

## Miya Misaoka: Being in Awe of What Exists in Nature

Charlie Morrow interviews Miya Misaoka



I met sound New York-based artist-composer Miya Misaoka through her Koto in *My Life*, an immersive audio piece presented in 2003 in my Sound Cube, presented at the New Sounds New York show at The Kitchen Center. Her work encompasses contemporary classical composition, improvisation, electroacoustic music, traditional Japanese instruments, and performance art and clearly illuminates space.

Charlie Morrow: The ask from my side is: how does immersivity fit into your current practice? And then what's your timeline from when you first got inspired to work with sound and built up to this point. I want a timeline and a discussion of what you're working with. So that is what I was proposing.

Miya Misaoka: Okay. So, let's see. Where's a good place to start? How about some of the early pieces using immersivity and sound? I think this discussion of immersivity without the computer is also interesting because in terms of the immersive experience with sound where it's coming from this three dimensionality and then smaller sounds that are very located in physical locations. Like if there's an insect in the corner of their house that's buzzing and you can locate that sound and it has a much more identifiable sound source via location. And that seems to somehow be contrasted with this idea. And perhaps not. I'm just thinking out loud, contrasting with the idea of immersive sound which is very global in the sense that it's coming from all around our environment and we can't locate or pinpoint a specific sound source. Would you say that that's kind of the general terms of what we're talking about?

Charlie Morrow: That's actually only one way to look at it. From my point of view, we're immersed in the atmosphere. You're immersed in the room and you hear the insect. And if there was no air you wouldn't hear the insect. Your head would explode. What I'm talking about is, if you think of the analogy of a fish tank: There's fish and then there's the water and the tank. My idea of immersivity is the combination of the environment and the things that we experience in the environment. And as a maker of 3D experiences, I need to make both for it to happen. Otherwise, what you get is the provided immersive environment of the room you're in and there's the mosquito. But if you're going to create a new work, you would then have to add to the room, doing something that fills the room and then the mosquito is both in the room and in your sound field. So, that's kind of more what I was talking about.

Miya Misaoka: So you're talking about the R. Murray Schafer idea of the soundscape and that it's this overarching flow of sound of the environment.

Charlie Morrow: Exactly. That's how I've heard it and, in that sense, that's what people, say, doing work specifically in virtual reality or games or underwater performances where there's an environmental element, plus the sound. And so everything has a context, is really what I see. And so everything is some place except in the imagination, say a platonic universe where you have a perfect object as a pure idea, that just exists, an idea space without any boundaries,

which is one of the historic ideas of things totally without context – just there they were, perfect objects in idea space.

Miya Misaoka: Can you go back to this analogy of the fish and the water in the tank? So do you mean that the fish is swimming in different locations in the tank? You're talking about the water. You're talking about the fish. You're talking about the tank.

Charlie Morrow: I'm talking about all three things. Absolutely. That might be my practice. I didn't want to hear you describe immersivity from my perspective, but rather from yours. How you imagined, how you're hearing the mosquito in the room and your ability to locate it was key. Both. And then if you play an instrument, then the instrument is part of the room where everything is part of something.

Miya Misaoka: Right. I guess you talked earlier about this idea of the perception of the sound, how we perceive it, and then what happens with the vibrations, if they happen and then nobody hears it or sees it. And does that even exist? I think you talked about that. That's a different conversation.

Charlie Morrow: Yeah. I think that's more pure philosophical. A lot of what I'm talking about with immersivity relates to everybody who's involved who I'm interviewing does something with sound and their practices with sound. I'm asking people how working with sound and spatial sound is important to them because spatial sound is immersive sound always. And then just how that thinking evolved because clearly you started maybe playing with a stick in a bicycle wheel or something when you were a kid. Something opened the door of sound in your head. One of our colleagues described walking with his mother as a very small kid in a narrow pathway in his town and that he heard the flutter echo of his footsteps with the sound sort of bounced between the two walls and that experience, which he had over and over again, as a little kid opened up his head and he still thinks back to it as a 70-year-old sound artist. And so I'm basically looking for stories about sound experience.

