DECLASSIFY
Episode 8: Acousmatics and the Contemporary

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Date of publication: 12/10/2020

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SUMMARY

This week Declassify delves into a newer and fascinating part of classical music practices, or it is really classical music? Our guest for this week's episode is acousmatic composer and researcher Alexis Weaver. Her principal interest lies in composing fixed-media acousmatic music, she has also composed soundtracks for animation, short videos, radio, theatre, and dance. In 2018, Alexis was awarded the National Council of Women's Australia Day Prize for her research undertaken during her Honours year on the visibility and practice of female electroacoustic composers and she has just completed a Master of Music at the Sydney Conservatorium, where she teaches composition and music technology subjects. This week we unpack the immersive realm of electronic music, the act of sound-making as music, accessibility to learning about music and music technology through to resources and programs for diverse listening, representation and engagement.

TRANSCRIPT

Victoria Pham (VP): And it's yet another episode of Declassify! I feel like these are happening at a faster rate than I had initially anticipated, so thanks to every person who has been listening along. I've been enjoying all of the engagement with the podcast so far, so do keep on writing to me and if you're game even send some topic suggestions or even questions my way. But back to the point of this week, I'm so pleased to introduce a composer and teacher who is someone I studied with at the Sydney Conservatorium and it is electroacoustic extraordinaire, Alexis Weaver! You'll get to hear some of her music throughout this episode and hear her talk about the realm of electronic or electroacoustic or acousmatic music and how this works within classical discourse. So, welcome Alexis!

Alexis Weaver (AW): Hi Vickie! Thanks so much for having me on.

VP: My pleasure! So, I'd be interested in knowing more specifically about your practice, well how your practice has developed. You've managed to join your practice as a sound artist with composition, for example the earlier training we did in classical music, and now moving deeply into electronic music, and you are also a researcher and a teacher at the Con.

AW: Well for me, as you said Vickie, I started out at the composition program at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music and I expected that my path would be one to instrumental composition. I was very interested in really rhythmic and modal chamber music, sort of in the chain of Ross Edwards, I suppose. Sort of in that kind of sound, and then as I moved through, I began to feel like I was out of my depth with instrumental music. I wasn't really connecting with it in the way that I thought that I would, or flourishing in the way that I'd hoped, for some reason, the way that instrumental music was taught and the way that we studied, it didn't resonate with me. And that was becoming more and more of a problem because I felt that I wasn't really finding my compositional voice. And then part of our compulsory studies, we were all introduced to electroacoustic music and sort of, music technology, which I remembered thinking was a big waste of my time. I was thinking, "I'm already falling behind on where I need to be, so why should I be learning a whole new computer program and thinking about sound when I need to be spending all the time I can on getting my head around instrumentation, and orchestration, and harmony, and harmonic progressions and making that work for me." But I am so glad that it was compulsory because slowly having to do the

compulsory units and then going to one-on-one lesson with my first teacher who was Dr Ivan Zavada, I discovered that working with sound rather than notated instruments made a lot more sense to me and how that works. So thinking about the musical concepts in different ways to shape sound objects and soundscapes rather than to create a through-composed instrumental composition, it just clicked. And so from there, I moved more and more into that kind of study. So, moving my listening from classical and romantic composers to late-20th century electroacoustic composers and getting to know how we've moved on from those initial ideas from people like Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre **Henry**, and then from there during my Honours year, I composed only electroacoustic works and moved onto my Masters and it's really been electroacoustic since then… and that's how I got to where I am today!

VP: Which is cool because now you're teaching and tutoring electronic music there now.

AW: Yes, yes I am. So, I sort of kept going at the Con when I began my Master of Music. I felt like I hadn't learnt anything I needed to in the time that we had about acousmatic music and about aesthetics in particular, so I kept going and I used my Masters as a way to hone my skills and my techniques in that area of music. And eventually there was an opening for some teaching work for one-on-one composition teaching with the second-year students which was my first of exposure to that, and that was a big learning curve and I now teach some music technology classes and music theory classes as well.

VP: And music theory specifically in acousmatic music?

AW: Oh, actually one of the first-year introductions to music research and discussion about musical opinions which I think tied in really nicely because even though it wasn't electroacoustic, my experience of looking at classical music from a sort of external space, I'm sort of able to encourage diverse opinions on classical music and our sort of Western traditions. So it tied in really well and I really enjoyed teaching that subject.

VP: And when you mean looking at it from an external place, is it because electronic music is generally not considered part of classical music practices or traditions?

AW: Yeah, I think that's right. I don't know where it sits for me. I know that electronic music is certainly art music in the same way and I do feel that we have many of the same goals and

processes really, but I feel like the way we arrive at that point is so different that I haven't quite made up my mind as to whether it can be considered in the same way, but I do feel that as an electroacoustic composer I do look in on the Western classical music tradition more than participate in it. We're coming from a genre of music that's so new and I feel like that gives you a lot more freedom to break with the traditions of classical music composition which can be scary at times as well.

