

Interview with Fernanda Navarro by Amanda Cavalcanti

The original interview in Portuguese can be found [here](#)

“She swallowed a glass piano” wasn’t easy to watch. Fernanda Navarro’s performance on the 7th day of FIME (II Festival Internacional de Música Experimental) was a disturbing work about diverse forms of violence against women – domestic violence, rape, femicide. While shaking and unstably playing different percussion instruments, Fernanda and the other five women – Dorothé Depeauw, Flora Holderbaum, Camila Zerbinatti, Júlia Teles and Natália Francischini – intoned several phrases and data relative to misogynistic violence. In the last part of the performance, a disklavier narrated several reports collected by Fernanda from “friends, family and colleagues” who underwent violence and domestic abuse.

Fernanda is a composer and performer, master in composition by University of California Santa Cruz. Her MA thesis studies the relationship between musical composition and corporeality and she is currently a doctorate candidate at UC San Diego. After two years collecting reports for “She Swallowed a Glass Piano”, Fernanda was shattered by the case of a 16-year-old girl from Rio de Janeiro who was raped by 33 men (or 30, or 27; there’s no difference!) and she decided to create a piece for II FIME – festival curated by her, Mario Del Nunzio and Matthias Koole.



When I interviewed her, she told me about the impossibility of creating emotional distance from the several reports of violence that she has heard, about the sexist culture in experimental / contemporary music circles and about the diverse reactions from the audience regarding “She Swallowed a Glass Piano”.

AC: How and when did you have the idea to compose a piece that dealt with

violence against women? Have you ever approached this theme – or other issues related to feminism – in other compositions?

FN: First things first: FORA TEMER! The compositional process of this piece was very different from the processes I usually see myself involved with. When I was invited to compose a new piece for FIME, I immediately foresaw a problem: with whom can I work with? One of the reasons that propelled me to leave Brazil was the lack of performers who liked and were able to play contemporary music. Even though I have worked and still work with sound installations and electronic/electroacoustic music, I'm very interested in working with instrumental music, and I really like to deal with the challenges that this type of music generates: to be part of an archaic music tradition (I spent years and years practicing an instrument developed 300 years ago!, semesters and semesters studying tonal harmony and counterpoint) and, at the same time, to feel that this tradition does not represent me; to deal with performers who are trained to play and act accordingly to this tradition and use the friction originated between the resistance of the instruments and the resistance of the "trained" body when confronted with physical actions and/or ideas that are not part of the corporeal repertoire involved in the performance of traditional music as a generator of compositional possibilities; to deal with an audience trained to be "passive", that can only appreciate security if through familiarity, or insecurity if through cheap shocking tricks. In any case... I'm interested in this conflict and in the fraying originated by having a foot grounded on the floor by roots of the past and another foot being pulled by the satellites of the future. Well, that was a giant detour, or rather a scenic route, around the question! Let's get back to the question: considering that I'd like to compose an instrumental piece for FIME (for the reasons I mentioned above) and considering that I would not find performers either adequate or with time to work with me in Brazil, I decided to compose a piece for people who were not necessarily trained as musicians. The piece would require simple actions, and any "non-musician", without major physical impediments, would be capable to perform: speak and hit some object that can make noise. I had a project that was sitting on my drawer for the past 2 years: I had written down reports from female friends and family who had suffered domestic violence and I wanted to, somehow, "give a voice" to those women who had to silence their stories. The case of the teenager who was raped by several men in Rio de Janeiro on May 21st, 2016 and the way most people blamed the victim, infuriated me. My mind was exploding in pain, fury and impotence and I allowed myself to release all those feelings – that's how "She Swallowed a Glass Piano" emerged. You know, all this thing about being a woman composer is quite tricky. At least, I find it tricky. For a long time, I thought that feminism was foolishness. That we already lived in an alright society, that treats women OK, that I could study, vote and work as any dude, so "we're even, stop the 'mememe' and act as a man!". *{find a more idiomatic way to explain mememe?}* Silly! I was very, very silly! I was educated "machista", in a sexist family, in a sexist school, in a sexist society. Obviously: I was sexist! I arrived to feminism because of a necessity and not because of an aesthetic/academic decision or by reading Simone de Beauvoir while drinking tea in the living room. And I remain feminist by empathy and because I think I can change the world for the better. Perhaps I'm being silly, very-very silly again... But I really think we can change the world and make it better. And I think the world will be a better place when women don't have their faces burned by acid by other men (as occurs in India),

