

My house in a score

low-tech paraphernalia in chamber music

by Cecilia Arditto

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1. Mini theaters



When I was a child I used to play spies with my sisters. Our communication system consisted of a tin tied to a string. By rubbing the string we could send secret messages to each other.

Some years later I put a tin on top of an organ and asked a percussion player to rub the string attached to it, all the way down towards the stage, bringing back those sounds from my childhood.

Ex 1. String tied to a tin. *La máquina del tiempo* (2011)

My most recent pieces are a form of chamber music in which traditional musical instruments interact with everyday objects: lamps, fans, mirrors and rocking chairs play together with violins, pianos, bass clarinets and cellos.

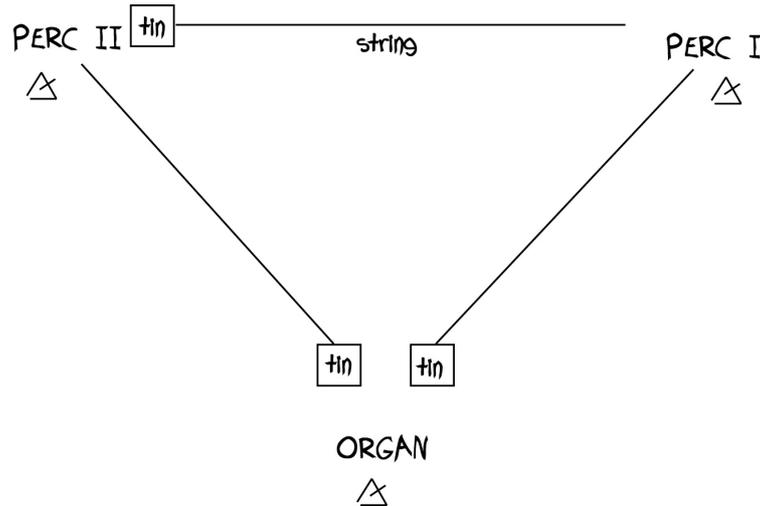
In these "mini theaters", furniture and things **acquire musical features** thanks to their proximity to musical instruments, constituting a **hybrid world of mixed categories**.

These objects are used for unconventional orchestrations, but they are also combined with musical instruments in a visual and kinetic way. Thus, a rocking chair adds a rhythmic line of counterpoint to a piano ("La máquina del tiempo / Time machine" 2011), long strings tied to tins draw visual lines in the concert hall integrating sonic and visual aspects ("La arquitectura del aire / Architecture of air" 2009), ordinary lamps turning on and off edit cuts between different scenes in real time ("El libro de los gestos / Book of gestures" 2008).

This mixing of appliances and low-tech devices with musical instruments creates a discontinuous musical space in which objects are an inseparable part of the musical discourse.

Ex. 2 In “La arquitectura del aire” (2009) for two percussionists and organ, the percussionists unfold three strings tied to tins at specific moments of the piece, outlining a triangle in the performance space. The architecture of the hall is related to the proportions of the music. “La arquitectura del aire ” (2009) Score detail ©Cecilia Arditto 2013

In this **new orchestration book**, objects and music instruments remain **in between classifications**. In my piece “Esta tarde leo a Adorno / This afternoon I read Adorno”



Ex. 3. “La arquitectura del aire” (2009) string telephone design.

(2013) I consider a fan to be a member of the wind instrument family, but it is also part of the noise generator group; from yet another perspective, a fan belongs to instruments “that spin around”. **This multiple interpretation of the same object allows for different conceptual interconnections between objects, opening up different possibilities for the creation of new formats of music.**

The superposition of different logics at the same time is inspired by “a certain Chinese encyclopedia” by the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. In his short story “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins” (“Selected nonfictions” 1999), animals are classified from different points of view at the same time, yielding one impossible list that divides them

as follows: (a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies. An unthinkable zoo.

My personal zoo of appliances and musical instruments proposes an oblique classification similar to Borges' short story, one in which sound and peripheral features from music practice coexist in the same space, opening up a new fascinating terra incognita for composition.

