



PIANO  
SONATAS  
OF



CONOR HANICK  
PIANO

GALINA  
USTVOLSKAYA



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# PIANO SONATAS OF

OTHER MINDS® PRESENTS  
THE COMPLETE PIANO SONATAS  
OF GALINA USTVOLSKAYA

CONOR HANICK, PIANO  
SIMON MORRISON, MUSICOLOGIST

MONDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2024 7:30 PM  
THE FREIGHT & SALVAGE, BERKELEY  
2020 ADDISON ST, BERKELEY, CA 94704

# GALINA USTVOLSKAYA

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**PIANO SONATA NO. 1 IN FOUR MOVEMENTS**  
(1947) Premiered December 18, 1973, in Leningrad. Oleg Malov, soloist.

**PIANO SONATA NO. 2 IN TWO MOVEMENTS**  
(1949) Premiered January 26, 1967, in Moscow.  
Anatoly Vedernikov, soloist.

**PIANO SONATA NO. 3 IN ONE MOVEMENT**  
(1952) Premiered February 16, 1972, in Leningrad. Oleg Malov, soloist.

**PIANO SONATA NO. 4 IN FOUR MOVEMENTS**  
(1957) Premiered April 4, 1973, in Leningrad. Oleg Malov, soloist.

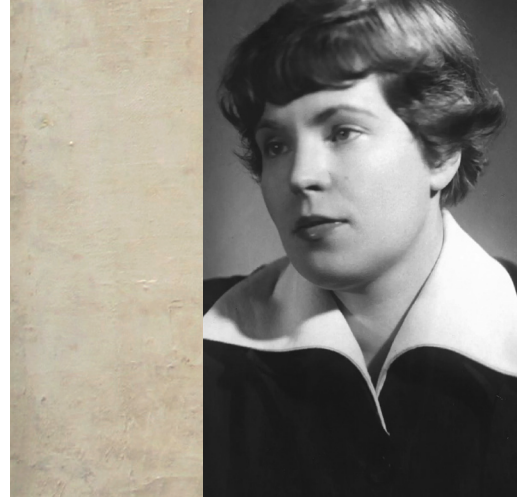
**PIANO SONATA NO. 5 IN TEN PARTS**  
(1986) Premiered October 1, 1987, in Leningrad. Oleg Malov, soloist.

**PIANO SONATA NO. 6 IN ONE MOVEMENT**  
(1988) Premiered November 20, 1988, in Moscow. Oleg Malov, soloist.

# GALINA USTVOLSKAYA

**CONOR HANICK, PIANO**  
The performance will be preceded  
by a talk on Ustvol'skaya's work by  
musicologist Simon Morrison.

# GALINA



# USTVOLSKAYA

**TRAINED** in music and earned her first recognition when Joseph Stalin ruled the Soviet Union but later disavowed much of her music from that period. Of the twenty-five works she approved for performance and publication, sixteen postdate Stalin's death. Thus her career more properly belongs to the post-Stalinist "Thaw," the era of Nikita Khrushchev and the agricultural, industrial, and socio-political "stagnation" that followed under the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev, Yuriy Andropov, and Konstantin Chernenko. Her final works date from the Glasnost era, the twilight of the Soviet Union.

Since the 1980s, Ustvolskaya has been grouped together with other so-called mavericks: experimental, iconoclastic artists who had long been silenced, only to be celebrated in the concert halls of Amsterdam, Heidelberg, New York, and other centers of new

music. She is exoticized (along with the entire Soviet experience) and has proved especially appealing to Western sensibilities for her “aura” of nihilism, association with the “apocalypse,” and oft-noted reclusiveness. Her *New York Times* obit seems to evoke the very project of writing music history in the late Soviet period: “Forms emerge from pitch-blackness only when the eyes have become accustomed to the lack of light.”

