

### **The Music Folder #3 Sarah Davachi**

Interview by Michele Palozzo, Milan 11 October 2021

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**MICHELE PALOZZO: I'd like to start from an anecdote that I read in Harry Sword's recent book, *Monolithic Undertow* – basically a history of drone music – where you're one of the few voices from a younger generation to have been included. You told him about a sort of epiphany you had when you were studying music as a young girl, and which would eventually inform your approach to composition.**

SARAH DAVACHI: I was classically trained in piano and, when I would play, I just liked Chopin's music a lot. It wasn't specifically Chopin as opposed to other composers, but in a lot of that music I would notice that there were these harmonic moments that just sounded so nice. I think everybody experiences it. Like when you listen to a song, there's just a moment where you're like, "Oh, that's a really nice chord". Or, "That resolution is really nice". And my feeling when I was playing that music and listening to it was that I just wanted to hear that on a much longer scale. And like most of the time, in music, you're hearing those things and it's just passing, it comes and it goes, so my feeling was that I wanted to just have it extend, and just really listen to that for a long time.

**MP: In a way, drone music is precisely that, as if taking a moment in musical time and stretching it to enjoy it and find all the nuances within the sound.**

SD: Yeah. And I think also appreciating those things. In classical music, those moments always tend to be kind of subservient to the larger melody or the harmonic progression. And it's not really a concept that seems to be accepted, that it's okay to just listen to one chord, that it's more than just notes on the page. It's not just about the chord, or the interval. It's the actual textural aspect that can't really be transcribed.

**MP: Yeah. I feel it's like much like in cinema, where people feel that they need a plot to follow in order to stay concentrated, while in fact should just look and try to bask in the feelings of the atmosphere.**

SD: When I was a teenager and was thinking about what I wanted to do with myself, I really wanted to be either a production designer, like a set designer, or a cinematographer. So it's the same concept: it's the atmosphere, it's the textures, the feeling that the details populate, like the characters and the plot and all that populates this space. But it's the actual space that I was interested in creating, which I think is the same in the music that I do and I'm interested in.

**MP: On that note: judging from the album covers and your social media profiles, you seem to also have a keen interest in visual arts. From a compositional point of view, I think of photographs such as the one on your earlier records *Let Night Come On Bells End the Day* or *Gave in Rest*. What are your inspirations in this sphere, and how do pictures relate to your music?**

SD: I don't think there's anything in particular, like an aesthetic that I gravitate towards, although, in general, it's kind of a similar thing. Anything that tends to be more about the environment that is created, I'm attracted to that. But even when I was younger – before I really understood minimalist music, before I was even listening to any of it – I was quite interested in most visual art, people like Ad Reinhardt and that kind of very monolithic artwork where it's all about the details and the texture.

**MP: Or the absence of them.**

SD: I think, I've just always been interested in the layer below what you see when you look at things immediately, when you see the objects and the story that's there, that's fine, but there's something behind it that has always been interesting. So, I think, any sort of visual presentation that seems to pay attention to that, those kinds of things are interesting to me.

**MP: In the case of drone music and minimalism, as you mentioned, I think it also has something to do with the physicality of it, the bodily experience: because sometimes drone music seems to address just a continuous tone with no variations, but it's the raw physicality of it that makes it an experience.**

SD: I think that's true. I feel that, as a musician and as a listener, but in a more general way I'm also interested in the physicality of the sound itself: my doctoral research is kind of expanding this idea of timbre and how we think of, of timbre, texture, and how it's not just the acoustic aspects of things that you can measure about a sound, but also those intricacies that make sounds like individuals, in a sense, or instruments like individuals, with specific things that are sort of idiosyncratic to those instruments in the sounds that they produce. So in that way, I feel like there's are some very physical aspects, especially with instruments. My interest in musical instruments comes from the physicality of them.

**MP: In recent years, the whole new wave of electronic ambient music seems to have been replaced by the concreteness of a music once again centered on acoustic instruments, also thanks to the continuing legacy of masters such as Alvin Lucier, Phill Niblock, and Eliane Radigue (with her "Occam Ocean" series). How do you interpret this trend?**

SD: I can't speak for any of those composers and I can't speak for anybody but myself, but for me, thinking of sound from this physical point of view, there isn't really a distinction between electronic and acoustic any more than there is between like a piano, a flute: they're as different and similar, as those two things are just a different way in which sound is produced. So for me, personally, it wasn't a far stretch to go from electronic sounds to this other instrumental world, which is essentially the same. It's just a different instrument, a different version of the same thing.

