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 #17

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 #17 we trace how the gamelan collided with western notions of music and exotic percussion spread like a virus into every field.

01. Transcript. Studio version

[Gregorio Paniagua, 'Anakrousis', 1978]

In PROBES #11 to #15 we examined the appropriation and repurposing of ancient and folk instruments. Now we look a little further afield, at the ways instruments imported from alien or exotic cultural traditions have been incorporated into Western musical forms. I take exotic here to mean instruments that are either alien to Western ears or associated with non-Western cultures. Obviously, the reverse also applies: to cultures alien to our own, it's Western instruments that are exotic. This is taken from the album *Let's go Classics* by Takeshi Terauchi and The Bunnys, a sixties guitar instrumental group from Japan.

[Takeshi Terauchi and The Bunnys, 'Theme From Symphony No. 5' (excerpt), 1967]

And here's the start of their arrangement of the Romanian composer, Ion Ivanovici's 1880 classic, *The Waves of the Danube*.

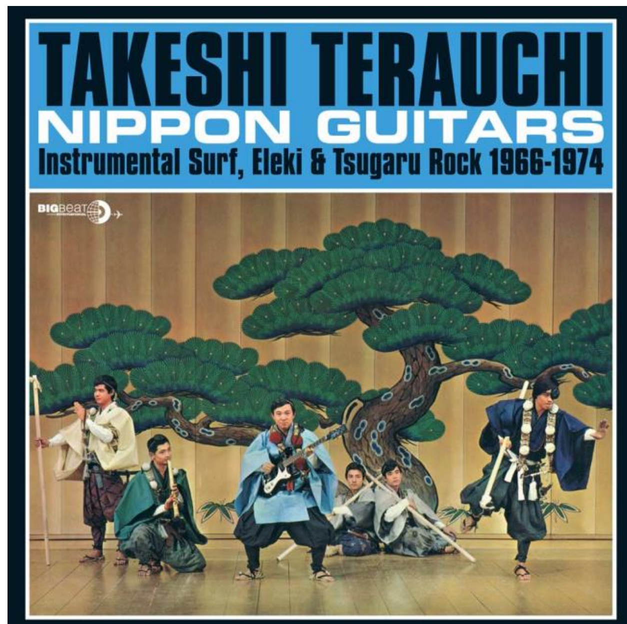
[Takeshi Terauchi and The Bunnys, 'Danube Wave Waltz' (excerpts), 1967]

For us, it's the shakuhachi that's exotic here, for them it's the electric guitar. And in the following excerpt you can hear that the guitarist, Takeshi Terauki, has approached the electric guitar through his familiarity with the Japanese biwa. So it would be a mistake to think of this music as simple imitation, because there's a complex mix of communication, assimilation and transformation going on here too.

[Takeshi Terauchi and Blue Jeans, 'Tsugaru Jongara Bushi' (excerpts), 1965]

So, to preface the next stretch of our programmes: I understand music as a kind of ecology; certainly its mechanisms are ecological. As people migrate, they carry their cultures and their cultural artifacts with them, and when they travel they collect new ideas and unfamiliar objects and bring them home. Inevitably, then, in a connected world, all musics will be mongrel musics, and their histories will be a record of the endless transformations effected by the assimilation of ideas and objects from outside. By uprooting and dispersing individuals and communities, famine, war, scholarship, trade and imperial ambition have acted throughout history as vectors of cultural evolution. And in the early modern period, as travel became faster, cheaper and safer, we can add tourism and structured migration to that list. It's no wonder then, that America came to play such a critical part in the transformation of twentieth century musical life, when the people and cultures of Africa, large parts of Asia and the whole of Europe were decanted over a relatively short space of time into one big petri dish, and then left to evolve as they may – with the implacable forces of modernity cutting off all retreat.

More importantly – and what makes this period unique – is that it marks the opening of an era in which *presence* ceases to be the primary engine of musical communication. Before 1877, people had to move: after 1877, in principle and



[Takeshi Terauchi *Nippon Guitars*]

then in fact, you could stay at home and the world would come to you – first on cylinders and discs, then through radio, television, tape, cassette and compact disc – and now by way of the world wide web. There's no *there*, and no *here*, anymore, when any space can be filled with any other space, and any time with any other time.

