
COMPOSER SPEAKS

Article received on: 21st March 2015
Article accepted on: 21st March 2015
782.071.1:929 Величковић J.(047.53)
COBISS.SR-ID 223344396

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THE VELICON: MAGNETIC ATTRACTION OF MUSIC AND SERENDIPITY

An interview with Jasna Veličković



Jasna Veličković entered the world of music as a classically trained composer and pianist. After completing her studies in Belgrade (with Srđan Hofman), she moved to The Netherlands and continued her education with Louis Andriesen, Clarence Barlow and Gilius van Bergeijk. Currently based in Amsterdam, she is creating

new music worlds in her studio overlooking the water. During her twenty-year long career she has developed an exciting body of work performed at festivals such as the ISCM World Music Days, the MATA Festival, Zagreb Biennale,

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Gaudeamus Music Week, Holland Festival, Time of Music, Archipel Festival, A-devantgarde, Avaton Festival, Neposlušno, Ring Ring Festival, and the International Review of Composers. Some of the ensembles engaged in playing her compositions are Blindman (BE), Studio 6, Metamorphoses, Dušan Skovran, Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra (RS), Piano Possibile (DE), Le Nouvel Ensemble Moderne (CAN), Ensemble Aleph, Cairn (FR), Ensemble MAE, Ear Massage, Ensemble Klang, de Erepijs, David Kweksilber's Big Band, Axyz, LOOS, Dutch Radio Kamerorkest (NL), and the European Contemporary Orchestra (EU). She won the 28th Irino Prize (2007) in Tokyo, Slavenski Award (1998), and the first prize at the 5th International Review of Composers in Belgrade (1996). She was nominated twice for the Mokranjac Award (2001, 2006). In 2012, she was a finalist of the ECPNM Live-Electronics Competition. Last Song (for percussion quartet) was nominated for the Dutch Toonzetters Award (2011) and received a "recommendation" at the UNESCO Rostrum of Composers (2011). Jasna Veličković also participated in the organization of musical events as a member and co-founder of CHINCH – Initiative for Research and Production of Contemporary Music, "Live" and Visual Arts and is the co-founder of TkH: Walking Theory / Teorija koja Hoda.

Veličković's interests in broadening the boundaries of the world of music lead her to the exploration of various subjects in her works. She rethought contexts of popular culture in *Epizoda zone sumraka ili kada je Zagor sreo Alana Forda* [Episode of the Twilight Zone or When Zagor Met Alan Ford] (1995), *Slika Dorijana Greja* [The Picture of Dorian Gray] (1995), *The Dracula Project* (2002), *Velvet Embryos* (2003), *Fantasia* (2004), *Uspavana lepotica* [The Sleeping Beauty] (2006), *Dance Dance Dance* (2008); she explored the sound manifestations of inhibition and trauma in *VriskrikExe* (1997–99), *Kada pokušavam da ne vrištim* [When I Try Not To Scream] (1998), *Self-accusation* (2007), and questioned the world of music theatre and opera in *Dreamopera* (2001), *Love and Jealousy* (2003–4), *Fiasko* (2005), and *Self-accusation*; one of her constant passions is the exploration of developments in the field of technology and their influence on the world of art, and this can be followed through *SuperInTellActUAllyMadManMadeMachine* (2000), *!DNA AND?* (2002), *472/XI Variations*" (2005), *Strelka* (2004), *Sputnik* (2005–6).

Since 2008 she became interested in various layers of interference between magnetic field and music. In producing a of works called 'Shadow Studies' she started playing instruments without touching them, by using coils and the magnetic field. This gradually led her to inventing the intriguing new instrument, the Velicon. The new phase in her oeuvre served as an impulse for our conversation.

KS: We have decided to talk to you about your current work that Jelena adeptly dubbed the “magnetic phase”. I am curious about “sonification” – rendering audible – that which we apparently have trouble hearing, such as the magnetic field which is the foundation of your recent research. You are combining the experience of a composer, musician and an inventor, in a brave attempt to find a new path for your art.

