

Danielle De Picciotto & Friends in conversation - Ulrike Haage

ULRIKE HAAGE: "I WANT TO GIVE FOOD FOR THOUGHT, ENCOURAGE AND CREATE SPACE FOR IMAGINATION"

20. January 2021, Danielle de Picciotto Corona COVID-19 Danielle De Picciotto & Friends in conversation Rainbirds Reichlich Weiblich Ulrike Haage Zen Buchstaben



Ulrike Haage

I met Ulrike Haage for the first time briefly in the early 90s in the backstage of a festival in connection with the Rainbirds. At that time she already had an impressive artistic career behind her, including being a founding member of "Reichlich Weiblich" Germany's first female jazz band; a band member of Vladimir Estragon and Stein alongside F.M Einheit and diverse theater collaborations and compositions, with Einstürzende Neubauten amongst others. However, I really noticed her a few years later via her solo works and radio plays. The mixture of experimental, partly improvised piano scores, spoken word or singing by selected guests and electronic sounds brought all her skills perfectly to the point.

Ulrike is a classically trained pianist. At her concerts the interplay between concentrated perfection and playful improvisation is fascinating to experience and this fascination of opposites can be found in most of her compositions. Her delicate and elegant resonances, comparable to precious gems, unfold into universal grandeur pulling you into an open unbound space of sound. Her work is timeless and radiates a certain mystique that has been intensified by her collaborations in Russia and Japan. Her music could also be described as a kind of acoustic Zen Buddhism. Apart from her many film music compositions (for example for Dorris Dörries), a children's opera and countless audio-visual projects, Ulrike Haage composes and publishes wonderful works in such a fast, steady stream that even I as a workaholic feel dizzy experiencing her output. I am all the more delighted that she was able to take the time to have a little chat with me today.

Danielle De Picciotto: Dear Ulrike, the way I see it you are constantly working on film music, radio plays and your own albums. Has the pandemic affected your life or are you basically always in the studio anyway?