But the first collision in the period we're examining came from bodies that moved. In his published remarks on the 1899 Universal Exposition in Paris, Claude Debussy makes no mention of the three modern harpsichords that Pleyel, Erard and Tomasini launched in that year, but he does declare himself profoundly impressed by the Javanese gamelan that played every night in the recreated Javanese village on the festival site. 'Javanese music', he wrote, 'obeys laws of counterpoint that make Palestrina seem like child's play, and if one listens to it without being prejudiced by one's European ears, one will find a percussive charm that forces one to admit that our own music is not much more than a barbarous kind of noise…' He made repeated visits to the village taking copious notes and… like his friend Erik Satie – went on to probe both the timbral and compositional ideas he'd gained from the experience in his own work. But neither composer made any attempt to use the instruments themselves – not least because the tuning conventions of the two musical systems were so irreconcilably different. It made the gamelan effectively impossible to integrate into a Western ensemble.

Three decades later, it's the Canadian composer Colin McPhee who hears the Balinese gamelan, this time on a record – in fact on the only commercially released record of the gamelan that existed at the time. It was an experience, he said later, that 'changed his life'. Three years later, in 1931, he and his then wife, the anthropologist Jane Belo, left America for a seven-year trip to Bali, where McPhee spent his time studying and performing with traditional gamelan Orchestras. So when, in 1935, the composer Carlos Chavez invited him to Mexico to write something based on his researches, he gladly agreed, and in a fairly short time produced the strongly gamelan inspired 'Tabuh-Tabuhan: Toccata for Orchestra', for which some specially tuned gamelan gongs were made. Although the piece was a critical success, it had very little immediate impact outside Mexico, and it was seventeen years before it was performed again. If you think you hear echoes of certain minimalists here, remember that this piece predates them all by some thirty years. Here's a brief excerpt from the first movement.

[Colin McPhee, 'Tabuh-Tabuhan: Toccata for Orchestra' (excerpt), 1936]

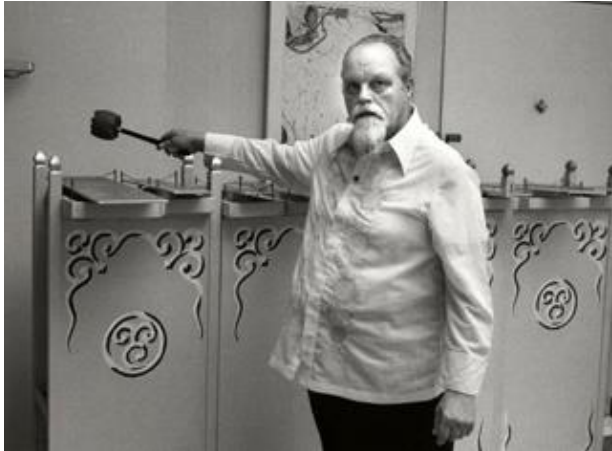
Back in New York, divorced and penurious, McPhee wound up in a communal apartment house in Manhattan, in which the British composer Benjamin Britten was also a resident. McPhee introduced Britten to the gamelan and in 1941 the two men recorded some of McPhee's gamelan transcriptions for two pianos. Here's one of them, 'Pemoengkah'.

[Colin McPhee, 'Pemoengkah', performed by Colin McPhee and Benjamin Britten (excerpt), 1941]

Britten would later adapt some of what he had learned from McPhee – augmented by his own studies in Bali – for a ballet: *The Prince of the Pagodas Suite*. But like McPhee, Britten merely simulates the sonorities of the gamelan, he doesn't attempt to assimilate the actual instruments.

