SOPHIE

INTERVIEW *Brooke Chroman*
PHOTOGRAPHY *Daniel C. Trese*

◆◆

Pop producer SOPHIE's music leaves no room for translation. Immediate, ecstatic and hyper-celebratory of the pleasure of music, SOPHIE's sounds relish music as a bodily pleasure, and in the tradition of Oscar Wilde cum Warhol, continues to shatter antiquated distinctions between surface and depth, existence and essence, popular and niche. With its latex and pop-rocks aesthetics, the almost overly-present sound of SOPHIE tapped into what Walter Benjamin once described as being, "filled with the presence of the now," in their contemporaneity. SOPHIE's work effortlessly strolls through a territory where the natural is artificial, music is advertising, and identities are multiple. Challenging the traditional construct that still dominates popular music: where a musician's work is an "authentic expression of the self," the producer also works on a collaborative project under the name of QT, which entails the single track "Hey QT" and an energy drink, as well as an upcoming line of products—all fronted by QT herself, a future-forward, headphones-and-clear-backpack-wearing-girl who wouldn't look out of place in Harajuku. Though the producer has released only a handful of tracks, most on the UK label Numbers, the songs have quickly gathered a massive following, and compelled collaborations with artists such as Madonna and Diplo. We caught up with SOPHIE between studio sessions, in The Standard Hotel in LA. Here the producer shares with us thoughts on transitioning times, reflections on dancing, and the sheltered joy of riding in taxis.

I met you for the first time in Morocco. I felt that it was a very special thing to meet someone away from any kind of familiar habitat—it allows you to know someone in a different way, because you're negotiating situations in ways that are unpracticed and spontaneous.

I agree. It's exciting to meet someone in a mutually new context or on neutral ground. Perhaps your different ways of seeing become more apparent when you're both looking at the same new situations, through different personal filters.

How do you tend to navigate a new city?

I seem to have a fairly reliable internal compass and sense of general direction and proportions. I can often land in a place and start walking and slowly build an internal map of that place outwardly from the point I started. The best thing you can possibly do is just try to merge with the flow of a city, following people and going where crowds form. I love how, in places like Madrid, there are so many small, specialized social spaces. I find tourist attractions to be disruptive to the organic flows of a city—they impose their own artificial forces on crowds, through rigid opening times and a perceived sense of importance or interest. Having said that, in London I prefer to follow the flows of tourists and the artificial realities they create. Perhaps they carry with them the illusion of what London could be—it keeps things lighthearted and exotic, whereas I think everyday UK patterns are quite grim.

SOPHIE seems to me something of a contemporary flâneur. Have you observed anything of particular interest on your walks lately? I know you really enjoy the experience of department stores.

Ha! I like that vision. Department stores are very rich and abundant sources of new and alluring materials, a bounteous garden of design objects. I think that going on walks is always useful to have a bank of internal references to call upon. It's more about absorbing materials than trying to construct any formal social theory on the fly . . . dreams can also demonstrate how a small detail that seemed inconsequential or irrelevant in waking life can be prioritized by the dream as a standout moment.

Have you been analyzing your dreams?

Not so much recently. At one time I was keeping a dream journal, and I think simply through the action of recording them you can encourage more regular and more vivid dreams. Unfortunately, they dissolve if you don't write them down.

What items or experiences have you brought back from your travels that are meaningful to you?

I try not to impose a hierarchy of importance onto a travel experience; I don't really grade my experiences in that way. Sitting in the airport could be as useful or meaningful in the end as museum visits or shopping trips. An inspiring event could come during a very dull trip. It's a bit like when I'm in an art fair—I may not like

individual works but I like imagining them as one combined work, putting them next to each other. So maybe it's like that with travel too. It's not one trip really, but the sequence of trips and viewing them next to each other. A lot of the time actually, what's not there is more inspiring than what is! Imagining what you might want to see, or hear, or experience in a particular place or time, this is often how ideas come about—going out and imagining what isn't there.

That's an interesting idea; we learn to judge spaces or experiences as inherently valuable, or even inherently invisible or transitional. It makes me think of the way that John Cage reformulated our understanding of silence, for example, by turning the conventional hierarchy of sound on its head: he made it evident that silence is a sound, and a value, just as a musical note is.