VP: I think from memory when we were studying the compulsory classes together, a lot of the roots of electronic music itself come from a classical tradition or at least people who were what we would categorise as classically trained, either in fine art or classical music.

AW: Absolutely, as well as other disciplines such as architecture. For example, Xenakis dabbled in electroacoustic music, the early people that we call the pioneers of electroacoustic music often teamed up with **architects**, such as Varèse who was a sort of a friend of **Le Corbusier** and Xenakis worked with him as well. So, people came to electroacoustic music from a wide range of disciplines but certainly classical music was one, and to developing new ways of seeing sound and seeing music and how it could work with our modern technology which I think is amazing, and how it can exist in spaces that we can exist in. So, introducing new dimensions to art music. Space and time as we walk through a space as well. From there I feel like it evolved so much that today people do question whether sound-art or electroacoustic composition could be seen in the same way as our classical art music, so I think that's a question everyone needs to answer themselves really. But whether it can be seen as another artform other than classical music, it needs to be respected in the same way because as far as I can see, the exact same time and consideration goes in just in different areas.

VP: And because you're talking about, perhaps earlier on, that relationship between architecture and sound, and how that may inform processes or experiences of it being spatial, would that then increase public accessibility or access to pieces of music that are electronic as you don't necessarily need to be in a concert hall. Often spaces are set up, even outdoor spaces, such as VIVID Festival being a big example, setting up spaces where people can have these electronic experiences?

AW: Yes, absolutely. Space being a creative element in electronic music means that it can be accessed in different ways as composers and sound artists, for example the amazing array of

sound installations you find in art galleries now, I think that's a beautiful cross-over and something that really makes a new connection for consumers of art, and you also have electronic music existing in spaces outside of academic institutions, in bars, night clubs, at open mic electronic nights where you have live electronic music hooking up to stereo speakers and going crazy with whatever they brought with them. So I think that's wonderful and I think on that, space has been harnessed in such a powerful way through the use of surround sound and ambisonic formats for electroacoustic composers which just shows how the dimension of space can be used so powerfully to evoke artistic responses in people, and that is a wonderful innovation which we've been able to do with modern technology. But on the other side, I think it's really important that we remain dedicated in creating immersive and valuable works in really simple spaces, for example headphones, for iPods and for CD players and in the stereo space. Those ways of listening to music that everyone can access even if you can't get to the concert hall, otherwise, in terms of accessibility and greeting music outside of institutions and away from concert halls, electroacoustic artists are no better than anyone in the classical space – and not to say that anyone's better because they make their music more accessible – but it means that more people are able to enjoy it which I think is a good thing.

VP: Well, I have to ask, just in case there is someone listen who doesn't know what it means (like me), what is ambisonic?

AW: So, in order to make this as accessible for anyone listen, just a quick breakdown of large diffusion spatial formats for composing sound. So when we say surround sound, we might be talking about having speakers to the front of you, to the side and to the back with a sub-speaker for the really low frequency content, and that starts to create a immersive experience, so you might have 5 speakers, or you might have 7 or 8, going up to as many you want or can afford – so that's surround sound. So even more immersive is something called an ambisonic array which is a full, uninterrupted sphere of sound which composers can design in advance just like they would any other creative parameter, and you use a special microphone to record 360 degree sound and there's a lot of different scientific processes to encode the sound and to make that ambisonic array, and it is what we call very enveloping and very immersive audio, and it is a very wonderful thing that recreates a very realistic sense of sound emanating around you. And in the headphone space, we could say that the equivalent of ambisonic sound would be binaural sound. Binaural, of course, meaning two ears, and when you're encoding music to the binaural space, you're ensuring that the music is emanating from outside your head and hitting

your ears in the same way that it would in nature. So, hitting one ear first and then hitting the other with a slight time delay, so you can actually locate the sound in a very natural way that your brain understands rather than having a simpler panning technique where you have sounds hitting one headphone only because our brains don't locate is as easily. So Binarual and ambisonic is a way of creating enveloping sound which is very natural for our brains to understand and helps us locate sound.

VP: That's really cool!

AW: Yeah, it's not something that I personally have delved into all that much. I'm interested in different, sort of, spatial designs for headphones in particular, but I think it's a wonderful thing and it's used in many applications including therapeutic ones for example for chronic pain patients, it's so enveloping it takes you to another place. And that's just one amazing interdisciplinary application of it, but it can also be used by sound artists and composers if they want to create a soundscape in the same way as anyone else would but they want it to sound realistic and it's an immersive thing that you can do.

VP: I'm glad to hear that you can do it on headphones though as opposed to being in a specially-fitted concert hall or space as advanced as that or like those ambisonic ones.

AW: Absolutely, and those tertiary institutions are starting to get more of these ambisonic arrays. I know that some Wellington universities have them, and sonic architecture schools often have very immersive sound-speaker arrays like that. But, it's definitely not achievable for everyone so it's important that we also look at other ways of diffusing sound, and sort of not discounting it's creative prowess just because it's not made for the most technical application possible, I think that's really important. But binaural is an amazing way o creating realistic sounds emanating from the world around you without getting into that too much.

