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The Score: In Memory of Maryanne Amacher  
By ALVIN CURRAN

The Score in “The Score”, American composers on creating “classical” music in the 21st century.

Maryanne Amacher  
installations, noise, sound art

She’s dead, damn it!

Maryanne Amacher, malnourished bundle of genius and bone, thin, taut drinker’s muscle and brains that literally burst in waves of successive icti, the strongest and most fragile woman I have ever known, unequivocally one of the greatest music-makers of the 20th century — a title she would have mocked and laughed at, but cherished in quiet — left in the middle of her life without even so much as sweeping the leaves off her front porch.

There are ways to die and ways to die. Of Maryanne, who one might say lived part-time on this planet, we could not have imagined a more tragic, untimely yet natural departure. From her hospital bed she told me over the phone feebly but happily that she was “going home next week” — having made an amazing recovery after a head injury and coma suffered in an accidental fall.

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That was late July. What followed was a martyr’s journey: her first stroke then her inability to communicate through speech and at last wired to brainless machines who could care less about you — the wired one — but mercifully give those around you constant hope. Such roars of hope from her friends and acquaintances all around the world, a constant, stadium-sized roar to get her past this one glitch at the base of her brain stem; surely, in health, Maryanne would have run out and recorded this sound and used it in her next piece, because it was truly planetary — nay, cosmic — like what she heard when she recorded the most distant highway sounds at night from Walden Pond — that “singing” she said, those distant voices, especially the inner ones, the choirs of euphoniums and French horns smack in the middle of an nondescript un-orchestrated New England landscape.

Maryanne Amacher  
Recombinant Media Labs

When did we meet?

Maybe it was at the N.Y.U. electronic music studio in an old movie house on Fourth Street in the late 1960s. Mort Subotnick invited her; she slept in a kind of mop closet with her precious tapes, magnetic, bubbly, bizarre, but hard-wired to things I was just beginning to intuit.

Or was it 1970, when she piled into Frederic Rzewski's mother's car, all bundled up, aviator cap and all, along with Serge Tcherepnin and Anthony Braxton to whiz off from the Upper West Side on a brief Musica Elettronica Viva early spring tour of Midwestern colleges? These were long hauls on Interstate 80, wet roads, stoned passengers, utopian destinations, laughing singing rapping hyping. Nothing mattered it seemed, except that the youthful skins we were all wrapped in should bestow us eternal life and that the world out there should be waiting for the revolution we were about to deliver from the contents of the trunk of this vintage car.

The conscious presence of a black man and a white woman, a half-Asian Russian-American and the rest of us ex-Ivy League golems-in-exile, in a 1972 Oldsmobile was a quintessential picture of the time.

Pulsing sounds emerged from what seemed like every direction, began to circle my head, I thought I was hallucinating swarms of biological air.

The music we made then was raw, liberated, wild and 100 percent organic. Maryanne stood out, not only because she was a woman, and a magnetic woman, but because her sounds, played then on multiple tape machines and mixed live, were at once so shockingly coherent, so unifying and powerful that, alone, she could have replaced the whole kit-and-caboodle of us. She wasn't soloing, but rather urging everyone else to another level, one where incessant musical convulsions (often accompanied by macho crescendo-itis) morph into a silky glass roaratorium of palpable audible vibrations. Her creative presence in that group led all of us to yet another path for liberating music.

With Maryanne, I felt the woman-power of an artist for the first time in my life. Her unique hearing of sounding events and her loving sensibility toward space, people, and incredibly drawn-out duration, her pure, uncompromising commitment, her unabashed femininity and ironic humor, were for me a musical lesson long overdue. And let's not forget her husky laugh, her fastest-gun-in-the-West comebacks, her self-acquired scientific sheen, and her ability to drink anyone under the table. Does this explain why she had so few devoted women friends? Why men approached her as one approaches an oracle? Why she worked like a dog and remained poor as a mouse?