Anyway, let’s start. We encounter magnetic fields on a daily basis and they have a wide use in modern technology, for example in electrical engineering and electromechanics. In this respect, we could call the history of electronic music also the history of “magnetic music”. Although magnetic fields are around us we usually do not hear them. So, when and how did you discover the “pulling force” of the magnetic field as a sound force?

JV: Indeed, magnets are all around us, and the more I use them, the more I am aware of their presence.

Looking back, it is clear that there was no single moment of creation but that it evolved during a longer period, allowing me to introduce silent phenomena into the audible spectrum. Today, I use coils as handhold inductors, which allows us to hear the magnetic fields, but in the beginning I was using coils to generate sound waves. My discovery using magnets directly came as a result of significant amounts of time spent working with coils (since 2008), a number of errors in experimentation and my constant drive and need to create sounds that I was not able to create or hear before. It didn’t happen instantly, it was foreshadowed for some time. Some steps were small, some bigger but almost all of them were serendipitous.

KS: In other words, discovering the magnet sound-world was an impact of contingency. Tell us more about it?

JV: It happened in Mexico City in 2013, while I was working with Diego Espinosa on a performance of *Shadow Study#7*, the composition that I wrote for him earlier. In this piece I was address very delicate, “small” sounds, but the background noise of the concert venue “Centro de Cultura Digital” was louder than any sound of my work. So I had to think of presenting something that could function in this specific place. I was busy searching for the solution, applying the accumulated experiences from my previous projects. An accident happened while I was mounting a set-up that I had used earlier in *Magnetik* (2013). There was a moment when purely by chance one magnet fell and touched the coil I was working with. This resulted in a huge, massive and exciting sound. That sound discovery was the moment when I decided to go forward, exclusively working with magnets and coils.

KS: ...and that led to something new: the development and invention of an instrument, isn't it?

JV: Yes. Since then I've been busy developing this particular performing set-up, which nowadays I call the Velicon. I should mention that many people that I collaborated with had a contribution to its present form, such as sound engineers Konstantin Leonenko and Clare Gallagher, performers Diego Espinosa and Nora Mulder and institutions which supported different stages of development such as the STEIM – Studio for Electro-instrumental Music in Amsterdam, the Gaudeamus Music Week in Utrecht, the Dutch Performing Arts Fund, the CIRMMT – Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in Music Media and Technology in Montreal, and the aforementioned CCD – Centro de Cultura Digital in Mexico City.

JN: I will try to find a link to your 'classical' compositions here. Sputnik (2006) was written for two pianos that together make a quarter-tone texture (they are tuned a quarter-tone apart), and sometimes they act as shadows to each other... So the 'poetic of shadows', (id)entity and its 'double', was, in a way, also there before the magnetic phase?



And I am also thinking about your ever-present interest in technological developments, including space explorations. It was evident in a number of your 'classical pieces': SuperInTellActUAllyMadManMadeMachine (2000), !DNA AND? (2002), 472/XI Variations (2005), Strelka (2004), and Sputnik (2006). One of them looks especially intriguing from this 'after the Velicon' perspective today: 472/XI Variations written for the LOGOS Foundation Robot Orchestra, voice and ensemble. Can you tell more about this piece, and also your interest in technological developments.

JV: I have been fascinated by technological development and how it has influenced our society, for as long as I can remember. Look, for example, at the work by the performance artist Stelarc, his Third Hand, Stomach Sculpture, and Extra Ear, etc. These are the kind of works that inspire me and are etched in my memory.

So, when I received an invitation from the Festival ADEvanguard to write a piece for the LOGOS Robot Orchestra and the Munich based ensemble Piano Possible, as part of the collaborative opera *Es lebe deer Sport*, I was really excited, since I had never composed for robots before. Logos M&M stands for Man & Machine, for using all kinds of musical interfaces combined with experimental robot design. The theme of the opera was "Sport", a subject that I hadn't been particularly interested in. But my imagination was triggered by the notion of "the world record" and the human need to extend the limits of the physical body. I was studying the statistics of the world records during the Olympic games, which eventually led to the title of the piece: *472/XI Variations*. In the title, I juxtaposed two events: 472BC, the year when the games were extended to five days and the formal outline of this ancient Greek festival was established, and XI which stands for the XI Olympic Games, held in Berlin in 1936, as captured by Leni Riefenstahl in her movie *Olympia*.