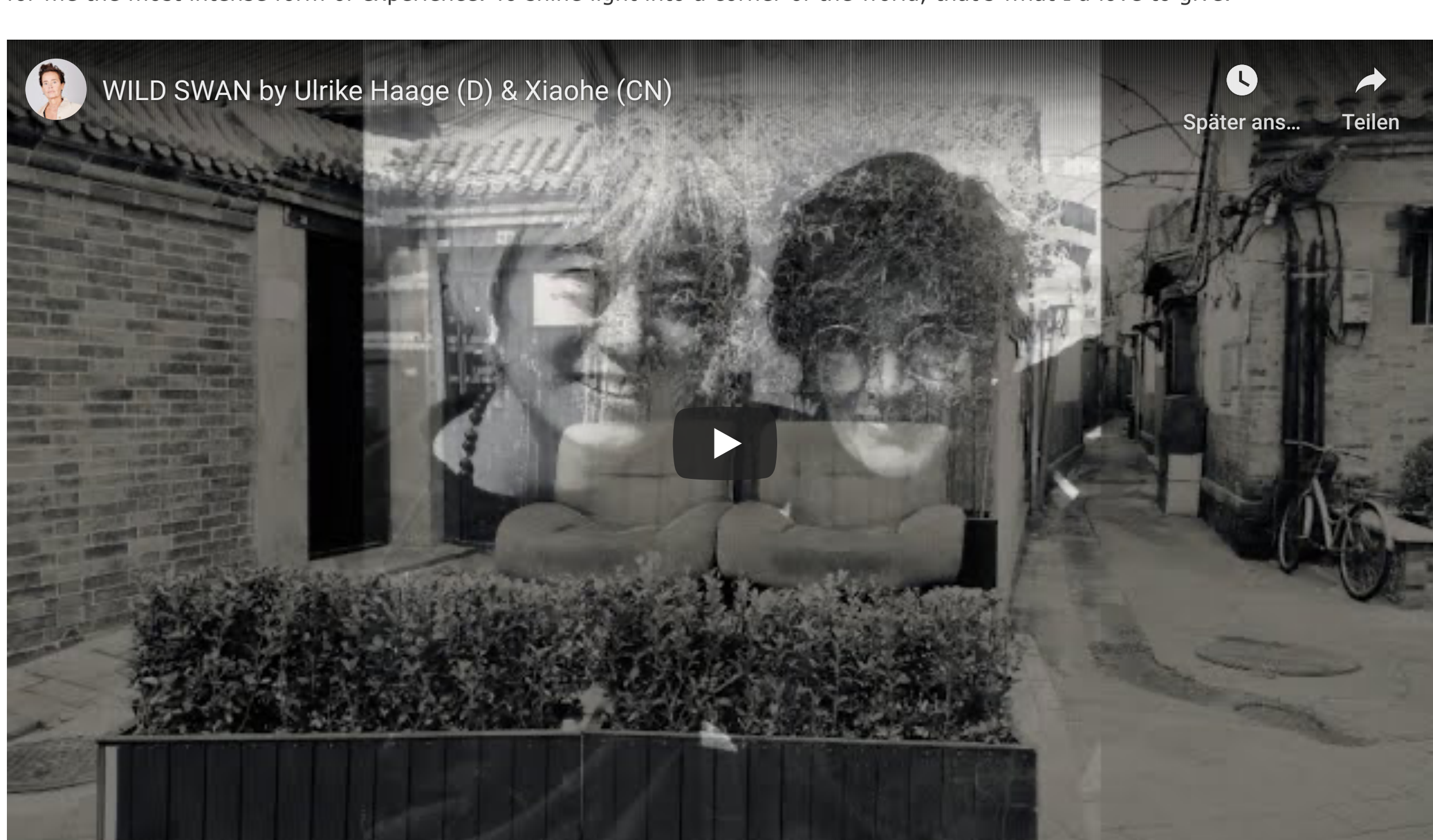
Ulrike Haage: The year 2020, in which the pandemic turned our lives upside down, was also the year of radio plays, films and books. Many people suddenly started listening to the radio again, discovering old and new films for themselves, reading more books, talking much more on the phone and taking more long-distance walks with friends than ever before. For the first time in our lives we have all come to a completely standstill. Because I've been able to work independently for a long time, in my own studio and on my piano, I was able to work with broadcasting stations with whom I had plans for 2020 or the film team with whom I was in the middle of the finale of "Berlin 1945 - Diary of a Big City", and could offer my home as a production site. So I had a surprising amount of work to do in the last year. At the same time my schedule seemed better used and stretched out. All actors* and my technical assistants were more relaxed, cautious and focused because we were all in a vacuum of not-yet-knowing, with a new time-table and style of togetherness. This led to a different awareness of every minute of our lives. The pandemic and my artistic life are inseparable because all events influence my work, sometimes more and sometimes less intensely.



How could you describe your music? What is most important to you in all the different areas?

I grew up with my parents' jazz record collection. We always had a record with the latest releases from Bill Evans, Oscar Peterson, Ella Fitzgerald, to Herbie Hancock, Miles Davis and Keith Jarrett. Later on I studied classical piano and then moved on to freely improvising circles.

My vision is to track down a memory, a memory that lies far back and is buried deeply. There are no words for it, for me there are only sounds. Topics often arise after hours of improvisation and listening to a specific sound. I like to work instrumental and I love working with classical singers. I like the duality of composition and improvisation, electronics and acoustics, different stylistic influences. In the course of time, the radio plays and the film music were added. Language and music, images and music are equally important forms of expression for me. Wherever words or film images dictate something concrete, the music opens up another emotional level and appeals to other senses. With my radio plays, in which I often focus on texts by wonderful women, I want to give food for thought, encourage and create space for imagination. To write and play music is like a constant research and for me the most intense form of experience. To shine light into a corner of the world, that's what I'd love to give.



How do you see the future of music? Do you work with labels or independently?

I've been working independently for over twenty years and have been working with a small, committed label from Hamburg for several years. The opportunity to follow my own artistic intuition and responsibility is more valuable to me than to be integrated into the system of a large label and to have supposed security and corresponding guidelines. That is why I prefer close collaborations and the personal commitment of my allies. It's a long and rocky road, but good for your feet, good for your own development and it suits me. The general question is, what do you want as an artist in this one life? There are very different views.

