

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 #12

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 #12 harpsichords return from the dead; a spectre is haunting music: the harpsichord.

01. Transcript. Studio version

[Gregorio Paniagua, 'Anakrousis', 1978]

Previously, on Probes...

In the first four programmes we looked at probes into tuning, harmonics and portamenti – in other words, into those areas that broke with common tonality while retaining their connection to the aesthetic possibilities of pitch development.

[Bob Drake, composite using PROBES #1 – #4 materials, 2014]

Others, less persuaded by the mathematics of pitch, turned their attention to the exploration of *timbre* – and to ways of making the immediate qualities of *sound itself* their primary, rather than secondary, vehicle of aesthetic exposition.

[Chris Cutler and Bob Drake, Gerard Grisey in a composite from various sources, 2014]

Then we looked at some of the ways orchestral resources have been explored in the pursuit of contrast and colour – and at the way, in the search for new sonorities, individual instruments have been transformed, both by physical preparation and through extended performance techniques.

[Bob Drake, composite using PROBES #5 – #11 materials, 2014]

And throughout, we observed that nowhere was the focus on *timbre* more critical than in the world of popular music where, as recording technologies improved, aesthetic content became increasingly linked... to the materiality of particular performances, to the physical qualities of individual voices and to the signature sounds of specific ensembles, arrangers and modalities of production.

[Chris Cutler and Bob Drake, composite using Frank Sinatra, Olivier Messiaen, Smokey Robinson and Bob B. Soxx, 2014]

So far, then, we have followed the way that conventional instrumental forces have been challenged from within; now we'll begin to look at the way they've been augmented or reconfigured from without. First, we'll look at how resources drawn from ancient, exotic or exogenous sources have been used to extend or refresh existing instrumental limitations.

And we'll start where the early probes started, with an art world instrument that had fallen out of favour, but for which important repertoire still existed.

[Bob Drake, courtyard of the Paris Conservatory, 1879. Historic documentary reconstruction, 2014]



[Wanda Landowska]

It is a sad fact that, in the cold winters of the nineteenth century, the Paris Conservatory broke up all its surviving harpsichords to use as firewood. The music originally written for them – and for spinets, clavichords and virginals – was by then played – if it was played at all – on pianos, which were considered far superior. Interest, in any case, in early repertoire was primarily academic. But scores don't die and the fashions of the day don't endure forever and, by the end of the nineteenth century, a handful of musicians had begun to pay more attention to early repertoire and even, to a limited extent, to early instruments, and this may well have played a part in the appearance of not one but three contemporary harpsichords, specially constructed for the now legendary 1889 Paris Expo – at which, the founder of one of the first early music ensembles to use original instruments, Louis Diémer,¹ performed early repertoire on an antique harpsichord built in France by Pascal Taskin in 1769. Harpsichords, it seemed, were rising from their ashes.²

[J. S. Bach, 'Concerto for Harpsichord No. 3 in D major BWV 1054, Third movement' (excerpt), played by Wanda Landowska]

But it was the Polish virtuoso and early music champion, Wanda Landowska, who became the harpsichord's leading ambassador. Commissioning a specially modified instrument from the piano manufacturer Pleyel – who'd designed one of the three harpsichords shown at the expo – she began by introducing just one or two pieces into her regular recitals, until she was soon filling entire concerts with harpsichord works alone. She was not unsupported in this; there was a general, if specialised, interest in early instruments at the time – a symptom, perhaps, of a broader intuition, not yet named, that from various different perspectives had begun to query the privileging of pitch over sound. For the revivalists, as for the radicals, *sound* was becoming an issue of increasing importance.

But Landowska saw more than history in the harpsichord; she wanted to reintegrate it into the life of contemporary music, and realised quite quickly that to achieve this, new repertoire would be needed. So she set about commissioning what would be the first new harpsichord pieces to be written for well over a century. Two were particularly influential: Manuel de Falla's 'Harpsichord Concerto', premiered in 1926, and Francis Poulenc's 'Concert Champêtre', the following year. These commissions were more of a challenge to their composers than they were a natural solution to perceived musical problems, but as challenges go, rethinking the harpsichord for the twentieth century was not insubstantial, and their respective solutions – which were relatively similar – established a template for new harpsichord writing that remained unchallenged for the next thirty years. Manuel de Falla's was the earlier, and more radical, work. Here's a short extract...