KS: You have mentioned that the usage of coils already occurred in Magnetik (2013). In which way was it different from what the Velicon would become? Were there other examples of coils in your other compositions written in this pre-Velicon period? Or rather tell us more about the genesis of magnetic sound?

JV: The Velicon is made of magnets and coils solely, where the sound sources are magnets. In *Magnetik* on the other hand I used a more complex system, which was a combination of two coils with different functions, where the sound source is a cimbalom.

For *Last Song* I was using the same coils as for *Shadow study #1* (2008) which was the first composition written for coils and piano. The coils produced

sound waves that excited the vibration of the piano strings. In *Last song* I used coils to play on the mbira. The mbira does not produce a loud enough sound to be heard by the audience, so a pickup microphone and mixer were used, which lead to interference with the coil. Since this interference created the desired sounds (not initially, but after tweaking), the set-up and score were changed so to accommodate these new sounds. So, instead of trying to get rid of the interference, it became the centerpiece of the score. Observation and open-mindedness allowed me to think of other solutions. Again, this discovery was made possible by trying to do something else. And using interference as a sound source paved the way for what would eventually become the Velicon.

JN: In some of your 'pre-magnetic' pieces I detect an intriguing interest in – let's call it – reinventing identity through the music. One of your early compositions was entitled The Picture of Dorian Gray (1995), as Gray's identity was inseparable with his portrait growing old instead of himself. In Good Bach (2001/4) for pianist and CD, when the pianist plays a reinvented Bach's Prelude in C Major alongside the recording played by Glenn Gould, the gap becomes obvious. Self-accusation (2007), for synthesiser, narrator, loudspeaker and a prepared piano shakes up the default procedure regarding the incompatibility of what is written in the score and what is performed. Fiasko (2005) for three voices, six detuned pianos, spinet and portative organ examines, among other things, the 'pluralism' of keyboard instrument sounds. When I try to trace your 'magnetic phase' in what you did before that, I find it in this peculiar interest in an 'identity gap' embodied in the sound. Could you comment on this?

JV: When I think of the sounds that are produced with the Velicon, which is the latest stage of my work where I use the magnets and inductors only, I don't see any link with the subject of reinventing the identity, since the sound of the Velicon is new, and therefore has no references.

But almost all the works that were composed between 2008 and 2013, while I was experimenting with coils without permanent magnets, dealt with the subject of reinventing identities or modifying existing ones. Coils were an excellent tool for this action, and I agree with you that the subject of reinventing identity is embodied in the sounds of these works.

For example in *Shadow study #7* (2012) I was using samples of siren sounds. I was focused on the physicality of the sound wave, and how the sound vibration affects the movement of the zither string. The siren sound has a very wide frequency spectrum that changes all the time, so it was the ideal sound wave to work with. For this work I tuned the zither strings in such a way that once the vibrating coil pushed the air, it excited the zither strings by producing small

rhythmical patterns or melodies. In the end, the sound heard from the zither was a lullaby-like song. The left-hand coil produced the harmonies with rhythmical patterns, while the right-hand coil excited the zither strings playing the melody. I was consciously modifying existing sounds into something else.

Shadow study #4a (2009, version #4a 2013) on the other hand, builds on Frederic Chopin's Prelude Op. 28 No. 4 in E minor. It is written for two performers. One performer excites the piano strings by placing the coils that transmit the manipulated recording of Chopin's Prelude over them. The other performer silently presses the piano keys, playing the original score in an extremely slow tempo. The keys that are pressed are used as a guide for the performer with the coils to know where to move. Once the piano key is pressed, the piano string of that particular key is open and therefore vibrates more. The strings that are used in Chopin's Prelude are prepared with small disc magnets. The function of the disc magnets is to amplify the sound. I discovered this phenomenon while working on *Magnetik*. In this way, the harmonic development of the prelude is extended to the acoustic phenomena of the vibrated strings, opening up almost infinite possibilities of how this work could sound. Seen as a "print", the piano acts as a tool and becomes the body (without an external body we would not be able to hear the coils). The identity of the piano as an instrument is changed. In the end, the sound heard is the shadow of an existing music piece and the piano becomes its own shadow.