Miya Misaoka: Well, one possible early experience was I had a cat and I was always holding the cat, petting the cat, touching the cat named Fur, etc. And so you could feel the vibration of the purring, which is a really interesting kind of thing that happens. The purring happens when Fur is happy and content and you're touching it. So there's this very emotional quality of the sound and vibration of the purring of the cat. And I think that had a big influence because the cats were a big part of my life as a child. And that sense of what is that vibration and what's the relationship between the two, because they are different, but overlapping and they're related. I think that is so intriguing. It's always something that's always so intriguing for me now. There's the idea that the cat does this vibration and purring when it's happy and therefore, it's also very calming.

My cat had a bunch of litters and I saw that when she was nursing, the litter, the baby kittens would also purr and that there would be group of purring entities or bodies, and they would almost chorus with each other. I think like when there's six kittens and the mother cat, and they're all they're drinking and they're chorusing with they're purring. It's an interesting experience to behold.

Charlie Morrow: It sure is. It's amazing to hear you describe it when you hear versions of the same sound coming from different critters.

Miya Misaoka: And the sound that's so very closely related to what we know is to be in an emotion of calm, happiness, contentment, feeling secure – of course, these are human emotions that we're putting onto animals, but they feel safe and they're drinking, so they seem somewhat content. So there is this feeling and I think that moving on to thinking about working with different kinds of social insects and insects that sound such as the giant Madagascar cockroaches that I worked with for a number of years. Those are social insects and they make an extraordinary sound, not when they're happy, but when they're feeling distressed; they make this incredible electronic, very white noise, very loud sound coming from the insides of the insect.

And so while I'm talking about that piece – that was in 1995 – it was called "Ritual with Giant Hissing Madagascar Cockroaches" and for that piece I was naked on a table and there were 12 Madagascar cockroaches that were crawling over me. And I had laser beams; at the beginning they were burglar alarms that were hacked from Radio Shack. And I recorded these insects because they had such an extraordinary natural sound. And then the samples of their sounds sounded like an electronically produced white noise. But when they crossed the burglar alarm trigger beams, invisible beams, they would, their sounds would be their samples and the sample of their sound would be recreated in the room.

There were also people holding these Tibetan bells that would slowly wander and rove throughout the audience. And so there was this further dimensionality of the sound slowly moving with the bell sounds. One thing about this piece I had in the liner notes for the evening in 1995, is that I talked about it being the idea of the social constructions of race and gender that are projected upon the body as a site for control. And it was based on the fact that as a Japanese-American, all of my relatives were put into Japanese-American prison camps during the war, based on one-sixteenth or one-thirty-second of Japanese blood. This was really an abstract idea of what blood is because that small amount wouldn't have existed because immigrants from Japan hadn't been coming from Japan that long to even have that amount, but it was this abstract amount, I guess, taken from tribal Native American ideas of what they would've called Indians at the time.

So, it was a piece that had to do with this idea of a social construction onto a blank canvas, and that these cockroaches were creating their own landscape on this blank canvas of the body as a metaphor of society, as well as for race and gender. So, that's a long and complex description of the impetus of the piece, but it was performed in a number of places, including the last performance art festival in America, in Cleveland, Ohio, also at UVSA in Groningen, V2 in the Netherlands and it premiered at Intersection for the Arts in San Francisco. But there was also video of closeups of these cockroaches who were cleaning their antennas and doing different kinds of things. And they're crawling all over my body and then they're cleaning themselves or just walking around oblivious. And the shape of the knee is just like a random hill for them, but they do all run towards my feet because it feels, I think, more like a limb for them where they feel safe when they're on a limb. So, that's one of the pieces that was done in 1995.

Charlie Morrow: That's an amazing piece as described.

Miya Misaoka: And related to that was: I traveled with these cockroaches at the time before 9-11, when it was easier to travel with these large insects. I put them in Tupperware boxes and drilled holes in the Tupperware boxes and wore them in this vest that has all these different pockets. So I put two cockroaches in one pocket and another five in another larger box, on my

back and different places. And then I was able to walk through the metal detectors because they cared about metal in those days. And so they traveled with me and I witnessed how they acted with each other. I only took one male and then the rest females. Because if I took too many males, they would just all fight with each other. But that was very interesting to watch them over a period of days. And I would be fascinated just watching them for hours in my hotel room every night. So it was an interesting time.

