

No Surface, Only Content: An Interview with Composer Lucie Vítková

Lucie Vítková is one of the most distinctive voices among young Czech composers. A native of Blansko, an industrial city near Brno, they studied at the Janáček Academy of Performing Arts (JAMU) with exchanges in the Hague, Berlin, California, and New York, where they worked with George Lewis on their doctoral dissertation (at JAMU) on the social and political dimensions of the music of Christian Wolff.

As well as composing – often using text and graphic scores in addition to standard notation – Lucie is also active as an improviser, performer, and dancer; in recent years adding the Japanese hichiriki and electronics to their main instruments, the accordion and voice. Their work has also never been confined to sound and concert halls, instead exploring various collaborations with artists and photographers, as well as Lucie’s own interest in Morse code and its sonic legacy.

We caught up with Lucie over video call – although they were stuck in Europe for a considerable portion of the pandemic (six months in Brussels followed by four months in Czechia), they have now rented an apartment in Brooklyn that will serve as their base between travels to Czechia, Slovakia, Germany, and Japan in the coming months. Our conversation started with general catch-up small-talk from two friends who only see each other once or twice a year. Inevitably, the conversation turned to the pandemic.

I really stopped enjoying composing during the pandemic. It all seemed very bureaucratic; devoid of people. I felt more like an office worker, constantly writing something up and sending it along. I finish a piece and I don’t hear it played, so I don’t really know what I’m doing; I don’t know what the music does to people. It’s only now that we’ll actually be rehearsing my new piece *Room* with Ensemble Spectrum from Slovakia.



Here in Brooklyn, I am in the full speed again, after the US opened its venues in April. I began playing with people almost every day. I work on my new orchestral piece, *Environment*, in the morning and meet with people to play in the afternoon. Just yesterday, we met up with cornet player and composer Graham Haynes, I'm also playing with clarinetist Madison Greenstone, with singers and composers Amirtha Kidambi and Leo Chang. With another friend, Teerapat Parmongkol, we just started a new band called Seminar Shadow. With Teodora Stepančić and her series Piano+, we rehearsed for a concert that featured a new piece of mine, *Extended Parts*, and I also collaborated with Petr Kotík here in New York. I also spent a month with my OPERA Ensemble at the Watermill Center Residency on Long Island and there is more coming in the next few months. It is a pretty broad range of activities.

Nevertheless, you took part in some of the social distancing online artistic activities.

That's right, I tried all these avenues, and I published an album as well, but I felt really out of place being just another link on the internet. It seems absurd to force people to spend one more hour sitting in front of their computers. That's not why I make music at all. It seemed demotivating. Nevertheless, I'm really happy with the album - it's called *Aging*, it includes seven pieces for double bass and electronics, and lots of people worked on it.

I make music because I think it can take people out of the house and bring them together, though I also understood that the point now is to keep each other safe. I was also stressed out by the technical instability of online performances or by the lack of feedback from people: you sit in your room, then you turn off the stream and you're alone. You have no idea if someone saw it or how they responded.

The fact we have been separated from audiences is bigger than we think. Their feedback and capacity have a huge impact on the music. On the other hand, maybe it is a good break to have where the musicians have to be alone with their music and figure it out for themselves, without the public. It seems unnatural because we have been living in symbiosis with the audience and now we have to manage by ourselves. That might be an important one year period.

I was generally unsure of what to do with music - whether there was any point in making it. But now there's hope; we're starting to play concerts again. I perform in a duo with my friend Teerapat - one could call it free improvisation, but it no longer really sounds like that. The music we play sounds like something new to me, playing together after such a long time spent in isolation. I feel like "working with the imagination of a place" would be a better description. Like you are in a physical place and situation, but with the music, you are transported to a space of interaction which visualises as another place in your head. It is another concrete room which doesn't have much to do with the physical space you are in but with the combination of two people who meet inside sound and relate to each other. We recorded our jam session and listened back to it and we felt very good about it - "this is great, we have to publish this, everyone has to hear this!". It was great to feel that motivation.

During this pandemic, I've realised the extent to which the music world makes us fulfil certain structures. The music isn't really about them. All this bureaucracy around the music, programme notes, CVs, video invitations, promotion, being seen, sending links, pictures, emails - why are we making the music? Sometimes it feels that our music is confined to the practical things, though I want to believe that music has different functions and could have transformative powers. Of course I sometimes meet people whose perspective is closer to mine and that's highly motivating - people for whom music forms part of a ritual, of a gathering, and so on.

