



**Theresa Wong  
Practicing Sands**

**Practicing Sands** by Theresa Wong was released in September 2022 on the Bay Area label fo'c'sle

<https://theresawong.bandcamp.com/album/practicing-sands>

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Theresa Wong and Frantz Lorient met for the first time in 2005, when they were both invited by bassist Joëlle Léandre to perform in Paris. Since then, they have met on a regular basis in the US and in Europe, collaborating and touring as a duo or with other musicians. Theresa and Frantz share diverse interests and are both important contributors to *Recordedness*. They both recently released a solo record and the following conversation is an exchange concerning the very special act of soloing and recording it.

**Frantz Lorient:** Could you introduce yourself and tell us what you do as an artist?

**Theresa Wong:** I'm a composer, cellist, and vocalist interested in exploring the outer limits of creative music making. My work spans the areas of improvisation, composition, just intonation, song forms, and intermedia performance.

According to you, what is so special about playing and performing solo?

You are opening up a direct channel between you and the audience. There is a heightened sense of care that you are leading your listeners through a space that you've created.

Do you think that having a solo experience and activity can be important and have an impact on your relationship with the collective practice?

Definitely- having a solo practice allows you to be very grounded in yourself and your sound, which makes playing with others richer. However, I know a lot of great musicians who prefer collective music making.

How is releasing a solo record different from releasing a record with a collective ensemble?

There is a sense of elasticity in the fact that you can shape it however you decide.

But with that comes a greater feeling of responsibility too, since it all comes back to you - whether in performing or releasing solo. How was the process of creating and releasing *While Whirling*<sup>1</sup> different from your other collaborative projects?

For *While Whirling*, like you, I had that feeling of full responsibility. Although, it was really a collaborative work at many different levels. The executive producer (Peter Kolovos) was extremely supportive about all my proposals (the music, the idea of using the art of Mark Younkell for the cover, the poem by Eliot Cardinaux for the tracks' titles). So I'd say this record is a collective work in the end. It was different in the sense that I wanted a "piece of art" and not an object concerned only about the music. I like the idea that some people would just put the cover somewhere as an art picture. It was probably different from a musical collaborative work in the sense that I didn't have to negotiate any of my ideas or conceptual intentions.

I was wondering what was the original idea behind *Practicing Sands* and what was the process? How is it different from the other records like *Venice Is A Fish*<sup>2</sup> or *The Unlearning*<sup>3</sup> (which isn't a solo record but nevertheless under your name)?

*Practicing Sands* is really a result of many years of exploring the cello and voice. That said, it's simply a snapshot in time of something that is continually changing. As the title suggests, it is a practice and evolution of my approach to these two instruments. Even since recording the album, I feel my vocabulary has developed quite a bit. When I began playing the cello again in 2003 after an eight year hiatus, I was inspired by improvisers who were inventing their own sounds on their instruments. There is such beauty in making sounds in a personal way, rather than 'executing' something correctly, which is so emphasized in classical music. So, that has been an important intention to my work; the discovery and invention of new sounds. This same intention is behind *Venice Is A Fish* and *The Unlearning*. For those two albums, the driving question was *what can a song be?* But for *Practicing Sands*, the question I asked was *what can the cello and voice be?* Each piece grew out of a particular technique I was exploring, and developed into something that really straddles composition and improvisation. There are some very specific parameters in each piece such as tuning, technique, timing, phrases, etc., but the structure is there as a basis to improvise upon.

While listening to your record, as different as it is, it reminded me (among a lot of other things of course) of Abdul Wadud *By myself?* How do you feel about what a lot of people call "a personal language"? how do you deal with your influences?

I love that album by Abdul Wadud, so perhaps that influence comes through. My work also stems from the question, *how can I rediscover the core of the cello as wood and string and hair, or even simply as a tree?* This question really comes out of a sense of not belonging to any genre or tradition. In *Practicing Sands*, perhaps you hear influences of classical, folk, jazz, and the ever-evolving field of 'free' improvised music, but I think the variety of pieces also reflects a discomfort with settling into any particular genre. Instead, my focus is aimed at exploring the elemental qualities and nature of the materials at hand. With the cello, I explore a lot of basic string phenomena, from overtones of the harmonic series to glissandi to alternate tunings and detuned noise. There are many nuanced ways of plucking, bowing, and articulating the string as well as rhythmic and percussive explorations. I also explore the voice as melody, noise, primal utterances and sometimes more as a pure sin tone. I embrace the idea of a personal language. Yes, maybe it's a very individualistic and western way of viewing creativity, but I think a lot of beauty in art comes from the unique expression of an individual's spirit and energy. There are of course many exceptions to this. I embrace all of my influences and learn from them, but I aim to transform them in my own inner crucible somehow. How do *you* feel about the notion of a 'personal language' and dealing with influences?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.blackeditionsgroup.com/tw-s-frantz-loriot-while-whirling>