Another piece related to my insects was called the "Bees Show" or "The Bee Project." Again, it was social insects, showing how they relate to each other and how they exist both as individual insects, but also as a hive, as a group and what they're able to accomplish. It was in 1996, I had thousands of live bees and a glass exhibit hive. I took the smaller amounts of bees and put them in these tubes that my bee handler had and they created different pitches when they were in different tubes. And then when he put smoke into the glass exhibit, they would go up to a C-sharp from a C. So their wings would go faster and they would create this humming, would change this chorusing of their sound depending on what the bee handler was doing. I had different video projections of the closeups of the bees and they created a bee dance. But the bees themselves do a bee dance and they're able to do with the movements of their bee bodies they're able to show where the best place is for the whole hive to go, which flower and they're able to do this mathematical relationship of the sun and different bees will go and advocate for different flowers to go to in different locations of the X and Y axis.

And then the bees as a group watch and, with all the pheromones going on as well, perceive which is the most favorable place for the hive to go. And so they do a bee dance when they agree that that's the place they want to go to and they all leave as a hive to that place. And I was also exploring the idea of improvisation and what kind of agency and subjectivity is happening. And how are their group decisions being made because they would make these group decisions. I'm sure that there's been a lot of research done since 1996, but all of it points to this higher ability of complexity in their behavior than what was previously understood. And I think that's true with a lot of the things that I've been working with, whether it's insects or plants. Or these ideas that plants and insects have a higher aspect to their networking and to their exchange of data and information than what was previously thought?

So, that's just kind of a general thing. But this bee show, because it was so difficult, I think I did it twice with the beehive. I did something called "Sound Culture" in 1995 that Ed Osbourne curated. And at that time, I had people on different stringed instruments and they would play the bow and emulate different kinds of sounds on string instruments with, of course, the vibrating buzz soundings and so created a musical composition that incorporated these sounds. And because it was so impractical to travel with bees, also people could die if they got stung and were allergic to them, I had to have someone on hand with the vacuum who could vacuum up if the exhibit glass broke. So, it became quite a production and impractical and so I created a stand-alone video called "Adventures of the Solitary Beat." It's a bit humorous and it talks about the bee dance. That show was able to have a life and travel because it was a video stand-alone piece that could somehow document all the work that I had done over the years And not have to carry the bees around. But I will mention that I did create a beehive environment using an old-fashioned multitrack system with eight channels. And the bees sounds would be in the eight speakers. This was presented at the San Francisco Electronic Music Festival. People would sit inside the circle and different aspects of the hive sounds would wave in towards them and then the wave would dissipate, etc.

Charlie Morrow: That's fantastic to hear that story. I built a beehive. My first immersive sound experience that I built with my sound Cube was a beehive performance at Michael Schumacher's Diapason Gallery. We had the queen bees chamber and you were in a satellite and bees came up through the floor and visit the queen bee. And so you had the sense of being in the hive itself, but the hive had the feeling as though it was a satellite above the earth because of the scale, because the hive was the size of the room and the room was 20 odd feet on the side.

So you had a tremendously scaled up beehive with large bee sounds coming up and bees circling and coming closer. In the next room we had a system that had separate speakers and if you created a vibration, the louder, more intense, your vibration was the more the bees would chase you around the room. The system would locate you and chase you around. So it's interesting that we overlapped because that's my first real sound Cube piece.

Miya Misaoka: Well, it's a natural thing to go to in a way. And I used this software that Ron Anderson was developing and it was before IRCOM had their specialized software. So, it was before all of that. Nothing could be done in real time. So, I had to draw in the software, how things would go and how fast they would go from speaker to speaker. And then later, of course, with different programs, systems, specialization, things became very different.

But speaking of the queen bee in the documentary made, well, it was like a mockumentary because it was funny as well as these photos of all these bees crawling on my body. But the idea that the queen bee is fed special food and the other bees are fed a very different kind of food. Any bee can genetically become a queen bee. But because this one bee is given this special food it changes and matures into a queen bee. And so I used that as an analogy of the class system and these class distinctions of the queen bee and the worker bee, etc. But that the hive is a very interesting sonic idea for humans, how we imagine the hive to be and our experiences with these and how we imagine what it would be to be inside a hive. And so it's a really fertile area.

