

Miller Theatre Program Notes

Composer Portraits: Galina Ustvol'skaya
Saturday, November 7, 2009 at 8:00PM

*"There is no link whatsoever between my music and that of any other composer, living or dead."
-Galina Ustvol'skaya*

The statement is just. Galina Ustvol'skaya, born in what was then Petrograd (now St. Petersburg) in 1919, stood alone. Her music is different, not least, from that of Dmitri Shostakovich, with whom she studied at the conservatory in her home city (by then renamed Leningrad) and with whom she had an intense personal and musical relationship that continued after her graduation in 1947. The fact has gone down in history that Shostakovich quoted a theme from one of her earliest compositions (and one we hear tonight), her *Trio* for violin, clarinet, and piano of 1949, in his *Fifth String Quartet* of three years later, and quoted it again, near the end of his life, in his suite setting poems by Michelangelo. What these quotations signify, though, or what they remember, we cannot know. Nor can we know what Ustvol'skaya ultimately felt about Shostakovich. Almost anything is possible. Gratitude. Outgrowing. Reverence. Unknowability.

From her 20s to her 50s Ustvol'skaya supported herself by teaching at the junior department of the Leningrad Conservatory. Meanwhile, she lived two creative lives. She wrote cantatas, light orchestral pieces, songs, and film scores, all for immediate consumption and all subsequently disavowed. And she wrote the music she wanted to write, almost none of it performed at the time. That 1949 trio had its first performance in 1968. Other works similarly had to wait two decades to be heard, and in the 1960s she virtually gave up writing her "real" music, to start again in the 1970s, when her music was presented more immediately—though still only in the Soviet Union. She was virtually unknown abroad until the early 1990s, when she gained the advocacy of Joel Sachs in the United States, Reinbert de Leeuw in the Netherlands, and Frank Denyer in England. By that time, however, she had ceased composing.

*"All my music is 'spiritual' in nature."
-Galina Ustvol'skaya*

This is made explicit in most of the works she wrote after 1970, either by a subtitle from the Latin liturgy (in the case of the three pieces of 1970-75 entitled *Composition*) or by a sacred text (in the four symphonies that came later). But Ustvol'skaya meant the remark to apply also to her compositions of the late 40s and 50s; the spirituality was in the sound. Tonight's performances, of three earlier works and three from later in her life, will show what is exceptional and constant in that sound.

More words, at this point, would lose the track.

*"All who truly love my music should refrain from theoretical analysis of it."
-Galina Ustvol'skaya*

Yes, the music speaks with its own huge force, its own stark contrasts, and its own almost vacant simplicity. It needs only performers who can project—through its hugeness, its starkness, and its vacancy—the elemental.

Wholly open and yet totally mysterious, retracted to the fundamental and yet vigilant of the cosmos, Ustvol'skaya's work seems to stand outside its own time, as if waiting for ours.

Trio (1949)

Espressivo

Dolce

Energico

The link with Shostakovich is clear here, but not straightforward. More than to anything Ustvol'skaya could have heard or known in 1949, the piece relates to later, even to much later, Shostakovich—and by no means simply because the senior composer quoted from it. Ustvol'skaya, at 30, starts out in the place where Shostakovich a quarter-century subsequently, in his late 60s, was to end up, in an atmosphere of almost brutal austerity and cold shock.

Music of that kind often demands unconventional ensembles, as we will find later in this program. Here the instrumentation has its precedents (in Bartók's then recent *Contrasts*, for example), but Ustvol'skaya

marshals her forces her own way. The first of the three movements—which play together for about ten minutes—starts out as a partly canonic invention for clarinet and piano, which the violin joins on its own terms, forcing an accommodation. Once that has ended, as it soon does, the instruments scatter, and the clarinet is left to finish, as it had begun.

The play of instrumental characters is even more conspicuous in the slow movement, while the finale replays somewhat the drama of the first movement. Now, though, it is the violin that starts out joining the piano in a quasi-fugue, with the clarinet entering later and the dissolve leading to an unexpected conclusion.

