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**Sonic  
genius**  
Preserving  
Maryanne  
Amacher's  
legacy  
ART > 4



**Solar \$ense**  
Does it pay to buy or lease panels?  
ENVIRONMENT > 12



**Hugh  
Reynolds**  
Elliott Auerbach  
for Congress?  
COUNTY BEAT > 14

**KINGSTON**

**TIMES**

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 31, 2015

VOLUME 10; ISSUE 53

ULSTER PUBLISHING, INC.

[WWW.KINGSTONX.COM](http://WWW.KINGSTONX.COM)

ONE DOLLAR

# The Amacher archives

Preserving the work of a sound-art genius **BY LYNN WOODS**



The house on Marius Street.



Maryanne Amacher.



Amacher in her younger years.

**S**TACKED ON SHELVES IN A STORAGE ROOM at the Allways Moving & Storage facility on Grand Street is an unusual and irreplaceable trove — more than 200 cardboard boxes filled with scores, notebooks, tapes, audio mixers and other material that belonged to electroacoustic pioneer and sound installation artist Maryanne Amacher.

Amacher, who taught in Bard College's MFA program, was, prior to her passing in 2009, a leading figure in the experimental music community, with breakthrough sound installations all over the U.S., Europe, Asia and Central and South America.

She was also a local eccentric, living in a dilapi-

dated Gothic mansion on Kingston's Marius Street and riding her bicycle around in a leather aviator hat and goggles. Utterly devoted to her work and hard-pressed for money, she closed off most of the mansion in her later years. She lived in two rooms and donned a bucket as an impromptu hardhat when she used the bathroom to avoid the ceiling leaks and falling plaster. Friends helped out: some years ago, concerned about the precarious second-floor balcony, Bob Bielecki, an experimental sound designer and engineer who also teaches at Bard—he designed Laurie Anderson's instruments starting in the 1970s—recruited some Bard students to help him remove the balcony.

Despite the squalor of her digs, Amacher was no

Miss Havisham. “She was totally brilliant and loved by her MFA students,” Bielecki said. A collaborator with John Cage who had spent time as a fellow at MIT and other prestigious institutions, Amacher “was experimenting in a way that was fascinating to me and other people in the experimental music community,” said Pauline Oliveros, an electronic music pioneer, composer, and multimedia artist/performer who also lives in Kingston. Oliveros, who met Amacher in 1980 at the New Music America festival in Minneapolis and subsequently rented a room in Amacher's house for a few months, noted that Amacher “developed her own language sonically and in her scores. Ideally I would love to see a space devoted here to her archive, where scholars could come and study her work.”

Amacher lacked an heir, so the preservation of her archives has been entirely dependent on her friends. Robert The, a visual artist who had lived in Amacher's house in 1999, served as her health-care proxy after she fell and suffered a brain injury, followed by a debilitating stroke. He began drying out her mildewed papers and carefully boxing and labeling them. After her death, he transferred them to the storage facility, paying the monthly fee out of his own pocket.

Bill Dietz, a Berlin-based composer and another close friend who'd assisted Amacher on many of her European installations, has also been involved in the preservation effort. After a stint of teaching at Bard this summer, he extended his stay in Kingston to help catalog the materials. “I created an inventory of all the boxes containing the most important print materials, including 15,000 images,” he said. Seventy boxes contain her unreleased tapes of audio material, many in fragile condition; Bielecki is spearheading the digitalization of the tapes. (“She was particularly fond of recording the sounds of trains,” he noted, adding that she would change the pitch or otherwise distort the sound.)

Dietz said there's been a lot of interest in the archives, with requests coming in monthly and a publisher interested in releasing a French edition of her writings. A professor at the University of California-San Diego is writing a book about her.

## Raising funds

The and Dietz plan to raise money to pay for the tape transfers as well as the storage costs. The goal is to “get the materials out in the world in the right way,” said Dietz. “If everything is published and digitalized, then maybe these things don't have to be here and could go to an institution.” According to Bielecki, the University of Pennsylvania has expressed interest; Amacher attended the school on a full scholarship and became the disciple of Karlheinz Stockhausen, a famous European avant-garde composer (he's featured on the cover of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper* album) who was a guest professor in 1964.

Besides working with Bielecki, The and Dietz have recruited Lawrence Kumpf, artistic director of the Issue Project Room in New York City who recently co-curated an exhibition of Cecil Taylor's work at the Whitney, to help “stabilize things.” Composer/performer Richard Teitelbaum, a colleague of Bielecki's at Bard, has also been instrumental in providing support. A benefit is planned in the spring, with an auction of works donated by Amacher's friends.

“Maryanne had many visual artist friends as well as people from all fields who want to support this effort,” said The. “Many of the people she knew were younger than her and became very hot.” (One example: Sonic Youth guitarist Thurston Moore, who collaborated with Amacher in a video posted on YouTube.)