I'm going to talk about another piece that I did called "For Birds, Planes and Cello." And this was one of my so called hits. Relatively speaking, it's quite a joke, but it was written for Joan Jeanrenaud from the Kronos Quartet and it premiered at Headlands Center for the Arts in California.

And later it was performed at the White Box with Alex Waterman and the Issue Project Room. And this piece was being performed between 2003 and 2007. I was living in San Diego and there are these deep canyons in San Diego. So, I took a microphone and with my friend Marcus Fernandez and we went down into these canyons with all this equipment. Actually, I hurt my back trying to climb with the tripods, etc. But I basically wanted to record an hour of uncut sound from very early in the morning to later on. And it was very interesting what happened because there's 200 both native and migrant species of birds in the San Diego canyons. And they're going from the Arctic to South America. And then there are native species there and they all kind of mingled together. But when the planes fly overhead and you're in a deep canyon, everything sounds like it's amplified. It's a very odd sensation that sounds like there's mechanical, electrical amplification going on. When in fact it's just all natural reverberation of the earth's shape. And so as the planes are going by the birds and all these 200 species are squawking and chirping and singing in response. And then the plane keeps going on its merry way and it's quiet in the canyon and the birds just settle down and they're quiet again. There's

this soundscape sound of the quiet field and then another plane comes by and the birds start building up again because the entryway, the incoming plane is kind of a long fade in, and there's also an associated fade in with the birds. It's really quite sonically interesting. And so what happens is that with the San Diego airport's early morning schedule, the planes create their own climax of the piece because the birds are chorusing and responding to the plane. And so it builds up to this constant noise and cacophony of these things.

And then I wrote in a cello part where Joan Jeanrenaud plays a detuned cello and the different times work with the sound of the engines, the mechanical industrial sound, the very noisy sound of the engine. And then there's the sound of the birds. She doesn't literally go to imitate all these different sounds, but she is a very big part of this composition. And so it was basically a one-hour recording of the Canyon. And it was in a time when what was in style was fast plunderphonics of two-second samples was all the rage at the time. So, this was really going completely against the grain of what was happening among the people doing sound and samples and field recordings, etc.

Charlie Morrow: Oh, that was a wonderful description, a really wonderful story. I think that, it seems like ... am I hearing right that you sense the communication as well as the sound. In every one of these pieces you're working with what you've become involved with, with what's going on, so to speak. You're not just appreciating it or getting off on it, you are actually setting up and enhancing communications and interrelations and that becomes little worlds that then animate.

Miya Misaoka: Well, I did not interact with the birds or the planes. I just kind of let them do their thing that they would do every day of the week. But by having a cello, writing the cello part with that, was not a completely transgressive act. But at the time, the purists and some of the people I was friends with thought that these soundscapes should be completely without any musical intervention at all and just purely a field recording. So there are these different ideologies that I think that I transgressed in different ways. And, of course, I mentioned the plunderphonics and really fast samples, which was the aesthetic of the day. And then also, on the other hand, there were the purists of the environmental field recorders who basically ideologically would not be in favor of any kind of musical instrument being put with sound recording, field recording. So, there's that.

Charlie Morrow: Marvelous. Your own role in this is, of course, what our conversation is about. You're the traveler and the composer and the gatherer of sound and the initiator of orchestrations. That's why I'm talking to you because of your gift for that kind of world making.

Miya Misaoka: Oh, thank you so much. I mean, that's very kind and I'm very happy to be talking with you because you were an incredible world maker. I'm fascinated by the worlds that you are a part of and that you contribute to and that you make. There are these inquiries I think of, why something is the way it is, or even how do we know we know something and what do we know? And then being in awe of particular experiences in a world that brings us out of our worldly bodies into some other kinds of space – mental and physical and spiritual space. I think that it's the closest thing to the awe of both existing in nature; I think we talked about experiences in nature and childhood. My dad did in particular as our families would go camping and at different times and also backpacking as a teenager, or I'd see, not just the sunset, but be in the woods and see deep ravines and lakes and fire falls and waterfalls, and have an incredible feeling of awe just being very much attuned to a larger sense of what the universe is. I think as

a modern person that's the closest we can get to this kind of ritualized sense of being rooted with the universe and kind of a sense of eternal time. I don't want to say it's a religious experience, but it does that a little bit. I think when we try to recreate some of these feelings and sounds, those are areas of inspiration.

