Revue & Corrigée
Interviewed by Rui Eduardo Paes
November 2003

Revue & Corrigée: You're using more the laptop than the drums now. Is it happening with you what happened, for instance, with Kaffee Matthews, who gave up her violin to concentrate exclusively on the electronics? We can still hear you playing percussion on your most recent CDs, namely with Toshimaru Nakamura, and you continue to do solo concerts with your metals, but to focus on a sampling work. Why?

Jason Kahn: I don't feel that, as you've said here about Kaffe Matthews who gave up her violin (and I don't know if that's true, in fact) that I have given up the drums for working with the computer—to focus on sampling work, as you put it. For me, the computer is a means of delving deeper into the nature of the drums: their sound. I don't feel that I am using the laptop more than the drums; I see the laptop more as an adjunct to the drums than as a replacement—it extends the sound of the drums, focusing in on and expanding the resonances of the instrument. Which are precisely the qualities of the drums which have always interested me most. If anything, I would call what I am doing "extended percussion," focusing on the sound of the instrument and extending it with the computer. Incidentally, rhythm is also still an important factor, though in recent years I would say the rhythm I am working with occurs more on a micro-level: the shifting sonorities of resonanting drums and metals. This approach to rhythm can also be heard on a solo CD of mine entitled "Drums and Metals," which has no electronic processing whatsoever.
In the last few years I have embraced a simpler approach to the playing of the drums, concentrating more on their sound. The computer is a useful tool for expanding on this way of playing and of dissecting and magnifying the sound of the instrument.

Revue & Corrigée: You started playing in punk bands and I know that you love jazz since you were a teenager. Do punk and jazz, each in it's different way, of course, have any influence on the music you play now?

Jason Kahn: Very early on I realised that the spirit of punk (and by punk, I have to emphasize here the punk music I was listening to in the mid to late 70's—the time when I first started to go out to clubs and discover live music) and jazz (and by jazz I would mean the very early years of be bop, the post-bop-into-free jazz of Ornette Coleman and Eric Dolphy's groups, to the even less structural approaches of late-John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor, etc;) were not so far apart. For me, the best jazz existed on the edge of disaster, where the musicians pushed the music into regions where they themselves didn't know where they were going. They took risks. Punk, too, was for me about taking risks and pushing the boundaries of the performative and musical aspects of a concert. Of course, often in punk groups the musicians were less technically accomplished on their instruments than jazz musicians (which isn't so important for me, actually) but their spirit, the expression of their music moved in the same realms as many creative jazz musicians.
So, to answer your question, yes, in a way punk and jazz still have an impact, albeit indirectly, on my music today—which is to say, for me risk is still very important. I want to push myself beyond what I can play, beyond what I can imagine playing. Only in this blank space, where one is faced with complete failure can new ground be discovered. And this holds true not only for myself as a performing musician but also for the audience: they are a part of this process; they are taking a risk and discovering right along with the performing musician. It is this exchange between audience and performer which makes live music so vital and which was, of course, such a big part of the initial stages in punk music: to reviatlize rock; get it out of the stadium dinosaur mode and bring it back down to a level where the audience had an influence on the music, where they could partake in the creative process right along with the musicians on stage.

Revue & Corrigée: And tell me, with that background, what was the click that made you play experimental music?

Jason Kahn: Without getting into any broad-ranging semantic discussions about what "experimental music" means, I would generally say that people who are reaching for something lying just beyond their grasp or existing only in their dreams will have to go through a process of experimentation to reach their destination. This process of seeking to discover new ideas can only be reached by taking risks, by being willing to fail and to accept failure as the starting point for something new. And I think with what I said above about punk music and risk that it should be clear why I am interested in an approach to making music which has no pre-conceived notions of right or wrong, success or failure: i.e., experimental music.

Revue & Corrigée: In your electronic music, or the one you play with other people, it seems to be present a great influence of the 60's minimalism and drone music, namely the one composed and played by La Monte Young and Tony Conrad. I know that's one of the main characteristics of current electronica, but we certainly don't expect that from a percussionist (even if there's others doing this, like Stephan Mathieu), because of the nature of his instruments. Do you chose to do that to run from percussive and rhythmic parameters (even if asymetrical), to find other sound worlds?