**MP: Let's talk a bit about your latest record, *Antiphonals*, which you'll be presenting tonight as an electronic set at Inner\_Spaces, here in Milan. What were the musical ideas behind it and how does it place itself in your artistic path?**

SD: There are a few things that came together with this record. I work on records quite regularly, my brain can't stop! On certain records I'll focus on working with other people, like the one I'm working on right now which includes a lot of other musicians; and then with other records, it's very intimate, very private, it's just me doing everything. And in this case it was basically just me in my studio, partly intentionally, although it kind of overlapped with the pandemic in an interesting way. The way that I work on records, it's usually planned for, like, six months before I even start working on the actual record, while I'm working on something else. And then when I'm finished with the previous thing, I'll sit down and start a new one. So I had already been planning to do this solo record where, essentially, what I wanted to do was incorporate more of the things that I do in live performance on record, because typically I like to separate them. I like to have things that work well on a record and things in the live space, where there's so much more that you can do. But I'd been noticing that there were things that I was doing in my live sets that you couldn't hear on record, so I wanted to kind of overlap those two. And so my intention was to just be in my studio

anyway, but last year I ended up spending a lot more time there than I anticipated. But it was nice in a way that I had the luxury of just being able to set everything up in my studio and not having to tear it down to go traveling or whatever, and really just having the luxury of time to work on it. So I think it ended up sounding different than it would have under normal circumstances: I think it ended up sounding more introspective, slower.

**MP: That's it, this inner quality, very intimate. But again, I think all of your music, even with other performers, it really sounds like the sound of one, as if you were all pointing towards the same direction. It feels like a "polyphony of one".**

That's beautiful, thanks for that. Even when I work with other people there will be the recording, surely tracking the part, and then it always comes back to my studio and me alone, working through stuff. So at the end of the day it always comes through the same process.

**MP: Lots of vintage instruments you work with.**

SD: I just love instruments. As probably a lot of people listening right now already know, I used to work at a musical instruments museum for a long time and that really sparked this interest. It's one thing to think about instruments from a historical or technological perspective, but when you actually get a chance to play them and use them it's another layer of understanding the instrument, having a sense of closeness and intimacy with it that you can't get just from explaining it or thinking about how it works. And you really have to play it and have that dialogue with it. And that was such a valuable lesson to me, being able to interact with so many different kinds of instruments. And like I said, I tend to think of instruments as individuals: every instrument has a personality, in a sense, and the same way that you take the time to get to know a person, you have to take it in order to know your instrument, so you'll have a specific dialogue with that instrument that somebody else won't. But again, they're all the same, I don't think that an old instrument is any better or worse than a new instrument. They're just different.

**MP: I wondered if you were moved by a sort of nostalgic factor when you come to an instrument like the Mellotron, which is closely linked to the progressive era, or instruments related to Medieval music. Do you feel a kind of nostalgia for sounds that reside in the past?**

SD: Yes and no. I think there's an initial interest in an instrument and I also think that I'm interested in certain instruments just from a listening perspective, although I have no interest in playing them, really. For instance, I love the sound of the guitar, but I'm not a guitarist and I don't really have much of an interest in learning that idiom. So for me, there's two different versions of how I hear an instrument and there's definitely some instruments for which I have - if you want to call it that - a nostalgic interest, especially with early music instruments, like the ones from the Renaissance, you don't hear those things anymore, so they're always going to be associated with this period of time. But do I want to write a piece for every single one of those instruments? No, not necessarily. I think that when I do, like in the case of the Mellotron, it's a bit of both: there is this attraction to what the instrument represents culturally or what it has represented in terms of being used in a certain type of music; but when I use it in my music, I use it the same way that I would approach any other instrument, in a way that's 'me' and not trying to sound like anything.

**MP: That specific instrument, I think, is somewhat "caged" in that single decade [the progressive music era].**

SD: Yeah. That's kind of my interest, actually, and what I wanted to do with this album in particular, because it's mostly Mellotron. Obviously I love that kind of music, I don't think there's anything wrong with it being associated with it, but I wanted to just give it the opportunity to have a different kind of life and to be heard in a different way, I think it's a good service to an instrument; same with medieval instruments and things like that.

**MP: When you write music, do you tend to focus more on an overarching vision or, rather, on pure sound matter in its real-time unfolding? Do you have a project in mind, completely sorted out from the start, or do you develop it progressively?**

SD: I think it's a bit of both. I plan a lot, usually, even if it might be a very vague plan, like just saying: 'I want to use this instrument'. That might be as far as the plan goes, while other times it's more detailed, where I have an idea of what I want a piece to sound like and what I want it to do. So I usually go into things with that in mind, but I think you'd be doing yourself a disservice if you just stuck to that plan and tried to make it happen. When I start to work on something, if there's a certain way that it feels like it's going, or it's not working, or something comes up that's more interesting, then obviously I'll follow that and go with it in real time.

