

Setting *That Record Straight*: Revised Program Notes for *Sounds of New Music*, Smithsonian Recordings. Notes by Eugene Bruck. Revised by Ralph Hartsock, ©2005.

During my research for the book *Vladimir Ussachevsky: A Bio-Bibliography* (Greenwood Press, 2000), I encountered numerous recordings and several self-perpetuating errors. The recording, *Sounds of New Music* (Smithsonian Folkways: FX 6160; F-6160 on container) proved no exception.

The recording was originally issued in 1957, on the Folkways label, a company founded by Moses Asch (1905-1986). Many of the recordings they issued utilized field recordings. The recordings were later bought by the Smithsonian Institution, and named Smithsonian Folkways. This recording was reissued around 2000 as a compact disc, and later as a streaming audio file.

The first discrepancy I noticed was for track 8, labeled *Sonic Contours*. This is actually Ussachevsky's *Underwater Valse*. Tracks 11-14 are Ussachevsky's *Transposition, Reverberation, Experiment Composition*, but in the order *Transposition, Reverberation, Composition, Experiment*. These two Ussachevsky works were premiered at a Columbia University Composers Forum on Thursday, May 8, 1952, a date now recognized by eminent scholar and musicologist Richard Taruskin.

Another glaring error is that the mild sounding track 6, *Aeolian Harp*, is actually Henry Cowell's *Sinister Resonance*, a dissonant piece of prepared piano music.

Some of the works were actually brief excerpts. Track 5 is a 56 second segment of Edgard Varese's *Ionisation*, a work that normally last over five minutes. Likewise, the *Dance* by John Cage was an excerpt of *Dance no. 1* for two prepared pianos. The entire *Dance* lasts approximately twenty minutes.

I have verified most of the tracks via scores or books with actual excerpts, or correspondence with composers. I did not find any substantiating score for *Bahnfahrt* (track 1), *Natural pipes* (track 15-17), or *Sonata for Loudspeakers* (track 18). The score I observed of Meitus's *Dnieper Water Power Station* was for the second suite; its rhythm and timbre indicate that it is very similar to the recording.

Below are revised contents and program notes for this recording.

Bahnfahrt (2:51) -- Symphony of machines : steel foundry / by Alexander Mossolov (3:02) -- Dnieprostrot : Dnieper water power station / by Julius Meytuss (2:30) -- Dance / by John Cage (2:42) -- Ionization / by Edgard Varèse (:56) -- Aeolian harp [i.e. Sinister resonance] / by Henry Cowell (2:08) -- Banshee / by Cowell (2:39) -- Sonic contours [i.e. Underwater Valse] / by Vladimir Ussachevsky (1:13) -- Fantasy in space / by Otto Luening (2:48) -- Symphonies in sonic vibration : spectrum no. 1 / Halim El-Dabh (4:16) -- Transposition / by Vladimir Ussachevsky (1:28) -- Reverberation / by Ussachevsky (1:21) -- Composition / by Ussachevsky (4:07) -- Underwater waltz [i.e. Experiment] / Ussachevsky (1:36) -- Natural pipes (:24) -- Natural pipes (:08) -- Natural pipes (4:32) -- Sonata for loudspeakers / Henry Jacobs (9:32).

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OCLC numbers used, formats, and relevant label numbers:

OCLC no.	Label	Format	Label number
740898329	Folkways Records	LP	FX 6160
154188907	Folkways Records	LP	FX 6160
79867425	Folkways Records	LP	FX 6160
73798899	Folkways Records	LP	FX 6160
2193900	Folkways Records	LP	FX 6160
31389504	Folkways Records	sound cassette	FX 6160
45012059	Smithsonian Folkways Recordings	Compact disc	FX 6160
782548601	Smithsonian Folkways Recordings	Compact disc	FX 6160

Streaming sound also available from Smithsonian global sound for libraries, from Alexander Street Press.

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Track 1: Bahnfahrt

Bahnfahrt is a musical version of a sort of narrow gauge “Toonerville Trolley,” performed in Germany in the mid-1920s, before Spike Jones. Tubas and trombones, whistles and woodwinds create a cartoon image. This type of music first found favor in Burlesque orchestras at the turn of the 20th century and continued, much to every child’s delight, to be the standard accompaniment to the animated cartoons until recently.

