

Vladimir Ussachevsky: Film Music
New World 80389-2

by Alice Shields Vladimir

Ussachevsky was one of the most significant pioneers in the composition of electronic music, and one of its most potent forces. Born in 1911 in Manchuria, China, Ussachevsky was the son of a Russian Army captain. His childhood was spent on the windswept and sparsely settled Manchurian plain, visiting with the nomadic tribesmen in their tents, and singing Old Slavonic chants as an altar boy in the local Russian Orthodox church. By the time he arrived in California, at the age of nineteen, he was a skilled pianist gifted in the interpretation of Romantic music, and a fluent improviser. After receiving his undergraduate degree in music from Pomona College, he earned a Ph.D. in composition from the Eastman School of Music. From 1947 until his retirement in 1980, Ussachevsky taught at Columbia University, where he was known for his teaching of sixteenth-century counterpoint. But in his career there, he began experimenting with the use of tape recorders to manipulate sounds. Through much experimentation he developed the first works of "tape music," a uniquely American synthesis of the French *musique-concrète* and the German pure electronic schools. In 1952, Ussachevsky's first works of tape music were performed at an historic concert at The Museum of Modern Art in New York City, along with works of his colleague Otto Luening. Through a five-year grant awarded by the Rockefeller Foundation in 1959, Ussachevsky co-founded the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, and directed its course for the next twenty years as the leading electronic music studio in the United States.

Ussachevsky's electronic compositions include many milestones of the genre, covering a wide spectrum of solo tape pieces, pieces for live instruments and tape, tape music for radio plays, live theater productions, film and television. Among his solo tape compositions are such classics as *Piece for Tape Recorder* (1956), *Metamorphoses* (1957), and especially, *Of Wood and Brass* (1965). Perhaps the most beautiful of his works for tape and live musicians is the oratorio *Creation Prologue* (1961) for tape and four choruses.

On this recording are two of Ussachevsky's most powerful and innovative scores: *Suite from No Exit* (1962), from the film of Jean-Paul Sartre's play *No Exit* directed by Orson Welles, and the soundtrack for Lloyd Williams's avant-garde film *Line of Apogee* (1967). Ussachevsky's score for *No Exit* is a traditional soundtrack in that the music was meant to be a background to spoken words. *Line of Apogee* is quite different: There are only a few spoken words, and the images on screen shift quickly and wildly between weird, dreamlike sequences and partial animation. Here, Ussachevsky's music becomes the primary organizing element, as the various sections of music flow into one another smoothly, easing the shocking effect of the visual changes.

In both film scores we hear Ussachevsky's favorite musical form: variations on several alternating themes. His themes are significantly different from those of his serialist colleagues, who often choose themes consisting of the same pitch material they would

write for traditional musical instruments. Ussachevsky instead chose themes that often do not have traditional pitch or timbral characteristics.

In *No Exit*, for example, he used three main sound sources: electronic, vocal and *concrète*. The electronic sounds range from searing and slicing noises, to the ominous, bell-like tolling at the end. Here his use of the human voice is especially effective, starting with the torturous, electronically manipulated screams of the opening scene, through the voices of distant children, a woman humming, echoing male voices, and at the end, men laughing—suddenly silenced by rifle fire. The *concrète* sounds in *No Exit* include a threatening, pulsing loop of hog sounds (which appear in varied form in *Line of Apogee*), the rising wind (also developed in *Line of Apogee*), the crackling of fire, a clock ticking, and the rifle fire.

In *Line of Apogee*, Ussachevsky used an intriguing variety of sources:

Environmental: wind, footsteps, splashing water, telephone, creaking chair.

Animal: hog, songbirds, owl. Vocal: infant crying and laughing, woman humming and laughing, choruses singing Gregorian chant; Jewish cantor intoning.

Instrumental: piano (Ussachevsky improvising), flute, organ, brass, glockenspiel, drums.

These sources were electronically modulated through such devices and techniques as the electronic switch, echo chamber, feedback, ring modulation, tape loops, speed variation, volume control, complex mixing and detailed tape editing.

Due to his choice of such timbres, what constitutes a “melody” in his tape music can vary from the tempered scale of the piano in *Line of Apogee* to the simple intervals of high, medium, or low in the “wind” parts of the same score. By using the medium of tape music for its unique capabilities, Ussachevsky extended the orchestral resources of his time just as composers have done in every century, by developing an instrument with previously unknown musical possibilities.

But perhaps Ussachevsky's most remarkable achievement is that he did not fall into the common trap of electronic composers: he did not become obsessed with technology as an end in itself. Instead he concerned himself with the musically expressive possibilities of a sound or technique. Clearly, he brought to the development of electronic music an ear highly skilled in the perception and expression of emotion in music. This may be attributed to his early and intensive training in Romantic music and Russian Orthodox choral music, both characterized by the powerful expression of emotion.

Ussachevsky's uncannily sharp ear could detect the slightest technical defect in a recording. But more important, he would go to extraordinary lengths to remedy anything musically dissatisfying. Those of us who assisted him in the tape studio can attest to the often excruciating hours of work to which he would submit himself and us to gain the subtlest increases in musical effect. As we worked with him in the studio, we saw the means by which he transferred such emotional expressivity onto the tape: in a word, he danced. As he turned the controls of a machine, his whole body moved in graceful

choreography in response to his simultaneously listening and sculpting ear. Any machine under his sensitive hand became a fully responsive musical instrument. —*Alice Shields*

Alice Shields, composer of electronic and theatrical music and former associate director of the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, is heard in Line of Apogee as the laughing and humming woman.

Vladimir Ussachevsky Photo: Leni Spencer ©1989

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Creation Prologue. Multiple choruses tape. Columbia MS 6566.
Metamorphoses. CRI SD 356. *Of Wood and Brass*. CRI SD 227.
Piece for Tape Recorder. CRI SD 112; Finnadar QD 9010 (quad).
Sonic Contours. Desto DC 6466.

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Prepared for release by Karl Hereim Line of Apogee composed in association with Alice Shields and Pril Smiley. Recordings originally produced at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, New York. Mastering: Robert C. Ludwig, Masterdisk Both works available from American Composers Alliance

Cover art: June Wayne. *Debristream* (1979) (detail) from the Stellar Winds suite. Lithograph, ca 10 1/4 x 9 1/4 in. ©1979 June Wayne. All rights reserved.

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Special thanks to the Columbia University Electronic Music Center, Pril Smiley, associate director, and Susan Jackson. The film *Line of Apogee* ©Lloyd M. Williams. Available for rental from filmmaker's Cooperative, 175 Lexington Avenue, New York 10016.

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Vladimir Ussachevsky (1911-1990)

Suite from No Exit (14:28) in six parts

1. (3:04)
2. (2:17)
3. (2:48)
4. (1:10)
5. (1:41)
6. (2:42)

Line of Apogee (43:37)

7. (9:17)
8. (5:44)
9. (4:47)
10. (5:51)
11. (3:17)
12. (10:15)
13. (4:23)

Line of Apogee is a through-composed work. Although the tracks on this compact disc have been situated at various contrasting passages within the piece, they do not necessarily correspond to “movements” in the strict sense. Rather, they are intended as convenient entry points in the music.

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