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 #18

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 #18 drums have their day; then they start flying around the room. Kitsch becomes cutting edge. And all thanks to advances in recording technology.

01. Transcript. Studio version

[Gregorio Paniagua, 'Anakrousis', 1978]

In the last programme we looked at probes that explored unfamiliar and exotic percussion. Now I'd like to zoom in a little closer.

One-off concertos are a popular vehicle for investigatory probes. Often undertaken at the behest of a particular player in search of repertoire, they can make a composer's task quite daunting, especially when the instrument to be showcased has no pitch range and very little flexibility. For instance, here's an excerpt from the 'Concerto for Maracas' by the Venezuelan composer Ricardo Lorenz.

[Ricardo Lorenz, 'Concerto for Maracas', performed by Juan Ernesto Laya (excerpt), 1999]

And here's Steve Reich, writing for claves, a piece built around the repetition and offsetting of very similar parts against a single pulse, given shape mainly by the pitch dis-similarities between the pairs of instruments. Reich wrote it shortly after completing his studies with the Ghanaian master drummer Gideon Alorwoyie; and he also draws in this piece on his knowledge of the Balinese gamelan. Form is generated through the repetition and overlapping of static cells in changing relationships. The rest is done, dear listener, by your brain.

[Steve Reich, 'Music for Pieces of Wood' (excerpts), 1973]

Like a clave, a castanet makes just one hard wooden clicking sound, which is not very promising material for extended development. Nevertheless, there *are* concertos for castanets, and this is the beginning of one of them. It's by the Catalonian composer Leonardo Balada, and it touches on the ability of the instrument to create a kind of rhythmic glissando through the acceleration and deceleration of beats, at speeds no other percussion instrument can match.

[Leonardo Balada, 'Three Anecdotes' (excerpt), 1977]

But usually when you hear a castanet, it means Spain. If you want to lend a Spanish flavour to something, bring in the castanets. That's what Bizet, Ravel, Debussy, Rimsky-Korsakov and Manuel de Falla did – and it's what Elvin Jones does on Gil Evans' great rearrangement of de Falla's 'Will 'O the Wisp'.

[Joaquín Rodrigo, 'Will 'O the Wisp' (excerpt), 1939, arranged by Gil Evans, 1959]

Castanets were never part of Argentinean tango culture, but pop productions seem to find the combination irresistible. Here's probably the most iconic instance, a song written in 1954 for the Broadway musical 'The Pajama Game'. This version of it – which is even more of a *reductio ad absurdum* than the original – was a chart hit in the same year for arranger Archie Bleyer:

[Alvin Lucier]

[Carol Haney, from 'The Pajama Game', written by Richard Adler and Gerry Ross (excerpts), 1954]

[Archie Bleyer, 'Hernando's Hideaway' (excerpt), 1954]

But the most imaginative non-flamenco use of castanets I've heard is this, by one of the truly great bands of the seventies who are unknown only because they were based in Barcelona and, in those days, if it wasn't British or American, the press couldn't really be bothered to listen. Castanets run through the whole of this record. Here are the first two minutes of the opening track, 'Agost', in which the high transient precision of the castanets is used both to complement and transform the contour of the melody. This is Música Urbana*,* from 1976.

[Música Urbana, 'Agost' (excerpts), 1976]

I'd like to follow this thread for a moment – I mean the probing of apparently one-dimensional percussion instruments in pursuit of unexpected qualities. For the composers who took them on, the challenge was not so much to *impose* form on these instruments as to *discover* form in them. I'll give just two examples. Both of which, I think, say something interesting about the enormous change in musical thinking that has taken place over the last fifty years.

First of all, the triangle, certainly an unpromising solo instrument, since it really only does one easily exhausted thing. So the American composer Alvin Lucier's approach is to push that thing to its limit, and by so doing uncover another thing. I can only play a very short excerpt, but what happens here is what happens throughout the work – which can last ten to twenty minutes, allowing overtones slowly to accumulate and gradually to modulate. It's more like an exercise in listening, I think, than a musical composition. Lucier calls it 'Silver Streetcar for the Orchestra' .

