmstaedter-ferienkurse-nice-guys-win-twice/ (accessed 8 August 2022).

⁵ www.constantinbasica.com/.

listening again. It's not that big of a deal, but for me it feels like a big deal because I've always really relied on the visual. I made music out of visual things. So I am relearning how to think about time, think about when things need to change, and the rate at which things can change. This is all really different when you can only use your ears and not also have your eyes.

TRM: Is this is the direction you want to go in now?

JM: It's one of the directions. I think I'm kind of taking a large 'Y'. On the one hand, I just want to work by myself in the studio and tune my ears again. I feel like I've been ignoring my ears. I want to learn some tricks and get better at some software.

And, on the other hand, I really like working in the theatre and working with all of the things that the theatre has to offer, like space, time and proper lighting – just being able to set things up and making pieces that really take into consideration staging as a dominant feature that cannot be ignored. For example, the works that I've made on tables⁶ are sufficiently staged to separate them from normal music, but they're not theatrical enough to need to be taken care of in a very particular way in the course of a concert. I want to get out of that scene and work on a larger scale where I can flesh out the bigger picture, have longer narratives, detailed scenography and memorised musical and theatrical material. It's about being able to create a world that an audience can step into and be totally immersed. I really don't want to get stuck making table pieces for the rest of my life! I appreciate and needed the practicality of those pieces at that time, but don't feel like I have many different ideas to contribute to that medium or genre right now.

TRM: I really like the work you've done with gestures and focusing the audience's attention not just on the sound but on the person performing that sound. That said, you don't have any conducted pieces. Why is that?

JM: I've never had enough people: most of my pieces are for two people. It would be ridiculous if there were somebody conducting them. They are for people who are seated behind a table. Again, the dramaturgy actually doesn't make sense for somebody to be conducting. The pieces that are bigger are 'chamber music-y' enough that they don't need a conductor. Also, I've never had a lot of complexity in the rhythmic structure, so for performers it was also always fine without a conductor. They didn't really even want a conductor because they wanted to just rely on listening to one another, and with the kind of timbral-complexities, they didn't feel like they needed one.

TRM: How do you rehearse those pieces? Do you designate a rehearsalist or is it more democratic?

JM: I haven't been to rehearsals of my pieces in a while and if I am there, I will lead the rehearsals. But that's also because I'm performing in it. If I'm not there, I don't really know how it goes.

⁶ Marino has made several pieces for one or more musicians performing while sitting a table. These works are easily transferable from location to location. Examples include *Rot Blau* (2009), *Endless Shrimp* (2015) and *throw me to you and back again* (2018), www.jessiemarino.com/pieces.

I think when people have to memorise something, then that's quite a different process. Or, if they have to speak in a language that's not their native tongue or move in an unfamiliar fashion, each will get different kinds of particular attention. Some people can look at a score with gestural information and digest it immediately, whereas others cannot. Also, some performers are not so familiar with using their bodies very explicitly, like on the borderline of dance. So, I always encourage players to videotape themselves, because when you're working with different bodies, lots of little things can add up to it looking very sloppy or untogether. When people watch the videotapes, they can identify those things pretty quickly. Also, there's a lot to feel when you're rehearsing my pieces. You're doing something new with your body, so you may not really actually be listening or looking at the grand scheme of things. The videotape ends up becoming a kind of conductor or a director.

TRM: How else do you see the role of the conductor?

JM: I have to say that my understanding of what a conductor does is definitely tied into the old Western classical-music roles because I haven't seen a lot of conducting in contemporary music. Literally, the only people I've seen conduct contemporary-music ensembles are Boulez, Enno Poppe and Beat Furrer. My general thought is that when there's a lot of rhythmic information, there's more than four people on the stage, in order for rehearsals to be run efficiently, and for people to feel like there's a sense of communally felt time, we will have this person stand here to help run rehearsals, listen from an outsider's standpoint and give guidance.

I come from an orchestra tradition. I played the cello and so all of my very first musical experiences were in an orchestra. It never made sense to me why they [the conductors] were there. The orchestra knows these songs, we know these tunes – we've played this passage of Mahler's Fifth Symphony so many times – or we know how it's been done because we can listen to lots of different recordings – so why wouldn't we just watch the first violinist for cues and when to start? To me, [having a conductor] makes a lot of sense in regard to organisation, but I haven't seen so many pieces in which the conductor is more than that, to be honest. I think a lot more of conducting is about politics than it is about gestures. It is an organisation of community.

TRM: Within the context of Western art music, a group of musicians would all have the same understanding of, for example, the term 'agitato', and they would also know what a downbeat looks like and how to interpret it. These are what Paul Verhaege calls 'key-words' and gestures.⁷ I am curious if we can stretch this wider and argue that, within the same context of Western art music, there is a recognisable conductor's movement repertoire. Would a larger group of people, non-musicians, understand certain conductors' gestures?