Sonata No. 6 (1988)

There is a part for piano in almost everything Ustvolskaya composed. She wrote a concerto for the instrument and six sonatas. But this is not the piano we are used to. Ustvolskaya recreates it as an instrument of declamation, of force, and of extremes—extremes of loudness, of speed, of register. The result is virtuoso music, but completely unshowy. Nothing is grateful here, nothing merely fluent. All is incised meaning. Her *Sixth Sonata*, one of her last works, dating from 1988, is in one seven-minute movement to be played *espressivissimo* and very loud.

Octet (1949-1950)

I. quarter note = 66

II. quarter note = 108

III. quarter note = 69

IV. quarter note = 132

V. quarter note = 48

Though this work came so soon after the *Trio*—begun the same year and finished the next—we are in a different world. It is as if Ustvolskaya had filtered out everything she had learned from Shostakovich and left only her implacable self. The scoring is for an unusual group of instruments, assembled for this piece alone: two oboes, four violins, a set of timpani, and a piano. The oboes, especially, but also the violins and the piano, might sound like faceless voices, singing a liturgy of prayers, increasingly hammered upon by the timps. The rhythm is emphatically pulsed in each movement but not bound by any metre, so that the music proceeds step by step, sometimes turning in circles, sometimes moving forward decisively into the unknown.

Of the five movements, each baldly marked just with a metronome speed, the first marches, or determinedly trudges, in long loops in a process that could go on endlessly, while the faster second keeps insisting on a single motif as it builds steadily to a culmination. The shorter third movement looks back to the first, and the even shorter fourth makes a hurried, ostinato-driven prelude to the extraordinary finale. The whole piece plays for about fifteen minutes.

Composition No. 3 (“Benedictus qui venit”) (1974-1975)

The three pieces of 1970-75 to which Ustvolskaya gave the rudimentary title *Composition* are of irregular formations, like the *Octet*, and also like the four symphonies that came later. Each has a central piano part, joined in *No. 1* by piccolo plus tuba and in *No. 3* by quartets of flutes and bassoons—a “symphony of wind instruments.” Playing for seven or eight minutes, the piece remains intent on a single phrase of wordless chant, repeated and rotated in continuous varied sameness. The subtitle comes from the mass: “Blessed are they that come in the name of the Lord.”

Sonata No. 4 (1957)

I. quarter note = 80

II. quarter note = 192

III. eighth note = 184

IV. eighth note = 104 (108)

Ustvolskaya’s Fourth Sonata, of 1957, is in four movements played without a break and lasting altogether for about 12 minutes.

Composition No. 2 (“Dies Irae”) (1972-1973)

In *Composition No. 2*, the omnipresent piano plays with and against eight double basses and a hammered wooden cube—an instrument the composer invented to heighten the effect she had achieved with timpani in the *Octet*. The Latin subtitle again suggests links with the Catholic liturgy; “*Dies Irae*” (Day of Wrath) comes from the mass for the dead. But Ustvolskaya does not quote the original chant, instead creating a purely instrumental ceremony of verses and responses, solos and choruses, signals and outbursts. The work is in ten

linked sections, nearly all of which are loud or very loud throughout. The indications “profound” and “with inner tension” recur, and almost every gesture is marked “*espressivo*” or “*espressivissimo*.” Playing for about 20 minutes, the piece makes mighty claims on the stamina of the performers, who have to be immediately on a high peak and stay there.

Some of the best Ustvolskaya recordings are hard to find, including Reinbert de Leeuw's collection of the three *Compositions* (Philips) and an album on which he plays piano in three chamber works including the *Trio* (Hat Hut). The version of the *Compositions* under another pianist-conductor, Oleg Malov (Megadisc), is also scarce, but not so his record with the *Trio* and *Octet* (also Megadisc). A good alternative for *Composition No. 3* and the *Octet* comes from London Musici (RCA), and for the *Trio* from Alexey Lubimov and friends (ECM). Ustvolskaya herself approved Frank Denyer's recording of her sonatas (Conifer), no longer in print but easily available.

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