How do you feel about Spotify?

Streaming platforms have become extremely important today. Old and young make use of the music, in very good quality and all styles on these platforms. I don't mind, especially since CDs and records have an outsider value today. I'm still a fan of haptic products myself, but it's not profitable for most musicians. And of course with Spotify and Co. we have to fight for an equal participation, like we used to do with the record companies.

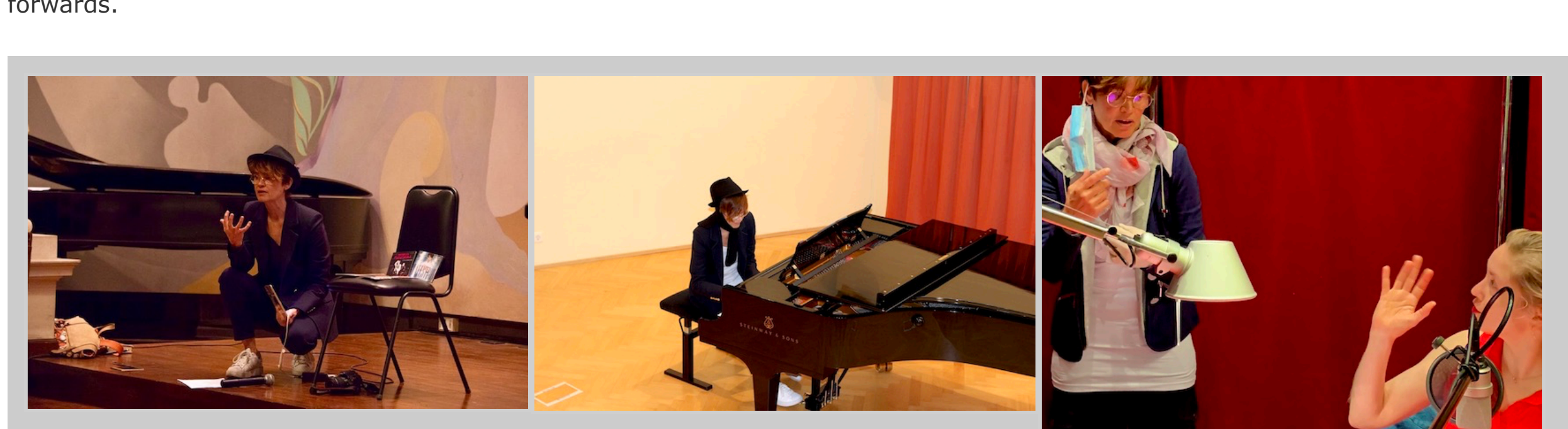
Will the pandemic change anything in the music industry?

The music industry will take advantage of every situation and also react to the pandemic just because they want to exist. Music itself, however, will always be of great importance for people regardless of everything, it has healing powers and that is why it is extremely important especially in times of deep crisis.



You have been working as a musician since 1985, and you also taught improvisation at the music college. In your opinion, what has changed significantly in the music world during this time? What has not?

I have experienced so much that it is difficult to describe it briefly. An important change is the independence of the individual artists and bands. Much has happened in terms of taking personal responsibility and the awareness of how much we can contribute to ensuring that we know about rights and injustices. The evaluation of copyrights and the exploitation of our compositions for instance. That the world is changing in this way is very positive. This applies to the music business, but also to other rules within a society. In terms of equality, historiography and social justice, there is still a long way to go in the artistic field but we are moving forwards.