I think it's kind of an entrepreneurial approach. Gaps in markets, that kind of thing, but superimposed onto creative fields. Where is there space for new music to move into? Trying to imagine a level beyond what is currently available for your ears—really, spending one hour doing that is more valuable than a whole day playing in the studio I think. Sometimes I also do this at clubs. I'll be dancing, but actually I'm dancing to the music that I'm making in my head, and imagining how it would feel in that space.

I always think it's so great that dancing is still able to exist! It's one of the dwindling amount of things we do in modern times

just because it feels good, and not necessarily for some other result. Why or how did you become interested in making music that people could dance to?

I was just having this conversation whilst on holiday with my sister. There were older couples dancing, not because they knew the music, but just as an expression of happiness. So we were asking, "Why do people dance when they're happy?" You really don't tend to see angry dancing. There is something really bizarre about dancing; I'm not really sure what role it plays right now. If you go to an EDM show it's actually more about fist pumping and stomping. Same in most clubs in the UK. Not much actual dancing. People in the US seem to dance harder. I like less obvious dancing music too. I suppose it's not actually essential that my music is danceable, but I want it to be energetic.

Is the idea of live music important to you?

I'm interested in music as a physical experience, even more so than a communal one. I don't get much from watching television, so I think the most satisfying audio-visual experience is in a live context. I'm interested to know where that format can be taken and how it can develop with technology. Perhaps there's space for it to evolve into a more intense physical sensory experience. I think that's where the real worth of live music might be found.

Do you think virtual reality is a possibility?

I'm not sure I relate so strongly to the concept. I'm really more rooted in trying to

"If Siri was a person I think I'd have deleted her number by now. We had a very brief flirtation period but didn't really connect . . . "

expand what's going on here already. The actual world rather than an alter-world. I think it would be sad to create an alter-virtual world and then leave it for one that you're unhappy in. If you've got a good idea for a world, why not try it in this one?

Which technologies seem smart to you right now?

Anything in a silicon case. Everything in a silicon case. I love having medical grade silicon everywhere.

And what feels futuristic?

Using my fingerprint to open my phone.

Do you ever use Siri? I've never seen anyone out and about saying, "Siri where is the nearest coffee shop?" So I wonder if she doesn't quite fit with the way people want to use technology.

If Siri was a person I think I'd have deleted her number by now. We had a very brief flirtation period but didn't really connect…

What is the most interesting mode of transportation to you?

This is going to come across badly, but I would have to say taxis. I love being a passenger. I love being momentarily devoid of responsibility. I find it very relaxing. It

seems to be some of the best thinking time. I suppose a train is a similar feeling, but there you're not so enclosed. It's the idea Gary Numan was talking about: of being safe in a personal bubble, but still able to traverse these metropolitan spaces without being affected by their harshness.

And what does the future of travel look like to you?

I think trying to imagine a future of something requires a lot of genuine hope and belief in the plausibility of that vision. I heard about trans-Atlantic magnetic bullet trains in vacuums under the sea that could take you from London to New York in 10 minutes. I think that would severely mess with our spatial awareness. Having said that, all advances in transportation at some point in time must have seemed inconceivable. For instance, the idea that traveling from Manchester to London could be made on a two hour train journey would have seemed unbelievable to people on the week long hike from previous centuries.

We are in a world of wild convenience now! In New York, you can basically get everything delivered to your apartment in a couple of hours. I wonder what effect this will have on travel? Does it allow us more time to travel to places we're interested in, or compel us to travel less?

You know, I heard recently that when Pixar Studios first started, it took them something like a day to render one frame, and now after all the technological progress it still takes exactly the same time. It's about people maxing out whatever power they have access to. Pixar has way, way more power, but they pack way more complexity and detail into every model now. So the processing time is actually the same. There is a similar situation when looking at music—the essential challenge, creating something cool and catchy that makes people excited, it doesn't get any easier because we've got computers and synthesizers. We just have a different set of shapes and materials to play around with. So perhaps in terms of travel, no matter how much convenience and power people have, they will still feel equally stressed out because they want more. In the end, our appetite for stress is insatiable.

When you interviewed Kyary Pamyu Pamyu for Dazed and Confused you asked her, "What about music in fifty years time, what do you think that might sound like? The music of the future?" What's your answer to that question?

