

Curatorial > PROBES

In this section, RWM continues its line of programmes devoted to exploring the complex map of sound art from different points of view, organised into curatorial series.

Curated by Chris Cutler, **PROBES** takes Marshall McLuhan's conceptual contrapositions as a starting point to analyse and expose the search for a new sonic language made urgent after the collapse of tonality in the twentieth century. The series looks at the many probes and experiments that were launched in the last century in search of new musical resources, and a new aesthetic; for ways to make music adequate to a world transformed by disorientating technologies.

Curated by Chris Cutler

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At the start of the seventies, Chris Cutler co-founded The Ottawa Music Company – a 22-piece Rock composer's orchestra – before joining British experimental group Henry Cow, with whom he toured, recorded and worked in dance and theatre projects for the next eight years. Subsequently he co-founded a series of mixed national groups: Art Bears, News from Babel, Cassiber, The (ec) Nudes, p53 and The Science Group, and was a permanent member of American bands Pere Ubu, Hail and The Wooden Birds. Outside a succession of special projects for stage, theatre, film and radio he still works consistently in successive projects with Fred Frith, Zeena Parkins, Jon Rose, Tim Hodgkinson, David Thomas, Peter Blegvad, Daan Vandewalle, Ikue Mori, Lotte Anker, Stevan Tickmayer, Annie Gosfield and spectralists Iancu Dumitrescu and Ana Maria Avram. He is a permanent member of The Bad Boys (Cage, Stockhausen, Fluxus &c.) The Artaud Beats and The Artbears Songbook, and turns up with the usual suspects in all the usual improvising contexts. As a soloist he has toured the world with his extended, electrified, kit.

Adjacent projects include commissioned works for radio, various live movie soundtracks, *Signe de Trois* for surround-sound projection, the daily year-long soundscape series *Out of the Blue Radio* for Resonance FM, and p53 for Orchestra and Soloists.

He also founded and runs the independent label ReR Megacorp and the art distribution service Gallery and Academic and is author of the theoretical collection *File Under Popular* – as well as of numerous articles and papers published in 16 languages. www.ccutler.com/ccutler

PROBES #11

In the late nineteenth century two facts conspired to change the face of music: the collapse of common-practice tonality (which overturned the certainties underpinning the world of art music), and the invention of a revolutionary new form of memory, sound recording (which redefined and greatly empowered the world of popular music). A tidal wave of probes and experiments into new musical resources and new organisational practices ploughed through both disciplines, bringing parts of each onto shared terrain before rolling on to underpin a new aesthetics able to follow sound and its manipulations beyond the narrow confines of 'music'. This series tries analytically to trace and explain these developments, and to show how, and why, both musical and post-musical genres take the forms they do. **PROBES #11** goes oral: everything your mother wouldn't tell you about what people can do with their mouths, and a little bit of spit.

01. Transcript. Studio version

[Gregorio Paniagua, 'Anakrousis', 1978]

The way that new voices – and new ways with voices – have evolved has been inextricably bound into the myriad probes launched into the new medium of recording – in particular, at its outer fringes, by the medium's vanguard genres – by which I mean musique concrète, tape and electronic music. These disciplines – and especially their primary instrument, the studio – had functioned prominently in the sixties as initiating contexts and experimental workshops for the generation of new and unfamiliar sounds. Perhaps more importantly, they also fostered and encouraged direct composer/performer collaborations, overturning the conventional hierarchy that had, until then, routinely privileged composition over performance.

Here's an extract from 'Visage', made in 1961 in just this collaborative way, by the Italian composer Luciano Berio and his then wife American soprano Cathy Berberian.

[Luciano Berio and Cathy Berberian, 'Visage', 1961]

And here's an earlier extract from Berio and Berberian's enormously influential, 'Thema' – essentially an extended reading of the Sirens chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and almost certainly the first electroacoustic composition to be made solely from a single voice. This dates back to 1958 – two years after Elvis Presley's made 'Hound Dog'.

In passing, it's interesting to compare Berberian's reading of Joyce with Hart's interpretation of Eliot that we heard in the last programme.

[Luciano Berio, 'Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)' (excerpt), 1959 (voice: Cathy Berberian)]

It was with 'Thema' behind them that Berio and Berberian saw their way to 'Visage' – taking the voice across the borders of both text and song into an Artaudian world of raw emotion, tears, hysteria and artifice – although considerably leavened, in their case, by the inclusion also of inconsequential chatter, unconscious intimacies and non-mimetic noise. Although, in the manner of the time, 'Visage' was credited solely to her husband, it's clear that the work took its life from Berberian's initial improvisations. We know that nothing was pre-composed and that Berio assembled the finished work empirically, using only Berberian's library of recordings and his ears. What's important to say is that it was the studio environment that underwrote this collaborative method: that turned process into material and then material into form. 'Visage' was also the product of a combination of two unusual attitudes: Berberian's acceptance, as a trained classical singer, of the frail, unmusical, messy and pre-verbally emotional dimensions of her voice, and Berio's profound compositional grasp of the aesthetic legitimacy of such 'unmusical' material.



