

Leah Asher embraces both knowledge and instinct in improvisations for Re:Sound

by Stephanie Manning



“A lot of people have preconceived ideas about what free improv is, and that it means everything is totally random,” violinist Leah Asher said in a recent interview, speaking from her home in New York City. “But there is a total spectrum of the amount of determinacy in music, and I like to think about where I am on that spectrum.” Also a violist, composer, and visual artist, Asher recently recorded a series of improvisations for the Cleveland Uncommon Sound Project’s 2021 Re:Sound Festival.

As for where Asher sees herself on the spectrum of determinacy, she said the answer is somewhere in the middle. “I have a practice of developing ideas, either with certain techniques or certain sound worlds, and then picking a few of those to ruminate on during improvisation.” This approach makes for a mixture of planned and spontaneous elements, allowing her to both make decisions beforehand and create form in the moment.

The four short improvisations, each about two to five minutes long, were recorded in a gallery in Manhattan. After performing in mostly dry spaces for recording projects over the past year, Asher said the location’s acoustics stood out. “That was the most reverberant space I had been in since the start of the pandemic, so it was nice to be playing in a really live space.”

Though the violinist recorded for almost two hours, the final set is about fifteen minutes in total. “I recorded a whole bunch of material and then selected what I thought made a nice collection,” she said. When deciding which improvisations to pick, she focused on variety and contrast.

“There’s a pizzicato one, so that’s a very specific kind of style, and there’s one that’s much more free and includes a lot of different techniques,” she said. “The first one has a lot of airy enharmonic sounds, and the last one has almost a bit of a tonal feeling to it to close things out.”

Having just a camera and the sound engineer in the room with her made for an unusual performing experience. “It did feel pretty strange, especially because I was recording so much,” she said. “It’s a very different feeling to not be able to build up towards the audience’s energy.”

Though Asher’s compositions have been programmed at previous Re:Sound festivals, this is her first time performing in the event. The Festival was virtual this year, but the Oberlin College and Conservatory graduate said she would love to one day revisit Northeast Ohio. “I love those kinds of opportunities to meet other performers and experience what they have to share, so I was sad to miss meeting people in person and hearing them play.”

As live performances begin to return, Asher hopes the industry will benefit from a new perspective. “As we’re coming back around, I’m hoping that people will have a bit more patience and kindness towards each other with music-making — realizing how precious our opportunities are, and how quickly they can disappear.”

Asher’s improvisations are available online for free through Wednesday, June 30. Register for the Re:Sound Festival [here](#) to receive an access code.

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