

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](http://www.ccutler.com/ccutler)

# PROBES #13

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. In PROBES #13: we look at folk roots as new routes; ancient and folk instruments re-imagined.

## 01. Transcript. Studio version

[Gregorio Paniagua, 'Anakrousis', 1978]

Back in the late nineteenth century, the early music revival had been closely shadowed by a revival of interest in national folk musics – and common to both had been a concern to recover, collect and document endangered repertoire and return it to life. However, by the fifties, when, curiously, both movements simultaneously re-emerged in stronger and more confident forms – their motivations had radically diverged. Early music now made authenticity its central platform while, for the new folk community, this was of little interest. Folk cultures are aural cultures and they leave little or no documentation, so what is known is whatever is passed from player to player or mouth to mouth.<sup>1</sup> Unlike cultures backed by writing, folk musics are more like a creative game of Chinese whispers, constantly transforming themselves as they move through interpreters and communities and time. In fact, even the notion of authentic performance would be a misunderstanding. In folk music, authenticity is more a matter of relationships – to roots, to functions, to audiences, to an inherited language or some idea of history. So it is interesting to discover that, even with these very different understandings, leading figures in both the early music and the folk communities, were drawn into a common orbit, from which occasional probes were flown to test the potential for their mutual enrichment.

Here, for instance are Shirley and Dolly Collins, pillars of the traditional British folk community, from their landmark LP project *Anthems in Eden*, recorded in 1969. The first thing to say about this is that there is nothing remotely authentic about it. While most of the songs belong to the mid nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the instrumentation belongs to the fifteenth and sixteenth. So we can certainly say that this is a species of experimental music. The sisters have form in this respect; they had already probed a variety of orchestrations before arriving at this one – and they moved on quickly afterwards, adding drums, electric bass and guitar recruited from the world of rock. It was sound and character that mattered for them, not authenticity. I'll play the beginning of 'A Song Story' and 'A Courtship' in Dolly's arrangement for an ensemble of early instruments – in fact the very recently formed Early Music Consort of London, led at the time by two of the movement's most prominent pioneers, Christopher Hogwood and David Munrow.

[Shirley and Dolly Collins, 'A Song Story' and 'A Courtship' (excerpts), 1969]

The sisters treated the following song in the same way, although it was newly written and had no particular ambition to sound traditional. I'll just play a snatch of it.

This is 'God Dog', written by Robin Williamson – at the time half of The Incredible String Band – a group that was loosely categorized as a folk group only because nobody knew what else to call them.

[Robin Williamson, 'God Dog' (excerpt), 1969]



[The Incredible String Band]

And, to close the circle, here are the Incredible String Band themselves in 1967. Still a duo, but about to become a quartet, the String Band were inveterate probers who would happily combine early, oriental, modern, folk, and electrified instruments in a single song. Dolly Collins guests on this track, playing the flute organ.<sup>2</sup> And of course there's a harpsichord. What was extraordinary about this band was its complete refusal to espouse any generic style beyond a highly idiosyncratic mixture of scholarship, eccentricity, eclecticism and a love of bricolage. The harpsichord here is the least of it: everything on this track is eloquent of our topic.

The whole song – of which I can only play an extract – lasts thirteen minutes and passes through at least a dozen different sections, all with constantly shifting instrumentation.

This is from Mike Heron's 'A Very Cellular Song'.

**[Mike Heron / The Incredible String Band, 'A Very Cellular Song' (excerpts), 1967]**

And before we move on, here's a probe heading resolutely in the opposite direction. This is Philip Pickett, from the early music group, New London Consort, wondering how sixteenth century instruments and compositions might be accommodated to twentieth century guitar, bass and drums. In much the same way that the Collins sisters had drafted in the Early Music Consort, here Pickett drafts in most of the rock band Fairport Convention – completing a circle in which folk artists, early music specialists and rock groups promiscuously passed around chunks of their respective DNAs.

This is Pickett's arrangement of 'Lo Ballo dell'Intorcia', written by the Italian composer Antonio Valente, in about 1575.