In "Esta tarde leo a Adorno" (2013), three musicians seated in spinning seats turn around while playing, creating various stage combinations between them as well as towards the audience. There are two other devices besides the seats: a pick-up player and a ventilator. Musicians "borrow a feature" from the appliances and become turning-machines themselves. This piece is located in between the dimensions of sound and movement: simple objects like spinning chairs, a pick-up player and a fan create complex mixtures when put together.

"Imperceptibly, the musicians are constantly turning around throughout the entire piece, as if the music were suspended in a slightly oscillating theatre. Always in movement, performers, record players and a fan share in this work a floating, quasi-airy condition".

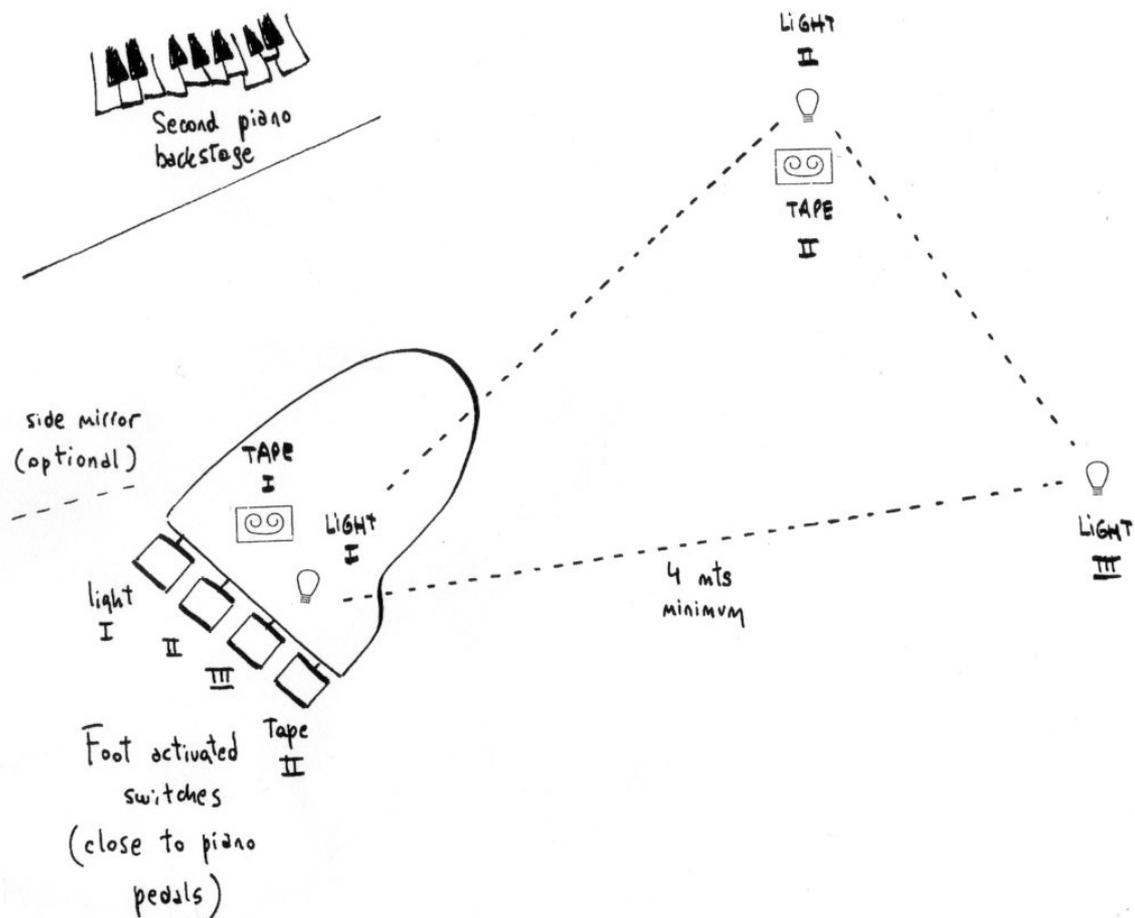
C.A. Program notes.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for three instruments: vibraphone (vib.), bass clarinet (b.cl.), and viola (via.). The score is divided into measures 14, 15, and 16. Measure 14 includes instructions like "distort sound and voices", "VINYL: SUDDEN VOICES", and "towards vibraphone all the way around". Measure 15 is titled "Scene #3: Blank memory" and includes "ONLY CRACK SOUNDS" and "Motor ON". Measure 16 continues with "High speed" and "towards vibraphone". A diagram shows the spatial arrangement of the Trio towards the vibraphone. The score includes musical notation and detailed performance instructions.