Dietz pulls out one of the six notebooks made by Amacher in the 1960s, when she was still in her twenties. Entitled “Space,” it consists of pages and pages of

brown-tinted paper inscribed with rows of notated black-outlined squares. The notations allude to “the ways in which sounds can appear in a space,” Dietz said: A non-linear process of sound making that emphasized new ways of listening.

“Some of her sounds were based on field recordings and had a spectral sonic quality,” he said. “When she would hear a specific sound that was interesting, she’d filter that sound or add electronic support to emphasize it and use the same sounds over and over again. From the mid-1970s on, she was making large-scale installations in which the placement of large speakers was crucial. Going into a big building you’d hear how the surroundings changed those sounds.”

A key component of her work was “making the listener the focus and creative participant,” added The.

### The shape of sounds

Her “architectural stagings” varied the wavelength of the sounds so that they were perceived as actual shapes; listening to a piece from 1980 from the “Music for Sound Joined Rooms” series on YouTube, the complex sounds, which drone, vibrate, chime and seem to rush toward one, like high-pitched violins bowing at hyper-speed, then recede, is a pulse-racing, out-of-body experience.

Amacher later evolved the notion of “ear tones,” or “otoacoustic emissions,” in which the ear itself creates the sound in response to her use of electroacoustic sound technologies. Bielecki said the shifts in pitch and movement of the sounds, played at very high volume, stimulate the listener’s ears to create their own sounds. It is the ear tones, rather than the sounds that produce them, that Amacher was writing for, according to Bielecki.

“Maryanne had been around some really amazing minds from the beginning — mathematicians, engineers, people like Claude Shannon, the father of the information age, and Marvin Minsky, a founding father of artificial intelligence,” said The.

Buried in the archives are many unrealized projects, including a technology she invented called “ear pearls,” which would be a kind of “sunglasses for your ears; they’d filter things out or color frequencies around you,” according to Dietz.

As some of her gigs dried up—many institutions were no longer able or willing to pay the expense of a large-scale installation set up for a month — “it was hard for her to maintain the house,” said The. “She had nothing, no tenure or insurance.” What she had was “incredible courage,” added Dietz. “On top of dealing with existential things, she was able to maintain this incredible rigorous work and keep creative.”

### Restoring a gem

Among the boxes and equipment are a few personal items, including a bottle of Chanel and a tin of her tobacco. Many of her possessions are still in the house; it had been in foreclosure and was at risk of being torn down when it was purchased by artist Dennis Connors last August. Connors plans to convert the house into a B&B, including a room devoted to Amacher’s life and art. He’s so far funded the work himself but hopes to get a grant to complete the restoration.

The house is spectacular, both for the state of its



Bill Dietz and Robert The.

decay and the still-intact chateau-like roof. Designed by Arthur Crooks, the architect of Kingston’s City Hall, it was built in 1876 on a massive limestone outcropping, a site that would have afforded spectacular views of the Catskill Mountains. According to Connors, it was converted into a senior residence in 1909. Amacher lived in a large room with French windows that had been added on at that time.

The steep slate roof, which almost doubles the height of the building and features exceptionally

large dormer windows, the turret and sliced-off corners, which give the interior a feeling of being in the round, and the Gothic board and batten siding (most of which has been removed and replaced for now with plywood, due to extensive water damage) make the house unique. Connors recently opened the house to visitors for an impromptu Christmas party; inside, amid framed lumber supports propping up the rotted beams of the ceiling, was a jumble of stuff — chairs, lamps, a file cabinet, an antique sink and gray, dust-covered Selectric typewriter and turntable.

“That should be saved — make sure water doesn’t get on it,” said Bielecki, pointing to a computer hard drive with a rusted bottom; he noted that its contents might be “priceless.” David Lee, a photographer and friend of Connors who’s involved in the renovation, said he found a letter from a MIT professor in a box in the attic that contained the decaying remains of a cat. He also found boxes of unpaid bills and letters from Amacher’s mom when Maryanne was in high school.

A few years before her death, “Maryanne got a big award, the Prix Ars Electronica award, for an installation she did in Mexico City,” said Bielecki. The piece consisted of sounds produced in a cave beneath the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan, which included Amacher rubbing against the cave walls with a Bundt pan; entitled

*Sound Characters 2: Teo!*, it was recorded on John Zorn’s Tzadik label. A review on AllMusic noted “Amacher’s music had a constant sense of darkness lurking in the background, much like the environment in which it was created. Whereas so much Western music is concerned with bringing light to the darkness of the world, in this piece, Amacher brought the darkness to the brightly lit Palace de las Bellas Artes.”

She was, Bielecki repeated, “totally brilliant.”

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