<sup>2</sup> <https://theresawong.bandcamp.com/album/venice-is-a-fish>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.tzadik.com/index.php?catalog=7725>

I used to have this conflictual relation with influences, somehow. It is quite inevitable to be influenced, inspired and affected by something or someone. Although, I've always got to a point where I started questioning my own influences with desire to detach myself from them to find something of "my own". I had that feeling especially with my first solo record *Reflections on an Introspective Path*. Back in those times, I was staying in New York City and was reading an interview of Marcel Duchamp where he was talking about unlearning - unlearning being a first step to get to creativity. For me, this text was pretty determinant! I consciously went through an "unlearning" process, tried to detach myself as much as I could from what I have learnt during my education and tried to build some kind of vocabulary in which I had pruned what I'd found irrelevant. I tried to get rid of all the material which somehow referred to my classical education. I wanted a rupture with my own past somehow, to create a language of my own. This is what I believed and in retrospect, I've realized that it was still there, of course, there were still some traces but it was morphed. After a few years, I have changed my perception about this question of "personal language" and influences. Today, I fully welcome all my influences. I accept them (which doesn't mean I don't stay critical towards them) as being part of me. I'd say that the personal language isn't something that belongs to me; it is part of me but it is mainly an entanglement of all the influences which go through me. Influences would be like moving lines, and an arrangement of these lines intersecting at a specific point would create a specific language in a given time. This point is constantly moving over time when a line, or more, would move out of this intersection point when some others would come in. And when there is no more movement, it may explain the reason why I go through "crises", being bored or feeling stuck with a frozen language. But basically, I try to detach the language or the vocabulary I am using from the idea of property. It isn't mine. The language I am using would be a sign or a trace, a connecting point of multiple influences which I would translate through my sensibility. I don't know if this makes sense?...

Let's bounce back to your record! The pizzicato technique has a very specific place here (only 2 pieces (maybe 3?) of 10 are with the bow). What has driven you to dig into that specific sound and technique? I was quite astonished by how you could really make hear different "temperaments" or "characters" just by using that specific technique. Listening to your record really stimulated my imagination. I was hearing different instruments than a cello. And it brings a very specific tonality to the whole record.

I agree with what you say about influences. There are a couple reasons why I gravitate towards pizzicato techniques on the cello, although I didn't intentionally weigh this album towards this technique. Firstly, there is a metaphysical connection to pizzicato and how the sound reverberates (albeit rather briefly), which I like; this feeling of 'igniting' the sound versus always being in control of it as with arco. You let go of the sound the moment you make it. I also feel a genetic predilection for the sounds of the guqin, an ancient 7-stringed Chinese zither. Playing that instrument requires a multitude of ways and subtle variations of striking the string with your fingers. I sense a kinship with the philosophical approach to playing the qin, which has to do with reflecting on nature in solitude. This circles back to Abdul Wadud's album, as I hear a quality in his playing which evokes a sort of 'private music'. But actually, there are just so many ways of playing the cello to explore, so more of the arco world will be coming on the next album!

Your voice has also quite an important role in your practice, more generally. How did you come to use it? what does it bring that your cello doesn't?

I sang in school choirs while growing up, but I came to use my voice as a primary instrument much later. One of the first catalysts came around 2003 when I was working as a designer at Fabrica, a center in northern Italy. (I had stopped playing music for about 8 years to pursue a career in design). Koichi Makigami came to do a workshop, and something really clicked for me. I discovered I had a great potential in my voice and as an improviser. During that period, I realized I wanted to get back to music and explore interdisciplinary performance. I began making songs and using my voice to explore abstract sounds and the materiality of language. Because I don't have any formal training with the voice, there is a certain freedom I feel on that instrument. But one of my main interests is combining the voice with the cello in ways that yields new timbres and sonic possibilities. I don't really consider it as 'singing and

playing', but rather as playing one instrument. Often, I aim for a timbral merging which creates a unique conglomerate sound.