KS: If we go back to Last Song, which you mentioned earlier, for me it was a transitional piece. Both, the sound of the magnetic field and a definite pitch exist side by side. This composition tries to break free from the contemporary music discourse by still belonging to it. It also shows a very specific and also radically disruptive use of sampling at the end of the composition that disappears into the "white noise haze" of the magnetic coil mbira. This moment is also the moment of erasing the classical music tradition with something else and opening a new signifier chain in your musicianship. However, it could also be read differently as the erasing of the "digital" by means of the pure analogue.

How do you see the Velicon – as an analogue instrument – in contemporary electronic music culture? What is your position on the digital-analogue divide, especially today when analogue instruments are becoming ever more present in experimental music-making?

JV: I guess my education and preferences have a lot to do with my choices. I was also trained as a pianist. I remember clearly the day when, for the first time in my life, I touched the piano keys. It was an intense experience, much

stronger and more vibrant than any other. Pressing the white and black keys of the piano and getting an immediate sound had an exhilarating effect on me. This tactile nature of playing the instrument is something that I am drawn to. Looking at the physical action of a violinist, trombonist, singer or organist; the relationship between the body, the instrument and the produced sound is still intriguing. The Velicon is exactly that. Sometimes I miss this quality in electronic music concerts where on stage you see a performer who is almost unaware of the fact that he/she is on stage, merely turning around a few knobs or typing some codes. Also, today we are surrounded by electronics, might I say even polluted with the vast volume of sounds coming out of user-friendly software. But, this is not the reason why I created my set-up in this way. I simply enjoy making sounds with something tangible. I like to believe that the Velicon sound is pure and transparent, two values that I really appreciate.

KS: Thank you for bringing the question of sound into the discussion. Let me go back, briefly into the history of the magnetic phenomenon. In the 18th century, the German doctor, Franz Anton Mesmer, argued about the existence of an intangible mysterious fluid force that could be manipulated for healing patients or even other purposes. Animal magnetism was the name he gave to this phenomenon. His healing method was devised around bringing people to a state of hypnosis with the help of “mesmeric magnets” so as achieve a proposed remedial benefit. For about seventy years, after its foundation in 1779, “mesmerism” was practiced as state of the art treatment in medicine, yet with new developments it was put aside and forgotten as an unproven practice of dubious value. Even today, we use the term “mesmerising” to describe something enchanting, spellbinding, charming, dazzling, fascinating, transfixing, transporting. It is the term that is used abundantly today to describe many electronic music pieces and their effect. Since you work with pure ferromagnetic materials, thereby bringing the audience inside the magnetic field and healing it, in a manner of speaking, from prejudices, that electronic sound is something intangible and mesmerizing. With the Velicon the sound becomes tangible and present, unexpected and new. Or as you put it pure and transparent. Did you envisage this sound in the first place or did it come gradually?

JV: Since I have been working with magnets for more than two years, my approach in finding sounds has changed. It all started with one amazing low sound, that was exciting enough to make me curious to see what would happen if I tried some other magnets. In the beginning, I was not looking for any particular quality. Everything in the process was new and everything was “needed”. All the novelties that occurred at the beginning were the result of time spent playing, listening and observing without a specific direction.

I had one clear and simple rule: I would not use any effects or computer processing. This decision made the whole set-up much stronger and unique and my research became more challenging and focused.

KS: Could you tell us more about the ferromagnetic materials you use in the Velicon set-up?

JV: When it comes to the material, there are two types of magnets that I am using, namely neodymium and ferrite magnets. Compared to neodymium, the attractive force of ferrite magnets is noticeably weaker. Ferrite magnets have a much warmer sound and higher frequency range than neodymium when played. When it comes to the shape of the magnets, I work with sphere, ellipsoid, cylinder, cube, rectangular, ring and irregular shaped magnets of different sizes and strengths. Magnets with a round and circular surface are mounted on flat surface magnets and easy to move.