VP: So what processes have you been looking at to create these sorts of experiences? Particularly now where a lot of audiences are at home and can't go to these spaces to experience this level of technical music, how are you doing this through portable devices like phones or whatever gear anyone has access to in their own home?

AW: So, my Masters research looked at a concept called small diffusion as opposed to large diffusion and this was a sort of two-pronged concept and the first was very technically that small diffusion was being very accessible, portable technologies like headphones and creating music for not-great Apple earpods, CD players, tape recorders and all those things we have lying around in our homes and stereo speakers which most people have these days. But in the cultural discussion, small diffusion is sort of a cultural move away from really technological composition and making sure that we note that you can make an amazingly immersive electroacoustic piece using really simple diffusion systems, and the considerations that need to go into these for example knowing the limited frequency response of small earphones as opposed to a beautiful, expensive set of loudspeakers. And then composing for that, that's a creative decision in and of itself, and using those creative parameters in order to create a beautiful piece, I think is very valuable and interesting. I think the limitations of technology can be just as interesting as having no limitations, in that way. And the other thing that I looked at was composing for the non-ideal listening space, so outside the concert hall or traditional listening spaces where you might have distractions from light or distractions from sound, how do compose a piece of sound work that people will listen to on a bus? This could also include site-specific work, but it doesn't have to be, and which frequency bands do you move away from? Can you have the full range of dynamics (probably not)? And in order to keep people's attention going, how do you work with environmental spaces to make music that communes with the outside world and teaches people to be mindful of their surroundings and those sounds as well as take them away from them? So these were all the questions I was trying to answer in my research, and really enjoyed answering through creating a portfolio of works and it was only the beginning of that discussion and I decided to focus on headphone works and exploring inter-aural acoustic imaging, or in-head acoustic imaging, rather, which is the phenomenon where using very simple panning techniques and headphones, you can create the idea that sounds are travelling through, in and around your head, rather than realistic binaural imaging which, of course, means that the sounds are emanating from outside your head. So really playing with that idea which can be really unsettling and uncomfortable – that the sounds are travelling between your ears and rattling around your head. Some people have explored it, but not that many, and it can be seen as a technical error, but I think that the inside of your head is a great space for creative exploration, and it's something that a lot of sound artists can do without really having to access any sort of plug-ins or extra technology.

VP: So that rolls into my next question in terms of studying electronic music or sound design or anything technological like that, when I started studying I presumed that I would always need to a relatively good studio in order to, not just do the work, but to learn, and because you and I were at a music school, we were provided such facilities. But then, if you're doing it by yourself, you need to access to software like Logic, Cubase or MAX MSP, and then you need access to training or training materials in order to use some of this software, so at that level and as your teacher, how has that been working with younger or new students in terms of considering access to tech, gear and studios?

AW: Absolutely, and that sort of question has become so relevant right now with COVID and not everyone being able to come into university and having to learn on-line. So the processes that we would usually have in my Music Technology classes can't occur. We can't have students always borrowing equipment because you have to think of sanitation, and you know, quarantine periods for all of the equipment, so there's not this easy transfer for all of the equipment even at tertiary institutions. But I think it poses an awesome opportunity to think about what we're imparting on students and this very technology focused way of learning that doesn't have to be that way. Thinking about how you can use what you have in intelligent ways, like a smartphone. How can you change your environment to make a smartphone conducive to a good recording, or at least a good enough recording that you can play with in creative ways? And even thinking about the kind of people who are admitted into tertiary institutions, what obstacles have they had to overcome? Maybe they're not as advanced as other students and thinking about why that might be the case, I think in general the world is getting better at seeing past privilege, and being more empathetic in how we teach and who we teach, and increases the diversity in our amazing canon of music.

And so that's one good thing has come out of this period which I think has been intense for everyone, and I think increasing accessibility in teaching is the way forward and being someone who wasn't a very technologically minded person and someone who struggled with understanding the very basic of jargon in the music technology world, I think that has permeated the way that I teach now, even very simple things like EQ, and just using the word EQ in the first sentence of a class and then stopping and thinking, they might not think EQ means equalisation which means bringing up and attenuating different frequency bands to change or sculpt a sound. So going back to that feeling of when you were in their shoes and being too timid to ask questions, or to ask stupid questions, and trying to answer them

beforehand so everyone is brought up to the same level so that everyone can start to think creatively instead of wading through the technology and the jargon, I think that's a really important way that we can make music technology accessible and less intimidating for everyone regardless of their background.

INTERMISSION I

VP: For our first intermission is an excerpt from of my favourites of Alexis' compositions, Scrapes and Sighs. You can enjoy this work on whatever device you have but I should not that this excerpt and the next for our second intermission are mixed for headphones, so feel free to grab a pair headphones or earphones if you have them lying around.