Ex.4. In "Esta tarde leo a Adorno" (2008) for bass clarinet, viola, percussion and spinning seats, a pickup player turns around bringing crackling sounds from the vintage speaker. The vibraphone motor, which is prepared with pieces of papers in between the blades, turns on. Inspired by the machines, the three musicians turn around at patterned speeds. "Esta tarde leo a Adorno" (2013) – Score detail, published by composer ©Cecilia Arditto 2013

Objects are singing, moving, breathing, turning on and off, creating different scenes in a sort of live movie. Many different aspects – sonic, visual, motional, spatial – are controlled in a unique temporal line, prescribed in detail. **The score is the wonderful tool that allows playing all the variables with extreme precision in real time.**

“Gespleten piano / Split piano” (2008) is about real objects and their replicas, both in sound and image. A mirror adjacent to the piano duplicates the pianist’s movements; cassette players clone the aural space with copies of the original music; a second piano echoes the grand piano on the podium from backstage. The pianist, following the score, builds a whole scenario by turning the lights on and off, switching cassette players, moving through the space and playing the piano. “Gespleten piano” is somehow a “real time film” in which all the different aspects of the piece are edited live. **The piano is split (“gespleten” in Dutch) in image and sound, creating a dissociated space full of folds and blind spots.**



Ex.6. In “Gespleten piano” (2008) for piano, cassette players, lamps and a mirror, the score, like a storyboard, allows for a perfect synchrony of many different layers: music, stage design, lighting and manipulation of recorded sounds together form a one-man task. “Gespleten piano” (2008) Score detail, published by composer ©Cecilia Arditto 2013

3. My house in a score

When do objects become musical instruments? When does their behavior start being perceived as music, in the sense of organized sound? Which is the alchemy that converts a fan into a cantus firmus like the ones used in medieval music?

In my personal scenario, dramaturgy always comes from music, never from texts, not even from the objects. It is the musical logic that unites this diversity into a single universe full of sense. Even within a profusion of foreign elements, music is the only basis and substance.

Having developed over the course of more than a millennium, music notation is the most powerful tool to organize sound events in real time. Like the cartography of an imaginary landscape, musical notation establishes particular links between a variety of situations: objects, gestures, images and spatial design are placed on a single map that unites all the different levels into a unique field.



Ex.7. In “Música invisible para flauta #2/Invisible music for flute #2 and optional ventilator(s)” (2003), the flutist performs with a large standing fan as her duo partner. A feather is placed between the casing and the blades of the fan, creating a sustained buzzing sound (C# in our fan). At the end of every phrase, the bass flute plays a C# in perfect consonance with the fan, recalling the cadenzas of medieval music. Unisons are structural moments of the piece, triggering a choir of four small ventilators on the floor that, like a kind of mechanical garden, move their heads, producing air sounds and rhythmic movement. Marieke Franssen, Zeebelt theatre, April 2012 <https://vimeo.com/48767850>

Scores [...] are [...] an essential tool for composition. There are things that no composer would have been able to do all of a sudden, without looking at the paper, step by step, considering what is happening between the different things that he or she comes up with. This may be one of the most important things that distinguish Western music from music from other cultures. (Leo Maslíah, 2008)

Such new non-standard musical instruments are complex and have different possibilities from the standard ones. Music notation allows for extracting the musical character from objects and actions, while leaving other features undetermined. Not only does it organize events into a time line; additionally, it creates a particular frame, establishing how these elements behave and the way they relate to each other.

Notation agglutinates events horizontally and vertically on a timeline within a specific frame: the piece has a beginning and an end, and its total duration works as a border.

