

La Comédie

**Les
productions**

de Valence



The Lady with the Hammer

Silvia Costa

based on the music of Galina Ustvolskaja (Piano Sonatas from n°1 to n°6)

Production: Comédie de Valence, national center for drama - Drôme-Ardèche
With MC93-Maison de la Culture de Seine-Saint-Denis and Festival d'Automne à Paris

**Live performed
by Marino Formenti**

**Centre dramatique
national
Drôme – Ardèche**

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Direction
Marc Lainé

The Lady with the Hammer

Piano Sonatas: Galina Ustvolskaja

Lived performed: Marino Formenti

Direction and scenography: Silvia Costa

Cast: Hélène Alexandridis

Marieff Guittier

Anne-Lise Heimbürger

Rosabel Huguet Duenas

Pauline Moulène

and with a little girl

and an extra chosen on the spot

Costumes: Laura Dondoli

Sound design: Nicola Ratti

Light: Marco Giusti

Texts: Umberto Sebastiano

Première 16th November 2021 at Comédie de Valence

Production: La Comédie de Valence, Centre dramatique national Drôme-Ardèche

Co-production: MC93 - Maison de la Culture de Seine-Saint-Denis, Bobigny et Le Festival d'Automne à Paris, Théâtre National de Bretagne

Silvia Costa is member of the Artistic Ensemble of La Comédie de Valence, national center for drama - Drôme-Ardèche.

Available on tour on demand

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The project

The genesis of this work lies in a music, six piano sonatas, written between 1947 and 1988.

In hearing those notes I sensed a mystery that stopped me and put me on the tracks of their composer, Galina Ustvolskaja (Petrograd, now Saint Petersburg 1919 – 2006).

Also dubbed «The Lady with the Hammer», the only female scholar of Dmitri Shostakovich, she took it upon herself to conduct a radical and personal research in composition, in total rupture with the style of her master. Although her relationship with him remained a presence that left a mark on all of her life, her dissent has been one of the reasons why her music is still today rarely executed in Russia.

Galina's music makes a lasting impression on the listener for its severity and intensity.

It is materic, physical. There is no entertainment, nor adornment in it.

There is only one essential core, a militant simplicity, an other-worldly purity.

It is the sound of a restless journey at the heart of an intimate and private vision, pulsating, built obstinately with each and every stroke of the fingers and the knuckles on the piano keyboard. Forged and sculpted with the persistence of a blacksmith who strikes the iron until it's white-hot.

Galina's music sounds like nothing else.

Within this sound's unexpected patterns and ffff flares, I glanced glimpses of bedrooms, those places where one lies down, seen through doors left half open; in rarefied and melodyless atmospheres I saw fragments of stories, living pictures inhabited by desires, fears, reveries, figures caught in the moment of their intimate confrontation with the blackness and the backbone of the soul.

For each sonata I imagined a story.

Music, as in a chain, links these stories, draws the walls and corners of the room, foreshadows, influences and channels the events; a vibration, a trace, a flame, a sign for the spectator, and it is executed alone, with nothing moving around it, in full focus. Only after the music is revealed and has spoken, only in the wake of its memory footprint, these stories come to life and take form.

The piano is part of the scene and is paired, for its size and shape, with a bed, as its double.

Each story takes place above, under, around that bed.

The bed is an altar, the piano is its counter alter. They speak to each other in a dialogue of love.

Whether it is a makeshift shelter, or a comfortable crib, the bed is that place accompanying us for our whole life, there we go back every day, out of need, necessity, cycle.

Where consciousness is suspended, subconscious is released.

Nightly stage of shared intimacy, and of shared hostility.

Where physical pleasure happens, where the lovers discovers something of the other, something they shall not want to know.

There, we expose our body and its Vanitas.

There, idleness, love and murder happen.

**In rarefied and melodyless atmospheres
I saw fragments of stories, living
pictures inhabited by desires, fears,
reveries, figures caught in the moment
of their intimate confrontation with the
blackness and the backbone of the soul.**

For many years Galina led a life of uttermost privacy and very few episodes are reported in her biography. Despite this apparent lack of experiences, I could perceive in her *Musik aus dem schwarzen Loch*¹ the emanation, by radiation, of everything that binds us and untie us as human beings. The synthesis of her music is transposed into a scene by the choice of a unique, gaunt space. On the stage, only the piano appears next to a bed, to these I assign the role of Original Places through which a primitive force is imposed: that of the actor's bodies on the bed, as that of the pianist's fingers on the keyboard. This is a force of liberation and pushes the characters to take off every sign, every dress, to deflesh themselves, to go inside, to the bottom, to dig into the mine of the heart.