As I said before, my music sounds pretty different after the pandemic and I actually like that a lot. I also came out with my non-binary identity during those months, so there are lots of changes in my life and it was good to have the OPERA people around, especially during our one month residency, where we lived and made music and art together every day.

You started the OPERA Ensemble following a commission from Roulette in New York.

Yes, we performed for the first time together in my piece *OPERA* in 2017 and have continued since then. After our latest residency at the Watermill Center, we were discussing what to do next – we could easily put out three records, as we’ve collected over fifty gigabytes of material to date. We agreed to meet up once a month, with each meeting organised by a different member of the group. We all feel it’s important to keep the work up and not let the energy dissipate after the residency, but the absolutely best thing would be to rent a van and do a tour of the USA, camping in between fixtures.

The community aspect is an important part of the OPERA Ensemble. Is this a response to the standard conditions of labour in contemporary music? People taking music as their “day job”?

You know, I don’t really get that feeling. I recently performed a piece at a Ukrainian Contemporary Music Festival in New York and it was all very human and friendly. Maybe it’s to do with being in New York as well, but generally, I mostly encounter people who want to enjoy it all and who have a lot of enthusiasm.

But of course, it’s different with *OPERA*. It’s all about *who’s* in the ensemble, what we need to do, and what each of us needs to do. I put it all together, but when we’re at the residency and someone has an idea, we go for it – we don’t think about whether it’s adequate in relation to the main project. If someone has an idea, we go and do it. We started making wooden combs and then playing them, for instance. With Sophie Leetmaa, we set up a wood workshop, bought tools, and started woodworking for a week to see what it would bring. We also organized a Comb Cult Gala with Sydney Viles, where we played the combs for seventy minutes. In the following weeks of the residency, we spent some time dancing, moving and playing with Muyassar Kurdi, playing graphic scores of magnolia leaves with Aine Eva Nakamura, or in my project, for which we sung into vases and noted their resonant frequencies. Then we stuck these pitches onto a keyboard with tape and created a piece out of this drone. We have made an Instagram Reels video as another form through which to work with the vases, one connected with pop culture. We have also played the drawings on ancient bowls in a piece by Vered Engelhard, *Monkeys in the Edge of the World*. We played with lots of people on the site, such as the poet Candace Hill, we gave a workshop for kids and visited the Shinnecock Reservation where we played with the musician and activist Shane Weeks and artist Jeremy Dennis.

I am interested in the multiplicity of the ensemble, which has its foundation in each of the members. Everyone is doing loads of different things and has a variety of skill. They’re not just professionals at one thing – they practice on multiple levels and in multiple disciplines.

How did the idea come about?

I got the commission from Roulette Intermedium, an experimental music venue in New York, and I wanted to make an opera. I also thought it would be great to have a single group of people doing both the singing and the playing, so I set out to find instrumentalists who would be open to singing. There’s a great range of both trained and untrained voices in our ensemble that people use in various genres and

contexts. I liked the versatility of having a small choir, a small ensemble, or a mix of the two. I called the piece *OPERA* and wrote it using graphic, text, and classical notation. Some members don't read classical notation, however, so I "translated" the entire standard notation into an audio score for them so they could learn it by ear. That way, I could understand the accessibility of different kind of notations and really learn to be flexible.

In *OPERA*, there is no story in the usual sense. The text is composed of excerpts from *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, a book by the Italian philosopher and feminist thinker Adriana Cavarero. So it's a piece about the voice itself. The story was that we live through the piece on the stage, while doing whatever was necessary to play it. All the texts were translated into Morse code, which is another layer of this piece, in which I explored the musical potential of this sonic language. I paid a lot of attention to staging, so that each movement would have its own place. I used my experience with dance choreography for that aspect of the piece, even though there was no dancing except for the scene where the movement was determined by an electronic feedback loop. After the premiere, there was a review in the San Francisco Classical Voice by Lucy Caplan. I really liked when she mentioned that the piece had no surface.

"Vítková's sound-world might be described as music turned inside out. Through sounds both strange and unremarkable, she puts the seams of music-making on full display. You hear the stuff in the nooks and crannies rather than the glossy facade."
Lucy Caplan in a review of OPERA for the San Francisco Classical Voice.