KS: So, in your exacting research for particular sound qualities, how did you react to the volatile and ever changing nature of the magnetic sound? How did you make yourself familiar with this strange magnetic animal?

JV: The more I played magnets, the more I became aware of their behavior, what kind of sound I could expect, which gradually led me in a more specific direction in my research. The first sound palette I created allowed me to hear what type of sounds I was missing. I figured that every element in the set-up affects the change of sound. The thickness and shape of the metal base structure that the magnets are mounted on, as well as the combination of the used magnets and their shape, material and strength, play an important role when I build a specific sound.

So far, I have had magnets for playing sounds with different textures, magnets that are good for playing rhythms, and magnets with a fairly big range of registers. With specific combinations of magnets, I created particular techniques of playing special articulation, which brought a distinct diversity in the sounds coming out of the same magnet combination. More recently, my focus was on producing magnet sounds by using various metal boxes that influence magnetic fields and therefore act like magnetic resonant boxes. I also created sound “filters”, by adding new materials in between the magnets and the mounting metal plate. At the moment, I am searching for long duration sounds that would last more than one minute.

Some of the sounds are really easy to reproduce. But there is another type of sound that is possible to repeat only as a texture. Everything that is happen-

ing inside the texture is full of small variations. In a way, it is similar with what is happening when we look at the flames of a fire. We can never expect to see exactly the same picture twice. We know its behavior, we know how the flame reacts when we add another piece of wood to the fire, or when we blow air. In a very similar way, the performer can easily control the texture's duration, loudness, speed and color, by changing the position of the coils around the magnets that are excited, and also by changing the speed and intensity of the physical touch of the performer's finger while moving the magnet.

In a way, working with this kind of sounds, one can never fix the score one hundred percent accurately. Unexpected sounds are part of the Velicon nature. For me, this is a great advantage, since it requires extremely deep concentration and dedication from the performer. Because of this it is also a great instrument to improvise on.

JN: How easy is it to train someone to become a 'veliconist'?

JV: The principle of playing a Velicon is – and feels like – playing any other acoustic instrument. Due to the performance-centered nature of Velicon, and my personal relation as its designer, I am very determined to perform as many of my own compositions as possible, all the while creating a frame of reference that could easily be shared with other interested parties. So far, I have worked with percussionist Diego Espinosa and violinist Dejana Sekulić. Both of them are experienced musicians, with an interest in expanding their skills. Since the sound and technique of playing the instrument is new, the hardest part in training is to articulate which quality of sound one should listen to while producing it, and to discover how to do it. This is an exciting process since it pushes me to look back at the sounds I made, and describe their nature, limits and character to someone else. Magnets are not easy to control, and each magnet needs a different touch, so jumping from one set to another requires skill that comes only after hours of practicing.

JN: Was it your decision to leave 'the comfort zone' of classical music also political? Was it stimulated by issues of power in the field of classical music? You were educated in the world of classical music, you were also trained as a pianist, you have a considerable number of compositions written for classical instruments and ensembles, and you have a strong career in this field. Suddenly (or not so suddenly?) you bravely decide to invent something else in a different world, and position yourself in the field of electronic music. And as far as I know, you didn't compose 'classical' works during this period?

JV: If I look at the instrumentation of my compositions written for classical instruments and ensembles, the majority were written for an unusual combination of classical instruments: such as *Strelka* (written for two pianos, harpsichord, harp, musical saw, cimbalom and accordion), *Fiasko* (for three voices, six old detuned pianos, spinet and organetto), *Sputnik* (for two quarter-tone apart pianos), *Unbackable* (2002/03) (for voice, piano, harpsichord, harp, accordion, percussion, two flutes, two clarinets, two trumpets, two ‘cellos, two double basses, and double bassoon), and *VriskrikExe* for live-electronics and orchestra. I never wrote a composition for string quartet or wind quintet. But, the practical reality of writing the mentioned pieces was upsetting. There were not that many opportunities to perform these works since they were too complicated from a production perspective. I had no chance of gaining experience from these works and to see them grow while being presented and performed. So, I had to find some other way to put out my work.

