*[Intro music with overlaying footage of piano technique masterclass recordings, climaxing then ending with sole Edna Golandsky of the Taubman Institute]*

Narration (Kyle): Pianists devote years to developing a spotless technique

*[Bach-Busoni ‘Chaconne plays]*

Narration: By weeding out imprecision in the touch and unevenness in passage work, students in piano build dexterity, velocity, and control. In fact, ever since being a keyboardist was considered a specialized skill, there were practitioners of how to develop that spotless, healthy technique. As you’ve just heard in the prior amalgamation, injury prevention became an important (and lucrative) part of piano teaching, complete with different schools of thought on the matter. The only catch: what happens when a composer refuses to go along with the well-intended practitioners of injury-free technique?

*[Ustvolskaya ‘Sonata No. 6’ plays]*

**Cizmic**: I’m Maria Cizmic, I’m an associate professor in the Humanities and Cultural Studies Department at the University of South Florida. I wrote a book called *Performing Pain: Music and Cultural Trauma in Eastern Europe*. There’s something really satisfying about playing music that violates your training and conventions. I guess you have to be a certain kind of person or performer to sort of enjoy that, but there is something really satisfying about making a lot of noise; and there’s something really satisfying about that ramping up of that physical relationship with the piano––that force. Every teacher (at least my childhood teacher) would be very unhappy with me sort of “belly flopping” onto the piano with my hands.

Narration: I am of the opinion that the role of the musician is to seek to achieve the sort of sound a composer had in his or her head at the time of conception. As I’ve mentioned in a previous episode, musical notation can only get us so far when it comes to understanding that original idea, but it can certainly help––especially in late-20th century music when styles became so individualized and certain sounds became so novel. Throughout her piano works, the Soviet composer Galina Ustvolskaya gives numerous written instructions on the technique she sees fit to achieve such characteristic sounds. It’s not uncommon to see instructions such as “Strike the keys with the knuckles of the left hand (four fingers curved, thumb protruding at an angle), and ensure these strikes are clearly audible.”[Sonata No. 5] In other passages, such as throughout the 6th Piano Sonata which you’re hearing now, she indicates each tone cluster should be “Struck with the edge of the hand,” the “flattened palm,” or the forearm. I spoke with a number of other musicians about the relationships between this expansion of technique, its physicality, sound production, and how it effects the overall affect of a piece of music.

**Curry**: My name is Tom Curry; I am the tuba and euphonium professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

**Ugrcic**: I’m Iva Ugrcic and I’m the Founder and Executive Director of the LunART Festival and the Artistic Director of the Rural Musicians Forum.

**Hayami**: I’m Satoko Hayami and I’m a collaborative pianist living in Madison from Japan.

Narration: The three performed Galina Ustvolskaya’s *Composition No. 1* for tuba, piccolo, and piano, in summer 2018. We’ll hear their performance of that work at the close of this episode. Here’s a bit of my discussion with them.

**Johnson**: In the latter half of the 20th century, there were these artistic movements that seemed to idealize art that confronted people. So, you have the abstract expressionists: part of the art was the violence of creating it––the technique of creating it. Not only did the technique of creating visual art become more violent, but performance art became very popular. It became just as much about people’s reactions, about the reception of the art, as it did the work itself. So, there are several ways I thought Ustvolskaya’s music falls into this: it’s confrontational in that it’s a sustained dissonance that people are subjected to, something that doesn’t let up in intensity; it confronts audiences with silence, which generally makes people uncomfortable; and then it also confronts musicians with techniques they wouldn’t otherwise use, such as sustained notes that are really really loud or soft. The piano music in particular: there is one piano sonata where she wants clusters, but she wants them played with the knuckles of the hand and she wants you to knock on the keys. She wants the actual sound of the knocking, as well as the sound of the strings. Whether audience or performer, I feel like the music hurts on some level. I wonder if you all could comment on any of those ideas?

**Ugrcic**: Well, I remember Satoko (tell me if I’m wrong) saying when we were rehearsing that ‘it not only hurts emotionally, but it hurts physically to play.’

**Hayami**: Yeah, if I play it louder than I am right now, it’s going to hurt… but that’s what’s written.

**Curry**: As a tuba player, it’s not necessarily painful, but you know it’s going to be uncomfortable. Part of the physical preparation for the piece is dealing with that discomfort––dealing with having to move massive amounts of air in a way that is going to put you in a position where you’re going to feel uncomfortable. I’m not sure there’s a better word for that. It’s uncomfortable to play this piece. You have to recognize that going in and you have to prepare for it, and that’s part of the performance. For me, it’s not “OK, how can I get through this and it’s going to be a breeze?” It’s about going into that extreme and about navigating your way through it. And if that means it’s a little less precise, that’s fine because that’s the piece. You know it’s intentional. There’s no way she wrote what she did for you to feel great while you play it. There’s no way she wrote what she did for you to feel great while you listen to it. I had the intimate experience with this piece of editing and mixing for a recording that I did. For hours, sitting there with headphones on listening to this piece over and over and over again…it hurt! It definitely damaged hearing…there’s no way around it. So, to think of a composer, a meticulous composer like it’s clear that she is––there is just no way she wrote that without it meaning to be extreme and be uncomfortable and be painful, physically.