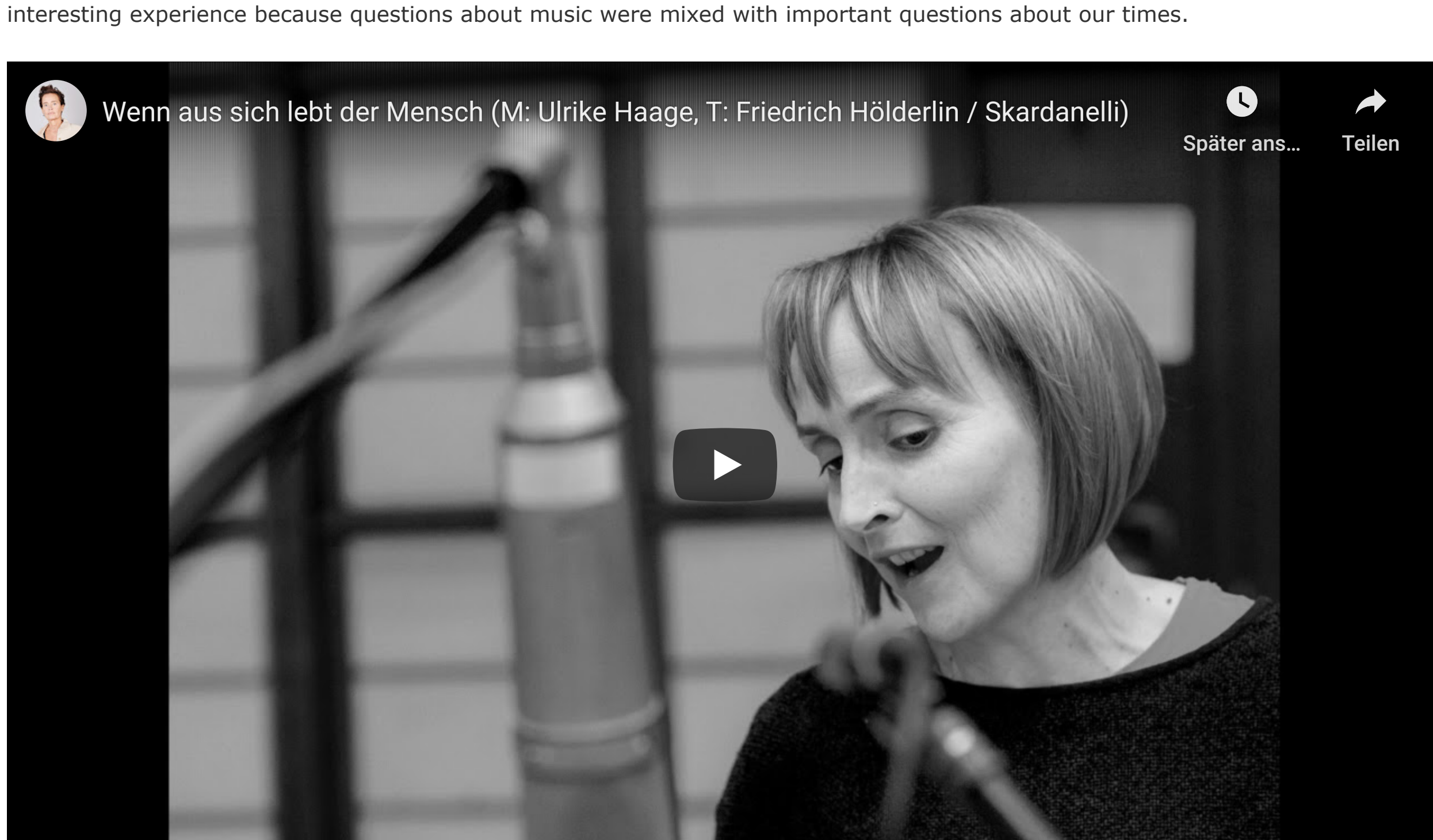


During the pandemic, culture was often described as a recreational activity. How do you feel about this term and what kind of meaning does music have for our society in your opinion?

Yes, that is really a terrible description of culture. Music, art and good craftsmanship are part of the human identity, they contribute to our well-being and reduce negative feelings such as fear or depression. But I am not surprised that culture - with a few exceptions - is still not recognized as "systemically relevant", since in many cases it rightly wants to question, reflect and give new impulses to the system. For me it is part of seeing the world as a visible but also an imaginary place, as a place that one should actively shape and not destroy - instead of imagining that we could start all over again on Mars.

What projects have you been working on this year?

