

Rūta Vitkauskaitė

Composer

AIR – ARTIST IN RESIDENCE Niederösterreich report

Advantages of AIR – ARTIST IN RESIDENCE Niederösterreich

I felt very privileged to be at AIR. I came here during the Spring 2021, it was a time of when pandemic situation was just getting better, but not yet over. It was my first trip in over a year.

It was amazing experience to leave all the clutter – thoughts, works, unfinished to-do list, - and come here into this very spacious and empty flat with just the necessary audio equipment, and a piano. I only brought my violin, and one loop pedal with me, and a blank manuscript book. It was totally refreshing.

There were absolutely no disadvantages of being here – I had all I needed artistically for equipment, and everything for living, including a kitchen and supermarket just a few steps away, so I could cook vegan meals.

The interaction with other residents and with cultural life at Krems was very limited due to covid restrictions, but I did not feel that was a problem – there were less distractions, and therefore more time to focus on my work.

MY PROJECT AND INSIGHTS

Performing while composing

I only brought one project to work on – violin concerto. My goal was to take this space and time to work with my creative processes when I write classical score.

In recent years, I have been working on commissions, which include very strict timescale to deliver the work. Because of time pressure, it became natural for me to use the tools and working methods I have already established and can rely on. However, it started to feel too much of a 'job', rather than a true artistic wonder into unknown. I missed experimentation, which I - on the hand – do a lot when writing semi-improvisatory pieces for myself.

During the residency, I worked through performance, spontaneous improvisation, and constant and direct contact and experimentation with my instrument. I stayed away from music notation programme Sibelius, and used only recordings and hand-written sketches for the entire time.

Results:

- The normally exhausting mental activity became much less draining process. Normally, I would imagine all the music in my head, and hold that image until the piece is finished. In this situation, I did not need to, because I have recordings to listen back to.
- Because of the freedom to forget what I was composing, I generated much more original music than normally over such period of time (I have now enough material to put it into 45 min. long concerto).
- This also contributed to me establishing some routine, where I can dedicate my full attention to composing in the morning, and then do admin or anything else later in the day without feeling that I'm 'forgetting' my music. Normally, I would find it very distracting to even check my emails on my composing days, which would lead to a

terrible pressure for not keeping up with my 'other responsibilities'.

Composing outdoors

Another passion of mine is hiking. Already for some time I have been considering how to integrate being outdoors with compositional process, but struggled to find the right way for myself.

I took some time to go on solitary long hikes around the area, thanks to the hiking map provided by Paula (I left it at the studio 23 for future residents!). During those hikes, I would sit down and take rest, and sometimes I would notice that the place, the view, the area would affect me in this very special, very inspiring way. One of those places was a red rock facing the beautiful nearby town Rossatz-Arnsdorf.

I then came back there a few days later, with a manuscript book and some blank paper, to see what happens. As I work so much with my subconscious processes, and by now have established a reasonable awareness of how and when my composing processes start and how they work, I thought that maybe I could somehow subconsciously connect to that rock, to its million years of history? What music is locked in there, what sounds? I imagined, it could be some tribal, scratchy sounds, whispers. When I sat there with my notebook, I inquisitively started asking myself questions, focusing on the area around, and analysing why it is inspiring to be here. Soon after, the music came to me – but it was totally different from what I thought – it was very still music, yet somehow firm and stable in ever chanting landscape. The constant change of weather – clouds, sun, rain, wind, as I sat there, and the very still, calm mountain looking right at me. It was here long before me, all of us humans, and it will stand here long after we all will go extinct. That feeling of eternity, of being a fragile moment in ever-passing time, a blink in the life of that rock. This is the type of music that started flowing through me, like some very subtle energy which does not have beginning or an end, which just is there whether you listen to it, or not. I sketched what I 'heard'.

I did a few outdoor composing experiments, and I realised there are a few important factors to make it work for myself:

1 – I need to go to the place I already have been in (eg., came across accidentally during the hike or walk). Wondering around and looking for a new good location while composing is too stressful and too distracting.

2 – The place should better have a bench and a table. Otherwise it becomes difficult to stay for a longer period of time. At the rock, I stayed very still for a few hours, and it brought really good results. At the other locations without a proper seat, I would start feeling uncomfortable after half an hour or so, would have back pain, would need to move – very distracting. I did not manage to get into the right space of mind for a very long to get enough of the flow of music.

3 – The location does not need to necessarily have a view (I used to think that I only get inspired when looking afar). Equally interesting musical results come in the seat surrounded by bushes and crops, with small insects and animals.

4 – The experience of 'reflecting the location' sank into my work throughout. Even sitting in my flat, and experiencing the prison right in front of me, has brought music to myself - some very dynamic low register sounds, quite chaotic and extremely emotional. Same happened in when I got access to the Minorite Church for a few hours, thanks to Paula. I was planning to make some recordings of existing piece, but instead I soon started playing with sounds, reflecting to echoes and reverbs and coolness of the place. Lots of very high glissandi material came out of this.

WHAT ELSE I APPRECIATED

The one month at the residency seemed short. It took me the whole first week to adapt myself to the place (and the weather, which was extremely hot for someone coming from Scotland!). The last week I am spending on finalizing, summarising the results, deciding on where and how I will work on this material further. So only two proper creative weeks, nevertheless very productive, and it felt enough time to properly engage with the place and my work.

I mostly appreciated having a group very nice residents around me. After spending a year in the lockdown just with my partner, it was so refreshing to have some conversations around the cup of coffee with other creatives, some deep thoughts, and just some laughs. The socializing activities, despite being very limited, were also very kindly organised and facilitated by Flora and Johan – thank you for that very much, that made a huge difference!

The organisational side of the residency was absolutely perfect – we were provided full information in the very clearly laid out emails, not only usual practical summaries, but also all the updates concerning ever changing covid situation and test points. Thank you Flora for that!

I am leaving in a few days, and feeling a bit sad, but yet really grateful for absolutely wonderful time I had here. I will carry my insights and results further, and I look forward to seeing where it leads me. I wish all the residents who come here after me to enjoy this artistic residency, AIR!

Bottom left: the inspiring rock. Top right: composing spot by Danube, but not comfy. Bottom right: social time with other residents Gina and Erik, and my first meal-out with people in more than a year!