JN: *There is a lot of power-play in working with an ensemble. Could you tell us how hard it is to get an “A-list” ensemble to play your piece or commission one?*

JV: My impression is that “A-list” contemporary classical music ensembles (actually the ensembles that survived the brutal art fund cuts) found themselves in a strange position, and were forced to make a lot of calculations and compromises in their programming. In order to sell a concert, they tend to go for more acceptable or more commercial programs. In order to stay visible, the most secure place to be is to perform the “canon” or works of well-established composers. Sometimes, they even hark back to 19th century composed music which, in my opinion, is not their field of expertise.

I was commissioned by the Ear Massage, MAE and ECO ensembles during my “pre-Velicon“ period. It was great that the percussion quartet Ear Massage and MAE had no restrictions concerning the instrumentation. With the ECO ensemble, I was lucky that I was not asked in detail what I was planning to do, so that once the composition was finished, it was too late to make major changes to the production process. Unfortunately, safety and functionality are preferred values in today’s mainstream music making, pushing out playfulness and curiosity in the creative process. It feels as if there is no space for experiment or failure. With the Velicon, I found a system that allows me to work on a daily basis on something stimulating and uncompromising but at the same time practical, which is satisfying.

JN: *How do you see the relationship between the worlds/scenes of ‘classical’ and electronic music, and your position in/between them?*

JV: I do not deny the existence of different scenes, but when I compose I do not think of them. All my works derive from a specific compositional idea for which I create specific methods to realize that vision. Depending of what that idea is I use different music tools. What matters to me is new sound expression, irrespective of whether it's created with classical or electronic instruments, or both. That's the main reason why my works tend to sound distinct from each other. Judging from my experience, I expect that in the future I shall be doing the same thing, moving in and out, out and between... Right now, I am attached to the sounds that I produce with the Velicon, but in the future I might be writing a composition for a large ensemble (and the Velicon), or working for an orchestra, or I could be busy creating new instruments.

JN: In this sense, how you work out the problem of notation for the Velicon in the combination with an ensemble? Do you have a score for it?

JV: The first written composition for the Velicon was *sUn*. This score uses the traditional notation system combined with a graphic notation, which guides the performer on how to position and move the coils in the air. However, the problem that I am facing right now is that this kind of notation explains to some degree the performer's action, but does not explain the sound he/she produces. For example: if we write *pizzicato* next to the note, we know it as a playing technique that involves plucking the strings, and we know what kind of sound to expect. This is only one of the more interesting problems that I have had to solve in creating a consistent notation system for the instrument.

KS: Either way, you recently started something new again: building the performing experience with the Velicon within the field of experimental and improvised music. How would you describe it as an instrument-device fit for "live electronics" performances?

JV: The Velicon is an instrument that is perfect for live performances. If we were just to listen to the sounds, we would be experiencing something unusual and interesting but we would lose the visual aspect of the instrument, its complex system of magnets and its manipulation. Seeing someone playing magnets, visually connecting his/her gestures, attention, caresses and concentration adds curiosity and wonder to the live performance. Apart from this visual element, the real physical experience of the sound is very important. Some of its sounds are felt more than heard. And let me add, home PA systems are not built for them!

KS: And to follow the previous question – what is your relationship to division within electronic music? Let me briefly explain. You are a composer but you are not working within the parameters of academic electronic music. On the contrary, you are actually entering into the field of experimental electronic music and improvised music, which is so often a place of intersection between classically trained musicians, musicians who come from different genres of popular music and geek culture. Where do you find yourself more affiliated?

JV: I see the whole process as a natural flow. I have deep roots in classical music, continuously growing (horizontally or vertically), with the need to extend my own enjoyment of music. In the past, I had the opportunity to listen to concerts with large-scale works by classical composers such as Varèse, Xenakis, Nono, etc. These events were influential, amplifying my passion for music, composition and sound.

Using new technologies gives me the possibility of creating new sonic territories and new music ideas. Based on my own experience, the field of experimental electronic and improvised music is at this moment more alive, more exciting and therefore a more attractive place to be.