At the hottest point of those hippie times we passed a brief period together at Harmony Ranch — a utopian collective of architects and artists from Yale who'd created a dream space in a large country house in central Connecticut. I joined Maryanne and Serge, along with Richard Teitelbaum and Barbara Mayfield. With Maryanne we spent slow, stoned hours listening to the inner voices of everything and recording the marvelous outdoor symphonies of moment-form peepers and angelic slow glissandi piper-cubs on their landing path to a nearby airport against a background of little brooks, Guido the barking dog, and general hippy hi-jinks in the backyards. Inside, Maryanne would hold long conversations with the parrot, sometimes incessantly exchanging the word "hello" between the two of them until the parrot switched to, "How are you?" — a recorded event which opens my own radio work, "A Beginners Guide to Looking at Birds."

However Europeanized I thought I was, this return to "homebase U.S.A." at the beginnings of Soho with its Kitchen concerts and the downtown community of upstart-activists, light-show

wonks, stir-fried experimental “musici,” and socio-political organics was a most important moment in my creative beginnings; Maryanne was central to all of this. She was not only a dear friend but an ever-precious source of inspiration, a fearless guide to places and things unknown, a teacher by default, a born experimentalist and natural catalyzer. She was bewildering to comprehend but delightful and madcap-magical to follow.

Shortly afterward I made a visit to her basement studio in a building at M.I.T., where she was monitoring and recording the Boston Harbor at all hours for days and days. She had endless tapes of this same vast site (which I later explored in my “Maritime Rites” on the Coast Guard’s Nantucket Lightship II) in which she listened to “pure time” like a spy.

Those endless moments of nothing except the distant low rumble of the city, then in the midground or foreground a single ship horn, nothing to write home about except it came out of nowhere like a beautiful gift from a stranger; a couple of startled gulls, then lots more nothing; minutes later, in the distance a tug leading a big ocean ship into the port, then the ships talking to each other with their horns, the tug mid-range 300 Hertz, tight and trombone-farty, the big ship broad, deep 78 Hertz and maestoso. They start off in the distance and over a period of 10 minutes or so move right under Maryanne’s hidden Neumann microphones, a natural crescendo of intermittent phased pulses that even in their enormous slowness became instant music.

But it wasn’t only the narrative sonic-drama that Maryanne was after; she wanted to get inside the “hum” — the big hum that every urban and industrial location emits from its own natural circulatory system. The hum that underpins all the mid- and foreground sound of life, the hum of all vibrating substance that holds our damned planet on keel. (She’s inspired me to seek it too, from the Gianicolo Hill, recording Rome in the dead of night.) Maryanne knew that inside that macro envelope of noise is the All: nascent melodies, harmonies, beats and rhythms, starlike in their birth.

During that short visit Maryanne wanted me to hear a new work-in-progress that she was composing on tape. I sat dead-center between her two finely (obsessively) placed loudspeakers which she lamented were a disappointment; she hesitated, then started the tape. Pulsing sounds emerged from what seemed like every direction, began to circle my head, I thought I was hallucinating swarms of biological air, Maryanne was standing there looking at me with a knowing smile on her face. I said, “But how do you get the sound to circle my head, to move in back of me as well as in front of me?” She said, coyly, something like, “Well, I really don’t know but I am working on it.” Then we both broke up as if we were stoned.

On the train back to Providence, these magical sounds were still circling my head like a whirling wreath of pure outer space. Our common passion for natural sound made us friends for life but our musical natures (me the fool, she the self-made research fellow) kept us from competing in any way. Maryanne was of course in a class by herself — yet, while hermetic by nature, she was always ready to share her deep interests in the science of the brain, hearing, acoustics, biology and inexplicable mystical phenomena with anyone genuinely interested.

Her loft on Pearl Street in lower Manhattan was legendary. She kept beautiful indoor plants, and I remember cooking a traditional Italian lentil supper one New Year's in the company of Marvin Minsky and some never-to-be-heard-from-again record producer. Just across the street was the Blarney Stone pub, a kind of second home, and a couple of stone's throws from there was the pad of another luminary sound artist, Max Neuhaus — a genuine but loveable hermit — who also sadly passed away recently near Naples where he lived with his family. With a buyout windfall from Lloyds Bank — owner of her building and loft — she bought her house on Marius Street in Kingston, N.Y., and set up “home” with all the headaches of any homeowner who lived in two cold rooms of an old run-down 10-plus-room house.