Music chooses a foreign language to express itself that is not concrete sound waves but graphical signs. The dialectical relationship between signs and physical sound gives to music an ambiguous feature, an existence in an "in between". C.A lecture UDK Berlin, May 2010

With his technical tools the composer creates temporal universes. Each piece builds a different quality of time. Music made with objects is not so different from other music. Several resources come together in an **always running pulse: a heart beating.** Having a constant pulse is a fundamental feature that distinguishes a musical composition from an installation. In installations, sound objects are disseminated in a wide time frame with imprecise borders. This free time condition is different from the urgency of a music work: **a non-stop metronome rescues the music from the dispersion of quotidian time.**

Score theatre

Music theatre is too broad a term for this kind of music. I prefer to think in terms of score theatre: complete theatrical scenes involving different parameters that are written by means of music notation symbols, along with a few verbal explanations. The vocabulary of symbols and instructions for extended instrumental techniques, in use for more than half a century, is perfectly suitable for creating score scenes. It is not necessary to invent a new notation system, since the existing one is a powerful tool for arranging events on a timeline.

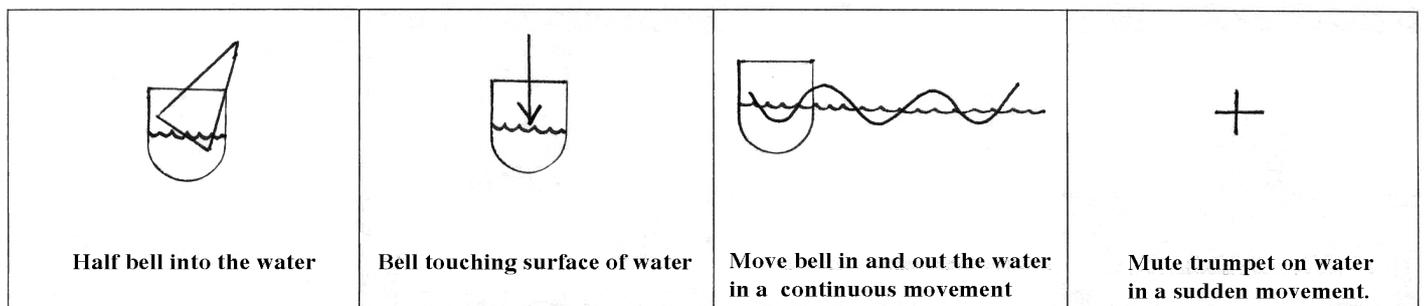
When composers of serious music, in the early 1950s, began to explore areas far beyond all traditional concepts, conventional notation soon proved insufficient for dealing adequately with the new musical techniques and philosophies. The invention of new notational signs and procedures thus became imperative.

[...] characterized by an unprecedented increase in precision of every conceivable component of a musical texture, with particular emphasis on formerly subsidiary elements such as dynamics, timbre, pitch inflections (microtones), location of sound sources, and so forth. [...] traditional notation could not cope with these new demands, and a host of new symbols and procedures had to be devised to accommodate the new musical concepts.
(Kurt Stone, 1980)

Score theatre doesn't need new ways of expression. The new actors (objects, gestures, stage design) are joining the already known vocabulary, creating a different sort of chamber music merely by their appearance, using the same old signs to build a new context.

To sum up, then, the meticulous observance of the rules and conventions of traditional notation (rules often ignored by, or not even known to many composers and performers) will increase the effectiveness of a composer's entire notational repertory, old and new.
(Kurt Stone, 1980)

In *Música invisible para trompeta #3*/*Música invisible for trumpet #3* (2005), a big bucket filled with water is interacting with the trumpet in place of a mute. The sound effect of this "water filter" resembles electronic music synthesis, made in this case with analog means. A diagram based on traditional mute notation explains how to use the bucket.



Ex.8. *Música invisible para trompeta #3* (2005) Score detail, Edition Plante, Berlin

Música invisible para trompeta turns out to be an unexpected comedy. The humor comes out when the performer interacts with the bucket, playing almost impossible notes and using extreme dynamic ranges. No words are necessary to build the comedy in this scene because there is no real acting. Humor is a side effect that arises from the mere interpretation of the score.

