

Bodies Keep

Berlin based pianist
Magda Mayas
explores the graphic and
tactile possibilities of
improvisation. By **Peter
Margasak**

The Score



Over the last two decades it's hard to think of a musician who has made more consistent sonic discoveries beneath the lid of the piano than Berlin's Magda Mayas. An integral figure of Berlin's *echtzeitmusik* music community, where free improvisation and experimental impulses intersect, she's developed a beguiling practice combining preparations and jerry-rigged tools to generate an ever-expanding encyclopedia of sound. Her performances, whether through solo improvisation or in duos like *Spill*, with Australian drummer Tony Buck, illustrate a fecund compositional imagination that unfurls fractured narratives as she assembles her arsenal of extended techniques into cogent soliloquies. In recent years, she has begun to crave more concrete ways to structure those improvisations, and this has led her to graphic scores.

She used a series of photographs taken at the convergence of the Rhone and Arve rivers in Geneva as the score for her excellent octet *Filamental* on their recent album *Confluence*, and in 2019 she tackled a work by graphic designer Daniela Burger as part of the *Letra/Tone* Festival organised by Hanno Leichtmann. But collaboration with the Australian visual artist Tina Douglas, who often enfold sound into her practice, galvanised Mayas's interest in working across media. The pair met through Buck, and they developed a friendship over the last few years. Mayas was particularly taken with the scores Douglas made with conductive paint, which trigger sounds when touched. "We started talking about notation, how to notate for improvisors or for musicians, or how to find a way to notate outside of Western tradition, because she's not a musician," Mayas recalls. "And then she said, 'Why don't I make some scores for you?'"

To strengthen the collaborative connection, Douglas fashioned some new tools based on some of the objects that Mayas utilises in her performances,

whether ball-shaped items or her own fingers, translated by Douglas as fingernail scratches engraved in paper. The results of the collaboration were recently released on Room40 as *Objects Of Interest*. The set includes a booklet with photographs of some of the gorgeous scores made up of cutouts, embossments and other markings. Mayas herself transported the fragile scores back to Berlin from a February 2020 trip to Australia, as photographs of them would sacrifice their inexorable tactility. Soon thereafter the pandemic shut down activity, so Mayas spent nearly a year gazing at the scores resting upon her music stand, thinking about instrumentation and letting the shapes sink into her consciousness. "The instruction from Tina was intuitive response," she says. "That was all she said."

After choosing which instruments to use in the four pieces, she recorded her performances in January this year, all of which feature subtle overdubs. The meditative "Intersect" is an extended performance on Fender Rhodes, and the other pieces combine acoustic piano and clavinet. The densest and most active of the scores is "Sediment", the music of which recalls Mayas's orchestral palette, but the other pieces deploy a stripped down approach, restricting duration and sound-producing tools. "I would play a track, listen back to it a few times, and then decide what was missing or what I wanted to add," she says. While she has clearly sat with her ideas, each performance is an improvised interpretation, and during a CD release concert at Berlin's KM28, she presented radically different iterations of two of the album's works, guided by a compositional quality. "I find it really hard to differentiate so much between the improvisation and composition thing, because there's a flow and it happens," she says, "but I played it with an intention that I thought about before, and then when the second or third layer comes on top, it's definitely compositional thinking."

Mayas notes that the music feels different from her other work, and, indeed, one can deduce melodic fragments and passages that use conventional keyboard-triggered sounds – elements absent from most of her output. She hesitates to assign the pandemic responsibility for the shift, as the simplicity of the scores themselves had a clear impact, but she's happy about the transformation, however it began.

"I really felt like I didn't only want to play inside piano, that I also wanted to kind of find a way back to the keyboard," she reveals. "Dealing with all that baggage that you have, and my own tradition, it's really difficult. I really like a simple triad to be there – just to be a triad – and a simple, fragile melody, and then finding a way to use that. That was kind of a big step for me. At the same time, I really enjoyed doing that... to reduce material and to not always feel the need to have the orchestral approach, to do everything."

She isn't sure how this development will fit into her future work, but hopes it will manifest itself somehow. Her interest in graphic scores, however, has definitely been cemented. Last year she launched *Smallest Functional Unit*, a new endeavour with Buck, Mazen Kerbaj, Ute Wassermann and Racha Gharbieh, as a kind of advocacy project for graphic and other unconventional scores. They recently published their first edition, *Graphème, Vol 1*, with scores contributed by Douglas, Buck and fellow Necks member Lloyd Swanton, Mayas, Kerbaj, Wassermann, Tomomi Adachi, Lotte Anker, Phill Niblock, Jon Rose, Marina Cyrino and Nate Wooley, all of whom meld improvisation with unusual structural devices. "Notation started being quite a big topic triggered by what Tina suggested, and other things," says Mayas. "It's been following me, this notation thing, for the last two years." □ Magda Mayas & Tina Douglas's *Objects Of Interest* is released by Room40 smallestfunctionalunit.com

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