Theses are burnished stories, like in a mind's dreamlike vision; few are the words spoken, many the metaphors, oddities, epiphanies and apparitions.

Galina's music gives the rhythm to the action and she also does not stop hammering, picking, reducing, sublimating, to reach her goal: the frenzy of life.

Silvia Costa, june 2020.

¹ The composer Viktor Suslin, with whom Galina Ustvol'skaya entertained a friendship over the years, described her music as «a voice from the 'Black Hole' of Leningrad - the epicenter of communist terror, the city that suffered so terribly the horrors of war».



¹ Markus Hinterhäuser is the actual director of Salzburg Festival, and one of the few pianists to have found favor in Galina Ustvolskaja's eyes.

This new piece is based on the figure of Galina Ustvolskaja, what inspired you about her?

I discovered this composer in Salzburg through my acquaintance with Markus Hinterhäuser ¹ who had become involved with her compositions and has often played them in concerts. I don't usually take too much interest in artists' biographies - to me their own work is the most telling piece of their life already- but this woman's compositions are so rarely played, that each performance stands out as a unique event, and I wanted to know why. Thus I discovered her story, and I was deeply touched by it. Her relationship with Shostakovich, that could've been not simply artistic. This moment when she let it all go and reveals all the ill feelings she has towards her master's music. Her quarrels with the Stalinist regime. Her distancing from all musical categories in the name of the uniqueness of her own. A whole life exuding an extraordinary strength of character, which translates in the search for a specific language, a quest for a music coming from within, and so to speak, ordinary. This is how I understand the expression she adopted about her music, described as coming from «the black hole». And I love the idea that she used her rage to make it into something constructive. It is something that resonates with my personal sources of creation. Not with regard to my life, or to her life, but with this struggle that she had to lead to bring about her own creation. It's important to work on defining who we are, what our creation really is, what comes out of you, out of your "black hole". This play is also a reflection on what the act of creation is.

Can we say she is an extraordinary artist also with regard to her music?

Indeed, her music is remarkably outstanding, it is unlike any other. It's the most radical music that I know: renouncing rhythm, melody and all artificial elaborations, favoring dissonance and going to extremes to obtain a strong, sculpted object with no compromise whatsoever. You have to find your own way to make contact with this music. It implies that the performer is willing to face this matter physically as well as spiritually. As long as she has put her soul into it, the pianist must do the same. This is what inspired me to make it into a work of theatre. Because it is a music that urges to be seen as much as to be listened to.

The sonatas will be performed on stage by Marino Formenti, why did you turn to him?

² *Nowhere*, 2010 | <https://marinoformenti.net/nowhere/>

I met him in Bologna, during a radical and immersive performance consisting of him playing for 48 hours ¹. There the audience would listen to him but also see him eat, sleep ... Following him in this intimate dimension, it felt like getting closer and closer to him, becoming almost his friend. It was a visual as well as a sound performance. Beside this Marino has already performed almost all of the compositions of Galina's Piano Sonatas cycle that comprise my piece, notably last year at Kollegienkirche in Salzburg. A few themes and ideas had already sparked in me for each sonata, but for one thing I wanted to let the notes produce impressions first, like fingers on a keyboard, like images can sometimes appear this way, almost magically.

And he helped me in that, like a dramaturg, by explaining and highlighting what was going on in each one in terms of musical structure. And I intend to be faithful to that, by truly transposing each element into an image.

How will the music and the scene come together?

Just as there are six sonatas, there will be six tableaux. But there will also be moments of silence. The composer Nicola Ratti, with whom I have already worked (*Dans le pays d'hiver* ; *Play / Why smile Dry sob*) will create the ambience and sound atmosphere for each story, which I approach as a journey inside the rooms of a hotel or a house, each with its tapestry, its light, its colors. Visually, I'd like everything to stay pretty stripped-down, I want to do with the minimum, the essential, like Galina did when composing. The

gestural scores will unfold in the void: there will be just a piano and a bed. The bed is the geometric counterpart that relates to and balances the volume of the piano, which is never easy to install on a stage without falling into the aesthetics of a concert. The bed is therefore an equivalent, a contender and a support for the piano. The narrative ideas set forth from there. From the bed. Which is the place we come back to every night. The place where we are born and where we die. The place of sexuality, illness, intimacy. And which also opens up to fantastic elements via the theme of dreams. This is how I intend to get closer to what I feel in Galina Ustvolskaja's work, as some sort of deep, almost out of control, form of freedom.