We use a precise vocabulary to talk about very imprecise things. The relationship between subtle materials like water, leaves, paper, gestures in combination with strong musical structures, rhythmic organization, and elaborate orchestration is a condition of score theatre: extreme calculations and solid proportions emerge from the voice of evanescent actors and fragile messengers. C.A

Low-tech paraphernalia:

Pick-ups, cassette players, radios and tape recorders have a double function. On the one hand they reproduce pre-recorded music, on the other hand they are themselves a source of sound.

Ex.9. In “La máquina del tiempo” the trombonist plays the buttons and the lid of a cassette-player in rhythmic counterpoint with the violinist who is modulating a radio frequency; the pianist joins this “machine counterpoint” playing a cassette-player located inside the piano. “La máquina del tiempo” (2011) Score detail, published by composer ©Cecilia Arditto 2013

Music notation symbols are very effective for notating sound players and lamps: duration, speed and dynamics can be perfectly determined by analogy with percussion instruments. Live manipulation of machines – pressing buttons, turning up or down the volume, tone and speed switches, moving radio antennas, scratching vinyls, etc. – uses a one-line staff. Pre-recorded music uses one small staff above the score just as in electronic music notation.

Movements and theatrical actions:

Movements in score theatre consist of common gestures used in everyday music practice like turning pages, tuning, closing the piano lid, counting, and so forth, plus a collection of simple actions: coughing, breathing, walking, clapping, etc. All actions are written on the score in a few words, together with rhythmic instructions. Execution is rather simple. Complexity doesn't come from the actions themselves, or from the way they are communicated to the performers for their realization. Their importance is given by the way these actions work on the total context of the piece. If turning pages is part of the musical composition, acquiring a quasi-motivic condition, all page turns done during the performance of the piece should be precisely performed to preserve the logic of the piece.

♩ = 60

SCORE

PAGES

TURN PAGE

hands in relax position

THROW PAGE AWAY

TURN PAGES

THROW PAGE AWAY

TURN PAGE

attaca #8

Ex.10. In “Gespleten piano” (2008) the pianist throws the pages of the score away in rhythmic counterpoint to a lamp turning on and off, which is also executed by the performer. Score detail, published by composer ©Cecilia Arditto 2013

In “Out Loud” (2013), a 30 seconds piece for chamber ensemble, all the musical actions should be performed silently. The result is a soundless choreography in the way of early silent movies, where all the events are coordinated in a sort of polyphony of movements. Quasi-choreographic, “Out loud” is not to be performed by dancers; **the score is the tool for communicating with the performers.** The musicians are the ones who dance this piece without special movement skill requirements. They just do what they have been doing all their life: they play their instrument in their own particular way. For every performer, body language will have developed in different ways according to their instrumental needs: percussionists are different kind of “dancers” than cello players; tuba players have different movements than do harp players.

“Out loud” asks musicians to play as they always do, **but silently**, so that their gestures are abstracted from sound. **“Out loud” is a theatre without acting, a dance without dancers and, even without sound, it is pure music.**

Complex movements and choreographic effects do not form part of the sphere of score theatre, which is not meant to be played by dancers or actors but by musicians.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for three instruments: piano, cello, and violin. The score is written in 3/4 time with a tempo of 120. The piano part is in the bass clef and starts with a dynamic marking of *mf*. The cello part is in the bass clef and also starts with *mf*. The violin part is in the treble clef and starts with *mf*. The score is annotated with the phrase "sempre gesture without sound" in three places, once for each instrument. There are also handwritten notes: "look cello player" above the cello staff, "look violin player" above the violin staff, and "look piano player" above the piano staff. The score consists of three staves, each with a series of rhythmic patterns and dynamics.

Ex.11. “Out loud” (2013) for violin, cello, percussion and piano, proposes a music theatre where the musicians are distributed in a half circle on stage; the dramaturgy is a long glissando going back and forth between the piano and the vibraphone; the choreography is given by the music being played without sound, filtering the gestures in a sort of silent music. Score detail, published by composer ©Cecilia Arditto 2013

Spatial design

Spatial diagrams are fundamental when notating theatrical scenes that include different layers. A map of the stage, as used in percussion music, arranges objects, instruments, appliances and performers within the space. Some examples displayed above show different multimedia stage designs: Ex.4. "Esta tarde leo a Adorno", Ex.6. “Gespleten piano”. Once everything is planned, the performers are able to control every single aspect of the piece without needing extra technicians.