[Benjamin Britten, 'The Arrival And Adventures of Belle Rose in the Kingdom of the Pagodas. Pas de Deux' (excerpt), 1956]

It was the American composer Lou Harrison who probed the gamelan itself. He had also first encountered it on record, this time by way of the composer Henry Cowell, who had studied the gamelan in Berlin and brought back copies of the institute's archive cylinders to use in his own groundbreaking course, *Music of the World's Peoples* – the first in America to introduce academically, what we would now call world music. John Cage took this course in 1934. Lou Harrison took it a year later. But it wasn't until the sixties that Harrison began his serious work with the gamelan. He also began by adapting the forms for Western instruments, but by the mid seventies he had built his own family of gamelan-style metallophones – which he had tuned in just intonation – and which he



[Lou Harrison]

called an American gamelan. This is from his 'La Koro Sutro' for American gamelan, 100 voice choir, harp and organ, composed in 1973.

[Lou Harrison, 'La Koro Sutro' (excerpt), 1973]

He then took up formal studies and began writing for authentic gamelan instruments. But here's a rare composition that brings both the piano and the traditional gamelan orchestra together. Harrison resolved the tuning issue in this case by adjusting the piano to the gamelan. Since every gamelan is unique, the tuning for the piano will be different for every performance. This is from Harrison's 1987 'Concerto for Piano with Javanese Gamelan'.

[Lou Harrison, 'Concerto for Piano with Javanese Gamelan' (excerpt), 1986/7]

And from the other side of this now porous border, here's an irresistible glimpse into the collision of Western and eastern ideas as they impacted on a traditional Indonesian gamelan orchestra. This is the gamelan jazz ensemble Kyai Fatahillah, a very young and enthusiastic group, recorded at a festival in Portugal; I have to apologise for the sound quality…

[Ensemble Kyai Fatahillah, 'Gamelan Jazz' (excerpt), 2013]

And from the Western side, a very rare example of the full integration of gamelan instruments into a jazz context. This is from the trumpeter and multi-instrumentalist Don Cherry's classic recording, 'Eternal Rhythm'. The gamelan – played by himself, vibraphonist Karl Berger and drummer Jacques Thollot – is combined with two trombones, a guitar, bass, bells and miscellaneous percussion. This is also a live recording, made at the 1968 Berlin Jazz Festival.

[Don Cherry, Eternal Rhythm (excerpt), 1969]

So far, I think it's safe to say that the different tunings and the specific complexities of gamelan composition have effectively resisted most attempts to adapt or reorient them. And since one of the characteristics of what we call exotic music is its divergence from our artificial system of equal temperament, we can expect to encounter similar resistance to assimilation from many other instruments.

Which is why percussion instruments, being for the most part unpitched, are by far the most commonly, and successfully, inducted into new contexts. Today's modern orchestras, ensembles and compositions are full of them.

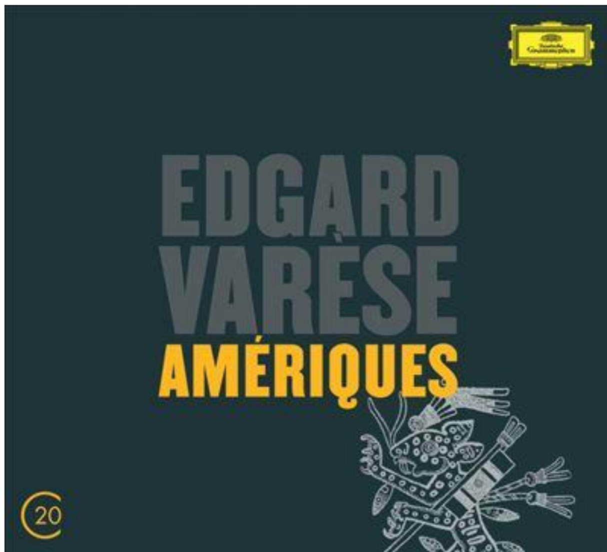
[Footsteps]

That said, of course, none of the percussion in the classical orchestra is in any way indigenous, it's all been imported at some time or another. Tympani, for example, were brought back from the middle-east sometime in the fifteenth century, making the shift from army to orchestra in the mid-sixteenth. A hundred years later the pan-European craze for Turkish Janissary music brought bass drums, cymbals and tambourines into the Western orchestra. And by the eighteenth century, the tam tam had arrived from China. After that, other than the inclusion somewhere along the way of the Egyptian triangle, not much changed until the mid-to-late nineteenth century. And throughout this period, percussion was, in general, lightly used and its role remained primarily metonymic or descriptive; it was there to invoke martial energy or peasant simplicity and, very rarely – with the occasional exception of some tympani writing – was it required to serve any autonomous musical function.

