*[Symphony No. 2, Documentary Footage]*

Narration: That’s footage from a documentary in the public domain about the process of premiering Galina Ustvolskaya’s *Symphony No. 2* for winds, piano, percussion, and male vocalist.[[1]](#endnote-1) The text you’re hearing now translates to “O Lord, true, eternal, and merciful.” Asked why *that* text and how to perform it, Ustvolskaya said, “It is the voice of a lonely person who cries into space. He gets into a situation and sees no way out, and he falls with every step…He keeps falling and asks God for help.

By many accounts, Ustvolskaya was a deeply spiritual woman, though not in the sense of a Western, denominational church goer. Rather, with laser focus and seriousness, she privately believed in the existence of God, as demonstrated by how she spoke about spirituality in her personal life, the texts of her musical works, and the ritualism of its performance. Mixed with the role of discomfort or pain in the performance practice of her music (ideas discussed in the last episode), it’s easy to see why her artistic output is especially fruitful for inquiry, conjecture, and discussion.

As a performer, I find it somewhat exciting to be asked to do something on stage that I wouldn’t normally do. In a way, it allows me to defy an audience’s expectation…it allows me to be the composer’s’ messenger in stretching the public’s ears. Since it’s clear from Ustvolskaya’s musical scores that pain may be necessary during performance, I consider my decision to undertake that experience as a form of consent. Missing from that perspective, however, is that of an audience member. Within contemporary music, broadly, what types of scenarios could lead an audience member to experience pain or discomfort?

**Cizmic**: This is the question that I think is really interesting about Ustvolskaya’s music and other music like it.

Narration: That’s Maria Cizmic, first featured in my last episode––a kind of introduction to the performance practice involved in Ustvolskaya’s music. Professor Cizmic teaches in Humanities and Cultural Studies at the University of South Florida. Her book, *Performing Pain: Music and Trauma in Eastern Europe* was published by Oxford University Press in 2011.

**Cizmic**: How does this piece perform or structure an experience that can be painful for a number of people––the performers, the listeners. Part of it, I think, rests on a situation that relies on control. Think of pain you don’t have control over––someone inflicting pain on you, or you experience an injury or illness. That’s a situation where you don’t have a lot of control, or very little. You don’t have a lot of control. What makes a performance is it can straddle some of that, but Ustvolskaya is very specific about how she wants the performer to play her piece.

She’s insistent in certain places in ways that she notates the score; you *have* to play the piece in a way that is uncomfortable for you. As a performer, you can still choose. You can choose to play the piece or not, you can choose to practice for ten minutes or an hour, you can choose what part of the piece you’re practicing. There are a lot of ways you can control and manage that. In terms of the listener, I guess they can get up and leave. That would be interesting to think about that issue in terms of control. I also think in the context of performance, it’s very much tied to ritual, which isn’t quite the same as a real injury of some kind.

Johnson: Yes, it’s not an accidental injury like falling down stairs or something, and it’s also not like one has been the victim of a random act of violence.

**Cizmic**: You can have consequences on your body but it’s not the same as being diagnosed with a serious illness or a more serious experience of violence where the consequences are extreme. You have the concert venue and the conventions around it; the experiences are happening in these ritualized spaces. It’s also circumscribed; it’s framed by the ritual of the performance space and the length of time it exists. So, when you start to think about performance accessing experiences that are painful, it structures the experience that is different from pain in your day to day life, but it is still embodied and uncomfortable.

Johnson: I wonder if we can come up with any other examples of these kinds of safe spaces where potentially uncomfortable or painful things can consensually take place? I guess the realm of performance art can get wrapped up in that, or maybe even a mosh pit.

**Cizmic**: I guess it’s not that different from watching a scary movie or horror film. The space is ultimately safe, but you’re able to engage in some kind of risky behavior. In the mosh pit, you can test those limits. Someone falls and then everyone helps them up and then continues to “mosh.” It creates a space where the role of the ritual of the performance ensures a parameter of safety within some risky behavior can be tested out or some limit of experience can happen (fear, pain, unpleasant experience), can be tried on, contained in the space, then moved on to daily life.

*[Grunge rock music begins]*

Narration: As a full disclosure, I’ve never been in or experienced a mosh pit; but I’ve known many individuals who enjoy the experience enough to seek it out. By many of their own accounts, a mosh pit is a kind of transactional experience: they give up a bit of control, in exchange for a Dionysian release. They’re able to embody the aggressiveness of the music, while upholding parameters that enable others to do the same. Bodies smashing, shoving, and bruising become a part of the maximalist (but ultimately safe) sensory experience.

About a year ago, during a trip down the Youtube rabbit hole, I came across a lecture of Maryanne Amacher, an American sound installation artist. Perhaps most prominent in the 1970s and 80s, she crated large-scale exhibits in site-specific places. She’d write electronic music that oftentimes reached the extremes of noise creation; the sounds were so loud and so shrill. It certainly didn’t help that they were synthetic sounds, not acoustic. In the lecture, she specifically stated that she’s more interested in the space that her sounds occur in, over the sound itself.[[2]](#endnote-2) The question explored was: How a space can change our perception of what we’re hearing?