[Manuel de Falla, 'Harpsichord Concerto' (excerpt), 1926]

By the mid thirties, then, thanks to the combined efforts of harpsichordists, early music aficionados and generators of contemporary repertoire, the harpsichord had become an accepted part of the musical furniture. And by the early forties, when the clarinetist and bandleader Artie Shaw unveiled his *Gramercy Five*, it crossed over into the world of jazz. Johnny Guarnieri was the harpsichordist – although his first encounter with the instrument had only been at Shaw's home on the night before the recording session – and as you can hear on their first hit, he proceeded with caution; in part perhaps because the playing action of a harpsichord is very different from that of a piano and he seems not to be quite sure yet what he might get away with. Later he used the strengths of the instrument with greater confidence, in particular mixing its jangly chordal colours with a guitar and contrabass to produce a uniquely throaty rhythm section, but here, in 'Summit Ridge Drive', novelty is still the hook.

[Artie Shaw & His Gramercy Five, 'Summit Ridge Drive' (excerpts), 1940]

Eleven years on, here's Stan Freeman, much more confident, and possibly with access to a better instrument...

[Stan Freeman, 'Perdido' (excerpts), 1951]

In spite of these examples, jazz harpsichord didn't really catch on. You can see



[Paul Anka]

the problem. Jazz lives by *expression* – and the harpsichord is, by its very nature, extremely unexpressive – with very little appreciable dynamic range and no meaningful *timbral* range either. And although it's a beautiful sound – precise, silvery, compact and a little distorted – it's also uncompromisingly invariant. That's not much good for soloists, who want colour and nuance, but it's great for arrangers, who quickly grasped the instrument's strengths and drafted it into all manner of unusual musical contexts – sometimes with humorous or referential intent, and sometimes as the workaday handle for a popular hit, such as this one: Paul Anka's 'Toot Sweet'.³

[Paul Anka, 'Toot Sweet' (excerpt), 1959]

By the sixties, you could hardly move for harpsichords, they were everywhere: on film soundtracks, pop singles and on TV themes...⁴ Especially in Britain which, in the fifties and swinging sixties was obsessed by any connections it could draw between the first and second Elizabethan ages. This is Edwin Astley's title theme for the immensely popular 'Danger Man' – an iconic series that later became *The Prisoner* – also a major showcase for the harpsichord.

[Edwin Astley, 'Danger Man', 1965]

By the middle of the decade, even hardcore rockers were down with the harpsichord. Here's the incomparable Jerry Lee Lewis, recorded in 1965.

[John Vincent & Huey (Piano) Smith, 'Rocking Pneumonia and the Boogie Woogie 'Flu' (excerpts), 1957. Sung by Jerry Lee Lewis, 1965]

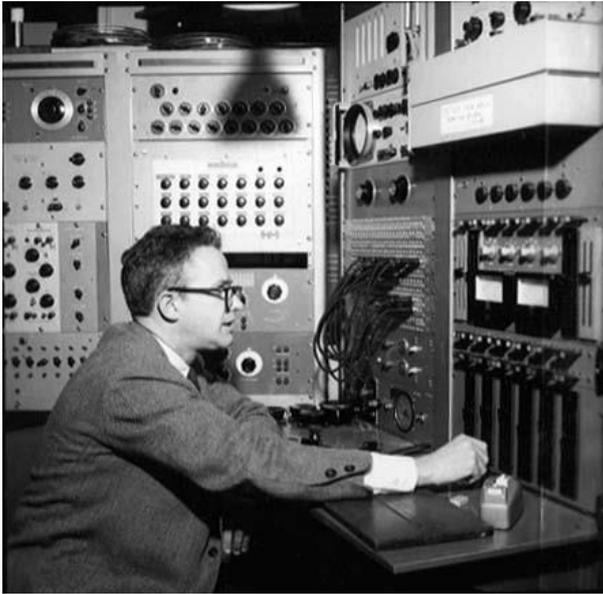
In the Art music world too, anchored by Poulenc and Falla, the harpsichord had become an accepted feature of musical life; piano pieces were adapted for it and many new works were written. In general, the new compositions either played with baroque forms or fell broadly into the ambit of romantic piano writing. Here, for instance, is 'La Scolopendre' from 'L'insectarium', by the French composer Jean Françaix, a piece that takes advantage of the clicky quirkiness of the instrument to paint a child's picture of a centipede.