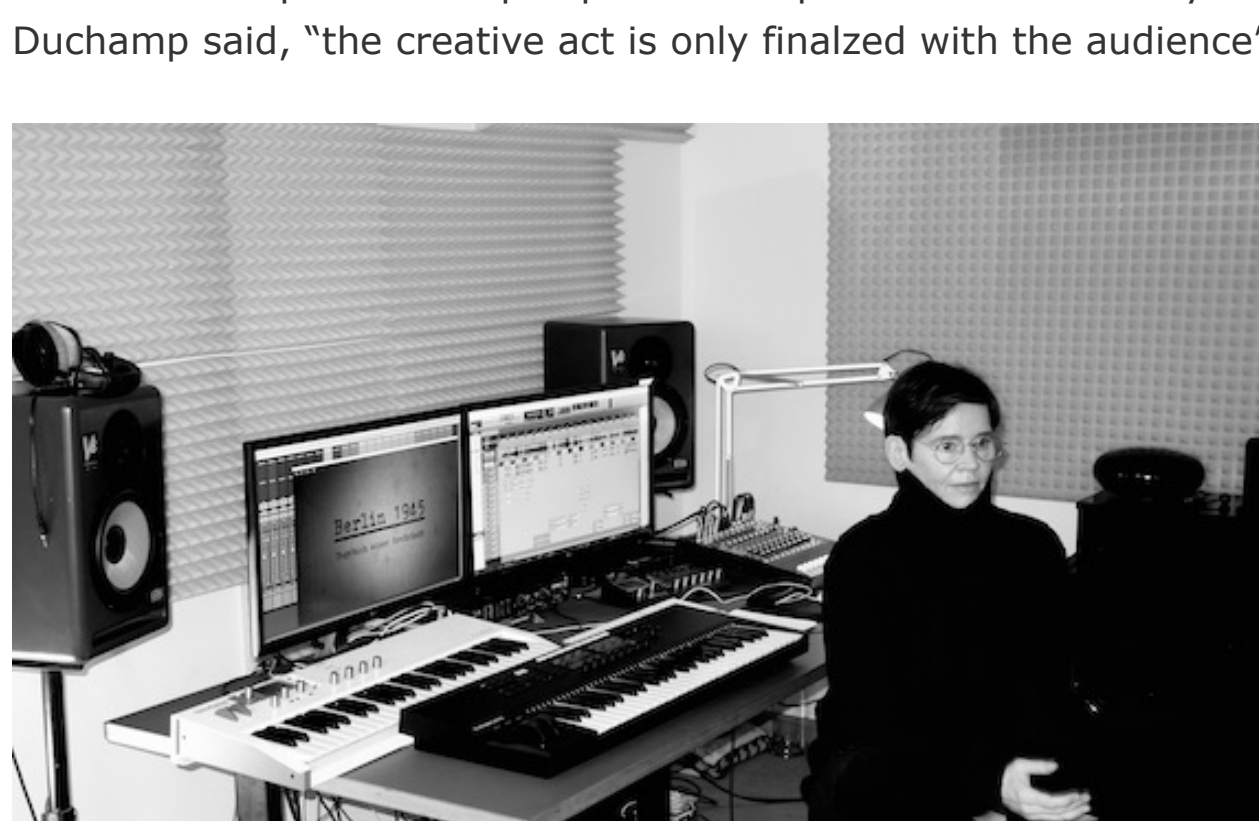
At the beginning of the year I was still absorbed in the film music for "Berlin 1945 - Diary of a Big City". Shortly before the first lockdown, we were able to play the slow poetry radio play "Sprach mein Stern. Listen to Hölderlin". We already had an inkling of what was about to happen and so the production was extremely intense, emotional and focused. In spring, during the lockdown, "Hyperbolic Bodies" was created, a dialogue fantasy between the two mathematicians Sofia Kowalskaja and Maryam Mirzakhani. It felt as if we all didn't know if this would be the last production in our fragile lives. The beautiful radio play received the audience award at the ARD radio play days in November, which only took place virtually. My new piano CD "Himmelsbaum" was also released. Unfortunately almost all of my concerts were postponed and most of my interviews took place virtually. But it was also an interesting experience because questions about music were mixed with important questions about our times.