There was no theatre in *OPERA* - it was all an authentic reflection of what we needed to do to perform the piece. It was important to clearly state that we are on the stage. In concerts, you focus more on the music over the presence of the performers, while in *OPERA*, you focus on the characters it portrays. And each person was very important in the piece. Despite the fact that there was no overarching story, each of the performers had their own story to tell while playing all these parts and changing clothes for their "aria". We started in casual dress and ended up dressed in a more extravagant/"aria" style. That transformation was important - the idea was to show yourself through fashion. *OPERA* is conceived as a spiral, in the next performance of it, we would start in the more extravagant "aria" attire and would end up in something even more "aria". All this is *OPERA* for me: to operate in space; to transform. What interests me about the word "opera" is not only its origin, in the sense of an extended dramatic composition, but also the meaning of the word as "work" or an "effort" in general. You can see both of these elements in *OPERA*.

It felt so good to surround myself with like-minded people, so I decided to continue and founded the *OPERA* Ensemble. I feel that we're more like a pack of wolves than an ensemble. There's quite a punk approach - someone might disappear for two years and we hear nothing about them, and then I get a phone call from South Korea and we can celebrate their return. Or, during the residency, one member didn't come at all, well, that doesn't mean that they weren't there with us! We had

them on our minds and worked with that presence. It was a composer, Elizabeth Adams, who could not join us because she could not access the residency with her child due to residency regulations.

I am really learning about how to lead, and also noticing how the mainstream structures and notions of leadership are not broad enough. It pushes me into a non-conformist world – most of the members, including me, are outcasts, to an extent, living more or less outside of the system. Sometimes it feels like anything can happen. This really stretches the range of how we can be together.

It does seem like a difficult situation in which to plan concerts.

Sure. It does a great job at disrupting all my organisational habits and stereotypes. Should I start to get upset about this? Should I reject someone and say they're no longer a member of the group? I don't think so. It really stretches the boundaries and often shows me new ways of being creative. If one person drops out, the pieces are flexible enough that we can always find a solution. And this also informs how we write. We can respond quickly and dynamically when something changes, which also teaches us to process our emotions. It should not be such a problem: if someone needs to do something, they should do it, and if someone needs to disappear, that's how it is and I respect that.

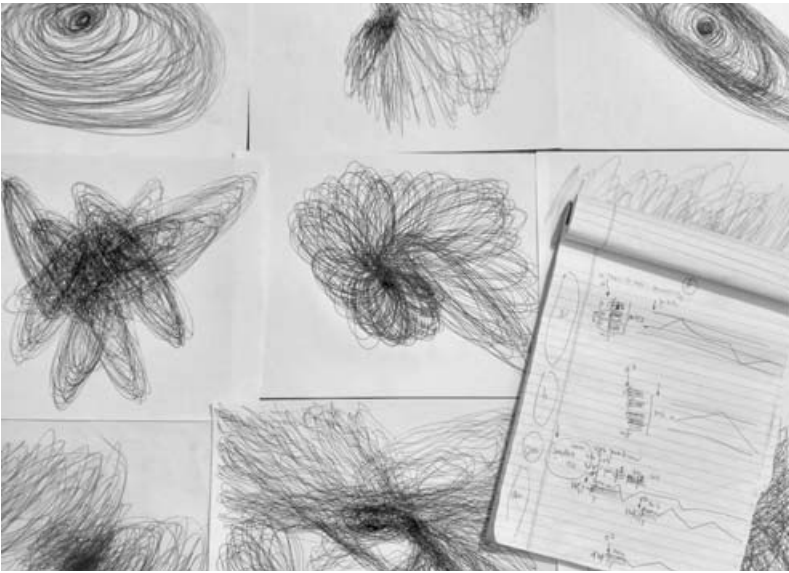
Just from this discussion, it seems like there is a distinct similarity with anarchist thought. Is the political made explicit in the ensemble?

Not really – everyone's politics are different and I don't really want to put a label on the whole thing. Even the fact that I am the notional leader of the group teaches me a lot. For instance, I realised there was a tacit expectation of peaceableness – we all want to be together, we always try to meet each other half way. However, this would exclude people of a more conflict-based nature. The make-up of the ensemble changes all the time – people come and go, some return, some don't, though there's a stable core that includes me and a few other people.

Personally, I'm definitely very influenced by democracy. I like when everyone has the same amount of space and can express their individuality in the collective. This also relates to Christian Wolff and his conception of music. I wanted it to be like that because I felt there wasn't enough of this approach in society, and it worked for years, but now I also want to be able to accommodate conflict, in part because conflict can have the effect of renewal, so we won't get stuck in a groove.