Follows a 4-minute excerpt of Scarpes and Sighs

VP: But moving into how this how this links up with classical music and popular culture, electronic music, at least to me, feels like it straddles the bit in between the two. Partly this is down to it being quite broad in terms of how you can apply the skills, particularly when you start learning for example the music technology class that we're now teaching you can be a sound designers, sound-artist all through doing very specific acousmatic composition. So in classical music, generally when I see electronic music brought into performances or programming, it is very often a work where electronics is a component or combined with an ensemble or soloist as acoustic instruments, or for example and I've only seen this once at the Con for a Wind Symphony concert, they used three electronic pieces to join together the program of separate acoustic works and the lights went down during those three experiences. Do you think these are ways of blending the two somewhat different genres together?

AW: I think that's an interesting approach and it's not something I made my mind up on yet , whether electroacoustics can exist in the same sense as classical music does. And I think that's because if we're talking about fixed media electroacoustic music, it doesn't have the spontaneous visual performance that classical music does so if you go into that concert in that space of mind expecting visual experience as well as aural experience, it can be a bit jarring, I

feel. So one way that we can get around that is to bring the lights down, to not give people a choice so their eyes can't wander and take them away from the experience and I think in part that does work. I think other people have felt, oh no, I need people to have something to focus on while they listen to their music, so they might introduce a visual component. So there's many ways to tackle that questions and it depends on the composer, and the work and whether they feel that the content works in the same environment as live classical music. And I think that mixed media which is what I refer to with instrumental and tape, because it does show that sound and music exists in the same sphere and that sound and instruments can all work towards the same musical goal. And it preserves the live element as well, the spontaneity and excitement of seeing someone perform on stage. So the jury's out on that one and everyone would have a different opinion, because while I would very very happily sit in an auditorium in the dark and listen to that… I'm not sure everyone would and that's to do with our contexts and our backgrounds, and whether you decide that sound is music and whether or not it's a bit of crap in between the good stuff. We can also use technology to preserve that spontaneous live element as well if we think about how live electronic performers use different speakers to respond to or technology that is performative as part of the electronic work which shows how the sound is being made. So, if you are interested in having your audience participate in technological listening and go 'Oh, how is that machine making that noise,' or you can think to a more traditional acousmatic diffusion technique which is the acousmoniam, which you had lots of different speakers of sizes and frequency responses dotted around the room and you would diffuse the sound live, as a sort of sound performance, and so the creative decisions by the technician was part of the experience and so it was a performance. So now that we have all of these opportunities, we can think, do we want the technology to be part of the performance, do I want my audience to just sit in a dark room? And I think that the end result is just as important as classical music is going to end up. For me, it's usually on headphones and I'm imagining it being experienced in the home or by yourself, it's a very intimate individual experience but it's not the same for everyone. So I think that's a rally important consideration for composers of electroacoustic music.

VP: I just had a flashback to the time you and I went to the premiere of Joe Manton's piece in Hornsby, and I'm sure there were other people who are listening who actually went to that performance last year because it was actually packed and it surprised me because it was a single piece of music that was an hour long and entirely electronic. And he rented out… I can't remember now…

AW: it was a movie theatre.

VP: Yes that's right. The movie theatre in Hornsby Westfield and it was a really full concert, and we all sat in the dark in this theatre and it worked!

AW: It worked, it absolutely worked! And it was just the amazing detail of that piece I don't think would have… no visual element could have done it justice and it would have taken away from the intense concentration needed to really experience it. That is one case where I feel like sound should exist for sound alone, and we shouldn't think of too many other elements. Again, another great example of that and not a case of one method suits every composition.

VP: And one thing that was really jarring was that because we entered a movie theatre and I was unprepared for what was going to be unveiled, I presumed there would be visuals.

AW: Yes, absolutely – so we come in with our own assumptions and expectations of what's going to happen and I think it's such a part of … we've all gone to a concert where we think I know how this is going to go and you walk out and it was nothing like what I expected. And whether that's a good thing and sometimes it's a bad thing, so it's interesting how the audience member can change the narrative in their mind and colour their experience of it, and the composer has absolutely no control over that, after a certain degree of planning.

VP: That's so true. Well actually I was thinking about what you said about live performance, because I actually don't know that much about live electronic performance other than attending some really cool festival gigs, and also things that I think have now filtered in popular culture, for example Australian artists like Flume, and that aspect of sound design and working with music technology has become of more mainstream media and experiences. So when it comes to live performance, having spoken to classical musicians, there is a belief that it's different or not truly live performance, because there is one person on the stage who is behind a heavy desk with gear and tech. So because there is the presumption that electronic music is all fixed, is there a stigma or preconceived notion that people who do live performance in live media aren't actually affecting the sound or sound experiences?