What are your plans for 2021?

I think it won't be easy to make plans for 2021. The situation of our world, the many challenges plus the urgently needed changes, take up a very large space in everyone's life. As an artist, I've known exceptional situations, not as drastic and threatening as at the moment, but you learn to trust the flow of things. For me, two large projects that started at the end of 2020 will continue in 2021. On the one hand, I will continue to compose the music for the wonderful radio play "My ingenious girlfriend" by Elena Ferrante. It is a saga for the ears that has extended over 19 parts and has been produced with lots of devotion since autumn 2021. On the other hand, I am working on a film score that deals with the current situation and is therefore emotionally quite demanding.

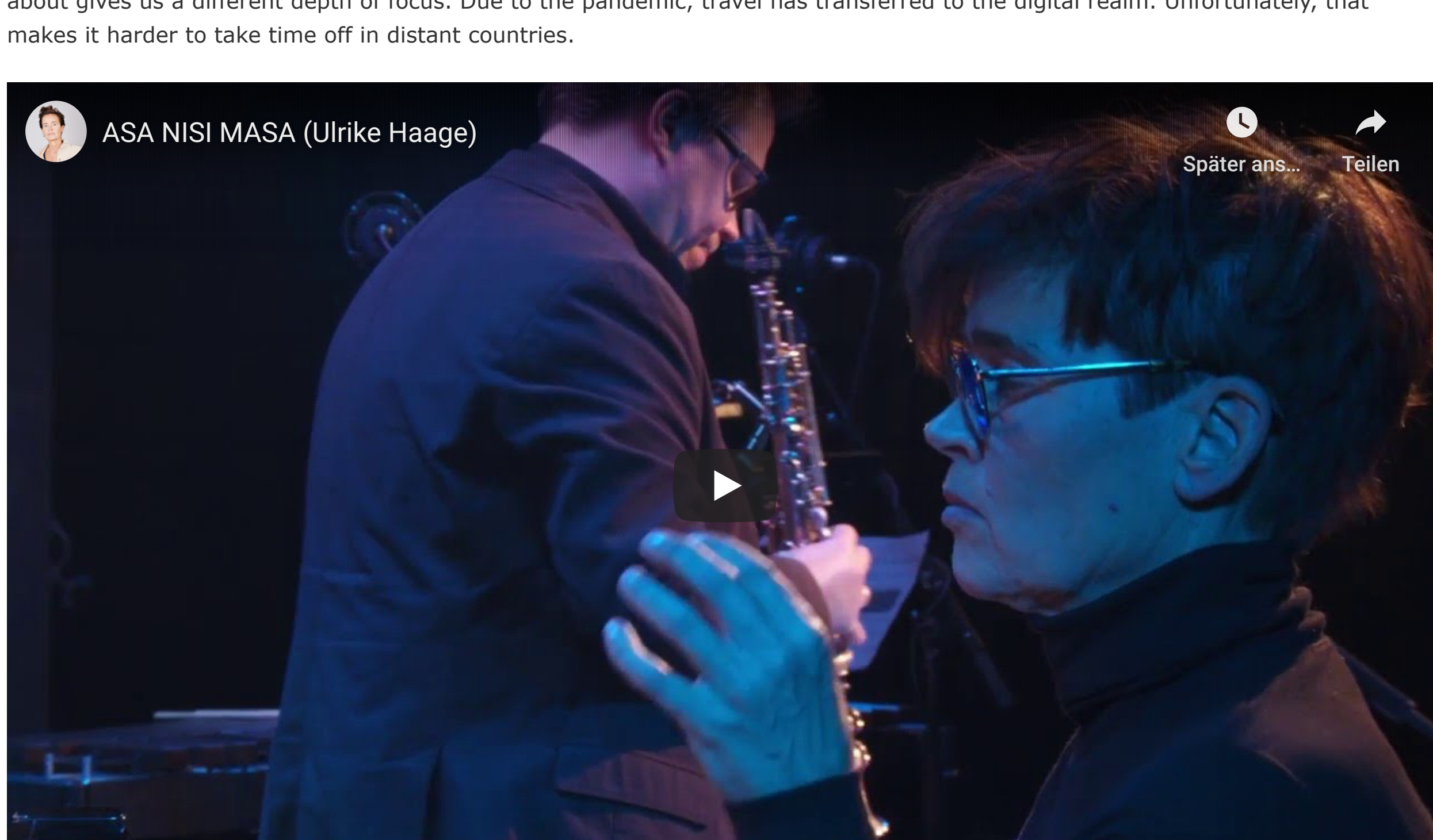
Of course I hope that the postponed solo piano concerts for my last CD "Himmelsbaum" can take place in 2021. Because, as Duchamp said, "the creative act is only finalized with the audience". I miss these moments on stage a lot.