What will these six tableaux deal with?

Each story will have its own theme. The first, for example, will deal with disappearance, the end of life as the end of a party, through the story of a character returning from a masked ball. The second will take into consideration life seen as a journey, as an incessant movement, with everything we collect in our baggage during our passage. The next one deals with affections and love through the story of a couple, whose man, asleep, can only be seen as the back of a head lying in the bed. The following will look into the issues of protection and legacy, in the form of a tale, with a little girl for protagonist, while the one at the end will be about mourning, loss, the weight of memories and the absence of someone in our lives ... this show is indeed about death. There will be six female characters altogether, at different ages, like this set of six sonatas that Galina Ustvolskaja wrote in different stages of her life between 1947 and 1988.

Your work often stands on the edges between theater, dance, music and visual arts, what role will be given to the text this time?

My last productions were based on texts previously written by other authors. Here, I go back to my own source and I look for what I need to say. Sometimes it's more effective for me to explain myself by means of metaphors and images. For this play I'm not going to write any dialogue beforehand, so far I've imagined specific situations where I want the spoken word to surface as a necessity during rehearsals. If this happens - and I do not rule out its appearance - it will have the role of a digression, of an aid and of a connection between the stage and the audience. Even though the work will initially be choreographic, I opted to work with actresses rather than dancers, because I noticed a key difference in their approach to gesture: whereas the dancers easily integrate movement and its abstraction as a signifying language, the actresses will question each gesture they perform seeking for a connection with language and utterance. Their brain will be speaking while performing these gestures. Therefore I would like to enter into this mental narrative of theirs, by asking them to pronounce the words that my scores will produce; to describe to me the sensations and the images that will appear. What does our body need to say when incarnating a gesture? What remains left out?

The tableaux that you imagined all seem pervaded by this eternal fight between sex and death, Eros and Thanatos, is that so?

It is. Although it is not an objective of mine to work specifically on this subject. Simply put, Eros and Thanatos naturally frame the bed, the place of love, birth and death. same way as these opposing impulses naturally frame our lives. I also draw a lot from fables and myths. And when you summon Oedipus, inevitably Eros and Thanatos invite themselves on the stage as well.

Interview by Eric Demey

A kind of beast by Marino Formenti

glosses
by Silvia Costa



Music is a kind of beast. It can't be interpreted, and it is not enough to perform it.
But of all the beasts, Galina is the most ill-natured.
Galina hated her music to be discussed and analyzed.
Here we're not trying to give images to this music: we're trying to imagine it.
And I will have to neither perform nor interpret it*.

Staging Galina Ustvolskaja's Six Sonatas in chronological order also means, willingly or unwillingly, to follow her life, her biographical evolution.

*- biographical versus Abstract
biographical as a source*

*Art bursts reality into pieces
and a reality in pieces is the Abstract*

Can a music ever be anthropomorphic, yes or no?

The piano has always been perhaps the most personal and intimate diary.
Though at the same time this music is as abstract as it is sufficient to itself.

- Nothing excessive, nothing ornamental

Galina's music seems to evolve continuously, and at the same time never to move.
It proceeds towards an unwavering, inexorable, vortex temporum, just like in the famous dream,
you cannot move forward, even by a millimeter.
It's the Six Sonatas of Sisyphus: you walk, and walk, and walk and walk...

**“auf der Stelle treten”: that runaround
in circles - literally: walking on
the same place “nicht von der Stelle
kommen”: that doesn’t go one step
forward**

The inexorable is what cannot be bent by prayers.
The ineluctable is a struggle with no outcome.
At the same time immanent: that remains «inside».

I feel this horizontality and verticality, as two forces in
perennial, titanic tension
that each single note and silence, at the same time is compelled to
move forward, but bound to a present moment.

*- verticality of the melody versus
harmony’s static horizontality*

Time is a convoy, but also a point, or rather: a hole.
There is a dizzying a-temporality in this music,
As such it appears to be dreadfully implosive, rather than
explosive

Though notes are forced to follow one another, to build melodic
lines, they remain separated, broken, isolated.

