Vladimir Ussachevsky

Vladimir Ussachevsky, musician, innovator, and visionary, died on January 4, 1990 in New York City. He had been a seminal figure on the electronic music scene since 1951, when he began conducting tone manipulation experiments with Columbia University's first tape recorder. With fellow composers Otto Luening, Milton Babbitt, and Roger Sessions, Ussachevsky set up the Columbia Princeton Electronic Music Center in New York, an institution which developed into both a model technical facility and a community of innovative composers, teachers, and students. The CPEMC became the most important center for electronic music in the United States.

Ussachevsky's students went on to establish electronic music programs in colleges throughout the world. They provided instruction in the techniques of electronic music composition to the generation of musicians who would embrace the tape recorder, synthesizer, and later, the computer, as their musical resources of choice.

When Vladimir first began working with tape recorders, he was already an experienced and respected musician. Born in 1911 to Russian parents, his father was a career army officer; his mother, a piano teacher. He studied piano and choral music with his mother, and played in vaudeville houses before coming to the U.S. in 1930. Originally intending to study electrical engineering, Ussachevsky decided instead to continue his musical studies upon learning that the depression had caused a lack of engineering jobs. He earned a B.A. degree, and an M.A. and Ph.D. in composition at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York.

After serving in the U.S. Army during World War II, Ussachevsky joined the Columbia University music faculty. The department had acquired its first tape recorder, an Ampex 400, and Vladimir was assigned to care for it. After using it extensively to record live performances, he began looking for new ways to use the tape machine. He created new musical sounds by speed changing, playing segments of tape backwards, splicing, looping, and electronic processing, and then assembled the new sounds into experimental compositions. The tape compositions were first heard in concert in 1952. Reporting on one event, *The New York Times* stated that Ussachevsky's music "seemed a little remote from the purposes of composing, but amused his listeners greatly." Those early compositions are now widely regarded as landmark works in contemporary music.

Ussachevsky continued his work throughout the 50s. His collaborators included fellow composer Otto Luening and engineer Peter Mauzey, who designed and built many of the special microphone preamps, mixers, and patching equipment that Ussachevsky needed. Both Ussachevsky and Mauzey were perfectionists, which meant that the equipment Mauzey built and the technical practices they developed were of the highest possible quality. When I was an engineering student at Columbia in 1955 and 1956, Mauzey was my electronics lab instructor. Occasionally he talked to us of Ussachevsky's work and told us about some of the wondrous musical developments taking place in the music department.

Vladimir had been active in the Audio Engineering Society since the early 50s. He described his developments at the 9th AES Convention on October 9, 1957, and published the manuscript "The Processes of Experimental Music" in the *Journal* (vol. 6, July 1958). After he and his colleagues established the Columbia Princeton Electronic Music Center in 1959, awareness of the importance of electronic music technology grew rapidly. When I joined the AES in 1964, its conventions often featured entire sessions on electronic music technology, at which the CPEMC was always well represented. Throughout the growth of the voltage-controlled synthesizer technology of the 60s and 70s, one could count on Ussachevsky's enthusiastic participation at industry forums and concert demonstrations.

In addition to his involvement with CPEMC and his teaching at Columbia, Ussachevsky's professional activities included research work at Bell Labs and the University of Utah, and a roster of commissioned compositions, many of them for orchestra and electronic sound. He remained active as a composer and teacher until a short time before his death.

To the hundreds of students, fellow composers, and technicians like myself, who were privileged to be able to collaborate with him, Vladimir will be remembered for his musical talent, his insight, and his boundless energy. Wendy Carlos, one of Vladimir's students well-known to AES members, remembers him as a "gentle giant" who "loved to work at a Scherzo, tempo Presto Possible and then accelerando poco a poco."[1] But, we will also remember Vladimir for his willingness to help anyone who was trying to contribute to the idiom of electronic music, for his patience and tact in offering advice, and for his easy charm that welcomed everyone.

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[1] Obituary of Vladimir Ussachevsky by Wendy Carlos to be published in an upcoming issue of *Keyboard Magazine*.