That's a frequent critique of Wolff's music – that it's too utopian and doesn't give any tenure to conflict, struggle, and the like. I remember George Lewis once saying: "If you want to make a change, you've got to make some noise!"

Studying Wolff's music was very important to me, but I feel like I'm in a post-Wolff stage – I have to develop his ideas further. In response to the quote by George, I remember that whenever I wanted to change things in an improvised context, I would start playing extremely quietly and paying enormous attention to it. It doesn't just have to be volume – it can also be about gesture and concentration. Though, I get what George meant and now I also make loud noises – ever since I started playing the hichiriki, which is a very powerful instrument.



*Sketches for the orchestral piece
"Environment"*

As for Wolff, what I was most attracted by was the interplay between the individual and the whole: we're all part of the whole, but we're all equal parts and there is space for each of us to express ourselves individually - even if it's through his material, we still get to decide how we use it. The conclusion I arrived at in my dissertation was that his approach operates on an abstract sphere: Wolff isn't interested in who plays his music. It's nice that he teaches us to behave towards each other in these ways (which might well be highly beneficial), but he applies this to people who are not representative of all of society. The techniques are therefore only applied to a particular group of people - to his friends or to a contemporary music community that isn't diverse enough to test the model in depth.

So far, I know that music is made by people, it doesn't fly in the air by itself. Somebody has to move to make it happen and the *who* is an important context of music which has been overlooked for a long time.

So what do you mean when you say you're "post-Wolff"?

Well, I finished the dissertation - it's going to be published as well - and now I'm moving on. I'm saying "Okay, Christian, I respect the way you're doing it and I take it on, but now I'm moving in my own circles and I have to think about what this all meant." So I approach it critically, but I'm definitely not saying Wolff wasn't an influence on me. And not just with the OPERA Ensemble, with other ensembles too - I was starting the NYC Constellation Ensemble while I was reading a lot of Wolff, so it was also based on equality and individuality in the collective.

When we met in Brussels a few years ago, we were both excited by Jane Bennett's ideas of an expanded ecology of things as set out in her now-classic book Vibrant Matter. How have these ideas developed in your work in recent years?

Jane Bennett is always with us, particularly when we're working with the OPERA Ensemble or in my solo work. What I was most captivated by was her question



*Comb making during
the Watermill Center Residency
2021, Long Island NY*

whether we can see things from a non-human perspective. This is crucial for me. We use things, look at them, constantly interpret them - how they relate to each other, how they work. In a sense, they are an embodiment of how we relate to the world. But how do things relate to themselves? This is a perspective I am very interested in.

Bennett talks about people who struggle with hoarding (*an inability to throw away things that would generally be considered trash - editor's note*). There might be something about being close to the objects in a way you start to perceive them as a part of your body. In this perspective, it is unclear where the human ends and where the objects begin.

As a musician, I consider myself a cyborg. I think about my instruments as parts of my body. This includes things like my portable speaker, which I've had for years. Whenever someone touches it, I become jittery - it's very close to me. People around me know this and the members of the OPERA Ensemble, for instance, are very careful with my things.

This is so crucial for my work as a performer - the relationship between me and my objects is the principal subject of my performances. I often use portable feedback, where I have a little microphone on my hand and an active speaker on my leg. This way, every move I make is reflected in the sound and when I hear it, it leads me to another movement or to play my instrument, creating the whole.

The aim is to give space to the objects, to my body, and to the relationship between them. Jane Bennett really just needed to say "non-human perspective" and that opened the floodgates for me to develop my practice in all these various directions. I like that she doesn't provide concrete answers. Instead, she circles around various questions, perspectives, and issues that create new locations for thinking.

My next question was going to be about the role of sound and listening in your approach to "vibrant matter", but actually, what you just said makes it pretty clear that your approach is not in the abstract or acousmatic listening tradition, but closer to Cage's idea of a musical



*OPERA Ensemble during the Watermill Center Residency 2021
Left to right: Lucie Vitková, Vered Engelhard, Sophie Leetmaa*

performance as total theatre involving all the senses and components of the situation.