One piece that I did was called "While I Was Walking, I heard a Sound" and it was for three *a cappella* choirs and nine soloists and there were two conductors and one conductor, Robert Gary, was the main conductor of three choirs. One was a professional, new music choir called Volti. Another was the San Francisco Choral Society and there was a very high-quality children's choir that went all over the world and made CDs.

And then I got nine soloists who were opera singers and new music, experimental vocalists, and it was commissioned by the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts for their 10th anniversary and it was an extraordinary opportunity. I created this piece and I wanted the sense that you could be walking and that you would hear these different kinds of sounds as you were walking. So, I would have the sound, for example, snake through the orchestra of singers, or I should say the different choirs, from one person to another. There were, I think, 40 individual voices and 120 singers altogether singing and at different times the choirs would be distinct and at different times there would be individuals and the movements would be divided by, everything was phonemes. There was no libretto, it was all phonemes. And so things were divided into consonants and vowels. So the first movement was all vowels. The next movement was all the hard consonants of the K's. And then the soft A's and E's and O's, etc. And then there were *a cappella* people; it was all *a cappella* and there were singers in the different balconies as well. So, there were these human bodies, almost like individual speakers that would be activated and non-activated. But through the score, they would sing at different times. And it was this way of composing that brought out both this location of the sound source and acousmatic Schaferian sensibility as well as more of a soundscape.

In fact, there's one part of this composition where all the choirs do natural sounds with their mouths, the sounds of water dripping and the sounds of what would happen in a natural soundscape. So, that was very interesting as well. And I found out that with more than a hundred people, there's a few people who have very good bird call sounds. And so I would invite them to do a few bird call sounds and other times when they would all whistle together and that would really sound just like birds and other times when they would use their mouths like a rhythmic percussive instrument. So, at different times their mouth shapes were delineated. You know, what kind of precision of the shape of their mouth, etc., and different sounds would come out based on their armature or the shape of the mouth. At times, it sounded like they were rhythmic, rhythm and percussion instruments maracas, etc. So, it was really this exploration of the body, the human body and the mouth and all these amazing singers. And then what they could do both with sometimes tonality and then other times more of a sound world.

Charlie Morrow: Lovely. I'm very touched by the descriptions. When we had our dinner together recently, there was the deep interest that you shared in the communication between plants and my house is in a forest in Vermont and one of the stunning experiences is to hear the wind arrive from a long distance away and pass you and keep on going and disappear because there's continuous forest. I followed some of your links where people have been

studying how trees communicate. And I'm just wondering: are you making a piece from this idea? Or where are these thoughts taking you?

Miya Misaoka: The pieces that I've been doing with plants have been experiencing a rebirth of sorts. And I started doing these pieces in the late 90s. We were using a philodendron because philodendrons are sebaceous so they can support sensors, medical equipment being put on them and they grow fast and they are semi-tropical. They have to grow towards the light, but they also wind themselves around things and they have to make so-called decisions of: do I climb over there; they follow the water, they follow these things but they also do different things.

I typically talk about Aristotle, when asked, what is the difference between a plant and a human? And he answered that plants are not mobile and humans are. And so that's the difference, but actually, plants in the rainforest, they live on a canopy on top of the rainforest and they send their roots systems down when there's favorable conditions of the soil. And when it becomes unfavorable, they stop nutrients and water from going to those roots. So, they cut those roots off and they move to another area and then shoot new roots down. So, they're able to really traverse areas of meters, yards and they're actually quite mobile. They move slowly, but they do move.

Plants have a root system that has concentrated cells and are able to have a system for determining the plants larger functions of what happens. So, I'm not calling the root system a brain, but just saying that there is some kind of coordination going on, that's very clear. But I've been invited by the Toronto Biennale to do a piece.