It is necessary not only to organize the different scenes and their set-up but their development in time: music and space are both part of the piece. In a sort of mutating storyboard from start to finish, the composition of the space is constantly changing in a sort of continuous live animation.

4.Human scale

Where to place our ears? Low-tech paraphernalia work on a human scale: radios and pick-up players have a dynamic range suitable for a house, but not for a big hall; objects with their own speakers have a reduced dynamic range, inviting close listening. This is somehow related to the soft acoustics of the instruments of the Middle Ages: lutes, gut strings and harpsichords were designed to be played in a room. That was the origin of the term chamber music, a genre that entails not only a certain spatial dimension but also the pathos of intimacy. As with medieval instruments, what is characteristic of low-tech devices is their human scale.

“El libro de los gestos” 2008 proposes an intimate space where a chamber ensemble is playing in a room with ordinary lamps. Musicians turn the lamps on and off while playing with absolute precision according to the score. In this way, **performers are editing the space in real time, showing and hiding different areas of the hall.**

The image shows a handwritten musical score for five parts: Violin (vl.), Cello (vc.), Percussion (pn.), Piano (pn.), and Lamps. The score is in 14/7 time. The violin part is marked 'pizz. Behind bridge' and includes a lightbulb icon. The cello part is marked 'l.h. and r.h. pizz - both hands tapping on fingerboard' and 'l.h. pizz'. The percussion part includes a hand icon and a triangle icon. The piano part includes a piano icon. The lamps part includes a lightbulb icon and the words 'OFF' and 'ON' indicating when the lamp is turned on or off. The score is divided into three measures. The first measure shows the violin playing a series of notes with 'x' marks above them, and the cello playing a wavy line. The second measure shows the violin playing a series of notes with 'x' marks above them, and the cello playing a wavy line. The third measure shows the violin playing a series of notes with 'x' marks above them, and the cello playing a wavy line. The percussion part has a series of notes with 'x' marks above them. The piano part has a series of notes with 'x' marks above them. The lamps part has a series of notes with 'x' marks above them, and the words 'OFF' and 'ON' indicating when the lamp is turned on or off.

Ex.12. In “El libro de los gestos” (2008) for violin, cello, percussion, piano and lamps, the violin lamp turns on and off in synchrony with the ensemble. “El libro de los gestos” (2008). Score detail, published by composer ©Cecilia Arditto 2013



Ex.13. As it gets closer to the end, “El libro de los gestos” progressively vanishes into more and more undefined music gestures. The ensemble is literally getting dispersed in the hall: around, underneath and inside their instruments. They end up in the dark, playing on the border of things. C.A. Program notes

5. Chamber music as intimacy

Avant-garde movements in the second half of the XX century were especially interested in the use of appliances, furniture and everyday objects in the concert hall. At that time, the goal was to transgress the limits of tradition by using informal objects in academic situations: radios, furniture, ventilators, sirens, radios, kitchen tools led to a total new definition of modern art. Visionary artists made everyday sounds part of what is now our classical tradition: John Cage as the theologian of quotidian objects, Pierre Schaeffer and the musique concrète, Varese and the broad concept of music as “organized sound”. The list is extensive, comprising more than half a century of creation.

The oh-so painful fact has to be accepted that certain issues are no longer being raised, and it is, by extension, important to identify those that are being raised these days by artists. What are the real challenges of contemporary art? (Nicolas Bourriaud, 2002)

Our questions are very different from those raised by those pioneers. Clearly our searches are inspired by them but like they did in their times, we are solving questions in our society now and here. The materials we are using are similar to those used by them, **but nowadays it is for the construction of substantially different universes.** The same resources have different implications now, simply because society is different.

To introduce the quotidian into the concert hall used to mean to wave the flag of rebellion against the academic. In my music, the quotidian is rather related **to a return to intimacy.** Everybody is familiar with fans, lamps, rocking chairs, and pendulum clocks. We all have experiences with those things and we have many of those objects at home. They are handy, accessible, and common, they radiate fresh everyday life air into the concert hall.

Nowadays the usage of appliances questions the state of private life within a society that is reformulating the borders between public and intimate space.