**Track 2: Alexandr Mosolov (1900-1973).
Symphony of Machines. Steel Foundry. (Stal.
Zavod)**

The ballet *Zavod*, op. 19, composed in 1927 during the reign of Stalin in the Soviet Union, depicts a realistic image of an Iron Foundry. Almost every listener is able to picture some sort of factory, with its relentless pounding and clanging movement of machines. The only concrete clue to the Steel Foundry is the constant rattling of a thin sheet of metal (flexatone or *Lamina de ferro*), the only non-conventional instrument in the orchestra.

**Track 3: Iulii Sergeevich Meitus (1903-1997) Na
Dnieprostroe (Dnieper Water Power Station)**

Born Jan. 28, 1903, in Elizavetgrad (now Kirovgrad), Meitus was a Ukrainian composer and pianist. Composed in 1930, *Dnieper Water Power Station* depicts the construction of a hydroelectric power station on the Dnieper River. We hear the initial work on the dam, the digging of the foundations and the sinking of posts. Meitus uses a conventional orchestra, with large woodwind and brass sections, and additional percussion featuring the xylophone and glockenspiel.

**Track 4: John Cage (1912-1992) Dance no. 1, from
his Three Dances for 2 prepared pianos.**

Composed in 1944, this dance symbolizes Cage’s invention of prepared piano music. He altered the timbre of instrument by inserting nuts, bolts, screws, rubber, weather stripping and other objects between the strings of the piano at different angles and at different distances from the dampers. Some liken this to the sound of the gamelan. The entire *Dance* is six minutes in length. We hear an excerpt from the conclusion of this dance.

**Track 5: Edgard Varese (1883-1965). Ionisation,
for 13 percussionists.**

Ionisation (1931) employs 13 percussionists with 41 unpitched instruments. Nicolas Slonimsky, the dedicatee, conducted the premiere in March of 1933. Only the second work of the western tradition specifically for a percussion ensemble, it

demonstrates Varèse’s use of alternation and variation of rhythmic cells. Percussion instruments, liberated from their subservient role to melody and harmony, were used here for resonance, something Varèse would further explore in *Déserts*. Varèse utilized instruments which had previously been used infrequently: West Indies bongos, a Cuban guiro, sirens, and the tambour à corde, also known as the lion’s roar. Varèse had previously used this eerie sounding instrument in *Ameriques*, *Hyperprism*, and *Intégrales*. This recording includes the first sixteen measures.

**Track 6: Henry Cowell (1897-1965). Sinister
Resonance (1930, revised 1968).**

Cowell makes new use of the existing instrument by plucking the strings of the piano in various methods to extend its timbre. The minor tonality is almost modal and employs the use of parallel fifths in the bass. Cowell instructs the pianist to cut off the string in its middle, and later to create a muted quality. He also utilizes harmonics or overtones by pressing gently with the finger of the right hand in the middle of the string of the note an octave below that which is written.

Track 7: Henry Cowell (1897-1965). Banshee.

The player stands at the crook of the piano and utilizes the open strings of the instrument. By scratching, plucking, pounding and sweeping the strings and taking full advantage of the strings’ sympathetic vibrations, the composer evoked the Banshee of Irish and Scottish folklore, the female spirit whose wailings forewarn the approaching death of a family member. Cowell has almost entirely obliterated the sound of the original instrument, so that all attention can be drawn to the work itself.

**Track 8: Vladimir Ussachevsky (1911-1990).
Underwater Valse.**

Along with *Transposition, Reverberation, Experiment, Composition*, this was premiered at a Columbia University Composers Forum on Thursday, May 8, 1952. Ussachevsky utilizes piano tones in what he called an experiment, with an easy going waltz rhythm.

**Track 9: Otto Luening (1900-1996): Fantasy in
Space.**

Otto Luening, in one of his first explorations into tape music, recorded himself performing on his baroque flute. He extends the range of the instrument by slowing down and speeding up the tape. This work, along with his *Invention in Twelve Tones, Low Speed*, and Ussachevsky’s *Sonic Contours*, premiered at the Museum of Modern Art, on October 28, 1952.