Jason Kahn: As I mentioned before here, I don't find that the music I am now doing is non-rhythmic, or in fact less rhythmic than I used to play—it is rhythmic in a different way. The reverberation of sound waves spreading across a pool of water would be a better analogy for my current approach to rhythm: you throw one stone in the water and slowly waves of sound expand outwards from the impact point; throw another stone nearby and the sound waves from this stone criss cross with the waves of the firs stone, and so on.
I am interested in the juxtaposition of rhythmic events, gradually unfolding and creating new rhythms in the autonomous mode of sound expanding and contracting, interfering and arriving in unison. The approach is polyrhythmic, but not in the sense of three-against-four, seven-against-five; but in autonomous rhythmic events combining and splitting; and in this process creating various rhythmic combinations, both symetrical and asymetrical.
As much as possible, I want to let the music form itself, let the various rhythms permutate, cross, disappear. I am trying to get as close as possible to a generative approach to music, while still being an active partcipant in the process as the sound develops.
Incidentally, you mention here the music of Tony Conrad, LaMonte Young, etc. and their use of drones as an implication of non-rhythmic music. In fact, drones are also rhythmic as a drone is comprised of sound waves pulsing at certain frequencies. These pulsing sound waves are by definition rhythmic, as they occur at precise intervals.
When I played in Arnold Dreyblatt's group The Orchestra of Excited Strings, I used to spend a good deal of time before each concert or rehearsal tuning the cimbalon I played. Each string had to be tuned to a certain interval using a tone generator Dreyblatt had built specially for his tuning system. When a string was out of tune with the tone generator there would be an incredible "beating" between the two sounds; completely in tune there was no beating whatsoever. Now, here we are taling about "beats," which might not be "fat beats" but are nonetheless beats and rhythm, as such.
In strikes me as odd that this approach to rhythm should be, as you put it here, unexpected from a percussionist. Like a string, the skin of a drum also reverberates, also "beats." It is precisely this kind of beat that I am interested in now.

Revue & Corrigée: You said in other interviews you gave that you always tried to find a way towards simplicity, giving a special attention to the snare drum or learning how to play the daf, a Middle Eastern frame drum, or the tombak, an Iranian finger drum. What you didn't explained is this fascination for simplicity, that we can find even in your computer music – the use of reduced

sound materials and processes. Explain me now, please.

Jason Kahn: For me, what is important in music is the expression of an idea, of an atmoshphere of a certain time and place. Technical prowess is not something to be avoided; rather, technical prowess in place of what I want to express is to be avoided. For this reason, I try to find simpler ways of expressing myself which is, in fact, a way of letting sound express itself.

This approach naturally carried over into my work with the computer—and especially with the computer, as with no other instrument I've played have I been faced with such an unlimited "technical" potential. The technique of using a computer exists on a meta level—we are not hampered by indadequate motoric skills, only by the limits of our imagination. It is precisely for this reason that a lot of computer-based music, approaches a complexity far outweighing its expression of ideas or emotions.

It took me several years of searching for a way to integrate the computer with live percussion, to use the computer as an extension, and to have the two work together on a level of balance. After much trial and error, finding this equilbirium ultimately entailed the reduction of material (the percussion) and the simplification of sound processes (the computer). This does not add up to a "simple" music, rather to a music which works on two levels, the electronic and acoustic; and where these two levels coexist mutually.

Revue & Corrigée: Most of what you do with other musicians is totally improvised. In those occasions, do you consider yourself an improviser, in the same way someone like Evan Parker or Cecil Taylor are improvisers, players of "improvised music", or you don't give a shit to improvisation, considering this only a process to achieve other purposes?

Jason Kahn: Very broadly speaking, I would say that in the grand universe of improvising musicians, we are all approaching the making of music in somewhat the same spirit. Clearly, what I am doing with my music involves a different approach to the instrument than Evan Parker or Cecil Taylor, who both are known for their physicality in playing, but nevertheless improvisation is a vitally important for me.

In solo gigs, do you use to improvise around your compositions or you only interpret them?

In my solo performances all music is improvised—which is to say, I have no score, no road map. I might know how I will start, but this is all. And, in fact, I'd rather not know more than this. The real question is: how much is really improvisation? Each of us has a repertoire of ideas, of stragegies, of approaches. Even when we consciously try to avoid the repetition of ideas, they are still there; and to conciously avoid something would only lend an unnatural censor to the creative process. I don't want to avoid anything (nor do I want to repeat myself). More importantly, I want to remain open for the music as it unfolds. I can't always control what I am doing. I work a lot with feedback and the computer is far from predicatable in its processes—many things can happen unexpectedly in a peformance. Disaster is never very far away. Only by taking an improvisatory approach can I take advantage of all these inherent factors, factors which can spur me on to discovering new creative processes.

Revue & Corrigée: Which one do you think is the most important in your music: improvisation or composition? Or do you think that improvisation is already a form of composition? If so, tell me why, because it's not a very peacefull idea.