[Footsteps]

[Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, 'Sleigh Ride' from the 'Three German Dances' (excerpt) 1791; Richard Wagner, 'Die Walkure' (excerpt), 1866; Ludwig van Beethoven, 'Pastoral Symphony, or Recollections of Country Life' (excerpt) 1808 c/w Steven Feld, 'Sardinian Tenores and Sheep Bells', field recording, (excerpt) 2006]

In the nineteenth century, sleigh bells, anvils and cowbells still meant snowscapes, blacksmiths or alpine pastures, but by the second decade of the



[Edgar Varèse, *Amériques*]

twentieth century, all that had changed. In the accelerating search for new resources, composers were beginning to think of percussion as a useful source of novel and complex timbres; and no longer merely as sound effects and stage-dressing. In the same way, timbre was becoming much more than decoration.

[Claude Debussy, 'La Mer' (excerpt), 1903]

Claude Debussy made an explicitly structural use of timbre in a number of his compositions and by 1911 Schoenberg had formally introduced the notion of klangfarbenmelodie (German for sound-color melody) – though both men were still thinking about conventionally pitched instruments and how to manipulate tonal colour through the combination – or alternation – of their different harmonic spectra. It was in this period too, that the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky was making his definitive break with figurative painting and flying serious probes into the autonomous use of colour. When he heard Schoenberg's *String Quartet No. 2*, he said its author had managed to realise in sound what he (Kandinsky) had so long sought to realise in painting. There's some justice to this sentiment, but I don't think it really holds up. The man who really achieved that breakthrough, some twelve years later, was the French composer Edgar Varèse. Varèse had emigrated from Paris to New York in 1915, a few months after his fellow countryman, Marcel Duchamp. On arrival he immediately joined Marcel and the New York Dadaists and within a few years had established an ensemble dedicated solely to the performance of new works. Meanwhile, between 1918 and 1921, he had completed his own groundbreaking composition *Amériques*, a vast, revolutionary work that called on the resources of an unprecedented thirteen-strong, percussion section – not to mention the wind machines, whips, sirens, boat whistle and slapsticks.

[Edgard Varèse, 'Amériques' (excerpts), 1918-21]

Amériques can be heard as an outsider's response to the energy and insomniac industry of a city whose noise and clatter could no longer be ignored. It was the beauty and power of *sound* that Varèse had recognised, because – as he said: 'the noises in our ports and streets have (...) changed our auditory powers'. By extension, he was sure that unpitched instruments would give concert audiences access to timbres impossible to interpret through pitch, meaning, therefore, that they would have to be listened to in a different way. Where Schoenberg had emancipated the dissonance, Varèse had emancipated sound itself.

[Edgard Varèse, 'Amériques' (excerpt), 1918-21]

By 1931, Varèse had driven his convictions to their logical conclusion, addressing unequivocally any residual doubt about whether or not there could be music without pitch. 'Ionisation', written for unpitched percussion requires, like 'Amériques', thirteen percussionists, who play an even greater diversity of instruments: three sizes of gran cassa, two tenor drums, two snare drums, a pair of bongos, a tambourine, one military snare, one piccolo snare, various cymbals, three tam-tams, a gong, a pair of anvils, two triangles, some sleigh bells, a glockenspiel, a set of chimes, a cowbell, three temple blocks, a lion's roar, a whip, maracas, castanets, claves, a guiro and two sirens.

If we look at this list of percussion, we'll immediately see that in the decade between 'Amériques' and 'Ionisation' several new instruments had been added to the panoply, in particular bongos, claves, maracas and guiro – all of them alien to the orchestra, but very familiar to radio and dancehall audiences. To extend his palette, Varèse had needed only to walk the streets and open his ears. But only these streets: what I'm describing is a uniquely American story.