AW: Yes, I'd agree. There is this assumption that a lot of it is pushing a button, and I don't even mind if it is. Most of the time it isn't, I know this. For a lot of live performers, and I'm not an electronic music performer and I prefer to make fixed media and very set works, but when I go to electronic music in the sound-art sense, I wouldn't say that I go to many EDM concerts… well especially not now. But, I get the overwhelming feeling like it's like a performer who's just rehearsed a work. You have an idea of how a piece is going to go and you might respond a little bit more to the stimuli in the room and decide, perhaps I'll extend this section a bit longer. And for me, it's a performance in the same way that any instrumentalist would perform. It's rehearsed, or it's improvised, which instrumentalists do as well and you're responding to the combination of sounds that you're creating and what the people around you are experiencing. So in conclusion, even if you are touching a button and dancing along, that's visual stimuli to go along with this planned experience you've created for people and that's fine, but more often than not it's a practiced and rehearsed performance and it should be respected just like it would be for any instrumentalist. I think different considerations have gone in, but they are considerations nonetheless. This is a prepared piece that is being presented to you, and I think that's important to remember.

VP: So, moving from this, some of the other things I wished to touch on were slightly more conceptual things like, music in the world of sound design, and practicing electronic music being more aware of the sounds around us perhaps more than what we were describing at the beginning which are the concerns of instrumentation and orchestration and harmony. So at least when I was studying electronic music, it really opened up my ears to listening to the audience members in a space, even thinking spatially when I compose acoustic music now and I have an acute awareness of the space it will be premiered in and who by which then affects an experience of the work, all the way to listening to our environment and there's been a long history of composers like yourself doing fieldwork and field recordings which then informs their work. So how would you introduce people to the world of listening deeply?

AW: So I think first of all, I would say that as you mentioned before, when you started to learn about sound art and electroacoustic music, it started to open up your ears to how instrumental music could exist and what is possible on the spectrum of sounds there, and I think that is the magic between sound and instrumental music. They complement each other and they extend the palette that is available for each other. Even if you are not using any electronic means in a performance and you've been working with sound and you're thinking about how you can use

sound creatively. You might approach what you can do on an instrument in a different way and think about extended techniques and using different parts of the instrument to create new textures and soundscapes. So I think in that way, it's important that we hear mixed music and important to appreciate sound as music as they're not different concepts and they exist on a spectrum. I think that electroacoustic composers tend to work at the far end of that spectrum and people who are purely instrumental are on the other end, but there is somewhere in the middle where you can meet. It's not somewhere that I travel to often but that opportunity is there and that's a wonderful thing. So moving on from that, how would I introduce people to the idea of sound as music?

I think that sound in music is rooted in nature, and natural processes. So for example I've done a project for children and created a sound story where I've sort of contextualised different sounds made my natural objects in a story about frogs being called back to a certain area that was very dry by making noises that resembled rain out of found sounds like rocks and sticks and leaves, and creating music that frogs would like. And that was really fun because it got kids thinking about the environment and how different sounds could be made really rhythmic or different textures could be fun an appreciate them as an artform and not every sound is going to music but perhaps if we organise them, we can appreciate that collage of sounds as an artform resembling music. So I think it's important to remember sound-art and how I tend to compose is very much to do with physics of sound in nature, so thinking of things like sonic looming where they rush in and they rush off in a doppler effect, and that's what we hear in nature a lot. It's a phenomenon that we all respond to deeply in our psyche. And the idea that, I suppose, a more organic way of structuring a piece like letting a sound repeats and grow and extend in a very natural way like the flowering of a plant over time, or like breath as we go about our day or do different movements. So for me, I feel like sound is… especially for field recordings and treating sound and its behaviours like different processes in life, we can really relate to it and appreciate it. This is a really long answer, I get really excited about this aesthetic topic because the way in which we can compose sound is so different from the way that we structure instrumental music and I think that if we meet somewhere in the middle, we can give structure to sound but we can make composition in general a more organic process, which follows the processes of the body and of nature. And whether you're using synthesised sound (bleeps and bloops) and, making them behave in that way, or you're using field recordings which are very anecdotal and we can definitely tell where they come from. If you're thinking about sound in a way that you find appealing and a way that resonates with you, that collation

of sound can be music. So for example, with my work, it's not meant for people who know much about electroacoustic music or music theory or music aficionados, it's meant to inspire wonder in people who don't and for them to go "Oh that's a great sound that I just heard as I walked by – I can imagine that in a piece." It's about fun and adventure, and appreciating sound in the world around us and being appreciative about the sounds that we have.

VP: So I think what I love about your music is that you managed to create these little pockets and inner worlds that your can experience but despite that, there are these little moments of the familiar within them.

