

the music
of sound



Katharina Klement Transforms Her Surroundings

BY CAITLIN SMITH

PHOTOS BY RANIA MOSLAM



TO REACH AUSTRIAN COMPOSER KATHARINA

Klement's studio from the street, one must go through many doors. First, the front door of a century-old apartment building in Vienna's twentieth district, set on a busy street between designer-lighting stores and red-light storefronts. Up the stairs and around a corner is the front door to her apartment. Then one must pass through an anteroom and another doorway, walk down a long hallway and through a final doorway to reach her large, high-ceilinged studio. A grand piano takes up half the room; her computer and electronics gear occupy the rest, covering tables, stools, the tops of bookshelves. There are bookshelves everywhere, with rows of neatly ordered scores and binders full of rough notes. Up near the ceiling, on top of large loudspeakers, are the remnants of sound installations that she has made.

Klement greets me quietly, offers tea, and then moves a ring modulator aside to make room for my microphone. We switch to the familiar form of address in German—shaking hands a second time, introducing ourselves using our first names—before I ask about the half-dozen sculptures on top of one bookshelf. “I studied sculpture for awhile,” she says, “but I had to decide.” She chose music, but the sculptures left over from these studies are obviously related to her work in sound: abstract, structured, well crafted, fascinatingly different.

After these transitions—from the noisy street outside to her quiet studio, from *per Sie* to *per du*—she pulls out some scores and sketches. These documents themselves occupy a kind of in-between space: half written on old graph paper,

half with the music engraving done on computer. There are cue cards with fragments of ideas in faint pencil, all neatly numbered to correspond to their place in the score into which they eventually found their way. There is tracing paper; there is a MacBook Pro.

The analog and the digital are both integral to Klement's work. An example of this is "HOPE," a piece from her 2011 collaboration with Lynn Book, Robin Starbuck, and Doris Schmid, *HOLE: In Search of Opera Without Opera* for voice, piano, electronics, and video. "HOPE" begins very simply, with just one line on the piano. Employing pickups placed inside the piano, Klement records this line and feeds it back into the piano, recording it again as it plays back. Eventually, this process leads to "a gradual transformation of the material without further electronic processing," as she describes it in her program notes. The effect is one of audible decay, breaking down music into its component parts and displaying each individual sound wave for the listener to examine. Listening to "HOPE" is like being handed an intricate clock, and then watching it dismantle itself into a pile of brass gears.

Conversely, *Jalousie* (2009) for saxophone quartet, started with ambient noise that was built into music. Klement based the piece on recordings she made of sounds coming from behind the jalousie (window blind with adjustable horizontal slats) of her studio at different times of day. *Jalousie* is built from a series of vignettes in which these street sounds are—"in the broadest sense and with no claim to realism," she writes—translated into an instrumental language for the saxophone. In her program notes for Klement's CD of the same name, Austrian musicologist Ursula Brandstätter writes, "*Jalousie* is based on the translation of acoustic impressions into musical language so that transformation between different audible states is taking place." The piece contains some organic noises produced through extended techniques on the saxophone, but also uses post-tonal compositional techniques to convey the impressions of the soundscapes Klement had recorded. Rather than transforming music into organic sounds, *Jalousie* turns sound into music through impressionism.

"HOPE" and *Jalousie* represent a central theme in Klement's work: the transformation of sound into music and vice versa. For Klement, the most interesting music happens during the process of transformation. Whether she is interpreting found sound into a language for traditional instruments or creating an atmospheric sound out of music created by a traditional instrument, the beautiful strangeness of Klement's musical language comes from what's lost in translation.

BORN IN 1963 IN GRAZ, AUSTRIA'S SECOND LARGEST CITY,

Klement studied piano performance and then electroacoustic music and composition in Vienna. She soon grew dissatisfied with working as an interpreter of piano music, and spent time studying dance in the United Kingdom. "I learned the so-called contact technique (of dance improvisation), from the 1970s. It's about developing a movement through the points of contact between bodies. When you've

learned the technique, beautiful and acrobatic things can happen. And I thought, That's how I want to be able to make music—above all, to transfer this freedom to music."

This pursuit of musical freedom led Klement to add free improvisation to her practice as a composer-performer. In addition to composing semi- and fully notated music for ensembles in Austria, Germany, Italy, and Eastern Europe, she also performs as an improviser in many groups. "It can be like this, making music," says Klement of her favourite improv sessions. "There are often moments when . . . someone else plays something that makes you react unexpectedly, and makes you play things that wouldn't have occurred to you alone. When it works, it's the best form of improvisation."