[Cathy Berberian]

Here's one of Berberian's own compositions, 'Stripsody' – a score assembled from text fragments, onomatopoeiae and captions snipped from strip cartoons.

[Cathy Berberian, 'Stripsody' (excerpt), 1966]

And while we have one foot in the theatre, here's the incomparable Shelley Hirsch, with her complex roots in psychology, Hollywood, glossolalia, song and mimetics.

[Shelley Hirsch, 'Radio by Three' (excerpt), 1998, with Lutz Glandien and Chris Cutler]

Unsurprisingly, it was improvising singers who most deeply probed the possibilities of the human voice: a matter of instrument, know thyself. Their probes, however, were launched from very different bases.

From the free improvising community, this is the Welsh singer Phil Minton.

[Phil Minton, 'No Doughnuts in Hand' (excerpts), 2008]

And from the world of jazz, the fearless Linda Sharrock, heard here with her guitarist husband Sonny on tour in France, in 1970.

[Sonny and Linda Sharrock, 'Soon' (excerpt), 1970]

From the same decade but the world of rock, here's Demetrio Stratos, singer of the Italian group Area.

[Demetrio Stratos, 'Flautofonie' (excerpt), 1978]

And from the exotic mainstream of fifties bachelor pad hi-fi, this is the Peruvian diva Yma Sumac.

[Yma Sumac, 'Chuncho (The Forest Creatures)' (excerpt), 1953]

And finally, thirty years later – and launched from a base somewhere on the border between opera and performance art – this is Yma Sumac's darker shadow, the American singer Diamanda Galas.

[Diamanda Galas, 'This is the Law of the Plague' (excerpt), 1991]

Now I'd like to backtrack a little and follow the poets. After all, it was the futurist poets who had first aggressively drawn the voice out into the semantic void, moving poetry off the page and onto the stage; away from language and into a world of noise and onomatopoeia. First amongst equals in that generation was the author Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Here's one of his most famous poems 'Zang Tumb Tumb', written between 1912 and 1914.

[Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, 'Zang Tumb Tumb' (excerpt), 1912-14, unattributed reconstruction]

In the same year, 1912, the Russian Cubo-Futurist Aleksei Kruchenykh invented Zaum – a transrational aboriginal language that abandoned semantic meaning altogether in search of a more universal form of speech rooted in sound. Here's 'Dyr Bul Shchyl', his first Zaum poem, from 1912.

[Aleksei Kruchenykh, 'Dyr Bul Shchyl', 1912. Reconstruction by Ernest Peshkov and Miguel Molina, Audio Lab of UPV dept of. Sculpture, Valencia, 2006]

Four years later, in Zurich, the Dadaists – less mystical, and far less earnest – evolved their own form of sound poetry which was principally a confection of nonsense and quasi-musical patterning – although, like the other avant-garde sound poetries, it remained rooted in the act of writing. The following probe – into the choral chaos of simultaneous poetry – was launched by the Romanian poet Tristan Tzara in 1916. Credited jointly to him, Marcel Janco (another Romanian) and Richard Huelsenbeck, this is a reconstruction by the Italian trio Exvoco of 'The Admiral Seeks a House to Rent', originally performed at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916.



[Henri Chopin]

[Tzara, Janco, Huelsenbeck, 'L'amiral Cherche Une Maison à Louer' (excerpts), 1916. Reconstruction by the Italian trio Exvoco, in 1993]

The following probe, by the Austrian composer Ernst Toch, was launched from a musical, rather than literary, base, but it came to a similar aesthetic conclusion. This is the Geographical Fugue, written in 1930, in which various geographical locations are ordered according to their rhythms, leaving pitches completely undetermined.

[Ernst Toch, 'Geographical Fugue' (excerpt), 1930]

By now – it's the early thirties – the classical avant-gardes were all in decline or retreat. The Surrealists, who superseded them, had little interest in music. Their would-be leader, André Breton, was mesmerised by the written word and despised musicians.

It was not until after the Second World War that the poetic strand of extended voice techniques was picked up again, this time with impressive vigour – especially in France where, in 1945, yet another Romanian, Isidore Isou founded the Lettriste movement. Amongst other things, the Lettristes proposed a poetry wholly devoid of semantic content – and to that end set about assembling a sonic alphabet of about 130 vocal gestures, including inhalation, expiration, groans, sobs and so on – much in the same way that Luigi Russolo had drawn up his catalogue of noises thirty years earlier. By 1953, François Dufrêne had broken away from the main body to found the Ultra Lettrists, and at the same time started to give recitals of his abstract sound compositions – which he called Crirhythmes.