AW: Aw thank you. I call myself an acousmatic composer but if we think about acousmatic in a very strict sense, acousmatic listening is listening for the sound itself and trying to achieve that idea of reduced listening where you're not associating that sound with anything, you're just appreciating sound for its tone and its texture and nothing else, but I don't think in our day and age that is possible. I think that technology gets in the way or the human mind would go "Oh that sounds like an elephant or a bit like an elephant," and then you start thinking about elephants. So I think that instead we need to play on that and for me it means leaving something familiar in my sounds or making it behave like something in real life. So, for example in one piece, the Shimmering Haze, I have lots of little sound objects that are just generated through really high sine tones but for me they wiggle through the sound space like little goldfish and that was in my mind when I was exploring that sound, and I think that adds an element of fun to it and maybe predictability in how it moves. And I would hope that even if a listener doesn't have that association, they might be able to see a sound in their mind's eye and create an ecosystem of it, and so it's another way of looking at sound and looking at music, and I've found the more I've been thinking about that, the more I see instrumental music and traditional forms of music in that way as well. It's about conjuring a sound image, I suppose, and making it fun.

VP: I definitely agree. Studying electronic music is what gave me an easier way of understanding the shape of a sound. Not as a still image but as a moving form or a silhouette, for example if previously I were to listen to a wall of sound which sometimes is a symphony, I wouldn't feel that as clearly. I would have focused on the harmonic progressions doing this thing, but now I can stand back and listen to this work in the way sound-art in a sense trained my ears, you can feel and touch, see and hear moving shapes that move together vertically and

horizontally so it was so incredibly useful to learn how to listen like that through music technology and electronic music.

AW: Yes, I totally agree. I think that the way that I listen to instrumental and orchestral music in particular has changed a lot, and it makes me wonder if the composers that we know well thought in the same way. It makes you really wonder how more, I mean we have a lot of different ways of analysing music. But it makes me wonder if they thought about music in the way that I thought about sound and it's made me appreciate orchestral music so much more than when I wanted to be an orchestral composer. Thinking about timbre, oh they've used the violins in such an interesting way to contrast with some of the low instruments here and thinking about how those sounds move in my mind's eye rather than in my ear, I suppose. I think exposing ourselves to sound as a form of music, does allow us to see and hear music in a different way in our minds, and a way that gives another dimension of appreciation and understanding of it.

INTERMISSION II

VP: For our second intermission is an excerpt from another one of my favourites of Alexis' works, this one called the Shimmering Haze. You'll soon find out why once you have a listen…

Follows a 4-minute excerpt of Scarpes and Sighs

VP: Now I'm thinking back to one of those Disney Films I think it was Fantasia and there's a seen which accompanies music, and I can't remember the piece of music that was playing, but I distinctly remember this shapes of colour moving across the screen and dancing – kind of like the old Microsoft movement to music shapes thing they used to have – your description of sound as music and it moving in your mind's eye brings that to mind. But now I realise I've gone full circle and I have to ask about your research as well as your practice. You had started your Honours degree just as I finished up at the Con but I do remember you were already investigating electronic music and your whole portfolio was in that field, but the research component was also very compelling… particularly having experienced similar feelings or

understood where some of those statistics came from particularly working in studios or studio culture.

AW: That's right. I had my electroacoustic portfolio which I really enjoyed delving into and then I had my research which was another thing entirely and that was my real curiosity which was finding out more about female electroacoustic composers in Australia. This is because I found that my earlier years of study, when we had examples of different composers in our classes, a lot of them were resoundingly male. That didn't help me to or encourage me to pursue music technology or electroacoustic composition, so I thought… and it didn't consciously bother me at a time and as I went on it did, so I decided I wanted to learn more about people like me who composed music in the way that I do. And so I embarked on my Honours thesis in that way and I interviewed 4 electroacoustic composers in Australia, or composers that incorporated electronics into their practice and that was: Kezia Yap who I knew from the Con and who had just graduated at the time, Fiona Hill who as in the Blue Mountains, Cat Hope who a lot of us who would be familiar with and Leah **Barclay** from Griffith University in Queensland. I set out with a few different goals in mind and one was to learn more about their composing process, to see how they differed and to see what I could find that was a through-line in their processes and see how that could help me and others. To find out what they felt about the current gender balance in Australian music, especially electroacoustic music but it turned into a much broader discussion as it always does because nothing is in isolation. And then to hear about some of the challenges and the different goals they had in writing their music, what obstacles did they come up against and what was the end goal for their music and how did that affect their processes? And it turned out that everyone had such different goals for what they were doing and different ways of existing within the electronic community and that really influenced how they worked, what technology they used, if they used it at all, if they were live performers in their own work, or whether they saw their electroacoustic practice as an extension of predominately instrumental practice. And that was so interesting to me because I hadn't delved into the work of any of them and it wasn't' because I wasn't interested, I think it was because in my earlier classes, I hadn't even been aware that they existed or had any direction towards them and as soon as I found that, I felt more reassured in what I was doing because it was a little bit different to what other students were doing at the time. I was very interested in the acousmatic way of composing and fixed media, rather than live electronic or performance or installation or messing about with large diffusion, which are all wonderful things to do but it wasn't what I resonated with. But I felt so much more confident after that,

