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TONE GLOW

035: Judith Hamann

An interview with Judith Hamann

Vanessa Ague
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Judith Hamann

Judith Hamann is a cellist and composer/performer whose interdisciplinary and immersive work explores the interconnection of sound and the body. She's spent much of her time traveling from place to place, moving where live music-making takes her, and worked on many collaborative projects with artists like her mentor, cellist Charles Curtis, and the composer Sarah Hennies. This fall, she's bringing her live performance practice to recording by releasing her first three solo albums—Peaks, Shaking Studies, and Music for Cello and Humming. Vanessa Ague talked with Hamann on September 10, 2020 to discuss how she landed in Berlin, the making of her debut records, and what it means to find home.



Photo by Martina Biagi

Vanessa Ague: Hi! I'm so glad this worked out.

Judith Hamann: Thank you for doing this!

Well, thank you for agreeing to it! It was so awesome to listen to your three albums. They're beautiful.

Oh, thank you.

Thank you! How are you doing today?

I'm good. I just went to see a sneak preview of a friend's film at the sound stage studio, but it was way out of town. It was kind of nice to go out to the forest, watch a film, and then come back.

Was it an outdoor showing?

No, it was indoors, but it was where they do sound mixing for the film. So it's just the people who work there.

I'm really glad to hear that you could go see a small film screening, because I feel like I've really missed going to movies.

This was the first time I've seen a film all year, I think. Actually, since February.

I was trying to remember this too, the last film I saw. It's possible that I saw *Uncut Gems* last, but yeah, it's been since February.

I played my first show since February, my first live show to other human beings.

That's amazing. How did it go?

Well, the thing was, I got my friend's two year old's stomach bug that apparently all the little kids have right now. So I was horrendously sick the day before. On the day of I was so tired and weak and I was like, will I be able to make it? But I did. I played the show and then I played again the next night and I was fine by then. My friend, Lucy Railton, curated these nights. They were short sets by a bunch of different people, and it was magical just to hear people performing in a space. I've been to some outdoor things, but this was just moving.

Outside feels like a totally different experience because there's distractors going on, but then when you're in the hall, you just have the resonance of the room and it's more in the moment, or at least that's what I've noticed. So that's really cool that you got to have that experience right now.

I know, I couldn't believe it. But people have been doing crazy, beautiful stuff here. I mean, I accidentally moved to Berlin because of the pandemic.

Really?

Yeah!

One of the questions I was going to ask you was how did you land on Berlin? Because you've been all over the world!

Well, I haven't lived anywhere for a couple of years actually, and I was going to continue with that plan, but I got locked down in Finland for three months on an island. So that was where I spent the first three months of the pandemic, which was kind of incredible in its own way. I was really lucky that I had somewhere to stay and that I had somewhere to work, and I was on this island so I could go for walks. Compared to so many other people I was very lucky, but also, I have never spent three months without being with another person at all.

Yeah. I was here in New York, and it was crazy because I realized at the end of May that I hadn't hugged anybody in four months. Isn't that wild? How did we do it?

And then it's like, am I okay? Like, is this okay? I don't know how I did it. But I also think there was so much stress and fear in that moment that I wasn't as worried about human connection. I just hoped everyone was okay. But it's so wild to think about because human connection is such a natural part of life.

How isolated is this Island?

You have to catch a boat to Helsinki and the boat takes like 20 minutes. Everything was shut down and everyone was being pretty strict and observing isolation and lockdown. There was a small market on the Island, but that was it. You would occasionally see someone at a distance, maybe if you were going for a walk, and you would wave.

I hadn't been living anywhere, and was going from project to project. I was meant to go to Australia in June for a few months. My other "home" is in Southern California because I lived there for a long time. I still have a visa for the US but I couldn't go to either of those places. And so basically I could become an island troll lady and just get a tent and a sleeping bag—they have these every man's land rules in Finland, so it's not like property in that sense—and wander around and sleep anywhere and no one's going to make me leave. Or I could go to Berlin. Those were my only two options.

I decided to come here and now I accidentally live here. I'm really lucky that I'm an Australian citizen and I could get some emergency COVID funding support to keep me afloat while I decide whether to retrain as a locksmith. I've been jokingly serious about retraining as one for a while. Maybe the time is ripe to really go for it and become a schlusseldienst in Germany.

I didn't even know that you could train as a locksmith. How did you find this?

I was just thinking about a trade that's essential. I don't drive, so I can't become a plumber or an electrician or something. And then I was like, what's a littler trade, where you don't need a van necessarily? And I was like, locksmiths.

That is the perfect solution.

I mean, people are going to have doors for the foreseeable future. They're gonna leave the keys inside or lose their keys. Even when the system is electronic, someone still has to fix them if they get broken. I also have problems with doors, generally, and this would help me overcome my door fear, which I think is just from touring a lot and not being able to use keys. There's been some incidents.

