

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 #16

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 #16** banjos, mandolins, balalaikas and the jew's harp are made to do unaccustomed and groundbreaking things.

01. Transcript. Studio version

[Gregorio Paniagua, 'Anakrousis', 1978]

Now where were we, oh right... we were looking at the way folk instruments have been probed for new identities and purposes. So... let me just find... Bob... if you could... spin those wheels of steel...

[Kurt Weill/Max Schönher, 'Suite from Die Dreigroschenoper' (excerpt). Original written in 1928, this arrangement as a suite, is from 1956]

Kurt Weill and Hans Eisler both employed the banjo in its traditional jazz and cabaret role to play simple accented chordal parts in support of the rhythm.

[Kurt Weill/Max Schönher, 'Suite from Die Dreigroschenoper' (excerpt). Original written in 1928, this arrangement as a suite, is from 1956]

From another lineage, also black in origin, the banjo was picked – like a guitar – in a style that became central to bluegrass, a hybrid form from Appalachia with roots in English, Scottish and Irish folk music – heavily filtered through blues and jazz. Bluegrass took its great leap forward in the forties when the banjoist Earl Scruggs mastered and popularised a three finger picking style that came to define the genre. Here he is playing his own *Foggy Mountain Breakdown*. The other soloists you'll hear are fiddler Glen Duncan, mandolin player Marty Stuart, guitarist Albert Lee, dobro player Jerry Douglas, and organist Leon Russell.

[Earl Scruggs and friends, 'Foggy Mountain Breakdown' (excerpts), 2001]

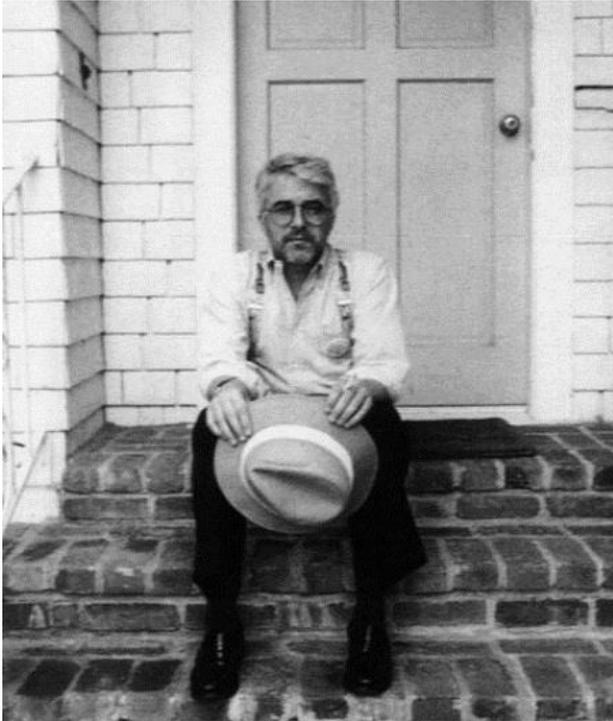
Rock too has flirted on and off with the banjo, but seldom as a central voice. The Monks, a maverick expat American band from the seventies, famously used an amplified banjo on all their songs but, like Kurt Weill and the Dixieland groups, only for rhythm support and its clanking metallic edge. A more seductive use is this, from the American soft rock band, Eagles. This is 'Journey of the Sorcerer', written in 1975 by Bernie Leadon III, and a fine showcase for the instrument's more complex personality.

[Eagles, 'Journey of the Sorcerer' (excerpts), 1975]

Banjos have also made a number of support appearances in chamber and orchestral works. George Crumb and Hans Werner Henze, for instance, have used them for colour, but it is seldom heard as a featured instrument. And when it is, the composer usually turns out to be a banjo player. The best of those I've encountered is the American banjoist and composer Mark Sylvester. Here's a short excerpt from the second movement of his 'Trio No. 1' for banjo, oboe and cello, written in 2006.

[Mark Sylvester, 'Trio No. 1' for banjo, oboe and cello, movement 2 (excerpt), 2006]

And lastly, this is from an improvisation by Eugene Chadbourne and percussionist



[Van Dyke Parks]

Warren Smith, in which the timbres tell most of the story. This is 'Odd Time for Two'.

[Eugene Chadbourne and Warren Smith, 'Odd Time for Two' (excerpts) 2011]

[Antonio Vivaldi, 'Concerto for Mandolin in C Major' (excerpt), 1725]

In common with a wide range of plucked string instruments, the mandolin too flitted in and out of the renaissance and baroque repertoires, but failed to make the transition to the romantic orchestra – although Beethoven did write three pieces for it at the request of countess Josephine von Clary-Aldringen, herself an accomplished mandolinist. Here's one of them:

[Ludwig van Beethoven, 'Andante con Variazioni in D major' (excerpts) 1796]

Most of the world's nations have a mandolin. The Beethoven excerpt we just heard, for instance, was actually played on a liuqin – a Chinese mandolin that traces back to the early seventeenth century. And long before the guitar took off in the fifties, there was a worldwide craze for mandolin orchestras that lasted from the closing decade of the nineteenth century all the way through to the end of World War One, after which it rapidly waned – though the tradition remains active in Italy, Germany and much of Asia. Here's the modern Japanese ensemble Arte Tokyo playing Giuseppe Manente's 'Arte Mandolinistica', written sometime in the first two decades of the twentieth century. This is a live recording made in 2011.