Critics past and present, East and West, have made the same claims about Ustvol'skaya. She was a victim of the Soviet cultural system, according to the consensus, and forced to retreat. But in the few places where she went on the record, she consistently used the language of no compromise. She was intent on carving out a space for herself—a place of power, not beholden to patriarchs and the institutions under their control. To be taken seriously on her own terms, she refused to admit outside influence, so her music became spiritual rather than religious. She not only challenged the conventions of art—especially art as approved by Soviet diktat—but also squared up against understandings of what is art. Rather than compose music for workers in obeisance to official aesthetics, she turned music into work. Listening to her music is laborious; she is not out to charm, delight, or entertain. There is no light, no lightness.

Ustvol'skaya preferred the extremes of *pppp* (or even quieter) and *ffff* (or even louder) to the middle ground, consciously positioning herself outside any and all expectations. One erudite Russian interpreter describes her music as neither conformist (“orthodox”), nor non-conformist (“heterodox”), but “beyond discourse.” Another equally learned scholar characterizes her music as terse but dense, because rhythm is sacrificed in favor of ostinato patterns and dynamic contrasts are exaggerated. Ustvol'skaya uses cellular, block-like constructions, recombining and reconfiguring their elements. The invocation of ancient occult beliefs, the hermetic aspect of the scores, adds “universal content.” Hers is the God of the Old Testament, a God of “furious fire,” “severe and punishing.” But there is also a personal, intimate aspect to her scores, which “transfer the microcosm of her subjective experiences,” including the physical pain in her hands in later years. The macrocosmic-microcosmic contrast is disorienting. Ustvol'skaya can mesmerize; she can also “shock.”

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To compare the sparseness of her textures to the pointillism of dodecaphonic composers like Anton Webern is to assume she knew and cared about German modernism. And while she is likened to her teacher Dmitri Shostakovich, she gave him more ideas than he gave her. Her six piano sonatas are things in themselves, effacing reference points in their insistence on drastic effects: the wood and wire of the keyboard, the force from the elbows through the forearms into the hands striking the single pitches, discrete intervals, and pitch clusters but seldom anything recognizable as a chord. Ustvol'skaya's sonatas reveal a consistent, even insistent interest in liberating pitch from chord and timbre from pitch without surrendering strict contrapuntal style. The second movement of the Second Sonata is perhaps the most explicit example of this fidelity to the technique that dominated music before the “common practice” period of goal-directed harmonic patterns.

Thus Ustvol'skaya avoids themes, developmental procedures, and discernable tripartite organizations. Her sonatas, which range from eight to sixteen minutes in length, vary in form: some are multi-sectional, others cast in a single movement. The music of the First Sonata is piercing, unadorned, and dry (very little pedal is used); these qualities persist in the other five even as the number of lines increases. There are soft and soothing passages and occasional flashes of humor, but the pleasantries don't last: that which appeals is quickly snatched away. The composer rejects 18th and 19th century sonata conventions except for a few trills and a nod or two to neo-impressionism.

Ustvol'skaya composed the Second Sonata in the worst of times under Stalin. In 1949, Soviet composers were cowed into conformity by the cultural establishment, branded formalists and yoked to the official artistic doctrine of Socialist Realism. Her student Boris Tishchenko stated the obvious: there are “no frills or whims,” in Ustvol'skaya's un-entertaining art, “but long chains of identical durations (usually quarter notes) grouped into polyphonic constructions.” She sometimes refuses bar lines because she wants to untether accents from meter, and the heaviness she demands from the pianist transcends notation and familiar temporal layouts. The Third and Fourth Sonatas are the friendliest of the bunch, which makes them the least characteristic of Ustvol'skaya's aesthetic, her belief that nothing in music before her time has adequately expressed the self.