that you can exist as an electroacoustic composer in so many ways and your goals will dictate how you work. You don't have to have the equipment or necessarily have expensive plug-ins to make beautiful and striking music, and that was something that every participant said to me – that it didn't matter about the technology and it didn't necessarily matter about your know-how after a certain point. It was about your ideas and how well you executed them, and that has weight across all different genres and that was really comforting in a way and it gave me the confidence to say, "well, if I'm not interested in this area of the technology then I won't pursue it, I'll spend my time pursing what I want to pursue and I will find my own voice." And After that I did find that I found my own voice and before that I was struggling. So that was a truly beneficial research topic for me, and I got so much out of it and from then on it was easier for me to seek out other female electroacoustic composers and think about the ways we all create music and why we create it and from there listening to different female and gender-diverse artists, and also appreciating male artists as being one section of electroacoustic music rather than their practice and their music as being the whole thing, and that made me appreciate it more too so it benefitted my listening to everyone, and I think that it could do the same for all students. The more that we show a broad and encompassing list of examples from people across different walks of life, different races, different experiences and different genders, then our students will be more well-equipped how their music fits into that world.

VP: And because you're teaching now has that been something you've been actively been doing, offering a wider range of repertoire for students to study and interact with to begin with?

AW: Yes, across listening and across research, across the sort of academic ideas that are coming out of this space. It's not that I'm trying to push an agenda, I'm trying to tailor my musical listening homework for my student, but now I'm more equipped with the knowledge that no way is the right way, I think that I can customise my recommendations and who we talk about with each student according to their goals, and that has been a really wonderful outcome in being really switched on in this space, so I definitely do try to lead by example about who to listen to and why we listen to them and what we can learn from them as well.

VP: Indeed and when it comes to a listening practice, by the time you listen you can't really tell the identity – gender or race of the artist – purely through listening, so by encouraging this broader engagement with what is happening out there, it's not really pushing a political or feminist agenda, it's about trying to listen to some good art and music.

AW: Well for me it is about pushing an agenda, and it's about pushing the agenda of a well-rounded listening practice! And you can't have that unless you're listening to a really broad range of styles and processes and technological priorities in your composers, and you only get that if you listen to everyone and you are able to listen to everyone, and you're encouraged to and I think undertaking that research on and asking 'There was female sound in electroacoustic music" and surprise, surprise there was not. But to a certain extent, because there were one or two token female representatives of electroacoustic music who perhaps had a mainstream sound within acousmatic music in particular, I expected that was the path I had to go down and it just wasn't. So I hope that my experience and undertaking of that research can hopefully benefit the next lot of students coming through so they feel like they are open to exploring whatever pathways and styles and genres they want, whether that be very aggressively spatially electroacoustic music in that very British-style, or mixed music which is very ambient and gentle, being able to embrace that and be proud of that and this is what I've decided that I want to do and this electroacoustic music is just as electroacoustic music as yours is which is more technological or interdisciplinary.

VP: Actually, I will make your thesis accessible for anyone who might be interested in your research in a link below and in the transcript because I think it's excellent. And on another note, you were kind enough to send me this brilliant list of recommended resources for me to look at, which I'll also provide below, and is it right that a lot these have informed your research and your thinking?

AW: So at the time of my Honours research I was really inspired by the 'Female Pressure Network,' which is an amazing network of female and non-binary composers who come together every two years and release a collection of statistics about electronic music festivals, concerts and the percentages of programming of male composers versus female, non-binary and people existing on the gender spectrum. And it's so illuminating to see where things have remained the same, where things have gotten better and they've just released their 2020 statsitics which will obviously slightly be affected by the cancellation of many events but I'm sure will still be illuminating. And that was a starting point for me in my research there and I think that two particularly influential bodies of research existing outside and inside the academic sphere were the two keynote artists from Australasian Computer Music conference this year, **Eve** Klein and Bridget **Chappell**, who both talked about how we can make electronic

music more inclusive and ways that we can encourage absolutely everyone to engage in that, whether it be the coding side of things, whether its an aesthetic side, so I would encourage anyone who's listening to go and view those two keynotes which are on the ACMC's Youtube page. So I think I'm really encouraged by people who have made huge waves in this field and that has absolutely influenced my teaching style and it makes me very mindful about how I'm teaching and the kinds of assumptions I'm imparting on my students. And another amazing book, which is a little bit older by now, is Tara Rodger's Pink Noises, which was really the original inspiration for my research. It's a compilation of interviews of different electroacoustic artists who talk about their very different approaches to composers whether that be improvised, live performance of fixed media and the different technologies they used from tape, turn tables all the way through to our modern technologies and how it's still relevant today and valuable art making, and so I still want to know more about how that applies in Australia, in our academic institutions, outside our academic institutions, and that's another valuable resource for people to delve into and keep reading if you can. It's a deep dive but it's just mind-blowing, the ways people approach electronic music and the results they get out of those composing processes is so inspiring.