Hmm. I asked it because I wanted some pointers about what kind of sounds I could use to make something she really liked. My only answer can be "absolutely mind-blowing." Imagine playing someone in the '60s a totally synthetic EDM track. They could not possibly begin to comprehend the sound.

Some of the dialogue around you and your work involves a guessing game over if you're male or female, or what your 'real' identity is. Though we've seen a lot of progress in our time, much of society is still very conservative about gender.

I think it stems from people's desire to understand something through its commonly believed social and political connotations. It's an automatic tool for understanding the world around us, and therefore people want to use the same toolkit to understand music or artistic works. It's like when you go down the street and someone is dressed in a certain way and you make an automatic assumption about what that person is like based on their appearance. People want to try to do the same in music, to understand it and base an assumption about that music on its appearance, gender, background etc. When you take that away, people are forced to use other tools, or they just write the whole thing off as 'not real.'

Can you tell me a bit about your basic approach to making music?

I try to think about and listen to music purely as materials, shapes, and patterns. That's how children would hear music, and there is something very pure about that immediacy, before we become aware of the cultural constructs around music, like genre. It just makes more sense for how I want my music to be heard: I want it to be purely a sensory experience that requires no intellectual analysis.

Do you ever find it hard to suspend analysis?

Yeah, I'm an analytical person so there are
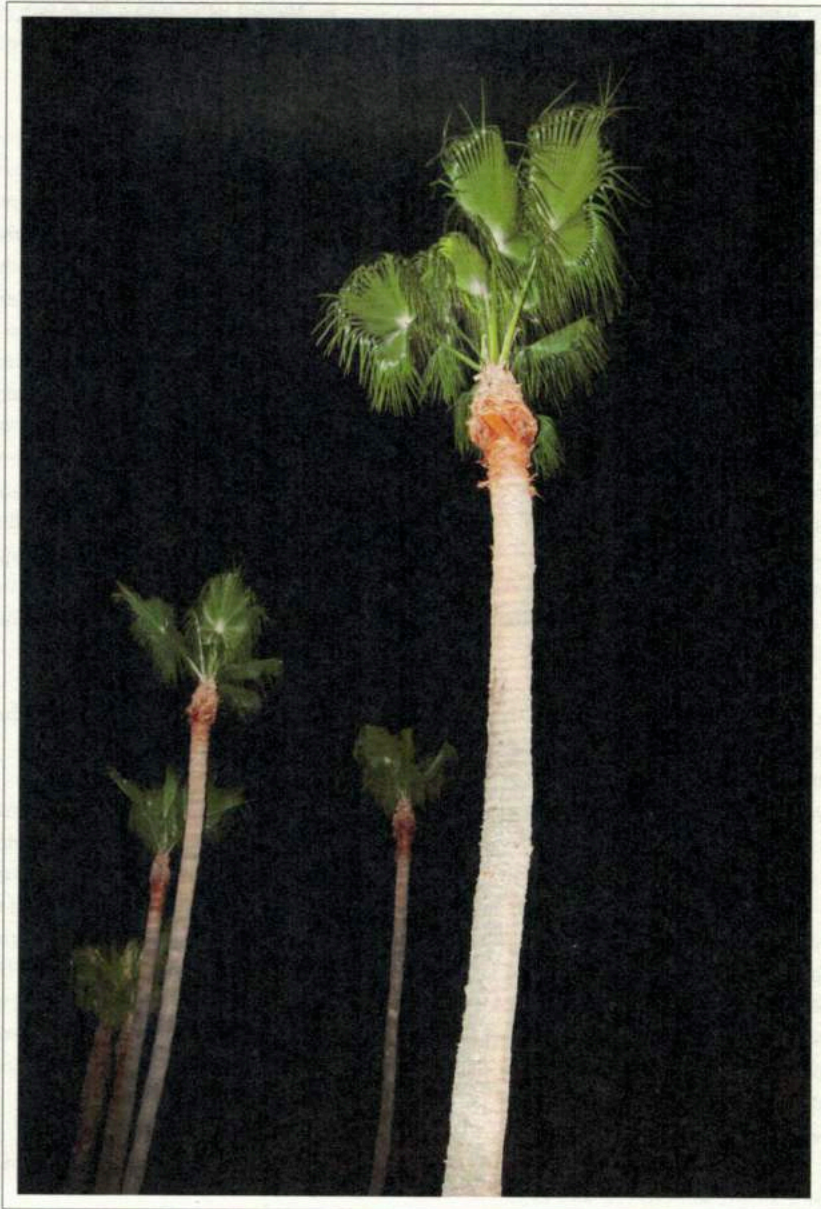
"If we think about the sound of waves or wind being soothing and satisfying, like honey—maybe we could make a synthetic sensation, like chocolate or jellybeans."