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With your voice, you alternate between words/text and timbre and thinking of it, it reminded me of an interview I've heard from French clarinetist and singer Isabelle Duthoit who once said she never uses proper text when she is singing. She builds a vocabulary from sounds which would be present in every person's childhood and which we would leave behind or hide as we grow up and learn "proper" words and language. We express ourselves with words but leave these sounds full of meanings from our childhood behind. How do you perceive this relation between texts/words and timbre?

I really like that you mentioned this. I am very curious about accessing that experience of pure sensing from childhood before we learned how to speak. When we enter into this world, we are perceiving all vibrations - whether visual, tactile, or auditory, with a deep state of openness and reception. We are trying to make sense of everything. Just because we don't have words for things yet, we feel and experience very intensely through what are still abstract sounds and impressions. When we learn language, I believe we start to parcel sounds into categories of meaning as well as value them; for example, this sound is improper to make versus this one that is polite and sounds good. When I sing and vocalize with abstract sounds, I feel I'm tapping into this early state of play and a primal form of expression that is visceral rather than intellectual. I believe there is sentience and consciousness in every sound. No matter how abstract a sound is, it communicates something. So the world of timbres and abstract sounds generated with the voice is a vast language. As far as singing actual texts, I love constructing lyrics and finding ways to create imagery with words. At the same time, using language sometimes feels limiting because it places me in a culture. I write mostly in English, but sometimes when I sing those texts, I feel like I'm wearing a mask because Cantonese is my mother tongue, even though my knowledge of it is very basic. In a recent work, *Fluency of Trees*, I combined some texts in Italian and Cantonese - two languages that feel very internal and personal somehow - but I also played with abstracting the sounds to evoke that sense of clarity vs. obfuscation that we experience as infants, as well as belonging and not belonging to the cultures of those signifiers.

It seems that the melodic aspect and the songs are an important thing in your music. You manage to bounce around and navigate between "abstract" and melodic material quite naturally. Did you ever feel like making a sharp rupture between these two aspects and focusing entirely on one of them? I've personally felt that way with my own practice.

Actually, like this last piece I mentioned, I've been moving towards integrating everything even more intensely and blurring the lines further between these different areas. Perhaps it would be more compelling to focus on only one direction in an album for example, but I've always been inspired by composers who embrace both melody and abstraction, such as Berio, Cage, and Partch.

How would you consider this record? is it an art object or is it something like an archive (already)?

I see it as a snapshot in time of an ever-evolving practice. I hope people will continually return to it as an opening toward new directions.

You have released this record on your own label *fo'c'sle*<sup>4</sup>. Did you try to get it out on another label or was it a clear choice you would put it out on fo'c'sle from the beginning? Does releasing a record on a specific label influence your music in any way?

I pitched it to several labels but got turned down by all except one that wanted to release it two years later (and I was too impatient!). I usually make music before I know where I'm going to release it, so usually the label doesn't really influence me. Does it influence your music making?

I believe labels and their musical genres do not affect my music, or at least not anymore. For my last solo record, I was lucky enough to have a label such as Thin Wrist to support entirely my own musical visions and perspectives. It was the first time I was contacted by a label which wanted to produce and release something of mine before I recorded any music. At first, when I received the message, I even thought it was a joke... The only way it actually did affect my way of thinking about the record was the LP format. For me, this was clearly something I had always in mind also for the way I would record and which kind of microphones I would use.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://focsle.bandcamp.com/>

Talking of this, did you already have an idea of the format you'd put your record out? and did this have an impact on your music or the "form" of the record? and more technically speaking, how did you approach the recording session in terms of micing and the space you recorded in?

I didn't have a specific format in mind when I made the music, but I was aiming to release either a CD or LP along with digital files. Originally, I was going to record in a former army gym at the Headlands Center for the Arts in Marin California, which has a rich acoustic, being built of old growth redwood. But the pandemic began and going there was out of the question, so I decided to proceed at home by myself. I recorded in a small space where I usually work because the acoustic is rather dry. This process turned into a three-month study of microphone techniques which has transformed my process of listening. I had seven different mics which I used in various configurations, adjusting them just by a matter of inches to best suit the musical intention of each piece. (For more on the specific microphones and recording techniques that I used, see this interview I did with Tobias Fischer: "[Theresa Wong on Tools of Creation - The Cello, 15 Questions, September, 2022](https://www.15questions.net/interview/journey-core/page-1/)".)<sup>5</sup>

About *fo'c'sle*, why did you put it together? what were the reasons which pushed you to build your own record label? how do you feel about it and what kind of satisfaction does it bring to you? what did you find out that you didn't know?