What kind of incidents? Have you lost your instrument or not been able to get in where you needed to go?

There was one time that I was staying at a friend's sister-in-law's brother's place in Brussels. He was a very nice architect. I went out for a coffee before I had to get my train, and then when I came back, I couldn't open the door. I tried for half an hour and then I even got a neighbor to help me try to open the door and he couldn't either. So I had to call this architect and he had to come home from work. And then he got there. And he just took the key and opened the door. Anyway, things like that happen.



Photo by Tomas Sundblad

I can imagine. So you mentioned that you spent a lot of time in Southern California and I'm assuming that was for your DMA, right?

Yes.

How was that? Did you like California?

I hated it at first. And then by the time I left, I was so, so sad to leave. It really got to me in the end.

Why?

It's partially to do with human beings. The first year I was there, I was in North County San Diego, which is one of the most expensive pieces of coastline in the United States. I didn't adjust very well to that. And then I moved to South San

Diego and I was just very fortunate. I stumbled into a community that really did not have to welcome me, in Barrio Logan, which is the historic Chicano arts district of San Diego. I don't think I've ever felt such a sense of belonging and love in a neighborhood in my life and I'm not sure if I ever will again. Once I moved down there and I started connecting with the broader San Diego music and arts community, things just really changed. I was just so smitten and now I miss it. I miss the light. I miss the way the air changes in the evening when the Marine layer rolls in. I always feel a sense of weird relief when I go back there.

What led you to get your DMA there?

There's this Morton Feldman piece that is almost a weird life trajectory thread. Someone gave me the CD of *Patterns in a Chromatic Field* when I was in my early twenties, and that was how I first heard about the cellist Charles Curtis. I ended up doing a concert at UC San Diego with a friend of mine from Australia for one of her programs, and I worked with Charles and we hung out quite a bit while I was visiting. And then, he was like, you should really, probably come here. I really wasn't sure if I wanted to go back to studying, but he convinced me in the end and I'm so glad that he did. The work that we've done together, in a very beautiful slow, methodical way, has been really amazing and a very deep learning process. I love that Charles and I still work together and I love that we have that relationship.

You have this whole experience with all of these collaborative works and now you're releasing your debut solo albums. How does that feel?

I feel a little bit better about it now. I was really anxious about doing this. I've been recording shy for a really long time, and I think it's partly a tension because I've been doing this work for a long time. I also really love records and listening to records. But, for a long time, every time I attempted to try to make a recorded document that felt like a satisfying record—that also captured a practice that's alive and changing—it never felt right. So I've been chipping away at trying to figure out how to do this for a really long time.

Everything was not necessarily meant to happen at once. That's a little bit of a COVID interference in timelines. But, Lawrence from Blank Forms approached me a while ago about it perhaps being time to try to do something. And anyone who knows me knows that I'm really great with a deadline and I'm not so good without them, generally. So I think I actually needed the nudge.

Those records are Frankensteined together from many different attempts in different places. It's so hard to make work when you don't live anywhere. But also I am very lucky and I have incredible and very supportive friends. I have a friend in England who was just like, it's ridiculous that you don't have any solo work documented, and next time you're here, I'm just going to book a studio, and then you can do whatever you want with it. I've been living with and thinking about this material and playing it once or twice a week probably for a couple of years. The *Shaking* stuff in particular is mostly what I've been playing solo live. So it's work that's grown and evolved over a hundred odd performances, I guess. The *Humming* thing is my repertoire—Sarah Hennies's piece, notated music, which she wrote me and I learned and performed.

How did you bring that live atmosphere that means so much to you to the albums?

The one where that mattered most to me was *Shaking Studies*, because that is the one that only really exists as a live performance work. The Black Truffle record, *Peaks*, was the first thing that I made that was just to be a record. And then *Humming* is in between because the works were framed as pieces. It made it feel a little bit different. I finished that record in March on my island in Finland.

I am not a recording engineer. I can record things, but I was on an island with a really mediocre audio interface and two microphones and that's it. A really good friend of mine had died and my life was canceled and it was really crazy. I was making this music for no one, in a way, or just for myself. But then, I actually played one of those pieces live last week for the first time. And it was so strange. It was a reverse process.

How did it feel doing it in this reverse way?

It felt strange and I felt nervous about performing it. I call all of these things studies because I really don't think of myself as a composer with a capital C. I think they are studies in that they're studying something or researching something, and studies aren't meant to be finished pieces either. They're about building some relationship or facility. It's a navigation between the interface of the body of the instrument and the body of the performer.