[Jean Françaix, 'La Scolopendre', 1953]

At the beginning of the sixties, two works appeared that completely redefined the harpsichord's character, setting the scene for increasingly radical future probes. The first was commissioned by the Swiss harpsichordist Antoinette Vischer, a woman whose biography seems mysteriously to have been expunged from almost all reference works – she doesn't even have a Wikipedia entry, in spite of the fact that she commissioned some 38 new works for the harpsichord, including some of the most significant. What makes this one, by the anglo-french composer Maurice Ohana, so remarkable is its break with the pattern set by all its antecedents. Ohana ignores the historical associations and concentrates instead on the harpsichord's timbres – and its ability to emulate the sonorities of another instrument, the carillon – as you can hear in the opening of his 'Carillons pour les heures du jour et de la nuit'.

[Maurice Ohana, 'Carillons pour les heures du jour et de la nuit' (excerpts), 1960]

The second pivotal work, premiered a year later, in 1961, started life as a request from the American harpsichordist, Ralph Kirkpatrick – an ex-student of Wanda Landowska's – for a duet that would give equal weight to both the piano and the harpsichord. He addressed his wish to the American composer Elliott Carter, and Carter came up – with the help of some serious financial assistance from the Fromm foundation – with the 'Double Concerto for Harpsichord, Piano and two Chamber Orchestras'. In this intensely complex work – which Stravinsky acclaimed at the time as an American masterpiece – each of the soloists is accompanied by his own dedicated orchestra of strings, winds and percussion, each of which is tied to a mutually exclusive repertoire of intervals, rhythmic groupings and metronomic speeds.⁵ It's the longest and most complex modern work written for a harpsichord to date. I say harpsichord but I should really say Landowska/Pleyel harpsichord, because it's this instrument for which almost the entire repertory of modern works prior to 1980 was written. And with its 16-foot register, piano frame construction, heavy stringing, pedal-operated tone regulators



[Lejaren Hiller]

and a gap reduction to one and a half inches between the double keyboards, the Landowska-Pleyel is in fact a very different instrument from any existing historical harpsichord.⁶ It would be impossible to play this work as scored on any restored or duplicated sixteenth century instrument.

[Elliott Carter, 'Double Concerto for Harpsichord, Piano and 2 Chamber Orchestras' (excerpt), 1959-61]

Now we are moving into territory free of historical connotation altogether, in which the harpsichord begins to stand solely for itself. In his groundbreaking 'Continuum', Ligeti took his approach directly from the mechanical and sonic idiosyncrasies of the instrument – and from an observation commonplace in the practice of electronic and electroacoustic music that, beyond certain speeds of iteration, discrete events tend to blur and take on a new quality: pulse is heard as pitch and single, adjacent, pitches are heard as unstable, shifting, harmonies. To achieve these playing speeds, Ligeti depends on the harpsichord's double keyboard, which allows both hands to play in the same register. 'A harpsichord has an easy touch' he wrote and, 'it can be played very fast, almost fast enough to reach the level of continuum... It takes about eighteen separate sounds a second to reach the threshold where you can no longer make out individual notes, and the limit set by the mechanism of the harpsichord is about fifteen to sixteen. And because the string is plucked you hear, apart from the tone... also a quite loud noise'. This piece too was commissioned by Antoinette Vischer.

'Continuum' is not only a landmark in the evolution of contemporary harpsichord writing, but a key work in the canon of twentieth century music.

[György Ligeti, 'Continuum' (excerpt), 1968. Played by Elizabeth Chojnacka]

Ligeti wrote three pieces for solo harpsichord, each of them exploring a different aspect of the instrument. Here's an extract from the second, 'Hungarian Rock', which features a heavy five-note riff in the left hand while the right throws out an avalanche of melodic variations.

[György Ligeti, 'Hungarian Rock' (excerpt), 1978. Played by Elizabeth Chojnacka]

Still in the early sixties, the reclusive Antoinette Vischer commissioned yet another monumental work, this time from John Cage – it was the 40-megaton monster that wound up being called 'HPSCHD'. Initially Cage had declined the commission, because he hated harpsichords; he said they reminded him of sewing machines. But a huge event organised to celebrate the centenary of the University of Illinois changed his mind. Teaming up with Lejaren Hiller, who ran the Experimental Music Studio at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, he masterminded a vast immersive event that called for not one but seven amplified harpsichords – as well as 52 computer generated tapes, 8,000 slides and 40-odd films, all running simultaneously. 'HPSCHD' filled the assembly hall of the university campus and some 6,000 people attended on the day. The seven soloists have to play mangled mash-ups of music by Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Schumann, Gottschalk, Busoni, Schoenberg, Hiller and Cage – using scores generated by a customized computer programme based on I-Ching hexagrams.