Back in 2014, I was invited to release *Venice Is A Fish* on Sensitive Skin, an online magazine. The release was digital only, and after it came out, I felt frustrated that I couldn't give copies to presenters, friends, radio stations, or sell them at shows. Two years later, I decided I would produce a physical CD myself. I enjoyed the process of designing and publishing this album so much and thought it would be great to eventually do this for others. Of course, no one in their right mind should start a label, so four years later I finally accepted I was just nuts and did it. I was also motivated by the feeling that there wasn't a label in the San Francisco Bay Area that really showcased the diversity and spirit of experimentalism that I love so much about the scene; that is, people engaged with improvisation, composition, song forms, electronic music and invented instruments. Maybe this connects to your earlier point about choosing one thing and limiting yourself to that, so I guess that's just not my way. I value open-mindedness and diversity, even if it means less commercial viability. Yes, it's a lot of work and resources on my part as I'm the sole operator, but it's incredibly satisfying to shepherd these works into the world by the brilliant people around me. I also love designing each album; creating a visual reflection for sounds and people very dear to me. I've learned what a 'fictitious business name' means.

What do you think about records critics? do you find them accurate? What interested you in contributing actively to *Recordedness*?

I am very appreciative of many record critics for amplifying my work to others. That said, I think reviews mostly tell you something about the reviewer. A positive review reflects someone who is on your wavelength, which is very affirming. A negative review shows someone doesn't get something that you hear and that's too bad for them. I've had both experiences; I still get excited or down, but oh well. I like contributing to *Recordedness* because I love recording and all that it entails. Similarly, what were the reasons which pushed you to start this online journal?

I am always curious to see and hear how other people perceive my music and thus, I am sensitive and receptive to critics and comments. They are important and considered for my own growth. I do appreciate reviews of my works and I am grateful that some people spend time listening, writing and making comments about it. Some remarks are very accurate but I always have the feeling that the reviewers didn't really get the effort I have put into it, nor the content I have tried to share. Maybe is it my responsibility? Most probably. I personally

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.15questions.net/interview/journey-core/page-1/>

believe musical works should not always be explicit and I am trying to give some hints through the titles of the tracks or the main title of the record or what is on the cover. It is easy to say but sometimes I have the feeling there is a lack of a proper "investigation". And as you say, sometimes, it feels it is about the writer and the record would just be a pretext. When I decided to launch *Recordedness*, I thought this would be a good way to give the voice directly to the artists to tell clearly what their intentions were, and this would also be an occasion to go beyond just the musical object of the record and ask questions which would tell more about what is behind the final object, about the artists themselves and their artistic views, their process and their relations to other subjects or interests which most often nourish the statement of the record. But perhaps this is too much information which would restrain the personal perceptions of the listeners?...

I have a last question and this concerns the relation of a record with the whole cycle of the music business. I explain myself: sometime back (not always and not anymore) I used to consider the record as an object of topicality. It would be some kind of event which could bring some light to my works, show off that I am working and active but the record would especially be something I would share with curators as something important or a reason to help me get some gigs. Having this "event" would push me to organize a tour. These records were a way for me and the ensembles I was part of to keep being somehow "attractive" for the circle of the business. At some point, I had the feeling of being trapped in this cycle of : releasing a record, having reviews, sharing on social medias, getting gigs and again repeating the same cycle. I decided to get out of it. How is/was it for you? What do you think about this cycle? Do you feel concerned by this or is it something you don't relate to?

I have never caught on to the rhythm of this cycle. My timing for creating, releasing and performing work is totally different. I don't see recording as a means to acquire gigs to tour, but rather as a creative act in and of itself. For example, *The Unlearning* was released and premiered, and then only performed again two and five years after that because it took time to develop the multimedia aspect of it. *Harbors* was developed *through* performances, so it was composed through four years of performing on and off, then recorded and released. *Practicing Sands* is recorded with many different tunings of the cello, so it's not even practical to perform live and I haven't yet had any release event! So - maybe I'm shooting myself in the foot. I do think that communicating things to an audience is important, so if people know what to expect and can have something clear in performance and in a packaged album, it makes it easier to appreciate the music. But I know part of me consciously refuses that cycle because I like keeping the door open to the unknown.