VP: Definitely, thank you for sharing us and I love that there's a whole body of research being amassed, everywhere, but particularly in the world of music tech and electroacoustic music, all through to your own research and the teaching you're doing now at the Sydney Con. I think it will have an impact because I remember the Con's studios and music tech department being entirely male when I was there.

AW: That's absolutely right! And I hope that, I don't care if I was hired for playing the gender card because I know I have something unique to offer, and regardless of why I ended up there it matter what I impart and whether it does in fact have the desired result and have an impact on people's assumptions about electroacoustic composition, and who can teach it and who's an authority on it. I might actually share an anecdote. When I was asked to take over from another tutor who was teaching my class, we talked about some of the assumptions of the students coming into the class being a first-year class, people would be coming in with no history of tertiary involvement in electroacoustic music, how to learn about it and who learns about it. And one student, a male student, remarked to another student "Oh there's girls in this class" very audibly and according to the tutor, he sort of saw this female student shrink in on herself and become very shy, and I think knowing that the first student meant no harm by it

and he was making a joke, it just goes to highlight the underlying assumptions there are in that age-groups and the cohort about who would be learning electronic music. And that made me nervous coming in and I thought "what if my students don't think I'm an authority on what I'm teaching." And I don't know all the answers to everything because I'm one person and we all have different ways of arriving at what we're good at, and so there are times where I don't have all the answers and I constantly worry that my authority on absolutely everything that I teach is undermined, but I also think there's this thing with me where I want to please everyone and I want to be liked and respected by everyone which is just not going to happen. And I think it's been a real journey accepting that even the way that I've come to where I am now has been different to other people's journey, it doesn't mean my practice is any less valuable or thought out, it's certainly not ignorant and there will be gaps in everyone's knowledge and there should be as we all have to specialise in different things. And some people are a jack of all trades, and that's a part of their compositional voice, but it's what we specialise in which makes it an incredible patchwork – a quilt of electroacoustics music – and I think we need to embrace that and what we're good at. And getting back to what I'm saying, I was quite nervous coming into teaching and being one person, and being quite fresh out of a tertiary institutions myself on whether I would be seen on having enough authority on teaching others, and I would say there are a lot of different people like me at tertiary institutions who are wondering if they're equipped to teach and having this imposter syndrome, and that's a journey and a growth that we have to figure out ourselves, and is something that continues, even though we know that we are fit to teach. I think that because of our experiences and the context of where we are it can be hard to overcome that and an ongoing issue and development.

VP: I think you also learn while doing the teaching as it's also a practice in and of itself.

AW: yes, And allowing yourself to make mistakes but not doubting to a point where you actually undermine your own effort to teach people.

VP: That's incredibly useful advice to any up and coming teachers or already teachers!

AW: Absolutely! Don't undermine your own confidence by doubting yourself. You can doubt yourself in order to become better but I think that losing confidence because you're worried what people might think about your practice and how you work, and whether you teaching that will be damaging to how they will learning electroacoustic music, I don't think that's helpful

to consider. I think we need not to discount those anxieties if they're going to make us better teachers, but not to let it undermine you, and knowing that what you share is going to be valuable and will allow people to find their own voice rather than copy yours.

VP: And I think that's an absolutely perfect note to end! Allowing people to find their own voice rather than copy yours – you're definitely a teacher. Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and words, and wisdom with all of us and your music.

AW: Not at all! I'm so honoured and privileged to be part of this podcast, and I always enjoy chatting to you and we don't get to chat enough considering we went to uni together and this is such an exciting project and I'm really glad that I can add my perspective to it.

VP: Pleasure's mine. And as usual I'll link all the info about your thesis, your list of resources and your music down below. Thanks to everyone who's listening and catch you all next time!

RESOURCES

Alexis Weaver

https://www.alexismarieweaver.com/
https://makingwavesnewmusic.com/pastcomposers/alexis-weaver/

Listen and Buy Alexis' Music:
https://alexismarieweaver.bandcamp.com/
https://soundcloud.com/alexis-marie-weaver

Alexis' research and thesis:
Alexis Weaver: Increasing the Volume: The Creative Diversity and Future Visions of Female Electroacoustic Composers in Australia
https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/SCM/article/view/12675

Alexis Weaver: Small Diffusion, Big Impact: Composing Immersive Acousmatic Works for the Non-Ideal Listening Space
http://computermusic.org.au/media/2019/12/ACMC2019Proceedings.pdf

References and Resources

Bridget Chappell - Founder of Sound School, a project upskilling and celebrating marginalised voices in electronic music.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQHoSJhcWcY

Eve Klein - "Makers, Gearheads and Genre Police" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6muRCIp3Kg&t=1784s

Tara Rodgers. *Pink Noises.* Can be accessed on-line via this link -
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/449269/pdf

http://www.femalepressure.net/fempress.html Female Pressure is an excellent database and data collection group who raise awareness of electronic artists around the world. The 2020 survey can be accessed here: https://femalepressure.wordpress.com