

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

- PDF Contents:
- 01. Transcript
 - 02. Notes
 - 03. Related links
 - 04. Acknowledgments
 - 05. Copyright note

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 #15

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 #15** we look at experimental uses of the more intractable folk instruments: banjo, bagpipes, hurdy gurdy and harmonica. Is nothing sacred?

01. Transcript. Studio version

[Gregorio Paniagua, 'Anakrousis', 1978]

While early music instruments were accorded symbolic gravitas by the art music world, folk instruments were generally regarded as unlettered bumpkins, so when they did occasionally appear in the nineteenth century classical orchestra, it was to bucolic or illustrative purpose, and not to exploit their sonic qualities in any non-referential way. Here, for instance, is Johann Strauss, scoring a zither into his 1868 *Geschichten aus dem Wienerwald* (*Tales from the Vienna Woods*).

[Johann Strauss, 'Geschichten aus dem Wienerwald' (excerpt), 1868]

David Lean made altogether more complex use of the zither in the postwar British film, *The Third Man*, associating it not with frolicking peasants and sylvan promenades but the echoing, empty bombscapes of post-war Vienna. It's an association that seems to have stuck. The film was scored by Anton Karas, an Austrian zitherist, who earned his living in winebars and never scored another film.

[Anton Karas, 'The Third Man – theme' (excerpts), 1949]

In more abstract mood, here's the Hungarian composer and zither virtuoso Attila Bozay, mixing virtuosity, precision and various extended techniques to altogether more contemporary purpose.

[Attila Bozay, 'Solo' (excerpts), date unknown]

A few new-age and Brian Eno-esque minimalists have also used zithers, typically as a species of surrogate harp – and usually with the addition of electronic processing. Frank Zappa also famously used one in his first orchestra concert in 1963. I mention this only because, although this next piece wasn't written for the zither, it has been arranged for one by this Finnish ensemble whose practice is to rethink modern repertoire for baroque and folk instruments. Is it really a probe? I'm not sure. But if it is, it's a probe that tests the compositional material rather than any new function for the instrument. Still I think there's something interesting happening here. This is the Ensemble Ambrosius playing Frank Zappa's *RDNZL*.

[Ensemble Ambrosius, 'RDNZL' (excerpt), 2000]

Genealogically, the zither belongs to the family of the harp, the psaltery and the dulcimer. The psaltery, plucked with a quill was the immediate precursor of the harpsichord, and the hammered dulcimer – which is struck rather than plucked – was a proximate forerunner for the piano. When the zither was dropped from the art music orchestra because of its incompatibility with chromatic tunings, it continued nevertheless to flourish as a folk instrument, giving birth in the late



[György Kurtág]

Nineteenth century to the cimbalom – still a virtuoso gypsy instrument and a staple of popular music in Hungary and Romania. Its distinctive sound – which is somewhere between a harpsichord and a piano – in combination with its size, range and volume – has drawn it into a wide range of unfamiliar contexts. Stravinsky owned one, and he wrote it into a number of his early compositions, including *Ragtime*, in 1918.

[Igor Stravinsky, 'Ragtime' (excerpt), 1918]

And here are four short excerpts from the Hungarian composer György Kurtág's *Eight Duos for Piano*, played with cimbalom and violin, written in 1961.

[György Kurtág, 'Eight Duos for Piano – Risoluto, Allegretto, Vivo, Vivo', 1961]

The Dutch maverick composer Louis Andriessen also used the cimbalom, specifically for its unique timbral qualities and percussive transience. Here's an excerpt from his 1979 composition, *Mausoleum*.

[Louis Andriessen, 'Mausoleum' (excerpt), 1979]

And here's part of Pierre Boulez' extraordinary *Répons* for small ensemble, harp, vibraphone, xylophone, cimbalom and live electronics. This recording, as you'll hear, was made right next to the zimbalist.

[Pierre Boulez, 'Répons' (excerpts), 1980 (rev 1982)]

Film and television composers also made much use of the cimbalom. Here's John Barry, in 1965, playing the main title theme to the film *The Ipcress File*.

[John Barry, 'The Ipcress File – title theme' (excerpts), 1965]

In jazz, it's only in Eastern Europe that the cimbalom has been accepted as a soloing instrument. Here's the Romainan zimbalist Marius Preda cutting loose at an open-air concert in Switzerland. Folk tunes, pop, jazz phrasings and snatches of Baroque have all found their way into this two-minute tour de force.

[The Preda Jazz Trio, 'Improvisation' (excerpts), 2008]

And lastly, this is Michael Masley, an American street musician with a unique take on his instrument. Instead of two hammers, he uses eight – one attached to each finger. And the hammers have been modified with bows, so that the resulting sound has something in common with Stephen Scott's bowed piano. It's a street recording, so I apologise in advance for the poor quality.

[Michael Masley, unidentified place and date, but recent]

Another instrument that never made it into the baroque orchestra was the bagpipe. With good reason: first, of course there are the insurmountable pitching problems and, second, the bagpipe – like the hurdy gurdy – comes with a drone attached. And, in passing, one has to say that the bagpipe is not generally considered very polite, nor is it, for the most part, a team player. So when the pipes are drawn into other contexts, it is mostly to metonymic effect: signifying animal herding, village ceremonial or martial prowess, for instance. The British composer Peter Maxwell Davies uses Northumbrian pipes in such an atmospheric way in his *Cross Lane Fair*. And it must be said that he is one of very few composers brave enough to have taken this plunge.