**Hayami**: My mindset before going into the performance that we did at LunART was that (I don’t know if everyone does this) I have to get in the zone, just to be in the same mindset as the piece requires. So, for me the mindset I was going for is: I don’t feel the pain and I want to.

**Johnson**: You want to?

**Hayami**: I wanted to.

**Ugrcic**: You need it, basically.

**Hayami**: You have to go for it. You have to hit the notes as hard as you can. You’re going to feel the pain, but you have to keep doing that until the piece ends. The mindset was that I wanted to attack as hard as I could. It doesn’t matter that it hurts, it’s just like ‘you have to.’

**Johnson**: That’s honestly the sensation I got when I did the 6th Piano Sonata, almost to the point of wanting the audience to be hurt by the sound I was making.

**Curry**: Well I would also say that the experience that you’re talking about requires a special musician, especially right now when there’s a lot of attention being paid to injuries in musicians in doing things the right way and having the correct posture and doing things sustainable. Rightly so. There are a lot of musicians who would look at something that’s meant to be painfully performed and just say, “Why would a composer ever do that? That’s almost disrespectful to the musician because you have this career, and to do something that hurts or to do something that could potentially cause an injury is wrong.” Ustvolskaya’s music really requires that you throw that to the side, at least for a little bit, and say, “No, I’m going in…it might not end well, but that’s the way it has to be.” Otherwise, it’s not the piece.

*[‘Composition No. 1’ plays]*

**Johnson**: Maria, in your book *Performing Pain*, you mention this term ‘hesychasm.’ I’m unfamiliar with that word, but you say, “Hesychasm emphasizes the positive role of suffering in the life of the believer.” I wonder if you can give a couple of brief examples of how, in the Soviet context, suffering and pain can be equated with truth?

**Cizmic**: With truth, yeah. Well, hesychasm is kind of a monastic tradition of the Orthodox Christian tradition. There is a way in which it takes the idea of Christ’s suffering and translates that as a way of conceiving pain in a person’s life as having, ultimately, a kind of positive experience. So, you have this Russian cultural idea of various redemptive roles that pain can play. I think in the Soviet context, there is a way in which drawing attention––really attending to the reality of pain and consequences of violence was very much tied to truth.

**Johnson**: You write that “Ustvolskaya’s advocates endow her life and compositions with a kind of sacralized suffering, moral and aesthetic authority.” We know that historians are still uncovering the degree to the death and poverty and starvation and fear that took place in the Soviet Union, but the way that she was talked about by the people around her seems to tell us that this music (both in sound and what it takes to perform it) is quite an accurate portrayal of the society. I guess the physicality involved in creating such sounds is a kind of sublimation of suffering.

**Cizmic**: The first part of what you mentioned––that way her former students and friends talked about her: you may be in this repressive regime, but artists and intellectuals who find a kind of internal, creative space, in which they can experience freedom and write and create what they want to (it may not reach a public, or it may only reach a very small public); the important thing was to do this act of creativity on one’s own terms. There were stakes of authenticity and integrity in that, as well as a kind of ethical stance––you were being truthful and truthful to yourself. When you look at the reception of Ustvolskaya by people who knew her who were close to her at the time when she was alive, they draw on that trope that she was true to herself and that truth to herself had these stakes to integrity. Maybe her music wasn’t for a mainstream audience or wasn’t for the official composer’s union, but she had integrity and it has value for those reasons.

*[Composition No. 1 continues]*

Narration: I’d like to give a special word of thanks to my guests this episode: Iva Ugrcic, Tom Curry, and Satoko Hayami. Their June 2018 performance of *Composition No. 1* will close out the episode. I’m also extremely grateful to Maria Cizmic for taking the time to speak with me from Florida about her research around music from the late Soviet Union, trauma theory, and embodiments of pain. Her book, *Performing Pain: Music and Trauma in Eastern Europe*, was published in 2011 by Oxford University Press. Lastly, I want to thank the listeners I’ve heard from who have encouraged me to get back into regularly working on podcast episodes. If you’re interested in a similar podcast, I recommend *Flute 360* with Heidi Kay Begay. I can honestly say I’ve gotten so much from her podcast. Even though, technically, it’s a flute podcast, she has on a number of interesting living composers and musician who are doing interesting things with their craft. Thanks again.

*[Composition No. 1 continues through end]*

END OF EPISODE