certainly people who—I can think of a few friends and family members actually—who are more in the moment, along for the ride, and I quite envy that. It would be amazing to just be totally open, to feel and experience without any judgment or analysis. Maybe sometimes I can touch on that, but it's definitely not a natural state for me.

I had a conversation with you some time ago about the instantaneous reaction of children to certain sounds, like silly honks or funny noises that immediately delight them or make them laugh. It's the same with certain visual objects—foam, bubbles, bright plastics, there's something immediate and visceral about them. We talked about how these experiences seem to require no translation.

I think you could include eating and smelling in these experiences; maybe clothes too. Indulgences, I suppose. They never feel like work, and I suppose that's why we enjoy them so much. Eating chocolate or sweets for example; it's instantly gratifying and requires no effort at all. I'd like to imagine music that could provide the same satisfaction: music that could be an indulgence. Even more so than music, just purely a sound. I think that is possible. If we think about the sound of waves or wind being soothing and satisfying, maybe that's like honey—and maybe we could

make a synthetic sensation, like chocolate or jellybeans.

I remember learning about how colors vibrate differently on your eyes, so it's not only an emotional response, but a very physical one. Is physicality something that's important to you in music?

Yes, it's the same idea with sound waves vibrating on eardrums. Some harmonious symmetrical tones will vibrate in a pleasurable way. Other, less satisfying dissonances will make the ear feel uncomfortable.

These experiences have the ability to activate your senses, almost to a point of overload.

Yeah, I love it when you happen on great combinations, like listening to Wagner on the beach, or eating mints and watching indoor cricket. Then you associate one with the other. Somehow they produce a hybrid sensation that is actually something new, and it's fun to work out what they have in common.

You've also compared making your music to something more like making "sculptures."

All the works taking place in my head at the moment are new sculptural visions I've been having, and I'm not sure what form they might take, but they have to do with enormous industrial proportions of dessert

mousse and gummy rubber plastic found on trainers and needle holes and icing sugar coatings being cut. The undersides of gargantuan suspended vessels being lit by motorway floodlights expanding.

And you've developed an energy drink. Are these similar activities to you, making music and making products?

Yes, it's about describing music through a drink product. One interesting aspect of that project is people don't seem to like it when you take control of your own selling point and overtly present it. What I mean by that is, people want to be sold something but they don't want to feel like they're being sold something. So they need a selling point to a musical product, but they don't want to acknowledge that they're being sold anything. I think that's where the 'real' comes in. They want to feel it's 'real'. Of course, in most cases it's not real, it's a fabrication or exaggeration of the truth or an alter-ego being performed by someone, or a pretense, or a posture. People are fine with that. But as soon as something takes control of its own image and selling point and overtly brings that to the fore, people don't like it.

I think you've tapped on something that is still culturally uncomfortable: to make transparent or acknowledge the often mythological hierarchies and separations between art and commerce.

That's a more concise way of saying it! Well yes, this sort of positive extolling of consumerism has been present since Warhol,

and then second-hand with '80s material girl stuff, and then third-hand with Lady Gaga and all that. So it's not a new feeling I think but still, people seem to fall back into wanting that trick thing. Or maybe it's like you get something genuine or with 'soul,' and then you get a lot of people trying to recreate that, by taking the stylistic cues and in a way simulating it but without the genuine soul aspect. Kind of an interesting approach actually, if you're conscious of it.

A big part of modern music is this very specific, and I think very problematic, relationship between the identity of music and the identity of its maker—the myth that music has to reveal something about the 'soul' of the artist.

I hate that idea and I think it's nonsense now. To me, pop music is the only type of music that exists. It's just done with differing degrees of success. Music is only industrial design, advertising, and fashion. And that's enough of a challenge. It's also just way more interesting and complex than me or whomever else. I would like to imagine music as a physical, sensory thrill. That's not really anything to do with the 'soul,' and why should it be? •