when women don't have their clitoris mutilated (as occurs in 27 countries in Africa), when baby girls are not discarded alive and abandoned because they were born female (as occurs in China), when women are not burned alive because they don't dress up as men tell them to (as occurs in Iraq, Saudi Arabia and many countries in the Middle East), when fathers don't rape their daughters (as occurs in Brazil, in the US, in Europe) Anyway... the whole world is contaminated by misogyny and, as much as we want to eradicate horrible diseases as AIDS – and we believe that the world will be better if we do so –, we also need to fight and eradicate this awful disease called misogyny.

We believe that a scientist who researches vaccines against AIDS is helping to improve the world. In the same way, we must understand that a person who's fighting against misogyny is also helping to improve the world. I have always dealt with feminism and my music with a lot of caution. I ask myself: am I dealing with feminism in my artistic practice to achieve individual / careeristic benefit? If I deal with feminism in my music, am I going to be reduced to "Ah, that female composer who only makes feminist music"? Am I going to be simply reduced to my gender and to my political views? I have a terrifying fear of being pigeonholed and reduced to a stereotype, and never be able to get out under the labels people may put on me. This fear has always dissuaded me of dealing with feminism openly. Nonetheless, in 2014 I composed a satirical piece as a response to idiotic and chauvinistic statements by Bruno Mantovani. The piece is called "Homage to Bruno Mantovani" and can be heard [here](#). Tânia Neiva wrote a super cool article about this piece! The article was published by and presented at ANPPOM this year and it's available [here](#) . Before that, I had composed a piece called "Pink" (it can be heard [here](#)), that deals with the idea of a repressed voice, but in a very abstract way. I think that "She Swallowed a Glass Piano" was the first piece in which I overtly dealt with feminism, with no fear of being reduced, judged or stereotyped. (Nah, I'm lying! I was afraid, but I continued even with the fear sitting on my shoulders.) {this translation is weird... it's common to "humanize" feelings in Portuguese, but that doesn't seem to work in English...}



AC: The performance of “She Swallowed a Glass Piano” on FIME was the premiere of the piece. Will you perform this piece in San Diego (or in other places)? Do you believe that the impact/reception of the piece will be different, considering differences in culture regarding violence against women (if you think that there is such a difference)?

FN: I still don't know if I'll present this piece somewhere else. I composed this piece to be performed in Brazil and it is written mostly in Portuguese, which limits its reach. I'd have to rework the piece, translate it to English, re-record the disklavier part, write a totally different score... For now, I want to take some time off and do nothing to this piece. It was a punch on my own stomach and I'm still recovering from it.

AC: “She Swallowed a Glass Piano”, at least to me, was a very strong and heavy piece to watch. How do you think the impact it caused on the audience contributes to the battle against this type of violence?

FN: I don't know. I have no control over the audience, of how people will react. Some people talked to me after the performance and I've noticed a varied gamut of reactions: some people cried, some people were angry, some folks were skeptical, some people liked it... I would hope “She Swallowed a Glass Piano” could make people feel the gravity, the weight and the trouble domestic violence causes. One thing is to read a bunch of news about domestic violence and rape in the newspaper; another thing is to feel this violence (even though one has never been a direct victim of it). I think that men who could “feel” this violence during the piece will probably have more empathy and when confronted with chauvinism (coming from them or others), perhaps they'll remember the discomfort and the pain that chauvinism can cause and perhaps they can refrain and control the aggression. But... this is a lot of theory! I'm not sure I have this power.