[Giuseppe Manente, 'Arte Mandolinistica' (excerpts), date unknown, performed by Arte Tokyo in 2011]

And there are still formal concertos being written for the instrument. Here's one written by the Israeli composer Avner Dorman, in 2006.

[Avner Dorman, 'Mandolin Concerto' (excerpts), 2006]

In contemporary art music, however, the mandolin is, and remains, rare. Stravinsky used one – rather as he used the cimbalom: for its colour. And both Webern and Schoenberg appreciated it for its distinctive fragility. In fact Schoenberg made very effective use of the mandolin in his 1923 'Serenade, Op. 24'.

[Arnold Schoenberg, 'Serenade, Op. 24' (excerpt), 1920-23]

Jazz didn't have much use for the mandolin either; the banjo trumped it for volume and, once amplification came along, the guitar seemed musically more flexible and *timbrally* rich. But here's the French luthier Jean Paul Charles playing 'Tida Swing' from a rather obscure recording made sometime in the eighties.

[Jean Paul Charles Quartette, 'Tida Swing', 1989]

Instead of mandolins, in Russia it was balalaikas that were collected into large popular orchestras – and these continued to flourish throughout the Soviet period during which time they also emigrated to Europe and America. Yet surprisingly few pieces have been written for the instrument outside its popular niche. Of course there are a few early twentieth century Russian concertos, but they are all very conventional. However, I did find this rather more interesting sixties Soviet jazz recording, *Dedushkina Svirel* – which possibly translates as "grandfather flute" – by the jazz ensemble Balalaika.

[Balalaika, 'Dedushkina Svirel' (excerpts), 1968]

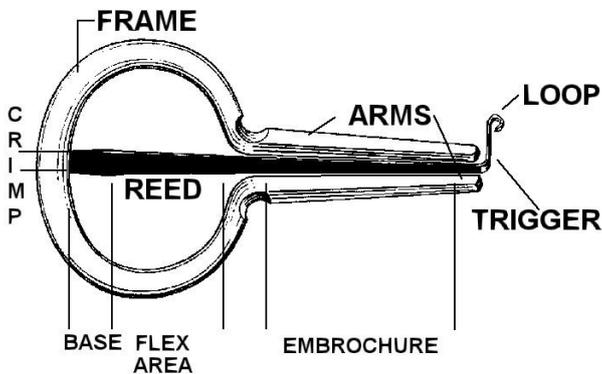
And since one should always take any opportunity to play anything by Van Dyke Parks, here's his 'Wedding in Madagascar', played on a Canadian tenor mandolin called a mandola.

[Van Dyke Parks, 'Wedding in Madagascar' (excerpts), 2011]

And now for an instrument that seems to exist everywhere – and whose origins certainly predate all written and depicted records – and yet it's an instrument you



TRUMP PARTS



[Jew Harp]

seldom hear mentioned in polite company, and which indeed most people don't seem to regard as an instrument at all.

A regular feature in every cartoon film, the jew's harp has – like many percussion instruments – a very narrow pitch range. One note, in fact – everything else is a process of selecting and amplifying one or more of its overtones by changing the shape of the resonant cavity of the mouth. And it's a pretty quiet instrument too, which rules it out of a lot of possible situations. But when it's not being funny, it does have a certain hypnotic solemnity. Here's the Siberian Baikal Jew's Harp Orchestra – there are eight of them – playing the old Norwegian folk tune, 'Fangjen'.

[Baikal Jew's Harp Orchestra, 'Fangjen' (excerpts), 2012]

And here's Johann Heinrich Hormann's Partita in C, written in 1765 – the first known appearance of a jew's harp in an art music context. It's subtly employed here, with a texture not unlike a muted harpsichord.

[Johann Heinrich Hormann, 'Partita in C' (excerpt), 1765]

Although the accordion and the harmonica – both close relatives of the jew's harp – have fared much better, the jaw harp still pops up in the least likely places. Here, for instance, is the great bebop trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, recorded at the Lincoln Centre in 1980.

[Dizzy Gillespie and Jon Hendricks, 'SCAT' with mouth harp (excerpts), 1980]

Its electric buzzing has also inspired beatboxers, like this French exponent, Jean-Jean.

[Jean-Jean, jew's harp techno demo on French TV Chat Show (excerpts), 2012]

In fact, scratch the surface and you'll find a whole community of contemporary players who are probing unorthodox acoustic techniques on the jew's harp, particularly in Russia and eastern Europe. Here, for instance, are Egor Gogolev, Szilagyi Zoltan and Robert Zagretdinov, all contributors to Taogawa Leo's Japanese compilation *From Siberia To Cyber-Area*.