An interesting aspect of low-tech paraphernalia **is its analog condition.** Tapes, vinyls and radios sound in a continuous timeline. Not only is the sounding result in real time, the processes involved in the machines' manipulation, too, are played live: turning motors on and off, rewinding tapes, placing a nail on the vinyl, switching radio stations, etc. **Analog machines were the latest technology half a century ago; for us, besides producing nostalgia effects, they provide a way to express events in real time, in clear contrast to a digitalized world.**

In spite of this invitation of everyday life into the concert hall, art doesn't necessarily become quotidian. In fact, we can say that it is everyday life that becomes special. By introducing the quotidian into more refined ways of expression, music can become extremely powerful as **the whole corpus of musical tradition is talking to us through our closest objects,** with poetry and not without a sense of humor.

This new appliance-filled scenario proposes a small subversion of values, a miniature private revolution, switching values between intimate space and performance space.

Music is played in between dimensions, in between the public and the private, in between artistic and the quotidian, opening up sites between the cracks of established structures. Music is finding non-invented spaces in the folding of musical tradition.

When the concert is over and lights go off, listeners bring a residue of the piece back home with them, and fragments of the experience remain in their memory for an uncertain span of time.

I like to imagine that in a slow after-concert effect, people will start looking at their daily objects **as if they were seeing them for the first time in their lives, and see them becoming enchanted through the eyes of the music.**

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Biography



photo by Daniel Nicolas. Photographer name required.

Cecilia Arditto (Buenos Aires, 1966). She studied music at the Julián Aguirre Conservatory, Banfield; Center for Advanced Studies in Contemporary Music (CEAMC), Buenos Aires and at the Amsterdam Conservatory (diploma with distinction). She studied composition with Silvia Goldberg, Gabriel Valverde, Mariano Etkin, Luis Arias, and Wim Henderickz. Analysis with Margarita Fernandez.

Her music has been performed in Europe, Latin America, the U.S.A, Canada, Australia, and China. She obtained various scholarships and awards in her country and abroad: Fondo Nacional de las artes scholarship, Antorchas scholarship, first prize CEAMC composition competition Scholarship. She has received commissions from the NFPK in Holland, Orgelpark, Amsterdam, KNM Berlin, Borealis Festival Norway, Festival Rümelingen, in Switzerland, Music at the Anthology Festival, NYC and "Innovations in concert" in Quebec, among others. She carried out artist residencies in Boswil Switzerland, in the Camargo foundation in Cassis, Ensemble Aleph forum in Paris and recently in KonventZero, in Berga, Barcelona. Cecilia has won the following competitions: CEAMC–Arditti String Quartet Composition Competition, New Maker Ensemble Call (London), Low Frequency Trio composition competition (Mexico) and second prize in Wilde Lieder Marx Music Competition 2018 by the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group. Cecilia won first prize in the prestigious Rychenberg 2020 Symphony Orchestra Composition Competition in Switzerland with her piece "Tissue". Her work "Musique Concrete" will represent the Netherlands (the only composition chosen) at ISCM 2022 in New Zealand. Her opera project, based on the novel L 'étranger by Albert Camus, has been selected as a finalist in the competition organized by the National Opera House in Mannheim, Germany (ongoing).

In 2021 her music has been recorded on CD by Jacqueline Leclair, Canada and Low Frequency Trio, Mexico.

She has lectured on her music at the UDK University of Arts Berlin, Sound–Forum Amsterdam, Astor Piazzolla Conservatory Buenos Aires, Museum of Contemporary Art Mendoza, Le Gesù Theater Montreal, among others. She has been invited as a composer in residence at Charlotte New Music Festival 2021, US and at the Third National Meeting of Musical Composition 2021, Argentina.

She has published several articles in specialized publications in Latin America and various European countries. Her music has been object of study by many scholars and researchers.

Since 1997 she has formed the Montorfano–Arditto duo together with the flute player and multifaceted artist Adriana Montorfano, carrying out original projects that deeply explore the relationships between sound, image, and architectural space in chamber performance and musical notation. Their intense activity includes presentations in Spain, Holland, Argentina and Austria. <http://www.montorfanoardittoduo.com>

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