AC: You spent 2 years collecting the reports of violence and abuse used in your piece. How was this experience? Did you feel the need to distance yourself from the reports to start composing the piece?

FN: It was a horrible experience. It was painful. It hurt. It healed weirdly. It originated new things. It transformed me. I did not distance myself from the reports. They were in my bed table, all the time during the compositional process. In a way, I relive all those stories everyday: you open the newspaper and read that a guy stabbed and killed his girlfriend in a subway (Chicago, 2 months ago); you talk to your family and you know that that relative is going through hell under the hands of her abusive husband; you open your email and the San Diego police sends an alert saying that a guy raped a 20-year-old girl, 2 blocks from my house... The reports are frozen moments of what is actually happening all the time around us. I have no way to distance myself from them.

AC: You wrote your master's thesis about “corporeality” in music, in performance. How does the relationship between body and composition unfolds in “She swallowed a Glass Piano”, in which the female body is a key subject?

FN: The way I approach corporeality in my thesis is very different from the way I approached (accidentally!) corporeality in “She Swallowed a Glass Piano”. In my thesis,

I talked about the relationship between the body and the musical instrument, reflecting the tradition of playing the instrument with the way in which composers disconnect the body from music, among other issues. This piece is a bit different: we didn't have traditional instruments against which we had to confront technically and historically (none of the instruments required a very specific technique to be played). Honestly, I didn't premeditate anything specific regarding corporeality in this piece. The choreographies arose as an expressive necessity and I did not formalize or theorized about the female body in this piece. Specifically, in the introduction and in the last movement, the body becomes, at the same time, a repository of traumas and a mirror, which folds itself inwards, outwards, inwards, outwards...



AC: You were also one of the curators of the second edition of FIME. Was there a preoccupation to balance the selection between male and female artists? How do you think sexism manifests itself in experimental music?

FN: Yes, there was a preoccupation to find balance between the casting of male and female artists. However, we are far from obtaining this balance. Let's look at the numbers: from all the applications, only 15% were women. This already shows us that the problem isn't simply to select more female artists. The problem is structural: fewer women are applying, fewer women are creating, fewer women are producing, fewer women are having access to musical education, fewer women are being encouraged to become artists and to participate in the experimental / contemporary music scene. We need to solve the problem, simultaneously, in several spheres: the curators must find balance between genders during the curatorial process; female (and male) artists who

already have visibility must be conscious of their power and privilege and help other female artist who are beginners or less engaged to gain visibility as well; educators must be aware of the historical sexism and empower the girls; the audience must be more demanding and say “Wow! Only man in this concert’s program?! This is a social disaster!”.

Regarding sexism in contemporary / experimental music: I think that chauvinism presents itself in many forms, but sometimes it shows itself in veiled aggressions, which gradually discourage women to expose their works and themselves. I’ll give a personal example. A couple of years ago I heard from a guy: “You compose like a man!”. This has become a “classic” for me, I constantly hear this or a variation of this. It’s a veiled aggression to my gender. The dude tried to give me a compliment, but in order to give me a compliment, he needs to disqualify my gender and pair me with *his* gender. We’re stimulated to see ourselves in a “masculinized” (stereotyped) way and then – and only then – we can be recognized and validated as people and not “only” as women. It’s a gigantic absurdity and it’s very difficult to deconstruct in a 10 seconds post-concert comment – normally when I hear this kind of stupidity. There are other manifestations of chauvinism in contemporary music that are directly related to historical privileges that men had and have. However, I am optimistic regarding the improvement of the experimental / contemporary music scene: today we have more women participating as artists in concerts and festivals, more women are going to the university, curating events, organizing their own concert series etc., than 10 years ago. I see women and men more aware than ever before, taking concrete actions to solve problems against sexism in music. This means that feminism is working and we need to keep working for equality. We’ll get there!

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*Photos: Premiere of “She swallowed a glass piano”, at Il FIME. All photos by Natacha Maurer