[Alvin Lucier, 'Silver Streetcar for the Orchestra' (excerpt), 1988]

And here's a tambourine. This is the beginning of the third movement of a very plausible work for percussion and orchestra written in 1994 by the American composer Joseph Schwantner, which is very nicely played on this recording by the Scottish percussionist, Evelyn Glennie.

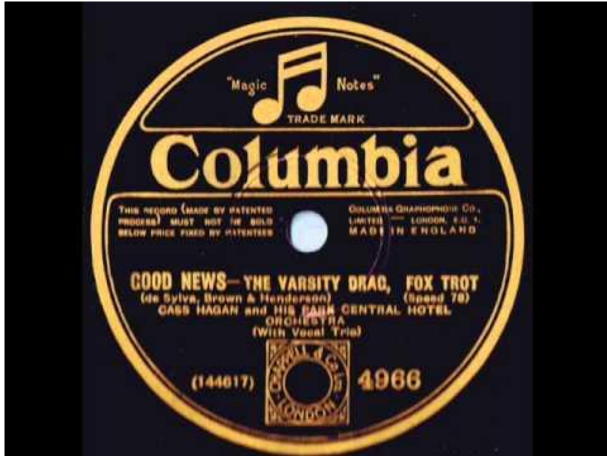
[Joseph Schwantner, 'Concerto for Percussion and Orchestra' (excerpts), 1994]

What impresses me about this passage is its complete lack of grandstanding: it's not about technique – and the tambourine is an instrument that can be jaw-dropping in the hands of a great player – it's the power of the suppression of virtuosity in favour of simplicity – and of sound. There's an unexpected reversal of priorities here, as rustic enthusiasm is given precedence over the sophistication of the classical orchestra.

And finally, as a footnote – here's what high technique *can* sound like. This is not traditional Asian or Middle Eastern folk technique – which can be equally breathtaking – but the product of long practice and original thinking. Here's what an acoustic tambourine sounds like in the hands of the Japanese virtuoso Takashi Tajima, using only his fingers. The low frequencies you hear are real; they're audible because he's using a microphone to amplify the acoustic sound. But there are no other treatments or electronic aids. This is a concert recording from Osaka, made in 2009.

[Takashi Tajima, 'Tambourine Solo' (excerpts), 2009]

I could catalogue my way through a lot of percussion this way, but I'm sure you've already got the picture. What's important is that, by the middle of the twentieth century nearly all the percussion imports from Asia and Latin America had found a permanent place in most genres of music. Then hi-fi happened, a medium in which percussion, especially exotic percussion, became central to a new aesthetic that was tied directly to advances in productive and reproductive sound technologies – and which also fuelled a growing fashion, amongst a certain demographic, for what we might call 'sensational listening' – I mean, listening not just to the music, but to the *sound itself*. In studios, arrangers began consciously to confect hyper-real experiences for their imaginary listeners,



[Cass Hagan And His Park Central Hotel Orchestra, 'Varsity Drag']

confecting alien soundscapes through the combination of exotic and unfamiliar instruments – in particular, percussion instruments, because the clarity of their sharp transients and rapid decay was perfectly suited to the new recording and playback technologies. Hundreds of albums with titles like *Mondo Exotica, Tropical Fantasy, Ritual of the Savage, Enchanted Island, Cuban Fire, Voodoo* and *Pagan Festival,* offered listeners exotic kitsch and high definition cocktail music under the new rubrics of full frequency range recording, living stereo, phase 4, full spectrum pan-orthophonic sound, visual sound stereo and stereo action.

['Train and railroad sounds' (excerpt), 1958]

The same climate also drove an unlikely fashion for sound-effect records, as listeners discovered the pleasures of being surrounded by tropical rainforests, or having vintage locomotives rattle through their living rooms. Perhaps having a band on a record might be something like having a band in the room, but sitting in a hi-fi rainstorm with the lights off, offered imaginative stimulation of a completely different order. One of the small companies that catered for this market was Mobile Fidelity Records, run by a railway enthusiast, Brad Miller. Sometime in 1964, in the wee small hours of the night, a San Francisco radio DJ, Ernie McDaniel, put one of Brad's railroad records onto one of his turntables, at the same time playing an easy listening LP on another. He was pleasantly surprised by the disproportionate number of, mostly positive, responses he got from his phone-in listeners. When he ran into Miller a little later he passed the story on and Miller, to his credit, took the hint and went away to confect the now famous *One Stormy Night,* by the fictitious Mystic Moods Orchestra. The record was an immediate success, and was followed up – by Miller and many imitators – with a string of similar releases.