Jason Kahn: As I stated before, improvisation is most important for me, especially when playing live. When I am composing–which is to say, working on the computer, mixing sound, creating a new piece of music—improvisation is also important, as much of the sound I am mixing started at one point or another as part of an improvisatory process. And, in fact, the thought process behind the act of mixing, of placing sounds together, is also for me a form of improvisation. I cannot, for example, do a mix too many times. After a while, the process loses its spontaneity. This is precisely the case with improvised music—it exists in the moment. How can we capture the same

feeling twice? We can't. This moment is there and then it is gone. I like to take a similair approach to non-live playing, to composition. I want to work within the moment of creative impulse, be inspired by this and capture this inspiration in organised sound: a composition.

Revue & Corrigée: You're an American living in Europe (Zurich) and playing in European and Japanese contexts. At least in my opinion, there's a difference between those geographical approaches, even in the electroacoustic field, where we sense more a globalisation of concepts and practices. Do you feel playing European or Japanese, or this is a false idea? If so, does that mean that each one's cultural background don't influence anymore the creation of music in today's multimedia world?

Jason Kahn: I grew up in America. I moved to Europe when I was 30. In a strange, de-contexualized way, I still feel very much American. I mean, I still have a very strong sense of the atmosphpere of growing up in that country. There are so many factors which comprise our cultural orientation. It would be impossible for me to even approach discussing this here, as the entire experiential process exists on so many levels, many of them incomprehensible or not even known to us. But, to answer your question: no, I don't feel that I am playing european or japanese or american. I feel that I am playing myself. And in that space and moment of playing with other muscicans, regardless of their cultural orientation, I only experience the sound as such. Now, I am only speaking for my way of approaching music. Maybe for someone playing in other more stylistically regimented contexts (ethnic musics, for example) this might be different.
This is not to say, however, that I feel one's cultural background has no impact on the music one plays. We've all developed differently, grown up in different environments, times, places—all these factors naturally affect how we make music. To say exactly how would be another discussion, and probably a discussion which would not be of much interest to me.
One thing I've learned from playing in many different countries, is that sound is universal. This might sounds banal or esoteric, but I don't mean it that way at all. What I want to say is, when we are playing together, making sound together, in sound together, then our cultural backgrounds pale in comparison to the sound we are creating—for it is this sound which is the unifying factor, which makes it possible for us to communicate, although we might not even speak the same language. Sound communicates so much more.

Revue & Corrigée: You're a traveller, always moving around to play (like in Portugal and Greece, recently) and to know other cultures and realities, and you already lived in several cities, around the world. Your own life represent the present state of creative music and specially improvised music, a nomad state. It even seems to me that improvisation is reinventing geography, approaching musicians and publics from different countries in new ways. What do you think about that?

Jason Kahn: One of my basic problems with live performance is this concept of being a "peformer." Which means, being on a stage, playing "for" an "audience." When we think in these terms, the idea of approaching audiences from different countries in different ways is a mute point. We are not approaching the audience, the audience is approaching us. We are not playing "for" the audience, we are playing "to" the audience. Of course, we can sense them, and some audiences might be, culturally speaking, more quiet or loud than others, but in the end we can not approach them because the nature of conventional peformance practices excludes any real contact with the audience. If I could, I'd rather not play on a stage, not give a concert. The ideal situation for me would be something between a sound installation and a peformance, where the people could come and go, could walk up to me, see what I was doing, walk away. Only in this context could I imagine being able to approach audiences, as you ask here.
In terms of approaching the musicians one plays with around the world, the answer is, as I stated before, on stage we are in the sound. Sound is the unifying factor. This is especially significant these days in the face of extreme travel: flying to Tokyo for a weekend to play; being in Chicago a

couple days later. Within the parameters of this extreme travel and cultural de-contextualisation, the idea of sound as unifying factor becomes even more important. We can carry our cultural baggage with us, but what good will it do when we are moving around so much? We might not even have the chance to assimilate the new culture we find ourselves in, or to give the other musicians there the chance to experience our culture through us. We have to rely on sound as the unifying element, transporting us beyond cultural and geographical contexts.