What are your relaxation options? Or do you have no time off?

My way of relaxing or taking a break from creative work actually happens several times a day. I start the day with meditation, yoga or qigong. That gives me a moment of calm before the pace picks up. Then I really enjoy cooking, even when we're producing a radio play or music recordings in my studio. Good food is medicine and sitting and eating together is an important part of a working day. I prefer to get up earlier to prepare than to miss it. So far, traveling has been the most important relaxation and inspiration for me. Traveling as an encounter with other cultures and collecting stories. Life is a weaving, you learn so much while traveling, especially when you take the bus, train, bike or taxi and pick up stories. Some time ago I wrote the music for a three-part series for Virginia

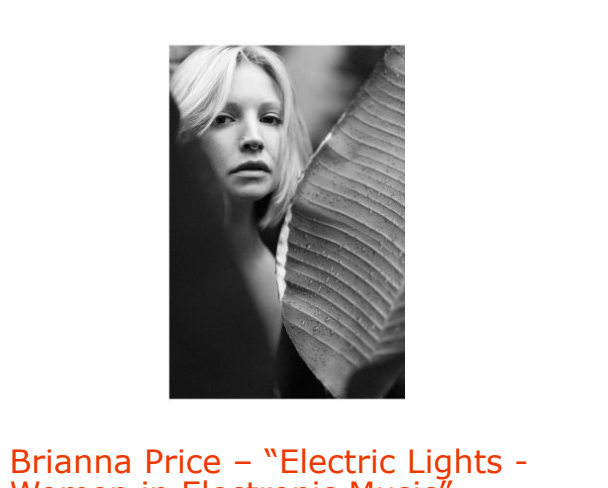
Woolf's great book "Drive to the Lighthouse". I went to the Isle of Skye for this. Woolf placed the novel there, but was never there herself. Nevertheless, I wanted to go to this place with its lighthouses to catch the mood for the music. To soak up the atmosphere exactly where the story took place. Without this trip I would not have discovered the adorable tiny dinosaur museum, the location of the Macbeth remake, or spoken to the residents about a book that is set on their island. I believe that traveling and moving about gives us a different depth of focus. Due to the pandemic, travel has transferred to the digital realm. Unfortunately, that makes it harder to take time off in distant countries.



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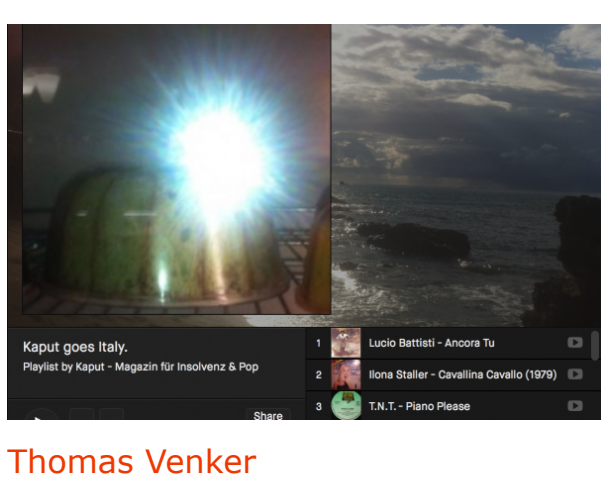
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