So, I'm preparing that for a number of different plants and some of the plants will be using Siri's voice and reading out different statistics of global warming in different parts of the world. So, if somebody goes and interacts with the plant at different times, there'll be some sounds that will be abstract sounds and at other times there will be readings of climate change – I don't use the words "climate change" – but readings of the sounds of radio broadcasts and other kinds of news outlets talking about how hot it is in one part of the world and other parts, etc.

I just did a piece called "Oak Plants in Germany" at Mainz University. I had sand on the floor and then video projections on the sand. And then when people interacted with the plant, the plant would respond with projections on the sand. People touch the leaves, etc. And so another one was called "Don't Kill Plants (Leaves are Murder, Meat is Murder)." It's kind of a funny to take on the "Meat is Murder" popular song [by the Smiths] and the idea that plants, because of all of this activity and this complex behavior that they have, are in a way eating them. You don't even want to, actually, eat them after working with them a lot. You just feel like they're too intelligent to eat. But, of course, we have to eat plants. It'd be very difficult if we didn't.

Charlie Morrow: In my experience with certain tribal individuals, the idea of talking to a plant was part of the tradition. So, for example, amongst the Seneca Indians, one of the artists that I knew through Jerry Rothenberg was a guy called Avery Jimerson and he lived in upstate New York and he knew hundreds and hundreds of songs and rituals and he was a ceremonial leader. But he also knew the tradition of making life masks, which would mean that he would carve a ceremonial mask, to be worn by himself or others in rituals, on a living tree and he would communicate with the trees before he even made one incision. He would just communicate all about it so that the spirit would migrate from the tree and he would make a deal basically to



animate the mask and the tree would understand what it was about. Somehow I thought that tale would be interesting for you.

Miya Misaoka: No, that is. You know, I used to do these pieces in the 90s and at one point I had a big group of gardeners come to one of the performances. They had never come to any kind of new music concert before and they heard about this one and they came and they were from some gardening association or club. People would come up to me afterwards and they would tell me about a plant in their lives that was very important to them. Like maybe a tree in their yard that had been in the yard for generations, and they felt a kind of kinship with it. It was very moving and it reconnected me with people for awhile too, because I think I was a very active musician at one point and playing and organizing ensembles. I had my own ensembles, I improvised with other people. You know, I was a woman and often it was just men in the groups. And it became very difficult because I had to have the leadership role and it's not easy to keep bands together. So, I just got fed up at one point working with people in bands and musical collaborations. So, I decided to start looking to other species to have as kind of living entities. That was not all of the drive, but it was definitely a portion of it. I would say, working with insects and the plants was a relief from humanity a bit. I had my own issues with the insects and the plants also. But one thing the plants did do is they kind of brought back this humanity in a sense, because everybody would come up and really tell me things that they'd never told to anyone before, and then they'd go on about a story whether it was their garden or different things with plants that had a huge impact on their lives. They didn't think about it until they saw my piece with plants. So, it's interesting.

Charlie Morrow: Well, that's extraordinary because I think you've stumbled on some of the steps that made it possible for our species to begin to take steps beyond our small habitats. The relationship with plants, relationships with certain animals meant the beginning of another kind of life. It was those relationships that opened up territories.

Miya Misaoka: Hmm. Yea, territories, that's interesting. There was this commission from the EMF or Electronic Music Foundation. And for that piece I wrote something called "The Last Living Stream in New York City." And it was Minetta Creek. So, part of the reason I had this connection to Minetta Creek was, for some odd coincidence, Joan LaBarbara and Morton Subotnick had an apartment on Minetta Creek. On top of it. I told her I was doing this piece on the last living stream of New York City, Minetta Creek, and I was interviewing people who had a relationship with the Creek, somehow, this underwater flow of water under their buildings in a very heavily populated, urban environment of New York City.