- infinitely alone

The musical lines are chained to the counterpoint, the fugato, the
canon:
But contra-punctus, fugato, canon, so often in dialogue with the
ancestors, here are not History
they are outside of History: an eternal struggle, to the last blow,
of hammer.

- Punctus puncti lupus

In these scores Tempo, as well as the traditional «measures» (4/4,
3/4 etc) are missing
from the first to the last, the notes are freed and enchained,
coexisting beyond time,
in another Tempo, in a single infinite non-bar.
The traditional metric measure, at least, would generate
hierarchies
strong and weak tempos, tension and détente, coercion and freedom.
The boundary always comforts us a little, is liberating
Within boundaries we move with confidence, and we call this
freedom.
No, rhythmic «freedom», the so-called musical «rubato», this
supposed self-realization - they don’t exist here.
That’s why this music can’t be interpreted nor performed*
The lack of these boundaries/bar lines/meter signatures instead of
being liberating,
it has a coercive, suffocating effect, and is frightening as well -
why?

*- maybe cause the choice is yours to make?
like being afraid to say a prayer badly?
like being afraid to say the wrong word?*

The piano is a coffin, Silvia dreams upon a bed: hung on the
threshold between life and death. Between progress and paralysis.

*- apparently Galina doesn’t really want to talk
to the dead either*

Metronome and counterpoint are instruments of torture, Nuremberg Virgins. The keys, blades. Choirs, perhaps nursery rhymes, dances macabres. Sneers. Forced marches. Nocturnes full of light. Sudden liturgies, perhaps prayers, or rather invoc-actions.

- *summon to yourself*

1 Ur-: (prefix, from German) original, earliest

Tenebrae Readings, Christ on the Cross. I thirst. UR-melodies¹ no one invented and no one ever will. Countless chromatisms, which since the dawn of time, are Seufzer: sobs, sighs, moans, tears. They are already found in Euripides. They are made of the so-called «minor seconds»: those sounds immediately contiguous, on the keyboard. And it's the nemesis of a metaphor that the closest contiguity generates the most ruthless dissonance.

- *Sonus soni lupus*

The scales on the keyboard spirals entwined in a tonally surreal vortex, of double-flats making the white keys doubly black, and going up to infinity, endless Jakobsleiter, the Jacob's scales that lead to heaven. But who the fuck would ever trust these hyperspaces?

But all these possible connections don't even exist.

- *almost a code?*

There are no memories nor past, there are no omens nor future.

Everything is transfigured, abstract. Temporarily not here, but not even before or after.

- *it has no place*

Everything is violence. Every note bursts of silence. All the more the strongest ones
Everything is silence. Earsplitting silences.

**“It is not difficult to find a quiet place to play qin, the only difficulty lies in finding silence inside qin”
Xu Shang-Ying (1582–1662), Dahuange Qinpu**

This is no matter you can deal with using elegant fingers. It requires moving on to fists. Slaps. Nudges. To the whole arm. To arm and fist
To the holed clusters, those you cannot perform with your fingers, nor with any other part of this body, not the human body, and that oblige to contorsionisms with disfiguring phonic consequences.

- *fate pounding on the door*

It is not about a call for arms though. Neither so are the pointed rhythms , the trochees and iambuses, so martial in the music of the many men who preceeded her. No, it is rather about internal alarms, catastrophes. You can also hear the trombones of the Apocalypse, the Krampus and Diabolacci flutes, the Cyclops drums.

- *we see the actors being obstructed*

Truth is, that Galina plays the piano like an infinitely little girl.

- it can save your life

Most purely. Innocent

- this can save your life as well

Literally: that generates from inside.
Immeasurably old

Galina puts her hands on the piano for the first time
Galina puts her hands on the piano for the last time

Galina puts her hands on the piano first.



Silvia Costa, director and performer

Since graduating in Visual Art and Theatre at the Venice's IUAV University in 2006, Silvia Costa has proposed a visual and poetic theatre nourished by a deep reflection on images, which drive her own reflection and shake the spectator. Alternating roles as writer, director, interpreter and set designer, this protean artist uses every aesthetic field, with no privilege given to one or another, to continue her own personal exploration of Theatre. Her creations are regularly presented in major Italian and international festivals.