[Peter Maxwell Davies, 'Cross Lane Fair – Ghost Train, The Bearded Lady and Five-legged Sheep' (excerpts), 1994]

Only in jazz has a noticeably different character emerged, especially in contexts that are, like the pipes themselves, harmonically modal. Here's the foremost black jazz bagpiper, Rufus Harley, playing his version of John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*. Again apologies for the sound quality; this excerpt comes from a very poor quality video recording, but it's a particularly useful example.

[Rufus Harley, 'A Love Supreme' (excerpts), 1987]



[Toots Thielemans]

Here, on the other hand, although retaining some martial references, *sound* is the subject, pure and simple. Made for a radical and genuinely prescient LP released in 1969 on the ESP label in New York, this track seems to anticipate not only noise music but also the nursery chant songwriting style of West coast art interventionists, The Residents. This is 'Caledonia' from Cromagnon's 1969 LP, *Orgasm*.

[Cromagnon, 'Caledonia' (excerpts), 1969]

It's the drone aspect of the instrument, and its imbricated overtones, that New Zealand performer David Watson exploits in this untitled piece from 2001.

[David Watson & Koichi Makigami, 'Untitled' (excerpt), 2001]

The hurdy gurdy, too, is primarily a drone instrument and is employed predominantly to that effect. It's been imported into a surprising number of rock contexts, especially in those genres of metal music that associate themselves with all things mediaeval. It's also used by a few improvisers, notably the composer and medievalist Stevie Wishart. But probably the closest exploitation of its sonic complexities – although still in the context of drones – has been accomplished in the work of the Japanese experimentalist Keiji Haino. Here he is at the Pitt Inn in Tokyo in 2013.

[Keiji Haino, 'Solo at Pitt Inn' (excerpts), 2013]

[Footsteps]

Of course drones occupy an enormous subset of contemporary compositional forms – both acoustic and electronic – and many of them probe microtonal and *timbral* manipulation at microscopic scales. However, they serve many other masters too and I plan to look at them all much more closely in a future programme, so here I'll just plant this marker.

[Footsteps]

[DeFord Bailey, 'Pan American Blues' (excerpt), 1928]

Yet another nineteenth century invention, the harmonica, has proved rather more expressively flexible. Popular from the outset, and extremely portable, it was initially used in European folk contexts before it arrived in America in the mid nineteenth century and took up residence in just about every other soldier or cowboy's pocket. Some white musicians made it rollick, others made it plaintive, but it was black musicians who gave it steel. Far from lonesome train whistles, here's one of the masters of the instrument alternating staccato accents with sinewy melodic lines and chords – and singing at the same time. This is Sonny Boy Williamson's 1963 'Help Me'.

[Sonny Boy Williamson, 'Help Me' (excerpt), 1963]

Jazz players give the instrument a completely different character. Here's one of the best of them, the Belgian Toots Thielemans – now in his nineties – playing Sonny Rollins' 'Tenor Madness'.

[Toots Thielemans, 'Tenor Madness (quartet)' (excerpts), date unknown]

And this is William Russo's *Street Music, A Blues Concerto*, written in 1976, which draws heavily on the black tradition. Russo was a great jazz arranger and composer as well as being the author of numerous more formal orchestral works, and here he mixes both skills I think, to their mutual benefit.

[William Russo, 'Street Music, A Blues Concerto – First Movement' (excerpt), 1976]

'Street Music, A Blues Concerto' was written for the pianist and harmonica player Corky Seigel, who was so persuaded by the compatibility of the two sensibilities that in 1988 he formed his own Chamber Blues group, consisting of a string quartet, a tabla player and himself. In this piece, 'Filisko's Dream', he is using a harmonica with altered tunings, specially built for him by Joe Filisko.



[Sir Malcolm Arnold]

[Corky Siegel's Chamber Blues, 'Filisko's Dream (Opus 12 From The Chamber Blues Suite)' (excerpt), 1994]

The harmonica was also well represented in the world of art music, indeed one of its great exponents – a Menuhin to Williamson's Grappelli – was the American Larry Adler, for whom many concerti were written by the likes of Darius Milhaud, Malcolm Arnold, Ralph Vaughan Williams and Arthur Benjamin. It's a strong example of a case in which repertoire exists because a particular player exists. Here's a snatch of Malcolm Arnold's 1954 *Concerto for Harmonica and Orchestra* played in this instance by the British virtuoso, Tommy Reilly.

[Malcolm Arnold, 'Concerto for Harmonica and Orchestra, Opus 46' (excerpt), 1954]

And this is from Heitor Villa-Lobos' *Concerto for Harmonica and Orchestra* written a year later and premiered by the American harmonica-player John Sebastian.

[Heitor Villa-Lobos, 'Concerto for Harmonica and Orchestra' (excerpts), 1955]

[Gregorio Paniagua, 'Anakrousis', 1978]

Oh for goodness sake, it was just getting interesting! ...we'll resume in the next programme.

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 remegacorp@dial.pipex.com with subject: Probe Me.

03. Related links

John Barry
www.johnbarry.org.uk

Michael Masley
www.artistgeneral.com

Peter Maxwell Davies
www.maxopus.com

Keiji Haino
poisonpie.com/sounds/haino

Sonny Boy
www.sonnyboy.com/

Toots Thielemans
www.tootsthielmans.com

Malcolm Arnold
www.malcolmarnold.co.uk



[DeFord Bailey]

Villalobos
www.villalobos.ca

04. Acknowledgments

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