And so Joan said: well, you can come over and record it when it's raining, you can actually hear it. And so, at one point it had been raining and she called me up and I was able to go there and then go down into her basement. And sure enough, you could hear the water running with the microphones. So, I recorded the sounds in her and Morton Subotnick's apartment, which I thought was really an odd coincidence as well, I mean, they are such luminaries in this New Music, experimental scene, and electronic music. And then to have this stream running underneath and me recording it. I thought that was an interesting set of things happening.

I did this piece at Judson Church that was multichannel with water and, and I think some video of different streams and interviews with people and I also interviewed someone from New York University Library and they would talk about how when it rained a lot the floods would come and they could hear Minetta Creek underneath. And it was almost like this kind of ghostly kind

of entity that would rise and fall with the weather in a kind of a metaphysical way, but also very real in the sense of flooding. Of course, now we think of flooding in much more dire, extreme, non-nostalgic ways, but, at the time, there wasn't such horrible flooding all over the world like there is now and it was a little bit more whimsical to have Minetta Creek flowing underneath your building.

Charlie Morrow: Have you ever had a dialogue with Annea Lockwood about streams and rivers?

Miya Misaoka: Not specifically, although she's an amazing pioneer, a huge figure in sound. And I've been in dialogue with her about different things. Actually she showed me on her iPhone a score she made with the maps of the Hudson River and the tributaries and ideas of a score.

Charlie Morrow: Well, I think that we've had a wonderful chat. Is there anything more you'd like to add?

Miya Misaoka: I have two other things to talk about and I'll try to be brief.

Charlie Morrow: You don't have to be brief. This is your time.

Miya Misaoka: One is called "A Long Way to F Sharp." It was these 12 speakers that were in a large circle and it was a 12-hour piece and a 12-day piece, and then, theoretically, a 12-year piece. So, these different frequencies would very slowly move and, depending on which way you ran, there'd be an arpeggio – woopp – going up. And if you ran in the opposite direction inside the circle, it would go down. This piece had a little bit more to do with our movements and then perception and how things interact. That was done at a private college in Florida. But it brings me to a more recent piece, which is called "Vaginated Chairs" that was done at MoMA PS-1 and KunstMuseum Bonn, Germany. And more recently at Mainz University and at the Fridman Gallery. And that's where there were 12 chairs and they were each tuned to a different frequency with transducers and there were these individual small vaginal inserts that were nontoxic silicon, embedded with a small little PSO mic that people would insert into the vagina. And so there'd be sounds from their bodies going into the space with all the speakers. And so there'd be the sounds of the buzzing and vibrating chairs with different, specific frequencies along with some people wearing these inserts. So, this piece could have been done with Bluetooth with no explicit or visual wire, but actually MoMA said they wanted to have that wire because it showed to the audience, to the viewer that something different was happening than just people sitting on chairs. So, from their pant legs, you would see a wire coming out of the bottom of their pant legs from their shoes and going into the mixer. So, that was interesting because I wrote this kind of manifesto called "Re-imagining Vagina Perception" and the vagina is the third ear. And the idea that the ear looks like a vagina, but without the bony cartilage. But, due to repression of talking about the vagina for young girls, like you can't use the word, they're not supposed to touch themselves, etc., this area has been really repressed and this area of possible perception has also been repressed. But, because we sit down on chairs and benches all the time, through body conduction, bone conduction, and then this area of perception, we're actually developing a higher level of perception, since we're doing so much sitting as human beings.

So, there's this article that I'm writing that hopefully will be published soon that talks about that. And, of course, different people who've talked about the third ear before.

And also I wanted to mention a piece that I did call “The Ear Hut,” which was a commission from Sonic Innovations at the Caramoor. There’s these different traffic signs that are yellow, and they look like official traffic signs, but they’re spread throughout the Caramoor Park. The signs say LISTEN AHEAD. And then there’s an ear hut that I built. It’s a small hut and you sit on a bench and you experience sound from these horizontal slots, I call them ear slots and there’s no boundary between the inside of the head and the outside environmental sounds. So, it’s a way of accessing both and having these permeations of the membrane between the inside and outside; the sounds go back and forth without us thinking so much.