Silvia Costa first made herself know with a few performances: *La quiescenza del seme* (2007) and *Musica da Camera* (2008), presented at and co-produced by the Festival Es.Terni in Italy, followed by *16 b, come un vaso d'oro adorno di pietre preziose* (2009), created specifically for the Festival Lupo in Forlì. In 2015 she created, collaborating with photographer Silvia Boschiero, *A sangue freddo* for the Uovo Performing Art Festival di Milan, followed in 2016 by *Alla traccia, lode a ciò che è stato rimosso*.

The first performance work she directed, *Figure*, was awarded by ETI Nuove Creatività prize and it was presented at the 2009 Festival Uovo Performing Art in Milan. From that moment she formed a strong bond with this festival, sustaining her creative activity. In 2012, she was invited to the Euro-scene Festival in Leipzig, where she presented *Stato di grazia* and creates especially the performance of *La fine ha dimenticato il principio* in collaboration with Juri Roverato, a paraplegic dancer. In 2013 she was a finalist at the Premio Scenario with the work *Quello che di più grande l'uomo ha realizzato sulla terra*, which debuted in its definitive form at the Festival delle Colline Torinesi. With this work, Silvia Costa also took her first step as a director on French stages, presenting it in 2015 at the Théâtre de Gennevilliers.

Alongside her performances and theatrical works, since 2012 and following a commission from the Festival UovoKids di Milano, Silvia Costa has created a series of installations for children which have also been presented in France at the Théâtre de Gennevilliers in Paris, the Festival Parallèle in Marseille, and for the Festival KidsPatch in Belgrade. These installations, often accompanied by a workshop on the same topic, are conceived as concrete sensorial experiences in which children can come into true contact with artistic activity.

In 2016 she created an adaptation of Jules Renard's novel *Poil de Carotte* for the Festival d'Automne à Paris and the Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers. This performance for younger audiences was later presented at La Villette, La Commune d'Aubervilliers, the Théâtre Louis Aragon a Tremblay-en-France, and at L'Apostrophe, scène nationale de Cergy-Pontoise Val d'Oise.

Her latest creation, *Nel Paese dell'inverno*, inspired by Cesare Pavese's *Dialoghi con Leucò*, made its international premier at Festival d'Automne à Paris in November 2018. In addition, she directed and designed *Wry Smile Dry Sob*, a choreographic and musical installation inspired by Beckett Spiel at the Landestheater Vorarlberg in Bregenz. For the triennium 2017-19, she was associate artist of the Teatro dell'Arte / Triennale Milano and, in 2019, of Quai d'Angers CND. Since 2020, she is part of the artistic team of the Comédie de Valence.

In addition, she directed and designed *Wry Smile Dry Sob*, a choreographic and musical installation inspired by Beckett's Comédie at the Landestheater Vorarlberg in Bregenz, that will see a French version during Fall 2020, produced by La Comédie de Valence, Centre dramatique national Drôme-Ardèche and Théâtre Garonne in Toulouse, in coproduction with Festival d'Automne à Paris and Centre Pompidou – Les Spectacles.

For the triennium 2017-19, she was associate artist of the Teatro dell'Arte / Triennale Milano and, in 2019, of Quai d'Angers CND. Since 2020, she is part of the artistic ensemble of the La Comédie de Valence.

De Singel in Antwerpen, where she has presented several times her works, will support the upcoming projects between 2021 \ 2023.

Silvia Costa made her debut in the opera contest in September 2019 with *Hiérophanie* by Claude Vivier, then in 2020, with *Juditha Triumphans* by Antonio Vivaldi, under the musical direction of Stefano Montanari, at the Staatsoper in Stuttgart. In 2020, she will direct together with Théâtre Garonne and Théâtre du Capitole in Toulouse a diptyk with *La demoiselle élue* by Debussy and *Carnet d'un disparu* by Janacek, with Alain Franco at the piano, and then at the Aix-en-Provence festival *Il Combattimento or the Black Swan Theory*, from Monteverdi and his contemporaries, with Sébastien Daucé and his ensemble Correspondances.

Since 2006 Silvia Costa has been an artistic collaborator and actress in the majority of director Romeo Castellucci's theatre and opera creations.