JM: I think it's pretty fair to assume that there are certain gestures that indicate tempo that could be pretty well interpreted by a lot of people in the Western art-music tradition. Gestures of urgency, I think, can also be read and communicated in lots of different ways. I would

⁷ Paul Verhaege, *Identiteit* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2012).

also say the gestures of loudness are also pretty easy to understand. A lot of it actually has to do with a kind of one-to-one ratio of how big or fast the gesture is versus the consequent sound. Even if you take away the consequent sound, I think you still would hear the intention. You would see the tension, the difference between something that's really fast and loud versus something that's calm or somewhat soft.

TRM: Even for the layperson?

JM: I think so. I think a person who is used to and conditioned in going to Western classical-music concerts would definitely get those kinds of things. Even for people who've never been to a classical concert before, I also think there are certain translations that are easy to make, too. The same gesture for soft, curved or fluid is also the way that you would pet the back of someone's head or give a little warm rub on the shoulder. The gestures are associated with ways of interacting physically that indicate softness, whereas a punch has a beginning, middle and an end. And that end is your fist in someone's body, right? So for a person who's never gone to see a classical-music concert, if they would just see a conductor up there without an orchestra doing those kinds of softness, fastness, loudness or activity gestures – let's just say that it doesn't even have to translate to sound. Just simply: this is a gesture of more activity, and this is the gesture of much less activity [demonstrates both] – I think those things actually could be quite universal in the Western context.

TRM: Given all that, can they also be used for artistic stimuli?

JM: I went to see Gustavo Dudamel conduct in Rome. That's not a thing I would go to do, ever. But I went and for the first part of the concert, I was seated in my assigned seat. I thought, 'this is terrible'. I can only see the back of him. It sounds great in this hall, but I can't see him. So I changed my seat in the break and sat behind the orchestra in one of the first rows where I could actually see his face. I could see his shoulders, the whole thing. My listening experience was completely different. It was so much more informed. Of course, I went there looking for those things and am particularly sensitive to gestural information. However, I had a chat with the people sitting next to me and asked them, 'Don't you think it's better to sit back here?' They replied, 'Yes, it doesn't sound as good, but I like watching the conductor.' 'Why?' 'You just get the story better here.'

TRM: Do you think composers today are thinking about those gestures while they're composing?

JM: Well, Beethoven understood what a dude looked like standing on a box in front of people. He'd been to a concert once or twice before. Let's think about that. . . Take, for example, Fernyhough. I think that those gestures in his pieces wind up getting built in from the beginning. So from a performative standpoint – for example, the flute solos – that's choreography. In order to be able to perform that piece well, you have to memorise the choreography of your lips, tongue, teeth and whatever else is going on. While that is not an outward gesture that the layperson could understand as a gesture, I do think that those are ways in which gesture gets pre-composed, or composed simultaneously as the pitch, because obviously [composers] know that you can't form that kind of a whistle-tone without your mouth being

in a very particular position against the embouchure and with its own cavity. You have to do something to get the whistle-tone. So those things actually do wind up getting put together in these little bundles.

TRM: How do you do that? Where do you get the gestures?

JM: I sit in front of a mirror.

TRM: Are you taking the gesture of, for example, putting your hand on the table, a normal gesture, and then doing something abstract with it? Or are they all abstract gestures from the start?

JM: There are moments where both things happen, such as normal things like flipping your hair back, crossing your legs or scratching your neck. Those things then get put into musical time so that they start to abstract the very everyday gesture-ness out of it. But then there are also things such as: 'OK. Now slam your hand down on to the table.' So instead of nicely placing the cup, we do something extra. We've made it fortissimo. It's about extensions of different parameters of that very normal gesture. I could also put the cup down extremely slowly. I can put the cup down and smash it. There's lots of ways of extending different points – that's how I work, by playing with all the scales of things.

TRM: Do you scale the role of the musician, too?

JM: Yeah. I think so. I use a few techniques. One technique is making the performers as physically similar to one another as possible, which erases certain kinds of visual information from an audience's standpoint. It also has the performers at least starting visually from a similar kind of ground. That's the neutral scale and then from there I ask them to perform things in exact unison, which is yet another level. So now the audience sees, OK, they look the same and they're doing the same. After that, you start to see the little things that are not erasable in a human. Maybe someone's hand, for example, doesn't bend back quite as far because they don't have as much flexibility. You can actually start to see, as if under a microscope, the tiny little differences, despite the fact that they are working very hard to erase dissimilar characteristics. That's a way of scaling that makes very small things much bigger than they normally would be.