[John Cage and Lejaren Hiller, 'HPSCHD' (excerpts), 1969. Reconstruction by Joel Chadabe, 2000. Harpsichords played by Robert Conant]

Now we come to the third – and the youngest – of our virtuoso commissioning harpsichordists, Elizabeth Chojnacka, for whom Xenakis wrote all four of his very substantial harpsichord pieces. 'Khoai', Xenakis's first work for Chojnacka, is one of the most technically and physically demanding in the whole repertoire and also, in my opinion, one of the best. It makes extensive use of the Landowska/Pleyel pedal system. 'I was attracted,' Xenakis said 'by the fact that the harpsichord has two keyboards – and pedals, and [by] the combinations of timbre those make possible.' This is from 'Khoai', written in 1976.

[Iannis Xenakis, 'Khoai' (excerpt), 1976]

In 1980, the Polish composer Henryk Górecki, completed his own – very personal – 'Harpsichord Concerto', the second part of which minutely explores the



[Louis Andriessen]

instrument's lower registers in a context of minimalist harmonic shifts.

[Henryk Górecki, 'Harpichord Concerto' (excerpts), 1980]

A very different approach was taken two years later by another quasi-minimalist, Louis Andriessen – a composer who always seems to have something new to say. This is a careful, melancholic work, a little like Eric Satie's 'Socrate', in which minimal materials are explored in an antique, linear, style that makes the most of the lyre-like resonances and janglings of an authentic period instrument. This is from his 'Overture to Orpheus', written in 1982.

[Louis Andriessen, 'Overture to Orpheus' (excerpts), 1982]

Yet another, and very different, quasi-minimalist probe was launched by the South African composer Kevin Volans in 1986, a kind of prelude to his later 'White Man Sleeps' – featuring not only the harpsichord but also the viola da gamba.⁷ Rather in the way that Ohana had been inspired to emulate the sonorities of the carillon so Volans here mirrors a Zimbabwean Mbira – or thumb piano. It takes two harpsichords to do it, and both of them have to be re-tuned to African scales.

[Kevin Volans, 'Mbira' (excerpts), 1980]

More re-tuning is required for this piece, by the Finnish composer and harpsichordist Jukka Tiensuu – who has pitched his two manuals a quarter-tone apart. It's a tango, more or less, and it was written in 1984.

[Jukka Tiensuu, 'Fantango' (excerpt), 1984]

Throughout this period, the early music movement – of which Wanda Landowska had been such an influential part – had quietly reconsidered its programme and, in the early seventies, it re-emerged in stronger and more ideological form, particularly in Britain and Switzerland, where new ensembles were established that shared a clear philosophy fuelled by decades of historical research.⁸ The same scholarship informed a new generation of instrument builders too, who now tried to work to original templates and – where possible – to use original materials. The new operative consensus was that early music performances should reproduce as closely as possible the sounds and articulations that composers and audiences would have expected to hear at the time they were written – which meant, amongst other things, using accurate reproductions of period instruments, appropriate tuning systems and historically compatible performance techniques.⁹

Modern harpsichords were, of course, not at all compatible with this new understanding and so were excluded from early music ensembles. What makes it wrong for them – the heavy build, extensive adaptations and customised features, all alien to the sixteenth century instrument, is exactly what makes it indispensable to the performance of virtually all the pieces to which we have listened so far. Now it's the modern harpsichord – once so instrumental in the revival of early music repertoire – that is disappearing and, with it, much of the twentieth century repertoire – which is impossible to play accurately on historic instruments. Even the skill-set required to play the modern harpsichord is significantly different from that required to play a period instrument. And compositionally, there seems, at least at present, to be no equivalent repertoire emerging for the period harpsichord – or indeed for any of the extraordinarily rich array of highly unusual sonorities that authentic early music ensembles currently deploy: the sackbut, the consort of viols, the viola d'amore, the crumhorn, the racket, the rebec or the family of recorders – to name just a few. Of course, there are pieces, but no longer, big, radical, pieces.

[Gregorio Paniagua, 'Anakrousis', 1978]

But perhaps I'm being unfair. In the next programme we'll look more closely at this repertoire and at the importation of other ancient instruments into contemporary contexts.