Klement is a lecturer at the University of Vienna in electronics and computer music and frequently works with electronics, especially when she's improvising. Her improvised music explores the same transitional space as her composed work. Subshrubs—her quartet with Angélica Castelló, Maja Osojnik, and Tamara Wilhelm—incorporates acoustic instruments and live electronic processing. Klement performs on piano, using preparations, mallets, and pickups fed into her laptop. Castelló and Osojnik play bass and contrabass Paetzold recorders—giant, blocky plywood machines invented in the 1970s. Paetzolds are particularly suited to creating organic noise, providing a full range of whispering, breathing, and clacking sounds, all resplendent with woody overtones. Wilhelm processes these live, gradually building the organic sounds from the Paetzolds into processed humming or loops or white noise. Working together over a series of concerts, subshrubs (which prefers its name spelled in lowercase) has developed a collective vocabulary. When Klement writes for them, her scores use a kind of shorthand notation that shows the closeness of this collaboration.

Subshrubs and the Austrian ensemble PHACE premiered Klement's *in dem HIMMEL benannten Darüber* for two ensembles at the 2015 Wien Modern (Vienna modern music festival), held in November. The festival's theme and subtitle, "pop.song.voice," sent composers scrambling to find a way to relate their work in some way to popular music. Instead of resorting to the usual distorted electric guitars, Klement's approach the theme by exploring the structural difference between pop and art music. "I thought, what am I going to do with this pop theme? My solution was this: pop is concrete; it says something; it names things. If it is a love song, it's articulated clearly. New music is more abstract. Even when it's about the same theme [love], it won't be so precisely named. So I had the idea to bring together two ensembles. The classical ensemble [PHACE] is more abstract, and the electronic [subshrubs] is . . . well, we're no pop ensemble, but we use a more concrete approach."

in dem HIMMEL oscillates between fully notated music for PHACE and improvisations by subshrubs that are guided by graphic markers and cues from the conductor, based on stopwatch timing. Each of its twelve fragments are based on texts, although the audience hears only a minute of explicitly sung text. The unsung words, which come from two different sources, served as a guide for Klement as she composed the piece. For the first text, she pulled lines from a book by Veronika Sayr, an Austrian journalist who worked in the former Yugoslavia in



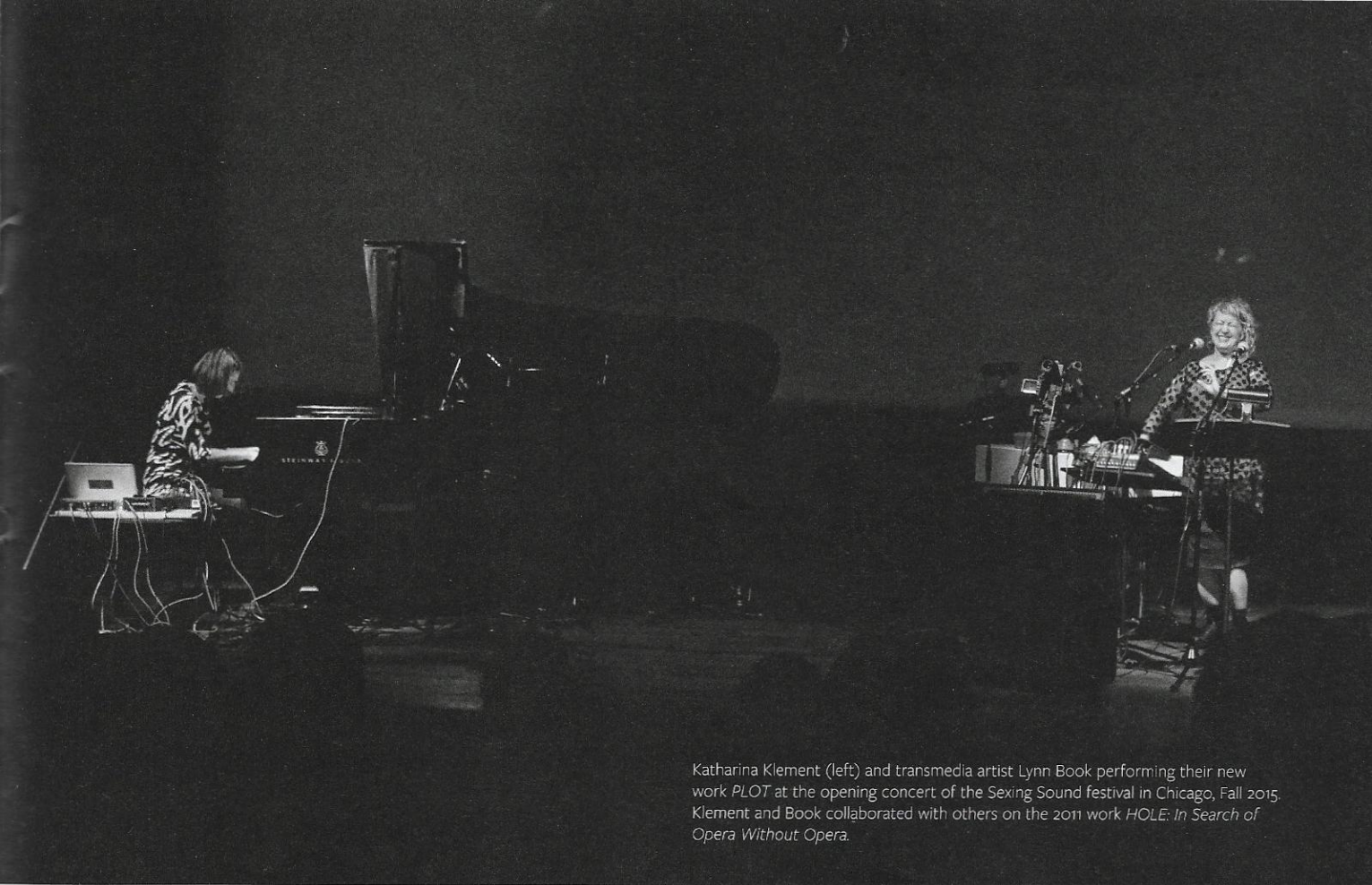
Katharina Klement with her quartet subshrubs (others not shown) perform in *dem HIMMEL benannten Darüber* with the Austrian ensemble PHACE (not shown) at the 2015 Wien Modern festival in Vienna. (An excerpt from the performance is included on the CD companion to this issue.)