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David Randolph remembers that he tended to call this the first hearing, not performance, of electronic music in the United States. Luening and Ussachevsky later collaborated, using *Fantasy in Space* and *Sonic Contours* to form the tape portions of *A Poem in Cycles and Bells for Tape Recorder and Orchestra* (1954).

Track 10: Halim El-Dabh (b. 1921). Symphonies in Sonic Vibration. Spectrum no. 1.

El-Dabh was born in Cairo, Egypt, on March 4, 1921. After immigrating to the United States in 1953, he became a naturalized citizen in 1961, and taught for many years at Howard University in Washington, D.C. and Kent State University in Ohio. The work is for strings of the piano, and drums of wood and pottery. El-Dabh describes this work as follows: "In my Symphonies in Sonic Vibration, I make use of traditional musical instruments (old and modern, such as bongos strapped) for the main purpose of producing vibrations, tonal shades, timbres and sound spectrums rather than melodies of harmonic progressions. The resulting vibration, an entity in itself, is used as direct expression for communication."

"The notation used for the instruments of the orchestra is traditional, except that it is written in a certain way to help release the desirable sonic vibration (spectrum) for each specific composition. A technical knowledge in instrumental juxtaposition, along with sensitivity to overtones and sympathetic resonances, might enable the composer to master the media of sonic vibration. I make use of a special notation simultaneously with the traditional one to help me clarify the intensity and timbre of the sonic vibration and also its quality and shape."

"Some of the technical aspects that I attempt to use for the release of specific sonic vibrations are by allocating certain notes that are in actual pitch and other notes that are in harmonics. I treat each group allocated with its sympathetic resonances within a syntax of heterophonous notes and delineated notes."

Track 11: Vladimir Ussachevsky (1911-1990). Transposition.

These four movements (*Transposition*, *Reverberation*, *Experiment*, *Composition*) were demonstrated as experiments by Ussachevsky at a Columbia University Composers' Forum, on May 8, 1952. Transposition is described by the composer as the first and simplest principle used in making tape music: "Most tape recorders have two speeds, and so any sound you record is immediately available in two versions, the original and one an octave higher, or an octave lower. If you have two tape recorders, then any sound can be recorded up or down as many times

as one wishes." All sounds in *Transposition*, from a high hiss to low bell like tones, are derived from the lowest "A" on the piano, which is 27.5 cycles per second.

Track 12: Vladimir Ussachevsky (1911-1990). Reverberation.

The composer subjects the sounds from *Transposition* to reverberation, using another simple device for modifying the quality of a recorded tone...by the electrical repetition of tones at fixed intervals.

Track 13: Vladimir Ussachevsky (1911-1990). Composition.

Derived in part from piano tones, *Composition* employs melodic patterns that would later appear in *Sonic Contours* (1952); this later piece would eventually form the second part of *A Poem in Cycles and Bells for Tape Recorder and Orchestra* (1954), composed in collaboration with Otto Luening.

Track 14: Vladimir Ussachevsky (1911-1990). Experiment.

This further develops the technique of reverberation; Ussachevsky utilized these melodies and harmonies further in his later tape music.

Track 15-17: Natural Pipes

These represent the type of fundamental tones used in *Musique Concrete*. They are natural tones not necessarily because they derive from Nature, but because they are obtained from non-musical objects that surround us. For the tones heard here Roger Maren, aided by Frederic Ramsey, Jr., hung pipes.

Track 16: Natural Pipes.

Track 17: Natural Pipes.

Track 18: Henry Jacobs. Sonata for Loudspeakers.

This is but one of the demonstrations in synthetic rhythm prepared by Henry Jacobs of station KPFA-FM in Berkeley, California, during 1953 and 1954. Jacobs describes his experiments with tape loops and rhythmic patterns by narrating on the recording. Jacobs used state of the art equipment of the time, a tape recorder, operating at 7 1/2 inches per second, and splicing; he later demonstrated a binaural tape recorder. His sounds were derived from north Indian tabla, Haitian conga, and vocal sounds. The tape recorder extends the range of these instruments and voices.

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