¹ La Société des Instruments Anciens was formed in 1895 and was initially composed of Louis van Waefelghem (viola d'amore), Laurent Grillet (hurdy gurdy), Louis Diémer (harpsichord) and



[Elliot Carter]

Jules Delsart (viola da gamba). They toured France, England and Switzerland in the late nineties playing old repertoire on old instruments, the first group formally constituted to do so. Diémer was also one of the first pianists to record for the newly invented gramophone.

² Louis Tomasini and the firms Pleyel and Erard all produced instruments, and all were based on the 1769 Taskin harpsichord, restored by Tomasini that Diémer played at the expo – though the Pleyel, in particular, with its very different architecture, was intended as modern instrument, not a reconstruction.

³ He wrote it in 1959 as an instrumental for the trumpeter and bandleader Tutti Camerata. Soon thereafter, with lyrics added, it was recorded by Anka's then girlfriend Annette Funicello as 'It's Really Love', which Anka subsequently recorded himself for the soundtrack of the Parisian film *Faibles Femmes*. In 1962, the TV host Johnny Carson made it his show's theme tune, after rewriting the lyrics – which he did in order to be credited as a co-composer. Although the lyrics were never used, Carson collared 50% of the writing royalties, which over the 32 years of the show's life, amounted to some 1.6 million dollars.

⁴ Film: *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), the *Miss Marple* theme (1961), *Anna Magdalena Bach* (1966), *Amadeus*, Tom Jones (1963); TV: *The Addams Family* (1964-66), *Danger Man* (1960-68), *The Prisoner* (1967-68), *Randall & Hopkirk* (Deceased) (1969-70); Pop: The Yardbirds, The Kinks, The Beatles, The Monkees, The Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, The Beach Boys, The Doors – who didn't use a harpsichord? The earliest I've come across used very prominently, is the Jamies' 1958 single 'Summertime, Summertime'.

⁵ 'The harpsichord and its orchestra form materials from the minor second, minor third, perfect fourth, tritone and minor seventh; the piano and its group from the major second, major third, perfect fifth, major sixth and major seventh. The harpsichord and its instruments mainly have rhythmic groupings in 4s and 7s, whilst the piano and its instruments have 3s and 5s. All of the tempi of the work and their interconnections and the various musical characters that emerge from these can be traced back to this fundamental duality, which is not only one of sonority but of intervallic, rhythmic, and even of differences in patterns of musical thought and of character and behaviour. The intervallic disposition can be seen to reflect the fundamental differences in sonority between the harpsichord and piano.' From PhD Thesis by Chau Yee Lo, University of Leeds, 2004.

⁶ To be exact, Elliott wrote the double concerto for a Challis variant of the Pleyel, with even more extra features, all of which Carter used.

⁷ The viol family was in existence before the violin family, then coexisted for some time before the violin (viola, cello, double bass) took over. Stringed like violins, viols were fretted and played vertically, like cellos. Some folk fiddlers still hold the violin this way.

⁸ Wikipedia currently lists 54 ensembles and at least 4 major festivals.

⁹ Though we still have absolutely no idea how this music sounded, how it was articulated or how it was 'felt' by its performers. And we never will.

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

Benjamin Dwyer
www.benjamindwyer.com

British Harpsichord Society
www.harpsichord.org.uk

Shiley Collins
www.shirleycollins.co.uk/

Harpsichord
www.harpsichord2000.com/home.htm

Mike Heron
www.mikeheron.co.uk



[A lady playing a harpsichord]

Molly Heron
www.mollyheron.com

Barry Guy
barryguy.com

Mauricio Kagel
www.mauricio-kagel.com

Stevan Kovacs Tickmayer
www.tickmayer.com/cv.html

György Ligeti
www.gyorgy-ligeti.com

Pig's Whisker Music
www.pigswhiskermusic.co.uk

Rondellvs
www.rondellus.ee

Pete Rose
www.peteroserecorder.com

Hirose Ryohei
www.komuso.com/people/people.pl?person=946

Eric Salzman
www.ericshalzman.com

Nissim Schaul
www.nissimmusic.org

Peter Sculthorpe
www.petersculthorpe.com.au

04. Acknowledgments

Carve their names with pride: Thanks to Molly Heron, Nissim Schaul, William Sharp, Stevan Kovacks Tickmayer, Dave Petts and Charles Vrtacek.

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