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The Fifth and Sixth Sonatas present the greatest challenges to the listener. “It is difficult to find an analogue in piano literature for this barbaric force, stunning and repulsive in the reality of the expression of evil,” Olga Gladkova writes about the two scores. The shifts from fortissimo to ultra-fortissimo are “oppressive,” “terrible,” and “defiantly unmusical.” The origin of the word sonata is “to sound,” and Ustvol’skaya barely gives us that. Pianists are confronted with irrational instructions, especially in the Fifth Sonata: a ligature for a single finger; a note saying “press the pedal softly, nor hard” during an exceedingly tempestuous passage; a “profondo” marking for a single octave. The hands suffer, since the edge of the keyboard must be whacked; individual or groups of notes slapped, and a finger jammed against the side of a key. Ustvol’skaya is neither ceremonious nor civilized. She’s often earsplitting, and she’s committed to transferring the physical demands she places on the pianist to the listener.

The Sixth Sonata demolishes all expectations of the genre. The search for a post-tonal organizing principle centers on the clusters, but statistical counts are pointless. The texture expands and contracts, from closely spaced clusters of tones and semitones in groups of six to clusters covering an octave, two octaves, and the range of the piano. Thus Ustvol’skaya avoids monotonousness. But the greater contrast, and the grander question being envisioned, concerns the shift in the chorale-like passage from clusters to harmonies, and the reference, in the crisscrossing upward and downward presentation of the clusters, to invertible counterpoint. Unfolding like a philosophical argument, the sonata pushes traditional compositional contrivances to the furthest point of abstraction.

Ustvol’skaya’s pitch selection favors D, which is present in each of the simultaneities in the chorale, suggesting that the cosmos might not be so random after all. But without a traditional sense of pitch, the ear is drawn, inevitably, to pulse, direction, and method of execution. The sonata moves in an often-predictable 3/2 meter, with the largest tone clusters falling in groups of six and alternating in pairs. The second system introduces a second subject, or “voice,” beneath the first. Ustvol’skaya loops the ending back to the beginning of the sonata by restating the performance direction, but with a slower metronome marking and the marking

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allargando poco a poco al fine. Ustvol’skaya also uses the direction “espressivissimo” (simultaneously passionate and nondescript), which masks the more indeterminate, experimental aspects of the piece. Ustvol’skaya is playing psycho-acoustic games with us. The ear tunes out, tunes in; concentration is increased and relaxed. In places, instead of honing in on individual pitches, the ear is drawn to under- and overtones.

According to composer Viktor Suslin, she produced “music full of despair and passionate protest” at the upright piano “in her miserable Leningrad apartment.” Perhaps. Her suffering was real, but composers (even Soviet composers and even Soviet women composers) aren’t necessarily so emotional that their scores can be reduced to autobiography. She invokes our rational selves—rather than emotional reactions—as listeners. In all six of the sonatas, Ustvol’skaya aligns the performer, the instrument, and the listener, ruining the binary of mind/body and logic/feeling while revealing the entanglement of experimentalism as musical, social, and political. The pounded clusters are a declaration of terror, of anger, of creativity unbound.

Simon Morrison

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Galina Ustvol’skaya takes a bow with conductor Arvids Jansons following the premiere of her First Symphony. Grand Hall of the Leningrad Philharmonia, April 25, 1966.





CONOR

HANICK

Pianist Conor Hanick is regarded as one of his generation’s most inquisitive interpreters of music new and old whose “technical refinement, color, crispness and wondrous variety of articulation benefit works by any master” (*New York Times*). Hanick has recently worked with conductors Esa-Pekka Salonen, Ludovic Morlot, Alan Gilbert, and David Robertson; collaborated with the San Francisco Symphony, Seattle Symphony, Alabama Symphony, Orchestra Iowa, Boston Modern Orchestra Project, and Juilliard Orchestra; and been presented by the Gilmore Festival, New York Philharmonic, Elbphilharmonie, De Singel, Centre Pompidou, Cal Performances, Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, Park Avenue Armory, and the Ojai Festival, where in 2022 with AMOC\* (American Modern Opera Company) he served as the festival’s artistic director.