Right, though I would like to distant myself from Cage at this point – he was an influence on me in my early years but not recently. As I perceive it, his music has become defined and established and is losing its flexibility for me. Jaroslav Šťastný (composer Peter Graham, Lucie's teacher at JAMU – editor's note) used to say that experimental musicians do music that they feel is necessary. When I perform, it basically just *happens*. I barely do anything – I simply exist in that situation.

To be on the stage is an extreme situation that influences what I do – for instance, when I'm on an elevated stage, I pretend I am not elevated. I try to demolish the stage and make it clear that anyone can do what I am doing. If people see it and say: "Well, I could do that too," then that's great! I hope people do start doing what they need to do and what is necessary for them. I don't need people to look up to me – sure, I want them to respect my work, but I also want them to search within themselves and maybe find something *they* need to say. That's why I find working with non-musicians so inspiring: I think everyone can do something; everyone can take part.

What's the relationship between virtuosity – the amount of time you had to spend with your instruments so that they could become part of your body – and the idea that what you arrive at is something anyone can do?

That's a good question. I find virtuosity is still part of my practice, only on a different level. Usually, my pieces have virtuosic coordination which underlays the resultant sound, which may well be considerably simpler. These co-ordinations are where I direct my education, dance practice, and composition practice. It is something which is not obvious at first sight, but sometimes, you look into my scores and they seem really complicated on the level of co-ordinating the movement to produce the sound, and I also write pieces in which you have to focus on multiple things at the same time. In my compositions, the players usually have an audio score in headphones and they have to listen to their co-players as well as reading multiple scores in front of them. From this overwhelming situation, I want to distract the players to stop performing and only be in the space making sound. I've called some of my later pieces multiplicity exercises, where you can try to train your brain to be able to do many things at the same time. I think this is a good contradiction to the specialisation and professionalism that is dominating our scene.

On the other side, I am also aware how virtuosity might cut off access for people to make music and where virtuosity dictates the binary of good and bad, which is not useful for music or art. People can often be cut off, divided from music – they don't give themselves a chance, or else they're told they're not suitable for music. I like

the opinion that they are suitable, so through my solo performances, I want to bring them in, offer the possibility of doing something themselves; the idea that it might be beneficial for their lives.

While you were at Columbia University, you began performing with the gagaku ensemble there (gagaku is a traditional Japanese form of imperial court music – editor’s note). This led to you taking up the hichiriki (a double-reed Japanese instrument) and you’ve kept up this practice. What is it that interests you about folk and traditional music?

Well, I have always been interested in all kinds of music – at Columbia University, I was also involved in a North Indian ensemble, CU Raaga, and during my time at CalArts, I tried out Javanese dancing with gamelan accompaniment and African dances with a live band, played by the students. Somehow, I stayed with gagaku the longest – we perform twice a year, and the second concert is always at the Miller Theatre with Masters from Japan. I also went to Japan for a six-weeks residency, I bought a hichiriki there and started taking it seriously; as one of my main instruments.

When I went to Japan for the second time, next to the traditional gagaku concert at the Yomiuri Otemachi Hall in Tokyo, I played a concert with two noise musicians, Toshimaru Nakamura and Tetuzi Akiyama – we formed a trio of no-input mixer, electric guitar, and hichiriki. I love the fact that the hichiriki has such a powerful tone that even in a noise setting, it doesn’t need amplification. I also performed some concerts in a duo with my colleague Haruhiko Okabe, who has a background in traditional Japanese music as well as free jazz.

The approach of my teacher, Hitomi Nakamura, is a huge inspiration to me. Whenever I hear her play, I feel great depth in what she does, combining a devotion to traditional music with a curiosity for contemporary music. She also came to my Appolo bar noise concert, so I really admire her capacity to be able to perceive the potential of the instrument on a broad scale.

I have a keen interest in what it means to play the hichiriki in various contexts. How we approach these blends is a challenge. What I’ve figured out so far is that it is good to be aware of one’s own position in this context and be transparent about your relationship to what you do. I’m actively thinking about this – what does it mean when I play the hichiriki in a free improvisation context, who I play with... The conclusion I’ve arrived at is that it’s good not to walk away from it even if one has doubts. To keep trying to connect, bring different environments together, keep asking and keep playing.

There seems to be a considerable difference between the training system of Japanese traditional music, with its high degree of rigour and specialisation, and the approach you described in your solo performances – that “anyone can do this”.