**[Antonio Valente, 'Lo Ballo dell'Intorcia' (circa 1575), performed by Philip Pickett, Sharona Joshua, Dave Pegg, Simon Nicol, Dave Mattacks and Richard Thompson (excerpts)]**

And finally, here's the Estonian early music group Rondellus, playing a faithful transcription of Black Sabbath's 'Spiral Architect' – or, as they have it: 'Architectus Urbis Caelestis'. This track is just one of an entire CD of Sabbath covers which, if nothing else, illustrates the huge debt that heavy metal bands owe harmonically to medieval and early music. Nothing in the writing here has been changed, just the instrumentation, articulation – and, of course, the sensibility.

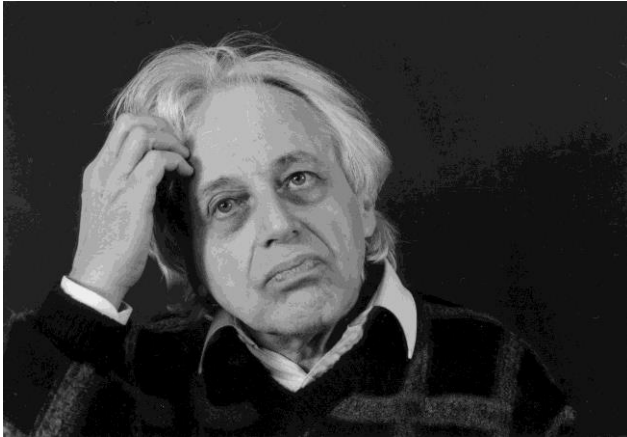
**[Rondellus, 'Architectus Urbis Caelestis' (extract), 2002]**

And it wasn't just the harpsichord that came back from its obsolescence. In the late nineteenth century, there was also a major revival of the recorder, which by then had been pretty much extinct for 150 years. The man most associated with its revival was Arnold Dolmetsch, a Swiss national educated and apprenticed in France who moved to London in 1883 and set up his first instrument workshop. A tireless champion of early music, Dolmetsch, as well as being a scholar and a performer, was an all-purpose craftsman. At the suggestion of William Morris, he built his first harpsichord in 1895 before going on to recreate, in some quantity, almost every other early instrument known.<sup>3</sup> A tireless proselytizer for ancient music, Dolmetsch set up a festival, performed with his family on instruments built in his workshop, toured the world with an early music ensemble and evangelized powerfully for the recorder – not only as a serious concert instrument but as a practical means of music education for schools.

**[Edward Elgar, 'Moths and Butterflies' (excerpt), 1907. Written for clarinet trio, interpreted by the Hampshire Recorder Orchestra]**

Compared to an instrument like the shakuhachi, the recorder has quite a narrow range of timbral flexibility – but it can sound very beautiful in consort.

**[Giuseppe Baldassare Sammartini, 'Concerto in F for Soprano Recorder', date unknown, but first half of the eighteenth century (played by the Hampshire Recorder Orchestra, originally written for recorder and strings)]**



[György Ligeti]

Recorders have found their way into relatively few unfamiliar situations. Berio's substantial 'Gesti' for solo treble recorder – which was included in the auxiliary programme to Probes #9 – is one of the more significant works to have been written for it.

And here, in György Ligeti's 'Concerto for Violin and Orchestra', composed in 1990, you can hear recorders, ocarinas and swanee whistles used to create a cloud of ambiguously pitched sonorities.

**[György Ligeti, 'Concerto for Violin and Orchestra' (excerpts), 1992]**

And here's an extract from Benjamin Dwyer's 'Crow', written for a tenor recorder in 1999. A tape supplies the accompanying atmospherics.

**[Benjamin Dwyer, 'Crow' (excerpt), 1999. Performed by Peter Wells]**

And this is from Ryōhei Hirose's 'Meditation', which sails close to demonstrating features that are easy to dislike in the instrument, but which he somehow makes acceptable.

**[Ryohei Hirose, 'Meditation' (excerpt), 1975]**

And here's Pete Rose with a prepared recorder. The bell has been covered with tape thin enough to buzz like a kazoo and the head joint has been pulled out as far as it will go. The composition itself consists of a single phrase steadily fingered in the right hand, with four variant fingerings that can be added in the left – the whole being articulated through various designated blowing strengths... anything else you hear is a product of the instabilities of the instrument itself.