**MP: Do you tend to improvise more when you write music?**

SD: Yeah, I'd say almost all pieces that I start with are coming from some sort of improvisation. And then I also believe very strongly in the idea of iteration, like reworking things and repeating ideas in different ways, so as to try and get closer to what you're really trying to do with it, or to come up with different ways. Because I think even when you have one musical thing that's happening in a certain context, and then you put it into a different context, it just can be completely different. I think there's always this idea, especially when you're making records, that it's as if you do one thing and then you can't ever do it again, for some reason, and I'm strongly opposed to that. I think it's okay to repeat yourself. I think the idea that you're just supposed to do something once and then never do it again, it's really problematic. It's okay to repeat and to rework things and think about them in a different way over time. So usually, for me, something will start with improvisation, but then it might go through that process of taking multiple times to be worked through, into a different piece or just something different.

**MP: This is particularly interesting because we just visited the Ricordi Archive together. I wondered if you ever visited a historic music archive like this one, and have you ever developed any project based on archival documents?**

SD: Again, I worked at a museum, at the time when I was doing my master's degree at Mills College. We did have some archival documents, mostly instruments, but there was also a pretty extensive paper archive of program notes, lectures from the past that I was digitizing when I was there; obviously, nothing quite as old as what they have here. It's such a complex subject when you get to talking about nostalgia and our relationship with objects from the past: for me it's interesting to just see those things in this different context; a few moments ago we were looking at these costume designs from the late 1800s, and they had these fabric swatches that were from the time; as somebody who's interested in archival studies it's obviously very interesting, in sort of an academic sense, but it's interesting to think of just something like the texture of a fabric that isn't here anymore, and to think about something like that and what it means now, and how it can relate to somebody now. It's the same thing with the Mellotron: you think of it in such a specific way, and if you think of these costume designs and these textiles, certain types of textures and colors, and the quality of them as being so associated with a specific time. For me it's interesting to think of

how all that can be divorced from that sense of nostalgia and just seeing it for what it is, without this contextual baggage.

**MP: Also because, when you look at it from really close, the texture becomes something else, there's a level of detail that you wouldn't think of just seeing it from afar. And that may be of inspiration for a composer, like it was for Morton Feldman, for example: he found that these Persian textures on carpets were, in themselves the elements of a melody or a motif.**

SD: I also think about this idea of obsolescence, at least from the perspective of musical instruments, because that's something I know about more intimately, I guess: there's always this narrative that we've been told, where newer equals better and old equals worse, and the reason that the old thing is obsolete would be because it wasn't good; there's a story about that and it's just completely not true at all. There's so many different factors of why certain things didn't make it through to a different era, or why they were gotten rid of, and most of the time it has nothing to do with the actual quality of it. It's just sort of a convenience factor. I think that giving these things another chance to be appreciated in a different way is also interesting.

**MP: Over the last decade - roughly beginning with Tim Hecker's album *Ravedeath, 1972* (2011) - there's been a renewed fascination for the pipe organ, its monumental body still holding a huge potential for experimentation. Apart from you, other female musicians have taken particular interest in it: Anna von Hausswolff, Kali Malone, Ellen Arkbro, Maria W Horn. Do you feel related to their research and poetics?**

SD: I think it's always a personal story of how people get into these kinds of things. I discovered pipe organs basically at the same time when I started working at the musical instrument museum in Canada, when I also discovered synthesizers; again, I'd been playing the piano, which is a fine instrument, but on a compositional basis it was completely the wrong instrument for me. And then I discovered this transference for which, in my mind, the pipe organ is just an acoustic synthesizer, they work in exactly the same way. And so there's really not much difference between the acoustic and the electronic in that perspective. So for me it was just this instrument that checked all the boxes: I was capable of manipulating sound and sustaining sound in a really meaningful way. And I remember – it was almost 15 years ago – I would go in at night, when nobody was around, and just play this organ and just hold chords on it, just listening to the acoustics.

**MP: There's this kind of miracle feeling, when you touch it.**

SD: Oh yeah, there's nothing else like it. And I would do the same thing with synthesizers, where I would just put two oscillators in tune and just listen to them drift, which is a natural thing that the instrument is doing. And it's the same with the organs because they're acoustic, they're never going to be exactly precise, they're always going to be a little off. And that's what creates, for me, their richness.

**MP: That's why I think they went back to the original interest in that, because it still holds so much potential to be explored, in terms of microtonal variations, subharmonics.**

SD: And that's another example of analog instruments kind of going out of fashion: they're coming back, obviously, but when they did it was because they were so imprecise, it wasn't because digital instruments sound better. It's just, people want their instruments to stay in tune and analog ones didn't do that very well. They weren't thinking of it, oh, maybe if they don't stay in tune, that's a musical device that we can, exploit in an interesting way. For me, the organ was just the perfect instrument.