A fierce advocate for the music of today, Hanick has premiered over 200 pieces and collaborated with composers ranging from Pierre Boulez, Kaija Saariaho, and Steve Reich to the leading composers of his generation, including Nico Muhly, Caroline Shaw, Tyshawn Sorey, Anthony Cheung, and Samuel Carl Adams, whose piano concerto, *No Such Spring*, he premiered in 2023 with Esa-Pekka Salonen and the San Francisco Symphony. This season, Hanick presents solo and chamber recitals in the US and Europe, including concerts at the Wallis, Cal Performances, Segerstrom Center, Stanford Live, Guild Hall, Musikverein, and elsewhere. He appears with the Phoenix and Alabama Symphonies, collaborates with Julia Bullock, Seth Parker Woods, Timo Andres, and the JACK Quartet, and premieres solo and chamber works by Tania León, Nico Muhly, Matthew Aucoin, and others.

Hanick is the director of Solo Piano at the Music Academy of the West and serves on the faculty of The Juilliard School, Mannes College, and the CUNY Graduate Center. He lives with his family in the Hudson Valley.

Conor Hanick is represented worldwide by Blu Ocean Arts. For more information, please visit [conorhanick.com](http://conorhanick.com).



SIMON

MORRISON

Simon Morrison is an archival historian specializing in 20th-century Russian and Soviet music with expertise in opera, dance, film, sketch studies, and historically informed performance. Having earned unequaled access to repositories in Russia, he has unearthed previously unknown sketches, scores, letters, diaries, official documents, contracts, financial records, photographs, and other sources related to musical life from the tsars through the Soviets. He is a leading expert on composer Sergey Prokofiev, and at present researching the career of Tchaikovsky as well as a new political biography of Shostakovich.

Morrison writes frequently for academic and general audiences. A regular contributor to the *Times Literary Supplement* and *London Review of Books*, he has authored feature articles along with opinion pieces for *Time Magazine*, the *New York Review of Books*, and *New York Times*. His biography of Lina Prokofiev, the composer’s first wife, was prominently featured on BBC Radio 4, BBC World News television, and WNYC radio. His most recent book, a history of the Bolshoi Ballet based on exhaustive archival research in St. Petersburg and Moscow, has been enthusiastically reviewed in major newspapers and magazines, including the *New York Times*, *The Guardian* (UK), *Wall Street Journal*, and *New Republic*.

A sought-after speaker, Morrison has taught academic seminars and delivered public lectures in Israel, Hong Kong, China, Denmark, Canada, Thailand, the UK, Russia, and across the United States. He has been featured on national and international broadcasts (both radio and television) in Russia, Britain, Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and across the United States. Recent appearances include spots on American Public Radio’s signature program *Marketplace*, *The Current* on CBC (Canada), and *Start of the Week* on BBC television.



# UPCOMING OTHER MINDS EVENTS



WEDNESDAY MARCH 26,  
2025. BOULEZ AT 100

Gloria Cheng and Ralph van Raat, two pianos. Solo and duo Boulez works including movements from Structures, Livres 1 and 2. Plus Cage, Feldman, Zappa, Lindberg, Stravinsky

7:30pm. Littlefield Concert Hall, Mills College at Northeastern University

SATURDAY, APRIL 5, 2025  
FROM ANTHEIL TO ZAPPA

Geoffrey Burleson, piano  
Music by George Antheil, Samuel Barber, Irving Fine, Norman Dello Joio, Vincent Persichetti, Mary Kouyoumdjian, Herbie Nichols, Gerald Strang, and Frank Zappa

7:30pm. Littlefield Concert Hall, Mills College at Northeastern University

This concert is sponsored in part by a grant from an anonymous donor.

Conor Hanick photo courtesy of the artist  
Simon Morrison photo by Elizabeth Bergman

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JOSEPH YOUNG / MUSIC DIRECTOR

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SEASON  
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SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 2024  
4 PM | ZELLERBACH HALL

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SILVESTRE REVUELTES  
SAMUEL BARBER  
KRIS BOWERS  
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