**[Pete Rose, 'Right Hand Pentachord Variations' (excerpt), 2005]**

And here's Nissam Schaul's 'Everybody's Going There', for four recorders, that draws some exquisite sounds from the instrument's lower registers.

**[Nissim Schaul, 'Everybody's Going There' (excerpt), 2007. Performed by QNG (Quartet New Generation)]**

Lastly, this is David Bedford's 1972 composition 'It's Easier Than It Looks', for eight descant recorders and eight alto melodicas.

**[David Bedford, 'It's Easier Than It Looks' (excerpts), 1972]**

Today, the main impetus for new works employing old instruments comes less from composers and more from a select group of period ensembles interested in contemporary repertoire. Before these ensembles existed, few of the instruments existed either – except under lock and key in national museums. So when the Argentinian composer, Mauricio Kagel – who, at the time, was still a student of musicology in Buenos Aires – planned a work to explore the radical timbral possibilities of early instruments because – as he wrote later – 'these instruments correspond to my tonal concept better than any present day stringed and wind instruments', he was forced to abandon the project, not only for lack of authentic instruments, but also because there existed no body of players competent to negotiate either the complexity or the demand for advanced extended techniques that his ideas required. He only took up the work again in the mid sixties when, as a result of the rapid expansion of authentic instrument building – and the proliferation of specialised instrumentalists – its realisation at last seemed possible. In 1966 he wrote: 'In recent years, I have become so familiar with each of the instruments that I could think out its tonal function afresh and have been able to develop performance techniques beyond the conventional limits. Even an instrument such as the recorder, which is closely associated with home and school music-making... proved extremely versatile'.

Although he dedicates the finished work to Claudio Monteverdi, it contains no quotations or references to Monteverdi's music, or to any other period works for that matter. But, in a nod to renaissance practice – when works were played by whoever showed up on the night – 'Music for Renaissance Instruments' is officially scored for any number between 2 and 22 players – although 22 are doubtless always expected. And here they are:



[Mauricio Kagel]

**[Mauricio Kagel, 'Music for Renaissance Instruments' (excerpts), 1965-66]**

Three years later, Eric Salzman released his remarkable *The Nude Paper Sermon*, written specifically for the newly formed early music group, the Nonesuch Consort – as well as members of the New York Motet Singers and actor Stacey Keach.

**[Eric Salzman, 'The Nude Paper Sermon' (excerpt), 1969]**

Today, the worlds of contemporary and early musics meet rarely and, for the most part, diffidently; you're as likely to find a tin whistle in an orchestra as you are a sackbut or a serpent and, other than the harpsichord, there's no easy mixing between ancient and modern resources. Such pieces as there are for early instruments are typically written, or commissioned, by specialist soloists – you'll recall Georg Friedrich Haas's 'Solo for Viola D'Amore' in PROBES #6, written for Garth Knox. Pieces are also commissioned by ensembles. Here, for instance, is an extract from a recent work written for the British consort of viols Fretwork by the bassist and composer Barry Guy, a pioneering improviser in the early sixties, who has retained deep ties to both the early and contemporary music communities.

**[Barry Guy, 'Buzz' (excerpt), 1994. Performed by Fretwork]**

Where Barry Guy draws the viols down the road of extended technique and into the vocabulary of contemporary string practice, the Australian composer Peter Sculthorpe holds fast to the conventional character of the consort in order to articulate it with sympathetic, if uncharacteristic, content.

**[Peter Sculthorpe, 'Djilile' (excerpt), 1986. Performed by Fretwork]**

And here, the Japanese composer, Ryōhei Hirose very neatly juxtaposes both approaches in his *Suite for Noble Cats*. This is the 'Gavotte'.

**[Ryōhei Hirose, 'Gavotte', 1990. Performed by the Yukimi Kambe Viol Consort]**

And finally, three more ways to work with mixed early instrument ensembles. First: the American composer Molly Herron, clearly intimate with all the instruments, and making every tiny nuance count. This is from 'Neon Helix', written in 2013.

**[Molly Herron, 'Neon Helix' (excerpt), 2013]**

And for small Baroque orchestra, this is the British composer Rebecca Saunders' 'Rubricare'.