For me, as someone who has never been to any of her installations, I only have the sound to go off of…and I can say it’s painful…it’s downright violent on the ears. The best example of this is entitled *Chorale* and is available on Youtube.

*[*Chorale *fades in/out –– low volume]*

Writing for VAN Music Magazine last year, Zack Ferriday describes listening to an album of Amacher’s: “The sound’s presence in your ears trumps all sense of volume,” he writes, “and the air itself seems to feel saturated with a sort of aural humidity. There is nothing pleasant about it, but it affirms its own physicality...”[[3]](#endnote-3)

Amidst my perception of Amacher’s *Chorale* as shrill and borderline-sadistic, there is a part of me that says, ‘It has to be like this.’ She likely created the work with the intention that it would be perceived in a given space––a resonant, multi-roomed space, such as a museum. Going to *that* exhibit is meant to be a maximalist experience, auditory overload, uncomfortable and risky at first, experiential. It’s really interesting, provoking stuff.

In fact, there is further reason for the unflinching certainty of Amacher’s music: some combinations of frequencies can, at high volume, cause the ear to produce and amplify tones of its own. In other words, certain sounds produced a specific distance away from one’s ear can cause the ear’s outerhair cells to vibrate––vibrations of which produce their own characteristic sound. Audiologists went on to demonstrate the naturally-occurring phenomenon in the late 1970s, naming the sounds ‘otoacoustic emissions’ [OH-TOE-ACOUSTIC], while the label of “ghost sounds” has persisted in reviews about Amacher’s work.

Continuing with Zack Ferriday’s listening experience, as published by VAN Magazine: “That [Amacher’s album] only produces its unusual effect when listened to through speakers is something that many of our modern listening practices might well miss. There’s a paradox underlying the experience—in order to really feel the sound within, one requires physical distance from its source. It also requires an almost ritualistic mode of listening—it must have been slightly disconcerting to look across the street through my apartment windows, and see me sat on a chair in the middle of the room, five feet from two large speakers, turning my head in different directions. Ritual is what it takes to conjure this music’s strange ghost.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

*[Footage of Symphony No. 2]*

In my conversations around Galina Ustvolskaya, mosh pits, and electronic music installations, I find there are a number of ways listeners can frame this post-WW2 era of art music. I think it’s worth pointing out that while there are striking similarities between these examples of spaces designed for a level of risk, discomfort, or maximalist experience, each is also separate and contained within its respective culture. Although the experience of a musician’s discomfort during a performance of Ustvolskaya’s music is comparable to an audience member’s discomfort during a sound installation of Maryanne Amacher, the contexts of each musical origin is a stark contrast.

Ustvolskaya’s life in the Soviet Union was, more than likely, one of trauma, authoritarian pressure, and fear: those things, in that society, were consensual only in the sense of wanting to keep one’s life. When asked whether she felt lonely (like the voice in her Second Symphony), Ustvolskaya stated, “Yes, I still do. I still do.” Asked, “Isn’t that really sad?” she responded, “Yes, that’s really sad. But so is my life.” It’s important to understand the separation between the context of a certain musical work *versus* receptions of that music, even my own here on *Art Music Perspectives*.

If you’d like more information on Galina Ustvolskaya, I highly recommend the short documentary *Scream Into Space* that is available on Youtube. For more context on the era of late-Soviet music, Maria Cizmic’s book, *Performing Pain: Music and Trauma in Eastern Europe*, is an invaluable resource and one that I found quite exhaustive in its approach. That’s available from Oxford University Press. My thanks goes out, again, to Professor Cizmic for the time spent during our discussions in the fall of last year. For more information on Maryanne Amacher, I recommend her 1999 album *Sound Characters (Making the Third Ear)* from the Tzadik label. She has a series of short discussions with Frank Oteri on the site New Music Box, as well, that are worth listening to.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Thanks for listening.

1. Joseé Voormans (director), VPRO Holland, 2005, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ninHa6TqgqM, also available at http://ustvolskaya.org/eng/films\_books.php. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. # *Maryanne Amacher speaking at Ars Electronica. Linz, Austria 1989,* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwYaL-Q1CKQ.

   [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Zack Ferriday, “Listening to Maryanne Amacher’s *Sound Characters (Making the Third Ear)*” in VAN Magazine, 25 January 2019, https://van-us.atavist.com/maryanne-amacher. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ferriday, “Listening to Maryanne Amacher’s *Sound Characters (Making the Third Ear)*.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Frank J. Oteri, New Music Box, May 2004, https://nmbx.newmusicusa.org/extremities-maryanne-amacher-in-conversation-with-frank-j-oteri/ [↑](#endnote-ref-5)