I'd never done it in this way where it was like, I'm just gonna sit in this giant concrete box on this island in Finland with no idea what's going to happen to any of this. I remember when they first started saying that there won't be normal concerts for like two years, at least. And I was just like, what am I doing? At the time, I had zero perspective about any of the work that I made. But, somehow, I think they were the right thing. It worked out.

Not having that perspective, I can imagine, is really difficult for improvised music, but how did you end up making it happen on your own without an audience?

I was definitely imagining, not an audience, but I could hear my friends on my shoulder. I have particular friends who I know so well, and we've worked together so much for so long and they're so in my brain, it's like, even if they're not there, I know how they would react. They were like the angel and the devil. And then sometimes I just had to be like, okay, well, you just can't think about what this person would say right now because you're just gonna psych yourself out. I don't know, I was in a very strange place during that.

The Black Truffle record, I also made at an artist residency. I guess this proves the point that I can't make anything when I don't live anywhere, but if someone gives me a place to stay for a couple of weeks, I can record. It's been strange that this one is out in the world because when I made it, I never imagined that anyone would want to listen to it. It was, again, a study for me, but it was a study in like, can I put something together in this way? Like, if I was going to make an ambient concrete record, how would I even do that? And especially

because I was in an artist residency in a small town in Austria looking over a male, high security prison and all I had was a cello and the recordings on my phone and an upright piano. So working with this limited palette of things that I had, I was like, should I try it? Because I wasn't making it for anyone else, I felt like I could ride the edge of cliché or sweetness in a way that I don't think I would have if I had been self conscious about it.

With that particular record, I was missing home life at the time. It took me a while to even notice that all the recordings had sorted themselves out geographically, so that one side was all Mexico and California and one side was all Europe. There was a lot of nostalgia and homesickness and it sorted itself that way, intuitively.

Do you purposely seek out remote artist residencies or does that just happen?

After a little while of never having my own personal space or being able to do any work, it became clear that artist residencies were going to be essential for my sanity to break up the using-my-dresses-as-a-pillow time. Although, I'm just going to say, I made a vow at the end of 2018 that I'm never going to do that again, and so far, knock on wood, it has not happened. Not living somewhere and doing concerts all the time is very varied because sometimes you'll be doing something really fancy, like you'll be doing an LA Philharmonic organized thing and you'll be at a terrifyingly fancy hotel. And then other times, you'll be curled up in a ball shivering at 4am in your coat, wondering what you've done with your life. So the whole gamut of things happens.

I realized after a little while that the only way I'm going to emotionally and physically survive this and be able to occasionally do some actual creative work, which requires living space and time alone, was through artist residencies. So I just applied for so many of them and every now and then I manage enough structural luck to get them and then I go. It became my solution to my lack of housing. But now, with this place in Berlin, a lot of the time I walk into the kitchen and it doesn't really feel real. It feels like I'm at a residency. I preserved some lemons, I made some mushroom ketchup, things that take time that you

only get to do when you live somewhere. It's slowly starting to feel a little bit more like maybe for a while, this is the thing, but I've been in this state of housing insecurity tension for such a long time that I haven't quite fully relaxed yet.



Photo by Tim Grey

Well, it's only been two months and it's a total change. Do you think that you're going to stay doing this for a while or like the second the touring becomes possible again? Or are you going to go back out?

I don't think that touring will ever be how it was and I'm also not sure that it should be. I mean, even the last little while I was really trying to only do an international flight a couple of times a year because ecologically, international long-haul travel is awful. I was trying to figure out how to tour with less flying and more land travel instead. But, now that I've stopped, I look back on that time and I'm like, how did I even do that? How did I survive? How could I be

that sleep deprived and exhausted? But, I miss playing shows and I miss my friends and people that I love. What if I don't get to go to Southern California or Mexico city or Australia for another year? It's not the same, and I miss people.

Yeah, totally. It's so hard right now to remain connected with people and to all be in one place. I totally understand that it's really different.

Yeah. And I know that I'm really not in a position to complain. I was in Finland and now I'm in Germany, of all the places someone who doesn't live anywhere and travels could have gotten stuck in these times. I believe my good fortune. It could have been a really bad situation for me and instead, it worked out that I'm in a relatively safe place with lots of people that I love.

There's this place 10 minutes from my house that has been doing shows across the Spree. They set up speakers and people play on one side of the river and then people listen on the other side. The way the sound bounces off the old buildings and water is beautiful, and there's a natural amphitheater built into the park on the other side. It's perfect. I've been going to a lot of those shows.

That's amazing that you ended up so close to something so nice.

I know! I'm going to go out and play a [Horațiu] Rădulescu piece with Alpine horns there.

That's amazing!

This is what I mean, I got really lucky.

Purchase *Peaks*, *Shaking Studies*, and *Music for Cello and Humming* at Bandcamp.

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