At more or less the same time, the poet Henri Chopin stepped outside both language and music. Like the crooners of the twenties, he discovered a new role for his voice through a close engagement with microphones and the intimate process of recording. Not in the formal institutional way that had supported the pioneering electronic and concrete composers, but at home, alone, experimenting with the first generation of domestic tape recorders. It was in the technology itself that he discovered the means of extending the range and timbre of his voice, marrying the intimacy of the microphone – with its ability to amplify tiny sounds – with the technical frailties of the medium and its ambiguities: he overdrove the tape, he impeded its progress over the heads, he built up sound in semi-transparent layers by covering the erase heads with matchsticks... The result was what he called a poésie sonore – as opposed, he said, to a poésie phonétique.

And here we also see – in anticipation of Marshall McLuhan's analytical theories – a clear shift from written to aural modality.

This is Henri Chopin's 'La Fusée Interplanétaire', made in 1963.

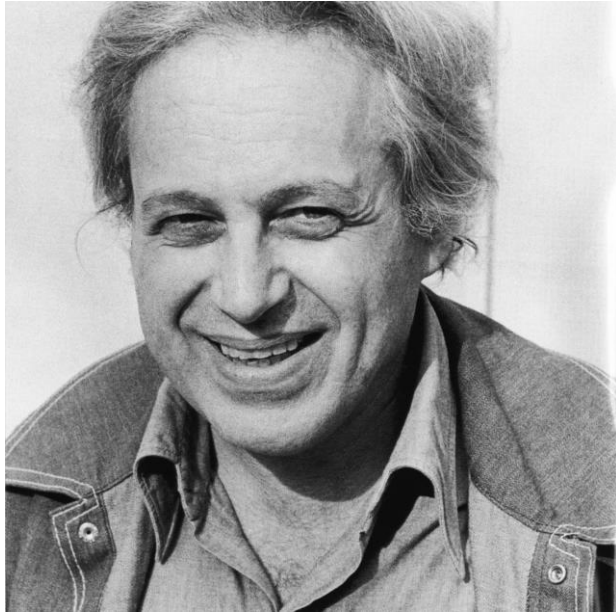
[Henri Chopin, 'La Fusée Interplanétaire' (excerpt), 1963]

In the following year, Chopin launched the now legendary audio-visual publication *OU* – a text-sound journal that attracted and published voice experiments from a variety of semi-autonomous sources: surviving Dadaists, Lettristes, Nouveau Réalistes, Beat Poets, Swedish Sound-Text poets, and a string of other more solitary innovators, all primarily united in their symbiotic entanglement with microphones, amplification and the process of recording. Here are just two examples. First, François Dufrêne's 'Dédié à Henri Chopin' crirhythm, published in *OU* in 1967.

[François Dufrêne, 'Dédié à Henri Chopin', 1967]

And from a very different base, this next extract comes from the pioneering Swedish community of Text-Sound poets. A fairly close group, they worked, like Berio and Stockhausen, predominantly in national radio studios. They are poets you might find hard to distinguish from musicians or composers, so entwined have the various strands become. But all the sounds are still vocal sounds. This extract is from Bengt Emil Johnson's 1970 poem: 'Bland'.

[Bengt Emil Johnson, 'Bland' (excerpt), 1970]



[György Ligeti]

I plan to look at tape work and amplification more closely in a later programme, but I think it's clear for now how the work of these poets played into a general re-conception of the way the voice could be used as a primary compositional tool – sidestepping the usual intermediaries of writing, text, interpretation and formal compositional skill.

Of course, these were individual pursuits. Choral music and probes into voices deployed en masse still remained, for the most part, in the hands of trained composers although, by this time, many of them were increasingly torn between the traditional approach of treating the voice as a pitched instrument, and more speculative probes into the less musical or more chaotic aspects of voices as textured masses, crowds or swarms.

Again. I'll just have to give a bare minimum of examples. Starting in 1965 with this extract from Luciano Berio's 'Laborintus II'.

[Luciano Berio, 'Laborintus II' (excerpts), 1965]

The next year saw the premiere of György Ligeti's 'Lux Aeterna' for 16 acapella voices. Although there is still a text here, it's in Latin and hardly comprehensible. Musically, it's a skein of micropolyphony and clusters in which the traditional pillars of rhythm, harmony and melody are completely sidelined in favour of modulating timbres.

[György Ligeti, 'Lux Aeterna' (excerpt), 1966]

In the following year again, 1967, Xenakis premiered 'Nuits', his first work for acapella voices. There is no text, as such, the choir is just given phonemes derived from Sumerian, Assyrian, Achaean and other ancient languages to sing.