Marino Formenti, pianist, conductor, performer

Praised by the Los Angeles Times as “a Glenn Gould for the 21st Century”, he developed through the years quite different, new performances onstage and beyond the stage. His interpretations include premieres, improvisations and individual reflections on classical masterpieces; his most recent projects include often non-western or popular forms of music.

In quite ground-breaking concert dramaturgies (“Kurtág’s Ghosts”, “Liszt Inspections”, “Torso”) he creates an intense dialogue between the works, often in a sort of continuous flow. This radically new approach has been presented a.o. at Lincoln Center New York, Lucerne Festival, Wigmore Hall London, New York Philharmonic, Konzerthaus Wien.

“Liszt Inspections” was hailed among the “Best Performances of the New York Times” 2015 and of the “Best Recordings of The New Yorker” 2014.

His exploration of the music experience led him to develop more radical performances, and beyond the traditional recital. Here some examples:

In “Nowhere” he lives, eats, sleeps and performs for several weeks in one space, open to the public and broadcasted on a 24/7 internet streaming.

(Performed a.o. at Berlin Festival, BoCa Lisboa, Teatro Colón Buenos Aires, Performatik Bruxelles, Triennale Milano).

“One to One” offers a 2-hours-long musical rendez-vous with one single visitor. Pianist and spectator become gradually partners in the performance.

The utterly intimate set-up was later expanded up to a full-day-blind-date in “seven studies of communication and musicianship” at the Haubrok Foundation in Berlin.

Originally conceived for Art Basel 2013, it was performed a.o. at MEC Los Angeles, Teatro Colon Buenos Aires, Steirischer Herbst Graz.

“Time to Gather” is a recital without the invisible wall between pianist and audience, without a set program or a predictable ending.

People can interact, and choose with the pianist what to listen, or play with him and instead of him.

In the music movie “Schubert und Ich”, Formenti selected the voices of five non-musicians of different age and background to work on songs by Franz Schubert, away from the clean rendering of the classical concert; the interpretations were developed on a eye level.

Marino Formenti has been Artist in Residence at Lincoln Center New York, at Wigmore Hall in London and Nike Wagner’s “Pèlerinages” in Weimar. 2021 he will be Artist in Residence at BeethovenFest in Bonn as part of the Beethoven’s 250th Birth-Year Celebrations.

He has appeared at the international festivals of Salzburg, Lucerne, Edinburgh a.o.; as a soloist he played with the New York Philharmonics, the Los Angeles Philharmonics, the Münchner Philharmoniker, the Cleveland Orchestra, the Gustav Mahler Chamber Orchestra, the Orchestre de Radio France, working together with conductors Franz Welser-Möst, Gustavo Dudamel, Kent Nagano, Daniel Harding among others.

As a conductor, he worked on invitation by Maurizio Pollini at Teatro la Scala in Milan, at the Salle Pleyel in Paris and the Auditorium Parco della Musica in Rome.

He worked together with important art institutions and festivals, such as Palais de Tokio in Paris, MUMOK in Vienna, Portikus in Frankfurt or the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisboa.

In the theatre and performance world, he collaborated with Rodrigo Garcia, Tim Etchells, Kris Verdonck, Ann Liv Young.

He closely worked together with some of the greatest composers of our time, such as György Kurtág, Helmut Lachenmann, Salvatore Sciarrino, Olga Neuwirth, Bernhard Lang, Georg Friedrich Haas and Beat Furrer.

For his musical achievements he was awarded with the Belmont-Award 2009 of the Forberg- Schneider-Stiftung in München.

Galina Ustvol'skaja's entire life (17.06.1919 / 22.12.2006) is bound up with one and the same city. She was born in Petrograd (now St. Petersburg), completed the 10-year program of the music school affiliated with the N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov Leningrad Conservatory, and in 1939 entered Dmitri Shostakovich's composition class at the Conservatory as the only female student in his class. In August 1941, she and other members of the Conservatory were evacuated to Tashkent, and in 1943 she worked in the Tikhvin hospital. Her studies were curtailed during the war, but from 1944-46 she resumed her education in the class of Maximilian Steinberg, after which she studied with Dmitri Shostakovich for a year, finishing her diploma composition – her Piano Concerto – under his tutelage. The two composers were in regular contact until the early 1960s. Shostakovich highly valued Ustvol'skaja's work. He sent some of his own unfinished works to Ustvol'skaja, attaching great importance to her opinion of them. He wrote to her saying «It is not you who are under my influence, but I who am under yours.» Ustvol'skaja was attracted to Shostakovich as a person, but his «dry and soulless» music never appealed to her, as she told the entire world in the 1990s. Ustvol'skaja's frank statements, her denunciation of her teacher and exposure of his ugly side, caused a great scandal and remain one of the reasons why her music is still rarely performed in Russia.