But I think everyone can play gagaku, in the sense that anyone is invited to play. That’s how I felt at the Columbia University Gagaku Ensemble, where I met some composers and musicians as well as engineers and people from various non-music oriented disciplines playing this music. The same in the temple in Tokyo: I had the impression that lots of the members in the ensemble were so-called non-musicians and had a broad spectrum of occupations.



PHOTO: MUYASSAR KUIRDI

*OPERA Ensemble performing OPERA
Left to right: Lucie Vitková, Sky Macklay, (Sophie Leetmaa – legs), Sydney Viles, Carolyn Hietter and Martha Cargo*

The training in gagaku is different from the experience I had at a conservatory when learning a solo instrument. In gagaku, you first need to sing “shoga”, which means that you internalise the melody you are going to play through your voice. There is a modern book of scores written in katakana to practice gagaku, though in some lessons we would still do it through traditional oral learning, where my teacher, Hitomi Nakamura, would sing the melody first and I would repeat it. Through learning to sing the song first, I would acquire a basic knowledge of it. After that we would learn to play it. The combination of singing and playing is very important; you only know the song well if you know “shoga” well. I think even the masters would tell you that there is still more work to do on their sound and more to learn. It seems that in gagaku, you are never finished with being a master or such, you simply continue to play your whole life. Each player also has their own distinctive sound, the reed is very sensitive to changes in temperature or embouchure, and there are more ways to play the songs according to the masters and their lineage.

In a gagaku lesson, I realised that we never practice the song as single sections or focus on the most difficult places separately. Also, nobody will give you any tips, tricks, and shortcuts to learn it faster. You play the song over and over, alone, with your teacher or in the ensemble, until it becomes clear to you. Daily practice is important to strengthen your breath and embouchure muscles, especially with the hichiriki, since it is hard to produce a sound on it. These are some of my experiences of gagaku acquired over the last four years.

The last topic I'd like to discuss is your collaboration with the musician David Rothenberg, whose life project is exploring musical interactions with animals.

That was an important experience. With David, we made an album with a nightingale in Berlin and another with hundreds of thousands

of seventeen-year-old cicadas in Ohio. I'm always aware of the environment around me and being able to practice and perform with him for three years, whilst also meeting scientists who study animal behaviour and calls, had a considerable influence on me. I learned a lot from David, who also wrote several books on the music of birds, whales, and insects.

Some moments were very strong, particularly with the nightingale in Berlin – we spent forty-five minutes playing with the bird, in the park at midnight. I was only singing, while David performed on clarinet and electronics. There is something about a realisation of contact with the nightingale. I was trying out things I often do in music: it would start a note, then I'd join it, it would stop, and what I'm interested in is whether it'll then respond and realise that we are singing together. There were two amazing moments when the nightingale came back to the tone I was singing. I don't know whether I imagined this or not, but the moment of connection was very strong. Though one has to realise that one can't beat the nightingale – it'll go on singing through the night, hours and hours, even losing a portion of its body weight during the process.

What you are talking about is your direct interaction on site. What is the shift that takes place when someone listens to a recording of this performance?

Being there is one experience, and we do live concerts of these interactions too, but once you put it on a CD, it enters the musical sphere and what's interesting is listening to the sonic interactions to see what new music is created. Though I'm still not sure if what we're doing there is really music. We can call everything music so just people pay attention to it, but maybe there is meaning in sonic interaction other than music-related meaning. I think that's one possible critique of Cage – he wanted us to pay attention to everything as music, which seems like a good thing at first, but on the other hand, we may begin to forget what the sounds were in the first place and that they deserve attention even without being called “music”.

To return to the first part of your answer: I think it's crucial that I'm listening to the interaction between a human being and another agent with a non-human perspective. I don't think it's as simple as “abstraction has now taken place; this is now music” – the deepening of our relationship with the environment and the animal kingdom can still take place.

I agree. It's unlikely that someone would spend forty-five minutes just listening to the nightingale. The framework of the concert or CD gives you an opportunity to focus in – a musical excuse.

Right, like the paradox of field recording – for many people who enjoy field recording, particularly on an amateur level, recording is actually just an excuse to stand here and listen for ten minutes, listen to anything, because it turns out that listening to anything for ten minutes is interesting.

Exactly. What you create for yourself is an environment for concentration, a motivation, and meaning. It's interesting that we have to use such means to break through the everyday structures we live in to arrive at activities that were once, perhaps, perfectly natural. Well, I don't know if it was ever natural to listen to birds for an hour... perhaps in a different way.