[Egor Gogolev, 'Buluu [Khomus]' (excerpts), 2011; Szilagyi Zoltan, 'Okha [Doromb]' (excerpt), 2011, and 'Kecskemet' (excerpt), 2011; Robert Zagretdinov 'ofo [Kumbyra]' (excerpt), 2011]

And Koichi Makigami and Anton Bruhin have developed a system which – like the e-bow – stimulates the tongue of the instrument electronically so that it vibrates continuously without being plucked, leaving the plucking hand free to modify the sounds produced by the mouth cavity using tubes and other objects as additional resonators. Here's an excerpt from their *Mojiri*.

[Koichi Makigami and Anton Bruhin, 'Mojiri' (excerpts), 1998]

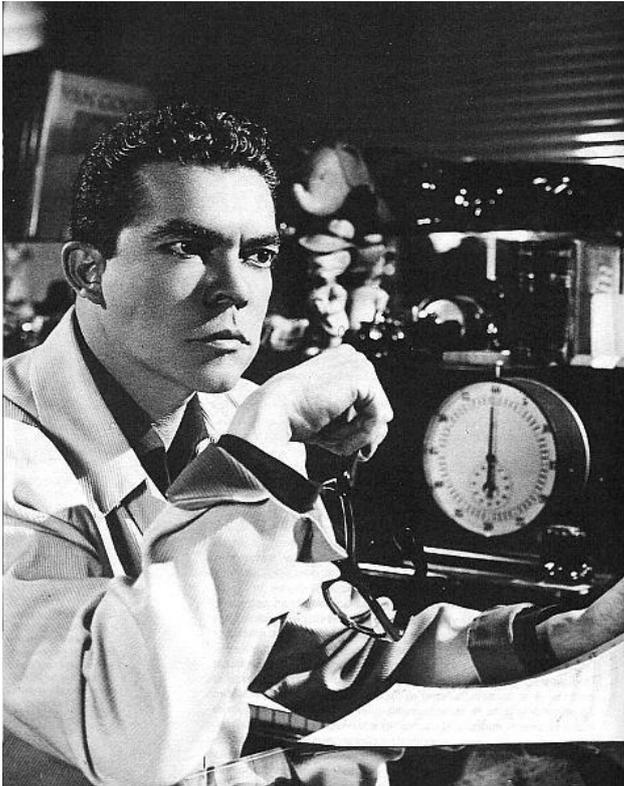
And here again, The Incredible String Band who just use their ears; combining it in this case with a sitar and an mbira.

[The Incredible String Band, 'Koeoaddi There' (excerpt), 1968]

And finally, here's the great Esquivel. This is his take on Johnny Mercer and Howard Hoagland 'Hoagy' Carmichael's classic *Lazybones*. And if you're wondering, that's a buzzimba at the beginning – a two octave set of chromatically tuned bongos, which the maestro claims to have stumbled across in a New York music store.

[Juan García Esquivel, 'Lazybones' (excerpts), 1961]

I'll close this chapter with two rare examples of non-commissioned compositions for folk instruments. The first is scored for an array of mainly Yugoslavian folk instruments by the Franco-Slovenian composer Vinko Globokar. Originally written in 1968, *Étude pour Folklor II* has subsequently been performed on normal instruments, but the now very inaccessible original version, recorded in 1971 by



[Juan García Esquivel]

Globokar's Phonic Arts ensemble, is the one that makes most sense to me. It's a piece, which – like many from that period – involves a lot of improvisation.

[Vinko Globokar, 'Étude pour Folklor II' (excerpts), 1968]

And this, from 1974, was written by the Polish composer, Zygmunt Krauze. *Idyll* is for four performers who, between them, play four hurdy-gurdys, four folk violins, four different kinds of bagpipe, eight bells and four pipes, while walking around the stage and auditorium accompanied by the taped sounds of rain, wind, thunder and domestic barnyards.

[Zygmunt Krauze, 'Idyll' (excerpt), 1974]

[Gregorio Paniagua, 'Anakrousis', 1978]

OK, Bob, you can put the wheels away now, our work is done here. In the next programme we'll be looking at the way instruments altogether alien to the Western tradition have been seconded to contemporary use.

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

Mark Sylvester
www.marksylvester.net

Eugene Chadbourne
www.eugenechadbourne.com

Arte Mandolistica
www.arte-mandolin.com

Avner Dorman
www.avnerdormanmusic.com

Schoenberg
www.schoenberg.at/index.php?lang=en

Van Dyke Parks
bananastan.com

Baikal Jew's Harp Orchestra "Fangjen"
www.overtone.cc/video/baikal-jew-s-harp-orchestra-fangjen

Jew's Harp Society
www.jewsharpsociety.org/publications



[Zygmunt Krauze]

Jew's Harp Guild

www.jewsharpguild.org/

The Incredible String Band

www.wolfgangrostek.de/5000onions/index.html

Mike Heron

www.mikeheron.co.uk/

Pigs Whisker Music

www.pigswhiskermusic.co.uk/

Zygmunt Krauze

www.zygmuntkrauze.com/en/

04. Acknowledgments

Carve their names with pride: thanks to David Petts, Ted Eschliman, Jonas Vognsen, William Sharp, Chuck O'Meara and Mark Sylvester.

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