**[Rebecca Saunders, 'Rubricare' (excerpt), 2006]**

And finally, for viola da gamba, recorder and a small chamber ensemble, written in quartertones, this is 'Zlata Zlata Pcenica' by the Hungarian composer, Stevan Tickmayer.

**[Stevan Kovacs Tickmayer, 'Zlata Zlata Pcenica', 2003]**

Early instruments and folk instruments had once been virtually interchangeable; in fact, they were just instruments. But as the baroque orchestra consolidated around the demands of notation, which required compatibility and uniformity, what we now think of as the instruments of the classical orchestra began to evolve away from their origins and take on different, more regimented, forms.

Many kinds of instruments disappeared from the art music context altogether. But in the hands of peasants and labourers, a lot survived – the hurdy gurdy, the zither and the mandolin, for instance; while others, like the psaltery, continued to evolve. Entirely new instruments were adopted too, in time, like the banjo, the accordion and the dulcimer so that, by the late nineteenth century, the orchestral and folk families of instruments had grown so far apart as to become largely incompatible. Violins and clarinets remain rare examples now of instruments with continuing dual citizenship. But things that go around, come around and, by the turn of the twentieth century, artworld composers began once again to show an interest in what remained of their national folk musics – and some in



[Peter Sculthorpe]

interest in what remained of their national folk musics – and some in the possibilities inherent in their instruments. We'll be looking at these in PROBES #15.

Before we launch into this, I'd like to backpedal a little and read a few markers into the record – because official histories tend typically to gloss over whatever is inconvenient or apparently marginal to their teleological narratives. The ubiquitous Alex Ross is only the latest to have captured the imaginations of concert programmers and documentarists – and all of those who find it easier to take a kings-and-queens approach to musical history, treating its footsoldiers and forgotten masses as so many inessential bystanders whose aesthetics and innovations just complicate their tidy narratives. As Brecht remarked: 'Caesar defeated the Gauls. Did he not even have a cook with him?'<sup>4</sup>

This series is for the cooks.

In our next programme, we'll be looking at the modest roots of an upheaval that impacted on all genres of music, and created a number of new ones.

<sup>1</sup> In seventeenth century Britain, gentleman collectors had already begun to collect folk songs.

<sup>2</sup> The flute organ was built by Noel Mander of St. Peter's Organ Works, London E2. It is a modern interpretation of a similar instrument built in 1684 by the German organ builder, Hasse.

<sup>3</sup> His harpsichords were considered the closest to the historical instrument.

<sup>4</sup> And who built Thebes of the 7 gates? In the books you will read the names of kings. Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?

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## 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 [termegacorp@dial.pipex.com](mailto:termegacorp@dial.pipex.com) with subject: Probe Me.

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## 03. Related links

Molly Heron  
[www.mollyheron.com](http://www.mollyheron.com)

Barry Guy  
[barryguy.com](http://barryguy.com)

Mauricio Kagel  
[www.mauricio-kagel.com](http://www.mauricio-kagel.com)

Stevan Kovacs Tickmayer  
[www.tickmayer.com/cv.html](http://www.tickmayer.com/cv.html)

György Ligeti  
[www.gyorgy-ligeti.com](http://www.gyorgy-ligeti.com)

Pig's Whisker Music  
[www.pigswhiskermusic.co.uk](http://www.pigswhiskermusic.co.uk)

Rondellvs  
[www.rondellus.ee](http://www.rondellus.ee)



[Barry Guy]

Pete Rose  
[www.peteroserecorder.com](http://www.peteroserecorder.com)

Hirose Ryohei  
[www.komuso.com/people/people.pl?person=946](http://www.komuso.com/people/people.pl?person=946)

Eric Salzman  
[www.ericosalzman.com](http://www.ericosalzman.com)

Nissim Schaul  
[www.nissimmusic.org](http://www.nissimmusic.org)

Peter Sculthorpe  
[www.petersculthorpe.com.au](http://www.petersculthorpe.com.au)

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## 04. Acknowledgments

Carve their names with pride: thanks to Niklas Bilstrom, Derek Healey, Molly Heron, Lars Johnson, Yukimi Kambe, Nissim Schaul, William Sharp, Stevan Kovacks Tickmayer, Dave Petts and Charles Vrtacek.

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