JN: At some point your magnetic, tactile research made me think about Theremin and his instrument. Did you ever felt connected to this specific reference? The funny thing is that Theremin, the instrument, was originally the product of Soviet government-sponsored research into proximity sensors. The context is, of course, completely different in your case...

JV: I was always attracted to the Theremin sound. As a child (nowadays too), I loved watching old science fiction movies where the Theremin was often used.

It is no coincidence that in the *Strelka* instrumentation (my composition named after the first space dog to go into orbit and return alive), I used a musical saw, the instrument that has a similar sound quality to the Theremin.

At the beginning of my research, I was playing piano strings with coils without directly touching the instrument. I can imagine that it reminds one of the Theremin. It was the first gesture-controlled electronic musical instrument and I feel attached to its transparency, its relationship between movement and sound.

The gestural aspect of playing the Velicon is also quite visible. However: the method of producing the sound and its actual sound color are different. I would like to imagine – just as an exercise – to play the *Dying Swan* by Saint-Saens on the Velicon, but I am afraid I am far away from this, since it is not a melodic instrument.

It is very interesting to see how the Theremin – an instrument with great potential for the exploration of new musical territories – was used to great effect in performing conventional instrumental music. I still love to listen to Clara Rockmore’s classical Theremin music recordings, even though in general I prefer the Theremin’s ability to experiment.

It is also quite interesting to notice the dynamics of invention, how in this case the Soviet government sponsored research into proximity sensors led to Leon Theremin’s creation of a new music instrument. It confirms that things often don’t turn out as initially planned.

JN: How does the audience react to your magnetic performances? Recently, it featured among the highlights of the MATA festival in New York? Tell us a bit more about it.

JV: It must be the attractive magnetic force, which draws the audience after each performance towards the instrument with many questions and remarks. Questions are quite often triggered by people’s curiosity about how the instrument works and how I got the idea. It is not as obvious as I thought, because sometimes they do not realize that the small metallic-looking spheres are actually magnets. I like to explain that the Velicon is a sort of sound LEGO. The audience reacts strongly to the performance, its visual aspects and remarks are often about the physical experience of the sound. Furthermore, associations are made with primordial or “out of space” sounds. There is something quite powerful about it, which creates a bridge on different levels that I am still not capable of articulating. I know for myself that I was attracted to them from the very beginning, and after each public performance I feel encouraged to go further.

KS: In a way you are also transitioning the form of the performance space into another new territory – album making (instead of composition writing) and recording. Let us imagine the future and your first album. Can you envisage the relationship between the Velicon, recording and post-production?

JV: As I mentioned earlier, live performance has its own advantages and I am very determined to perform live as much as possible. Making an album imposes new questions.

In my research, I quite often record myself and I have hours of material that I listen to in order to hear how these sounds affect me when I do not play them. Some texture-sounds function better in the recording, since its richness and delicateness might easily be lost in a live performance situation.

Recently, during an informal improvisation recording session with friends, I accidentally recorded the Velicon's input only. While listening to this recording, I was intrigued by its strange timing and the choices of sounds I made. This track was completely different from any of my previous solo recordings. The interaction between three musicians was present in the recording through the silences and choices of my gestures. There was no trace of their sound input but I could clearly hear that I was not playing alone. I intend to do the same experiment with a few more improvisers. I am very intrigued to record this process of human interaction and hear what comes out of it. This could be my first "with_out" the Velicon album.

JN: What are the plans for the future? What are you working on now? Do you intend to go back to 'classical music'? Do you intend to try to bring together magnets and classical music?

JV: At the moment, I am making new compositions for the violoncello and Velicon, which I intend to finish by summer. Also, I am working on the classification of the sounds, where each sound will have a short audio and video recording, describing in detail how it is produced. In a way, I am creating an archive based on my two years of research, which will be published on my website. There is a tempting invitation to do a new work for the Velicon and organ. And in the meantime, I am imagining a new solo Velicon performance, hopefully in a space with intriguing acoustics that would bring forth the physical quality of the long duration sounds that I am currently interested in. But where else will these long sounds take me? Who knows? I am curious, and I'm looking forward to the process.

Translated by the authors