[Iannis Xenakis, 'Nuits' (excerpts), 1967]

Another year later, in 1968, sees the first performance of Karlheinz Stockhausen's 'Stimmung', in Paris – we heard some of it in PROBES #2. Like Berio, Stockhausen had begun actively investigating the possibilities of voices in his early electronic and concrete works – most effectively in the extraordinary 'Gesang der Jünglinge' – a composition that was immediately accepted as the key work of reconciliation between the feuding French and German disciplines. Over the next 45 years he returned repeatedly to the human voice, and it would be impossible to do justice to the variety of his vocal compositions in a single programme. So, here's just a handful of extracts, taken more or less at random from a catalogue of over 47 different works.

First from 'Invisible Choir', written in 1979, part of *Saturday*, from his 7-day opera *Licht*.

[Karlheinz Stockhausen, 'Unsichtbare Chöre' (excerpt), 1979]

And this, from 'Lucifer's Farewell', part of *Thursday*, written in 1982.

[Karlheinz Stockhausen, 'Luzifers Abschied' (excerpt), 1982]

Written at the millennium 'Angel Processions', part of *Sunday*.

[Karlheinz Stockhausen, 'Engel-Prozessionen' (excerpt), 2000]

And for solo voice, this is an extract from 'Spiral', which brings us back to 1968 when it was premiered.

[Karlheinz Stockhausen, 'Spiral' (excerpt) 1968, for voice and shortwave radio (voice: Michael Vetter)]

In 1969, the British composer Cornelius Cardew launched *The Great Learning* – a series of instruction pieces intended to be performed by untrained as well as trained participants. This piece, for massed voices, is taken from 'Paragraph 7'.

[Cornelius Cardew, 'Paragraph 7' of *The Great Learning* (excerpt), 1969]



[Isidore Isou]

And here's another British composer, Trevor Wishart. A singer himself who has worked with voices since the early seventies – mostly in the extended world of electronics. This extract is from 'Vox IV', a vocal quartet written in 1987.

[Trevor Wishart, 'Vox IV' (excerpt), 1987]

I'll close with a popular choral group who, in this introduction to a fairly conventional song, employ a series of unorthodox techniques to establish atmosphere. The method is stochastic – territory usually associated with Xenakis – and is applied to impressive effect. This is the Slovenian choir Perpetuum Jazzile, literally singing up a storm.

[Perpetuum Jazzile, 'Unknown title' (excerpt), date unknown]

In the next programme, we will be looking at the importation of ancient and exotic instruments.

02. Notes

On length and edits.

The purpose of these programmes is to give some practical impression of the probes we discuss. This necessitates for the most part extracting short stretches of music from longer wholes, which, of course, compromises the integrity and disrupts the context inherent in the original works. I have also, on occasion, edited different sections of a longer work together, better to illustrate the points under discussion. So the examples played in the programmes should not be confused with the works themselves. Wherever the word (excerpt) appears after a title in the programme transcript, this indicates that what follows is an illustration, not a composition as it was conceived or intended. If something catches your ear, please do go back to the source.

Notification

If you want to be notified when a new probe goes up, please mail rermegacorp@dial.pipex.com with subject: Probe Me.

03. Related links

Cathy Berberian
cathyberberian.com/

Luciano Berio
www.lucianoberio.org/en

Shelley Hirsch
www.shelleyhirsch.com/shelley/

Phil Minton
www.philminton.co.uk/

Sonny Sharrock
www.sonnysharrock.com/info.asp?pgs=wkcrinterview2

Demetrio Stratos
<http://www.demetriostratos.org/>

YMA Sumac
www.yma-sumac.com/

Diamanda Galas
diamandagalas.com/

Italian Futurism
www.italianfuturism.org/



[Trevor Wishart]

From Zaum: The Transrational Poetry of Russian Futurism
www.thing.net/~grist/l&d/kruch/lkrucht1.htm

Isidore Isou
www.rolandsabatier.com/O/isou.html

Lettriste pages
www.thing.net/~grist/l&d/lettrist/lettrist.htm

Henri Chopin
www.hundertmark-gallery.com/artist-henri-chopin.0.html

François Dufrêne
www.dufrene.net/

Gyorgy Ligeti
www.gyorgy-ligeti.com/

Iannis Xenakis
www.iannis-xenakis.org/

Karlheinz Stockhausen
www.karlheinzstockhausen.org/

'Teatrise: an animated analysis'
<http://www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu/picturesofmusic/pages/anim.html>

Trevor Wishart
www.trevorwishart.co.uk/

04. Acknowledgments

Thanks to these names from the Probe Hall of Fame: Nick Hobbs, Massimo Simonini, Charles O'Meara, David Petts, William Sharp, Chris Wangro, Trevor Wishart, Phil Zampino.

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