





Inside out — Michael Vincent Waller's *A Song*

Hearing the improvisations of someone who primarily identifies as a composer is imbued with a very particular kind of intimacy, akin to reading the letters or diaries of poet, or discovering that one's favourite painter was also an equally accomplished photographer, yet hadn't shared this side of their work publicly. There's a familiarity in the contours, syntax and cadence of their phrases. The hues are equally saturated or muted. The glue that holds it all together even has the same viscosity, but it's as if everything has been turned inside out.

And on a certain level it has.

For composers, such as Michael Vincent Waller (b. 1985), who don't regularly give improvised concerts, it's a private, quotidian, yet utterly vital counterpart to their public-facing creative endeavour. It's an activity that feeds into gestation of compositions, without being subservient to it. It's not as though its sole purpose is to generate content that could later find a more refined form on the page. Rather, it exists as a reciprocal realm to composing in which one's aesthetic concerns are addressed in a more casual, instinctual, fluid and vulnerable discourse.

Fortunately for listeners, Waller has recognized the beauty of turning this process outward.

Prior to the 20th century there wasn't always such a sharp distinction between these two paradigms of creative music-making. It's no secret that countless canonized composers from Bach to Liszt were revered improvising virtuosos on their instruments. Historically, spontaneously-generated cadenzas were commonplace—offering the performer compositional agency, and the permeability to various forms of impromptu embellishment during the Baroque is widely noted.

Yet as artists' creative processes started to interrogate the presumed fundamentals of music itself, idealistic and ideological stances on the matter of composition vs. improvisation took hold. John Cage was notable for his qualms with the latter on account it asserting the subjectivity of its creators. At the opposite end of the spectrum, some would go as far as touting improvisation as the ultimate musical manifestation of a liberated, egalitarian utopia (in contrast to the rigid hegemonic structure apparently posed by written-out music.)

While this division lingers in certain corners of the vast and varied exploratory music community, the perspectives and practices of present-day artists tend to be more supple. There tends to be an increased awareness of the conditions that destabilize the purported solidity of composition, and also a corresponding understanding that improvisation is unconsciously composed by one's training, musical habits, body, listening diet, performance context and relationship to the instrument.

The body of work that Waller has generated thus far does not make a deliberate attempt to engage with these notions— at least not directly. The music is lyrical, personal and often quite delicate, embracing traditional shapes as much as it does contemporary restraint and coloration. His approach is staunchly intuitive, grounded in the very sensation of making music itself, rather attempting to narrate or illustrate some sort of commentary through sound. It's decidedly music that comes from listening, and gently insists that those interpreting it or witnessing it engage in listening of the same intensity.

The music heard here—an extended piano improvisation—remains true to his ethos, but the contrast in method it offers from Waller's other work speaks to his position within the above question, and does so with candour and eloquence.

At first blush, *A Song* might not even read as an improvisation at all. Driven neither by fiery virtuosic urgency nor exploratory meandering, it unfolds in a careful, stately manner, thoroughly reflecting upon—savouring—each moment, before moving forward. The sustained, transparent-sounding arpeggiations, presented in a strong, steady, but never forceful dynamic, evoke the tolling of bells. Elsewhere he will hovers quietly within a simple chordal texture, or, such as in the closing two minutes, unfurl a robust melodic statement over a sturdy bass progression.

Waller's real-time sense of proportion is remarkably acute. The piece's shifts of texture, such as the brief movement into surging repeated chords at roughly 11 minutes in, though surprising, come off with a lucidity one associates with composition more than freeform extemporization.

Though commendably clean in its construction, this piece still speaks to the fluidity and magic of improvisation—the

fact that it as a medium can serve as a mysterious agent of cohesion. The intricate but informal way in which the entire structure is articulated, keeps the listener engaged with the piece in way that feels constantly fresh and unpredictable.

As such, it also draws the ear toward attributes that are idiomatic improvisation. We're privy to the unique fluctuations of Waller's own internal clock which impart an idiosyncratic sense of breath one could never coax from an interpreter. Additionally, on a number of occasions throughout the 21 minutes, Waller touches upon material whose character is enhanced by the sincerity of the spontaneous flow, but might not end up translating in a written-out-for-someone-else context. There's an irrefutable momentum behind the authenticity of the gesture.

To that, this recording gives listeners deep glimpse into Waller's impulses as a musician. Certainly *A Song* is full of ideas that one could imagine nestled in a more settled framework, but here they're charged —directly and palpably so—with Waller's own internal curiosity. The energy that accompanies the arrival of each musical statement is the foundation and what make it so evocative.

Waller's scores already emerge from an intuitive and inward-oriented position, and in addition to playing freely, he's long used improvisation as a tool to generate, develop, manipulate his material. Admitting listeners into that once-private domain seems like natural and logical extension of his existing approach and the resultant music confirms this impression, too.

It channels his imagination with the same focus and fidelity, while allowing it to speak with newfound vitality.

— Nick Storrington, July 2019

Performed by: Michael Vincent Waller (piano)

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single take improvisation, with no editing.

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