**MP: Maybe contemporary musicians discovered that the imprecision was really the interesting thing in all that.**

SD: Again, I subscribe to the idea that no instrument or practice or whatever is better or worse than any other, they're all valid, they're all equal. It's just about whichever better suits a certain context or a way of working. And especially when you're dealing with tuning, sometimes you want it to be super precise, you need it in order for those kinds of things to happen, you need things not to drift out of tune all the time. So it just depends on the specific moment that you're trying to go for.

**MP: Drone music in general – not just with the pipe organ – certainly has a kind of transcendental character. Do you seek this kind of experience while making music?**

SD: It's kind of a tricky question, because personally I have a lot of issues with religion and I would consider myself to be very anti-religion, not just non-religious. So it's always complicated with the organ and playing in churches and things like that, because it has so much weight of that. I also grew up completely secular, there's no religious aspect that I was raised into. While being anti-religious, I would also consider myself to be a pretty spiritual person, but I don't think of it in religious terms at all. This idea of transcendence, I think it's very interesting this thing of being able to have this altered perspective of things or a different experience in the moment. And that's what I would consider to be quasi-spiritual experiences, which oftentimes come from aesthetic means: so for me, in music, it's always about creating that kind of space for myself. I make the kind of music that I do because it's what I want to hear, it satisfies that for me. So it's just an added pleasure that other people enjoy it too [laughs].

**MP: In some way you find your spirituality in sound.**

SD: Yeah. I think it's weird that we still have these connotations, that even now, when you bring up the idea of spirituality, it's still so connected to this idea of the sacred and this religious aspect. But I think there's a completely secular understanding of spirituality that is, to me, much more apparent and more tangible in a sense, much more easily accessible, and you can articulate how it happens and what the experience of it is, to an extent. I think it tends to work a bit easier in this kind of drone-based music. But for me personally, I can find it in any type of music. As somebody who's interested in timbre, texture, I think that even in popular music, the way production is approached in recordings can be just as transcendent an experience, being able to hear those differences in those moments, when they happen.

**MP: About timbre – do you know Simon Reynell's music label Another Timbre? Many Canadian composers are very much interested in these aspects. I was wondering if you found the same interest in some aspects like the space, the silences, this kind of focus on single sound events, and time, all of which stems of course from Cage and Feldman, which were the main inspirations for that kind of new radical, reductionist composition.**

SD: Yeah, absolutely. I came to it in a backwards way, Cage's way of working with time and spacing, using time brackets to actually express how you move from place to place rather than having this measured idea that you do on a score. I've been doing that since the first time I was performing. I think that it just made sense to me, conceptually, and only later realized that it was part of this larger tradition of breaking down this temporal way of understanding music. For as interested as I am in texture and timbre and for as important is that in their music, I think something that I don't talk about as much, for no particular reason, is the temporal aspect and this idea of spacing and how time is perceived in sound, and how sound can really be used to create a very different sense of time, a very altered sense of time. Maybe I'm realizing this

or being reminded of it even more as I'm starting to play live again, and having the last year and a half just working on records, it's such a vastly different way of thinking about time. I think they're both interesting and they're both useful, but being reminded of having the luxury of time and allow things to happen, like in the live works that I'm doing now; also I've been composing a lot of chamber works that are the intended to be performed, before they're intended to be recorded. And I just find myself so much more interested in: 'I just want this to be long'. I want to take time with it because that's something that you can't always do in other formats. And it's such an important thing, being able to have the patience.

**MP: I think musicians may have found the stretching of time as meaningful in itself. I'm very interested in that because I'm trying to write a book about it, about the various concepts of time in composition. I find that breaking the boundary of a track or a movement that previously had to stay within a reasonable timing gives you a chance to discover what's beyond those boundaries, entering a new state where time dissolves, it's not perceived as it was anymore. And that completely changes the perspective you have on sound.**

SD: Yeah, absolutely. Like you said, I'm changing the perspective on sound, but I also think that the experience of it is so dependent on the timing that is used, and it can just change things so drastically when something is taken much slower and happens in a much slower way. I'm finding that even with a lot of stuff I'm working on now, where I'm constantly slowing it down and I'm playing it for other people, asking them what they think: "You think it's a little too slow?"; and they're like, "No, it's not slow enough! It needs to be slower!". I guess if there's one good thing that's come out of the pandemic, for me personally is having more of a sense of clarity about what's important to me musically and what I really want, the kind of experience that I want to achieve.

**MP: It was a moment in time when you really had the chance to stop and just listen. I think many people didn't have the chance to do that before, to have an incredible amount of time just to concentrate on the sound. So really, I think this is the perfect moment for new music like this. It was already, but now it's more relevant than ever to listeners.**

SD: Yeah, absolutely. Every time I perform or work on music, there's always this very clear feeling that is what I'm interested in, this is the sense of time that I want to explore, this is the feeling that I need to create. And then this is how I do it, it becomes a lot more apparent now, I think.