Revue & Corrigée: You're a player of "extreme music", in the sense that you focus on extremes (noise, silence, ecstatic structures or no structures at all). Does this radical approach to music correspond to a radical philosophy running your day-to-day life? In other words: do you think and live what (in the way) you play? Because, you know, there's abstract, innovative visual artists that listen to classical music while painting and vote Republican…

Jason Kahn: This question brings to mind the title of Val Wilmers famous book "As Serious as Your Life," which was a collection of portraits of—broadly speaking—60's free jazz musicians. I cannot speak for, as you termed them "innovative" artists who vote republican, etc—maybe this is for them nothing strange; maybe this is them, as they are (or as they see themselves–nothing strange in this).
As for myself, I'd have to ask, "what would be a radical philosophy to everyday life?" Maybe the most radical people are precisely the ones who vote republican but produce the most extreme artwork—what could be more extreme?
In the context of Val Wilmers book title, I'd have to say that I approach my life exactly in this context: the music I make, the way I live, involve the same energy, the same impulse. But I hope not too "serious."

Revue & Corrigée: Laptop music is being criticized as a non-performative way of playing live. In the improvisation domain, which is/was considered the most performative of all musics, because it lived only in the place and at the moment of its playing, there's much discussion about the stillness of musicians that only move to click in the mouthpad, not making any physical effort or expressing any emotions. The discussion covers also the current tendency to edit improvisation recordings for CD releases, "composing" in studio what was played spontaneously on stage (I don't know if it's your case). What do you think about all that?

Jason Kahn: First of all, in terms of laptop music being non-performative, I'd just like to say that I personally know several laptop musicians who are anything but boring to watch or non-performative–they rock. And I've seen many "conventional" (piano, guitar, saxophone, etc) musicians who showed less emotion than the coldest laptop musician (and, by the way, an icy stage presence can sometimes conveigh more emotion and presence than the archtypical rock god, flailing his guitar in the spotlight…).
Secondly, when you're sitting in the back of a huge auditorium what do you see of the musicians on stage? You see ants. You see a person at the piano. At the most you can see their head moving. But their hands? You see nothing. What then is the difference between this and a laptop musician?
Why does music have to be peformative? What about acousmatique music? What about listening? In my opinion, music is about sound. Performance is aboaut other things. One could argue then, "What's the point of going out to a concert? Why not just stay at home and listen to a CD?" The point is, a concert exists in a certain space and time. And we partake of this moment; our presence, whether we want to acknowledge this or not, affects the musicans on stage. Otherwise, they too would stay at home. And we are all in this together, even if there is nothing to see. The space we hear the concert in is not our living room, and neither is it for the musicians who play the music. All these factors make a live performance experience what it is. I often close my eyes when I listen to live music. I don't care if people want to jump around on stage, but this is certainly not a prerequisite for me having a satisfying live musical experience.

In terms of editing improvisational recordings for CD releases, this has always occurred, even before the advent of computers. The only difference now is, with the hard disc we can edit more intricately than before. But why does music have to be a certain way? There used to be a group in Los Angeles, whose name I won't mention here, who on every album they released made sure to print "all improvised." So what? Is that like some kind of excuse for the music not being good, if it's not? Or for you to stand in mouth gaping disbelief at this disclaimer that these musicians could improvise? For me, totally irrelevent. Especially in terms of improvised music, which to be truly experienced, must be heard live. A recording might give you an indication of what transpired at the particular moment the music was recorded, but it can never, as far as I'm concerned, approach the live experience. And taken in this context, what's wrong with editing a recording? If people what to edit a live recording and still write on the CD cover "all improvised," then so what? For me, the music is what is important, not how it was made.

Revue & Corrigée: Tell me what are your impressions about your duo with Nakamura (four CDs already!) and about your cooperation with Gunter Muller and the Japanese Utah Kawasaki and Tetuzi Akiyama. Were those encounters the consequence of musical affinities with the musicians in question? What other colaborative projects do you have for the near future, or should we expect more solo projects, something that you seem to prefer?

Jason Kahn: Playing with Toshimaru Nakamura was always a kind of unspoken event between us. We never really discussed the music we played—we discussed a lot of other things—but in terms of our recordings, our peformances we just basically played. We shared a common approach, and this made it possible to work on such an intuitive level, which is perhaps the best level to collaborate on.

In terms of Gunter Muller, Utah Kawasaki, Tetuzi Akiayama and all the other musicians who I've had good collaborations with, I'd say that the basis for the music I made with them was certainly in part a musical affinity. Too much affinity could be non-stimulating; too many differences prohibitive. More important, though, is perhaps how I get along with other musicians on a personal level. Generally speaking, the better this is, the better the music.

Right now I am working on a recording with Steve Roden. After this I will finish a new solo CD for the Sirr label in Lisbon. In March I will be on tour in the United States, playing solo and also together with John Hudak, Greg Kelley, Bhob Rainey and Jason Lescalleet.