

PROFILE: JULIE ZHU

Julie Zhu is a composer, artist and carillonist. Her work is conceptual and transdisciplinary, operating on an expansive definition of algorithm, including without limitation the experience of unexpected outcomes resulting from parametrised processes. Her research interests include the creative and ethical use of AI and machine-learning in the arts; this is the focus of her Presidential Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of Michigan. As an advocate for intermedia composition, Zhu collaborates with artists and musicians globally. The results of these collaborations have been exhibited at and performed in studios and residencies throughout Europe, North America, and Asia, including Carnegie Hall (NYC), Herbst Theatre (San Francisco), IRCAM (Paris), digitIZMir (Izmir), Tetramatyka Festival (Lviv), Sansuši (Latvia), Chicago Home Theater Festival, Miami Design District, College Band Director's National Association and ICMC (Shenzhen). As a composer she has received numerous commissions, most notably from Radio France, GMEM, San Francisco Contemporary Music Players and the University of Chicago Carillon.



Julie Zhu, photo credit
Michiko Theurer

Your creative interests are very wide-ranging. Are you conscious of a particular focus for your work and is this changing?

At the moment I am curious about AI and what kind of relationship it has to artists, creators and audiences. Building on Walter Benjamin's notion of the 'aura' and its shifting significance in the face of mechanical reproduction, I'm currently exploring the forms in which AI is further disrupting traditional artistic practices during this new period of technological inflection. Importantly, my approach seeks to understand the manner in which these changes both threaten and expand the creative landscape. In my own compositional work I am experimenting with text-generation models as well as deep learning. As an example, I am currently creating a visual co-performer to augment past work I have developed and performed on the sonification of physical creation in the form of drawings created by hand in real time. My artistic work has always been driven by concept and my desire to create a felt experience within the constraint of the idea, which fortunately crosses all disciplinary boundaries and allows me to learn new things for each project.

That relationship between 'concept' and 'felt experience' is very evident in your work. Each piece has a strong overall identity but there's also lots of fantasy in the moment-to-moment detail. How do you achieve that balance?

When I think about the works that have been important to me, I've either experienced them just once and the concepts inspired by the experience live on in my memory; or they're a consistent part of my daily life, like favourite records on rotation, or a painting in a museum that I visit like a friend when in town. The works in the

former category are usually what I term musical epigrams: they have a powerful idea, one that is novel or surprising, and the idea is elegantly executed in an unusually clever or concise way. I sometimes compare creating art with creating a mathematical proof. Both are a demonstration of a creative idea, with certain assumptions or context, and the creation lies in manipulating these givens with a certain level of craft to convince the audience of the artist's intended conclusion, however open those conclusions may ultimately be. How one gets there, whether by brute force or a clever trick, or years of meticulous research, or with the aid of a computer, can determine how beautiful a proof is, how elegant and, to me, also how successful a music composition can be. But there is a third and last component of a musical epigram: its consideration of the human condition. This is where 'felt experience' comes in and when I'm most considerate of the audience. I'm a sucker for sentimentality, and I want people to feel what I feel. How does one balance thinking and feeling? Not sure I'm qualified to get into metaphysics. . .

I am intrigued by the way in which your instrumental music seems to grow out of the nature of the instruments, but also out of the history of their playing and the sort of music they have played (I'm thinking of forest, which seems both Baroque and folkly). Is this something you are conscious of doing?

I feel so lucky to be a composer. But I believe that an artist should make work of one's time to say something, to represent something of the world. I take the historical affordances of instruments (as in, say, Vivaldi's viola d'amore concertos) and spin them around in internet time, flattening everything as if on the side of a large, amusement-park teacup. Caves are wonderful metaphors for our time now: without sedimentation, an object from hundreds of thousands of years ago can lie next to one that's only been there 50 years.

How does your work as a composer relate to your activity as a carillonneur?

I love playing carillon and then walking out of the tower knowing that I just rained sound down on people, but no one knows it was me. There are two kinds of power there: the projection of sound as ambient experience and, for me, anonymity. While I have always enjoyed this experience, it simultaneously raises uncomfortable questions regarding surveillance, the unchecked power of institutions and the responsibility of public art.

Traps are good for artists. In a concert hall, bound by propriety, people don't leave easily even if they don't like what they're hearing. But then maybe, when they're forced to give the work more time, a transformation can happen. Many of my pieces are characterised by constraints: whether it is putting a percussionist (or myself) in a wooden box, drawing circles that are amplified through a speaker dome or hiding the harpsichordist and keyboard in a cardboard house with live video.

For the performer, the removal of the audience allows freedom of expression without judgement. Within anonymity, a better aural experience can be crafted if only because one sense is allowed to flex with the absence of a stronger sense. If human ears were as powerful as human eyes, what form would books take? Even when we cannot see the performer, the music the performer creates has aura. Even if the listener discovers liveness after the music has already happened, there is then an understanding of the time and place where the musical act took place. There is context. While the memory of the work is shortly suspended, our collective dialogue continues to shift.

This suggests that you have a keen sense of the relationship between your work and its listeners; how do you think this collective dialogue will shift?

I think it's important not to overdetermine how any relationship may shift and develop over time. In this context I think a lot about building trust. What does it mean for a composer to do what they promise? For me, as an actively growing composer of new, experimental music, I am still building trust with listeners. With the continued emergence of technology that seems inexorably to thin the traditional barriers between creators and their audiences, and also to provide novel opportunities for collaboration, I believe that the role of trust can only grow more essential in the future.