All through the nineteenth century, successive waves of immigrants had brought European and Asian instruments with them to America. Some had stayed inside their own communities, but many slipped into the public domain – especially percussion instruments – and by the early twentieth century, ragtime, jazz and vaudeville drummers had cobbled together increasingly elaborate trap sets, that mixed drums, gongs and temple blocks from China, cymbals from Turkey, cowbells from Germany, orchestral tympani, marching drums, and whatever else took their fancy. Their employment in the silent cinema, mixing music and foley work, only widened their search for unusual sounds.

[McCoy Tyner]

[Footsteps]

The only percussion instrument Varèse employed that was not in common currency, was what he called the lion's roar.

[Lion's roar]

This is what musicologists call a friction drum, it's made by fixing rosined string or rope to the centre of a drumhead and making it sound by pulling it taut and then dragging your clenched hand, or a wet cloth, along its length. Varèse didn't find this in the street. Although friction drums do exist in most of the world's cultures, I'm sure Varèse adopted the idea from his friend Luigi Russolo's notorious *Intonarumori,* since several of them worked on this traditional principle.

[Footsteps]

By the late thirties, the jazz kit had moved on and the gongs, cowbells, temple blocks and foley extras had all but disappeared. A new standard kit had emerged, largely thanks to the example set by jazz drummer Gene Krupa. This was a simpler more muscular set-up that restricted itself to a hi-hat pedal, two or three cymbals and small set of uniform but differently sized drums – each with two tuneable heads. Drum kits haven't changed essentially since.

Kit drums exist in a parallel universe to orchestral percussion. Firstly, their primary function is to provide rhythm, rather than colour, and secondly, they are a vehicle optimised for the expression of whole-body rhythm: kit drums are inherently polyphonic, allowing at least four interwoven patterns to be extrapolated simultaneously from the motor rhythms of a single performer. So, while classical percussionists are called on to deploy timbres and emphases, kit drummers deploy *feel.* It's a completely different way of thinking. To take an example pretty much at random, here's Elvin Jones, recorded in 1962. He's just playing on a standard quartet song; it's nothing special and it's not a showcase. It's certainly not written out; it's just what jazz drummers do. If you listen to the LP it's just part of the mix – you hardly notice – but thanks to the stereo protocols of the sixties it's possible for us to raise the level of the kit a little – since it's mostly assigned to the left channel – in order to hear better what Elvin is actually doing:

[McCoy Tyner, 'Effendi' (excerpt), 1962]

Four classical percussionists couldn't do that. And they couldn't collectively *think* it either – because in this field thinking and doing are pretty much the same thing. In fact it's so different that the American composer Harold Faberman thought it might be interesting to try to bring the two together – not very successfully in my opinion – in his 'Concerto for Jazz Drummer and Orchestra', which he wrote specifically for the forties swing drummer, Louie Bellson. Here's a sample.

[Harold Farberman, 'Concerto for Jazz Drummer and Orchestra' (excerpts), 1985]

By contrast, here's the opening of Darius Milhaud's 1930 'Concerto for Percussion and Small Orchestra'.

[Darius Milhaud, Concerto for Percussion and Small Orchestra (excerpt), 1930. Percussion solo by Laura Trompetter]

A vast amount of music has been written for percussion; of all instruments, it's probably seen a greater expansion in its repertoire over the last century than any other.

Here's a brief excerpt from the mammoth *Erewhon*, a 67 minute marathon in five parts by the French spectralist, Hugues Dufourt, in which six percussionists and 150 of the world's percussion instruments, try to speak as one.

[Hugues Dufourt, 'Erewhon' (excerpts), 1972-76]

[Gregorio Paniagua, 'Anakrousis', 1978]

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[Hugues Dufourt]

Sorry Ernesto, I forgot, there's a bloody election, so they've cut our time. We'll have to do the maraca concerto first thing next time… I know… hey, my people will talk with your people; it'll be cool. Sorry guys… Just see Eric on the way out

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. Acknowledgments

Heroes of the Revolution: David Petts, William Sharp, Philippe Glandien, Chuck Vrtacek, Jonas Vognsen, Ilan Volkov, Guigou Chenevier, Jonathan Myers, Joe Lasqo.

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