There are also sounds that I’ve recorded and I’ve embedded into the bench in the ear hut. So you hear those sounds in the ear hut and the sounds of the outside and it’s this experience of the inside and outside and the hidden and the revealed because there’s things that are like that in terms of what’s inside it and you can’t hear what’s outside, etc. So, just thinking about the ear hut in general – it’s a different kind of building an architectural space, however small and humble, that is built to privilege the ear over the eye and it’s conceptual, but it also kind of hearkens back, I think to Wilhelm Reich and the Orgone machine [ed: box], and thinking about these kind of metaphysical, spiritual places that exist in our imagination. I think they can be revisited in different ways that enhance our listening experience and how we experience the sounds of our different environments of the inside of our bodies, our brains, how we imagine a hive and how we experience the outdoors.

Charlie Morrow: Quite lovely.

Miya Misaoka: Thank you. I’m sorry, I just feel like I was talking about myself this whole interview.

Charlie Morrow: But that’s the idea; this is you. You’re leading us on a journey through your exploration, so it’s appropriate.

Miya Misaoka: Well, I want to be able to do the same for you at some point, so that we can reverse this process... But all this talking, I never thought about William Reich and the Ear Hut before, but actually, the Orgone and William Reich business was a big part of my consciousness as a teenager. So, it actually comes together for me.

Charlie Morrow: Did you build an Orgone box?

Miya Misaoka: No I didn’t. But the whole book, *Listen, Little Man!* And some of those ideas of you know, the group of my friends and my colleagues, even as a very young person, we were very much obsessed, a little bit humorously, with William Reich and these kinds of things. But I never put two and two together. So, it’s interesting.

Charlie Morrow: Have you gone up to Maine to where he was? There is apparently something of his where he lived and where he worked.

Miya Misaoka: I’ve just seen photos, photographs of the Orgone box, which just looks like a closet with a chair inside. I’ve never been there though. I brought my students to the David Tudor rainforest that’s at MoMA. David Tudor has a bunch of his instruments at Wesleyan, which I hope to see. I was able to study with him for a short while at Mills College, when he was a visiting artist. And there were just cables everywhere; there wasn’t an emphasis, on things being really pretty and clean. It was just more about the sounds and having things work and

creating this world. But at MoMA it was very interesting because there was not a cable in sight and it was very pristine. It was quite different. It was still very beautiful, but a very different aesthetic than what he did.

### **Immersive! Podcast 3: Miya Misaoka**

**composer, performer, sound artist, and director of Columbia University's sound art program, an explorer of inner and outer sound worlds.**

Interview by Charlie Morrow

Incidental sound samples used

- For Birds, Planes and Cello • Misaoka
- Metropolis Atlantis • Morrow
- The Adventures of the Solitary Bee • Misaoka
- Tiger Balm • Annea Lockwood
- While I was Walking, I Heard A Sound, Part 3 • Misaoka
- Queen Bee • Morrow
- Wind Song • Morrow
- Ritual with Giant Hissing Madagascar Cockroaches • Misaoka
- Vaginated Chairs • Misaoka

Mixed & collaged by bart plantenga, mastered by Sean McCann

Charlie Morrow: Have you ever visited his house?

Miya Misaoka: I've never, no. Have you?

Charlie Morrow: Yeah, I used to visit him there. I knew him a long time ago and he lived next door to Sari Dienes. She's a person who's been part of my life and

part of the scene for a long time and she passed on, but she was his neighbor. It was part of a settlement of artists called The Land that's up the Hudson River.

Miya Misaoka: What city is it near?

Charlie Morrow: Just north of Pomona. John Cage lived there for awhile, and various filmmakers were there, Stan Brakhage was there and the New York Early Music Ensemble, and the kids of those guys apparently are still there. But Sari Dienes left her work to Rip Hayman, who's my close friend. And there's the Sari Dienes Foundation. Rip's got a lot of her work, over in Pomona, on his property. And then there's a Gerd Stern, who set up an institute up there also in an old church. So there's echoes of the community of which Tudor was a part of. ... It's got a long history and it still exists. Tudor was there for a long time. I think he was an original artist there, or he took over Cage's spot because Cage moved to the city.

Miya Misaoka: It looks like it would be a fun trip for someone.

Charlie Morrow: Well, nice to talk and we should continue our conversation and I appreciate you being part of the Immerse project.