

Composing the Tinnitus Suites (2015)

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World Music Hall

- i. 2015 (a)
- ii. Armen Enikolopov in Conversation with Roger Mathew Grant
- iii. 2015 (b)

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Composing the Tinnitus Suites (2011-) is an ongoing project in which I try to create a musical situation where tinnitus can thrive, rather than interfere. Tinnitus is the perception of sound with no acoustic origin, and often manifests as a ringing or buzzing in the ears. My stated goal of this project is to ask, "What would Tinnitus Music be?" and attempt to answer. My secret goal is to contribute to the cultural context of tinnitus, which is misunderstood by the medical community, and ultimately to affect a global shift in the search for a cure.

I have invented an instrument/installation, Lady's Harp, consisting of guitar pickups and pressure transducers creating a feedback relationship for long piano strings; Lady's Harp can be attached to the walls of a room, or in this case, it exists on a collapsible frame. Its name is a tribute to the composers Ellen Fullman and Maryanne Amacher. On a fundamental level, I hope to resist the temptation to hear the long sounds of the sustaining strings as a representation of my tinnitus, but rather a sonic phenomenon than can *accompany* it. I listen to Lady's Harp in relation to my own damaged ears. Perhaps, through shifts in volume, duration, and perception, I can influence my tinnitus.

It has always felt natural to invite many people to play a 20-foot instrument. Often I am beguiled by the resultant sounds, which do not seem to be tinnitus music. In this iteration I am joined by a gifted ensemble, my colleagues Peter, Cecilia, Ron, and Cleek, who have provided me with continual support and a never-ending reevaluation of the very bedrock of my compositional assumptions. For the first time in my work, the ensemble plays the harp with traditional instruments. Rather than musicians, you might imagine them as virtual instigators of hearing damage. Where are the ears?

During the course of my studies at Wesleyan, I stabilized the construction of the Lady's Harp, which used to be a wild nest of wires, prone to fire, string breakage (once almost blinding my advisor), or destroying walls as a result of its high tension. A concise definition of Tinnitus Music, however, remains out of reach.

Armen Enikolopov is a neurobiology PhD candidate at Columbia University, where he studies the function of neural circuits involved in predicting sensory input in the mammalian auditory system. His popular science writing has appeared in *New York Magazine*, where it was nominated for a National Magazine Award. Armen's interests extend to the visual arts, and his work in functional and sculptural ceramics has been exhibited, most recently, at the Jewish Museum in New York.

Roger Mathew Grant is Assistant Professor of Music at Wesleyan University. His research focuses on 18th-century music theory, Enlightenment aesthetics, and early modern science. His first book, *Beating Time and Measuring Music in the Early Modern Era*, was published in 11/2014 at Oxford University Press. Grant was the fourth musicologist ever to hold a fellowship in the 40-year history of the University of Michigan's Society of Fellows. He has also collaborated on the creation of new and newly-imagined opera, including work with Bruce LaBruce, Susanne Sachsse, Vaginal Davis, and Jonathan Berger.

Thesis Poem

i have a thesis
i want to know what my hearing damage means
i don't want to get used to it
i want to find out what Tinnitus Music is
i have lost some of my hearing, but i have gained something as well,
i hear something instead
i can't describe it; i can't show it to you; i can't represent it

how can i describe something that doesn't exist in the air?
an absence becomes a presence
the transformative moments—the lucid tinnitus dream, when the
sounds were changing
on the verge of sleep, on the verge of music
and the dead moments, the phantom limb, the nerveless weight,
the numbness, the halo around my ears
the ear is unreliable

i sit in the music hall, my instrument assembled, wired,
all problems solved
speakers hissing,
surrounded by gongs,
nothing is happening
my ears blanking
i wait for my vision.

i want to listen to it, and i listen to all the ways it sounds
but one day i'll hear only these sounds
i want to hear your music
the concert is too loud for me, now
i put in my earplugs and then i hear something else

your thesis is out there—i found it
i read it, i cared about it, i loved your ideas
i read your interview, you extol
Wagner's absolute belief in the transcendent power of art
i read your suicide note

allies must be found
limits must be measured
*"Who needs all this endless music?
My question is when do we begin to understand?"*
(maryanne)
my audiologist trained me to filter, so i can live
but sometimes i let down this veil
and try to understand
all my endless music

you are a synthesizer, you are a container
you have all of these ideas and sounds inside you
is composition active or passive?
(when you do it, when it is done)

no compromise
no compromises
no promises
comprised of it
i don't compose it
i am composed of it
i am composing the tinnitus suites