

Diagnosis sends violin star Monica Germino in search of softer sounds at PuSh fest

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PuSh Festival

by [Alexander Varty](#) on January 24th, 2019 at 11:38 AM



Challenged by the onset of an ear condition that creates extreme sensitivity to sound, violinist Monica Germino has discovered that playing at very low volume has opened up expressive possibilities.

Monica Germino was once, by her own admission, “probably one of the loudest violinists” in classical music, known for her huge tone, but also for playing fire-breathing electric violin. Now she’s likely the quietest musician in the field, and for good reason. Germino was recently diagnosed with hyperacusis, or extreme sensitivity to sound, and advised that if she continued to perform she ran the risk of irreparably damaging her ears.

On the line from her Amsterdam home, the violinist reports that the first physician she consulted told her to stop playing entirely. “And all the rest said, ‘No, no... Keep playing, but just use a lot of ear protection,’” she says with an audible shudder. “And I just couldn’t do that; that wasn’t going to work....The idea of wearing ear protectors was like sensory deprivation.”

Then, as she says, “the composers saved me.” Having resigned herself to the idea of abandoning her performing career, Germino was in the process of bowing out of prior commitments when her frequent collaborator Michael Gordon, of the Bang On a Can composers’ collective, offered an alternative.

“I said, ‘So this is what’s going on,’ and he didn’t really want to talk about our other project at all,” she recalls. “He said, ‘Okay, I’m going to write you a really soft piece. I don’t care if anyone can hear it; I’m going to write it, and I want to be the first.’”

“I just said, ‘I don’t know, Michael.’ But my mind kept circling around that idea, and I went and started looking at mutes, and got lost in this fantastic world of crazy mute-makers who are working in all sorts of innovative ways to change the colour of the instrument but also cut the volume down.”

Much to her surprise, she discovered that playing at extremely low volume opened up expressive possibilities and tonal options she’d previously overlooked. Equally surprising was that Gordon’s Bang On a Can colleagues Julia Wolfe and David Lang wanted to contribute, and soon their mentor, the Dutch composer Louis Andriessen, was onboard, too. The result is MUTED, a suite of low-volume works that Germino will bring to Music on Main next week, playing on a variety of quiet instruments—muted violin, frame violin, and a new “whisperviolin” made especially for her—in an intimate space.

She’ll also sing while she plays—and one of the texts that Andriessen has set for her might just offer a few clues to her character. It’s taken from American humorist Don Marquis’s Archy and Mehitabel stories, based on the friendship between a poetic cockroach and a cat.

“I remember saying to Louis that I relate to Mehitabel, because she’s got such a desperate life,” Germino says, laughing. “She’s actually an alley cat, but the whole time she’s pretending she’s this reincarnation of Cleopatra, and she’s had all these past lives of glamorous characters....And in the meantime she’s homeless, and she’s falling in love with all these horrible cats who betray her all the time. But I like the way she can put on this amazing act, like ‘Life is fabulous, Archy. I may be old and dancing on three feet, but I’m a grand old dame.’”

“I like that combination of desperation and faking and... perseverance,” she continues. “I hope I can be that—maybe not so much the faking part, but forging ahead no matter what. I really did not think I was going to forge ahead the way I am right now, but I’m just so curious about what’s going to happen next and where this is going to go.”

Monica Germino and Music on Main present MUTED at the Orpheum Annex from Monday to Wednesday (January 28 to 30), as part of the PuSh International Performing Arts Festival.