After the release of the notorious February 1948 Revolution, Ustvol'skaja, like many other composers, was accused of Formalism, an abstract, audience-alienating approach to composition. She thereafter had to create accessible works «for the people.» So she wrote a tone poem based on a heroic tale for bass and symphony orchestra, Stepan Razin's Dream, which opened the autumn 1949 season in the Great Hall of the Leningrad Philharmonic and was nominated for a Stalin Prize. In the 1950s Ustvol'skaja wrote a number of vocal and instrumental works in a socialist realist style, most of which were performed once or twice – even in this official idiom, her music was considered too idiosyncratic.

Ustvol'skaja's true works found their way to the concert stage only with great difficulty. Often many years passed between their completion, performance, and publication. The middle of 1960s witnessed greater tolerance for such music, and interest in Ustvol'skaja began to grow – the Leningrad Union of Composers organized in the 1970s evenings of her music, which invariably received high praise from listeners and critics. Ustvol'skaja quickly became a cult figure, even though very few people outside of Leningrad and Moscow knew her. Widespread recognition came only after her music was performed in several concerts of the 1989 Holland Festival, thanks to the advocacy of the Dutch musicologist Elmer Schönberger. Concerts and festivals with Ustvol'skaja's music began to be held in Europe. Ustvol'skaja firmly rejected the suggestion that she emigrate from Russia. She lived as a hermit and left her hometown only a few times in order to attend festivals of her music.

Ustvol'skaja's music is unique, unlike anything else; it is exceedingly expressive, brave, austere, and full of tragic pathos achieved through the most modest of expressive means. Viktor Suslin, with whom Ustvol'skaja maintained friendly relations for many years, once described her music as though coming «from the Black Hole of Leningrad, epicenter of communist terror, a city that suffered so terribly the horrors of war.» Ustvol'skaja showed no interest in history, politics, or social matters, nonetheless she adopted the Black Hole metaphor and began to refer to her works as «Musik aus dem schwarzen Loch.» Her art was her only interest. And it was more than an interest – the constant, intense process of composing occupied all of her thoughts until her death. «My music is my life,» she said.

Pictures of the show

by Simon Gosselin







LES
ARROLOTT

Les créations 23-24

L'Art de la joie

Goliarda Sapienza / Ambre Kahan
Création novembre 23 à La Comédie de Valence
et aux Célestins Théâtre de Lyon (Parties 1 et 2)
Disponible en tournée en 24-25

En finir avec leur histoire

Marc Lainé
Création le 11.01.24
Disponible en tournée en 24-25

Le temps des fins

Guillaume Cayet
Création le 22.05.24
Disponible en tournée 24-25

À venir en 24-25

Entre vos mains

Une trilogie fantastique (3)
Marc Lainé
Avec les oeuvres de: Bertrand Belin, Alice Diop (sous réserve), Éric Minh Cuong Castaing, Penda Diouf, Alice Zeniter, Stephan Zimmerli
Création 1^{er} semestre 25

Édène

Alice Zeniter
Création novembre 24

Sœur-s, nos forêts aussi ont des épines

(titre provisoire)
Penda Diouf / Silvia Costa
Création janvier 25

À Sec - chroniques de la fin

Marcos Caramés-Blanco / Sarah Delaby-Rochette
Création printemps 25

LOTT
IONS

Également disponibles en 24-25

En travers de sa gorge

Une trilogie fantastique (2)
Marc Lainé
Création le 27.09.22

Ladilom

Tünde Deak / Léopoldine Hummel
Création le 19.07.22

Tünde [tyndɛ]

Tünde Deak
Création le 09.03.22

Nos paysages mineurs

Marc Lainé
Création le 21.09.21

Nosztalgia Express

Marc Lainé
Création à huis clos le 19.01.21

Comédie / Wry smile Dry sob

Samuel Beckett / Silvia Costa
Création à huis clos le 04.10.20

La Vie invisible

Guillaume Poix / Lorraine de Sagazan
Création le 22.09.20