Speaking of houses, one of my most remarkable musical memories is of the sound installation (the first time I'd ever heard that word) that Maryanne created for the empty house in Minneapolis, which Dennis Russell Davies and family were vacating. In time for the 1980 New Music America event in Minneapolis, Maryanne moved in like a new owner, reconfiguring it as no other sound-architect could ever dream, with meticulously placed loudspeakers everywhere — from basement to attic. So this poor empty shell of a Midwestern brick three-story home was given a new life by Maryanne's “residency” in an unforgettable drama of roaring, rumbling and shingle-shearing sounds that moved like mad armies of spectrally-filtered ghosts looking for food under every strut and beam and basement drain.

No house I have ever been in, including my own in Rome on the night of the violent earthquake in Aquila last March, has ever rocked like the Davies house did in the pre-DJ hands of Maryanne's live spatial remix. Fannie and Freddy could have solved their recent housing crisis by letting M.A. “retune the property” and sonically zap the bundles of junk mortgages. I remember standing outside in the chill night looking into the poorly lit empty cellar rooms waiting for this structure to levitate away from its foundation and for some unearthly beings to emerge from the anonymous basement cement. By then Maryanne had discovered that sustained levels of 100 decibels or more could induce physical and psychophysical events in the ear which otherwise could not be experienced. But Maryanne more than any of her musical counterparts and admirers (Lamonte Young, Glenn Branca, Arnold Dreyblatt, Rhys Chatham) was never trying to impress anyone, either by sound levels or any other means. She simply and most humbly performed for people as a kind of gift to them for which she demanded little in return outside of patience and respect.

At some point, probably the mid-late 80's, she came to Rome and took it by storm via a concert organized by the Beat 72; Simone Carella briefly offered a great series of experimental events in the marvelous Baroque park, Villa Borghese. With blind devotion Maryanne set herself up there in an open field under the benevolent Roman skies and tuned and tuned and retuned her multiple loudspeakers for days on end, even as she slept, ate, thought, practiced, and offered interviews right up to show time when all this energy mutated into a public event — a concert with a large cheering audience. What the Roman public saw and heard was a vertical rainbow, crowned in an old leather aviator's cap, her long blond hair emerging like an Armani model in a jump-suit, bobbing and weaving as if conducting Hassidic prayers at the Wailing Wall, but to us, it was simply Maryanne composing live with molten ingots of sound, which on contact redesigned the collective listening physiology of the astonished audience. She Conquered Rome indeed, hands down! Thumbs up!

Our friendship picked up again in 1993 when Maryanne was in residence at Mills College, and a guest in my apartment in Oakland, working nights at Naut Humon's music "compound" at a dangerously abandoned edge-of-the-world location on the San Francisco Bay. Just a year earlier her explosive presence had been felt at Mills in a marvelous version of "Lecture on the Weather," with the recorded thunder tapes that had been commissioned for her. Maryanne became a guru there overnight, offering her simple magic paradoxes to admiring students, usually between 2 and 5 a.m., when she was at her working best. The most adventurous among them became her lasting devotees and from what I hear elsewhere her teaching — namely Maryanne's unwritten book of mysteries, artistic commitment and heavy-duty research into every imaginable vibrating phenomenon, into every molecular theory of sound, into the very neuroscience that could not save her brain from imploding, and every caring and loving caress of her environment as a form of sacred musical ground, its people and its eternal hums, every joy, every precious moment of conscious living, of drunken abandon and fantastic confabulations — became their gospel.

The one thing she could not teach them was how to make the sound go around your head, because she was still looking for the answer when she died.

She always chided me about writing music for dead people — Cornelius Cardew, my father, Julian Beck, John Cage — so dearest Maryanne, I hope you'll forgive me; all I've put down on paper here is words.

Alvin Curran, a student of Elliott Carter and co-founder of the legendary group Musica Elettronica Viva, makes music with all sounds, in all forms, and in unusual places. His recorded work includes the CDs "Inner Cities," "Maritime Rites," "Lost Marbles," and "Crystal Psalms." His Web site, which contains writings, music and archival photographs, is [alvincurran.com](http://alvincurran.com).

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The Maryanne Amacher online archive.

The New York Times obituary of Maryanne Amacher.

Video of clip of Maryanne Amacher apparently reconfiguring Thurston Moore's brain, from the unreleased film, "day trip maryanne."