the 1990s. Sayr's *Thirty-three Letters from the Forgotten War* is a poetic but concrete account of the minute, everyday horrors of war. This story served as a starting point for the improvisations by subshrubs. By contrast, the source material for the music performed by PHACE came from Heiner Müller's so-called image descriptions, texts in which he describes a painting, imagining the possible stories inside it. "[Müller's descriptions] always have something to do with force or violence," says Klement, who was attracted to both of these stories after spending time as an artist in residence in Belgrade. "I asked myself: how does a war work? And also: what do women do in a war?"

Klement's piece for Wien Modern is not her first piece inspired by the theme of war. Her 2014 residency in Belgrade sparked work on a sound portrait of the city with echoes of the war in the former Yugoslavia. A work in progress, this portrait will eventually have eight movements. Shortly after arriving in Belgrade, she laid out a city map, marking the location of her flat as a centre point. "Then I drew eight

circles," she recalls. "I tried to put all the recordings I made in one circle on the same list. My strategy is to make eight tape pieces, one from each circle. In the performance, I will be at the centre, with the piano and eight or maybe sixteen loudspeakers around me." These concentric circles led to recordings from every city district, which gave Klement a thorough catalogue of sounds to work with. Because the final work will include both tape and piano music, her compositional process for this portrait is similar to her saxophone quartet piece. "I want to transform field recordings into a piano piece: making an analysis of pitches and rhythms, and then trying to play it on the piano. It's very simple . . . I try to translate these sounds one-to-one for the instrument. Naturally, this is impossible, it doesn't work. And that's what's interesting for me. That's the transformation. Because it's impossible."

For hybrid found-sound and live-performance pieces like the Belgrade sound portrait, Klement's compositional process benefits from her improvisational practice. "It's both [composition and improvising], but at the end it's more like composition. At the beginning, you try



Katharina Klement (left) and transmedia artist Lynn Book performing their new work *PLOT* at the opening concert of the Sexing Sound festival in Chicago, Fall 2015. Klement and Book collaborated with others on the 2011 work *HOLE: In Search of Opera Without Opera*.

out experiments [with the tape], but because you are in front of the loudspeakers, you can always hear the result, and you can really refine everything, and then it is fixed. So I would call that composition." The finished tape pieces (there are five at the time of this writing) give the feeling of walking the streets of Belgrade, but are not strictly narrative. Klement builds rhythms out of mechanical sounds and layers it with voices, the playing of street musicians, and the sounds of stones from the two rivers that run through the city.

In contrast to the slow-burning soundscapes of the Belgrade pieces, Klement's recent work for Chicago's Sexing Sound festival, held in Fall 2015, is a wall of sound. A collaboration with transmedia artist Lynn Book, *PLOT* is awash in layers of ideas: dialogue from Fassbinder's 1975 film *Bird on a Wire*, a washing-machine-like humming, the sounds of eggs cooking, water gurgling and rushing, opera, crowds, children and wind, electronic glitches, and excerpts from the orchestral arrangement of Beethoven's Opus 133, the so-called *Great Fugue* (or *Große Fuge* in German). The comparison with Op. 133 is apt: *PLOT* is big and full and

commands attention. In performance, Klement and Book performed improvisations around and on top of this sound piece, and the performance included video elements as well. To produce the work, they researched many aspects of the themes of the Sexing Sound, amassing a wealth of source material that informed the performance.

Klement sends me home with several scores packaged neatly in plastic folders, and as I unpack them I'm struck by the specificity of her visual language as a composer. Each piece uses a slightly different notation, tailored to the performers and performance conditions. Her graphic score for the 2015 organ and electronics piece *Drift* has a 3-D sculptural quality to it, while her score for *in dem HIMMEL* uses a mix of standard and graphic notation. No matter what sort of notation she uses, her work is meticulous and highly structured.

Both in her compositions and in her improvisations, Katharina Klement creates with deliberation, pulling in diverse sources and ideas, and building order out of chaos.

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ON THE CD: *in dem HIMMEL* benannten Darüber (excerpt), escalator

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