[Brad Miller / Mystic Moods Orchestra, 'A Dream' (excerpt), 1965]

Clearly, the act of listening was becoming imbued with its own aesthetic rewards. Part packaging, part zeitgeist and part fashion, it was, above all, a creation of the suddenly expanded horizons of audio reproduction itself. Or, it may be that the objectification of sound had reached a level of technical sophistication at which it was inevitable that the idea of listening – as a self-reflexive and autonomous activity – would emerge?

[Cass Hagan And His Park Central Hotel Orchestra, 'Varsity Drag' (excerpt), 1927]

The notion of high fidelity itself was hardly new. As a measure of the accuracy of reproduction, that is to say, the closeness of a recording to 'the thing itself', the term goes all the way back to Edison's famous tone tests. These were public demonstrations held right across America between about 1915 and 1925 to promote Edison's new, flat, Berliner style Diamond Discs. The set up was simple: a well-known performer would stand on a stage next to a state-of-the-art phonograph. First, the celebrity would sing or play along with a recording of themselves and then, at a certain point, they'd stop, leaving the record to play on alone. Apparently audiences just couldn't hear the difference. I know this is hard to believe, but that's what contemporary reports seem to say.

The concept of hi-fi that emerged in the aftermath of the second world war – first in the fifties as a fad, and then in the sixties as a normal part of global consumer culture – was rather different; in part because of changes brought about by the introduction of a new mediating technology: the tape recorder. Great advances had been made in Germany during the war years and in 1945 a number of very advanced machines was liberated by the American military and carried back to America as spoils of war. Very quickly they were adapted and then adopted for domestic use, in the process, revolutionising both the aesthetics and the practicalities of recording. Tape was infinitely more flexible than disc – a disc could only be cut once and it had to be cut continuously, while tape could be used again and again and different parts of different recordings made at different times could easily be cut together. So, from being a means of documenting one-time performances, recording morphed into a discontinuous and constructive process that enabled and positively favoured experiment and revision. At the same time, the noisy four minute-a-side 78 RPM shellac disc had been replaced by the much quieter 20 minute-a-side 33 RPM microgroove LP. These two developments, taken together – along with the continuing improvement of

[Duke Ellington]

domestic reproduction equipment – had the effect of making recordings sharper, clearer and dramatically more dynamic. The cherry on the cake was the much-delayed introduction in 1957 of domestic stereophony.

[FOOTSTEPS]

The first stereo system was invented by Clement Ader, using telephone technology, and was launched at the Paris World Expo in 1881. Within a few years it had been commercially developed as the Theatrophone, which streamed live opera and theatre into Parisian cafes, clubs and hotels through the medium of coin-operated machines. If you took out a subscription, you could have them piped directly into your living room. Marcel Proust, for instance, was an early subscriber to this service. The Theatrophone spread quickly across Europe and stayed in business until 1932, when it finally closed, unable any longer to compete with the improved technology of radio.

The stereo we know today was perfected in 1931 by Alan Blumlein for the British company EMI, but take-up was limited and confined mainly to cinema. The 1937 soundtrack for *One Hundred Men and a Girl*, for instance, although recorded on a nine-track optical recording system, was reduced to mono for commercial release. And in 1940, with great fanfares, Disney attempted to launch *Fantasia* in stereo; this also failed, and it was only in 1952 that Cinerama finally succeeded in getting stereo sound accepted in mainstream cinemas. It would be another six years before the recording industry followed suit.

Then there was the curious history of *inadvertent* stereo. When acoustic horns gave way to electric microphones it became routine practice to make an additional safety recording of every session. Usually the second microphone was placed next to the first, but not always, and in the early eighties a couple of record collectors spotted differences in their 78 RPM copies of Stokowski's 1929 recording of *The Rite of Spring* and realised that some of the pressings must have been made from the back-up recording. And indeed, when they played both versions together, the result was broadly stereophonic. Since then, quite a few accidental stereo recordings have been identified and reconstructed. Here's a snatch, for instance, of Duke Ellington's 'Black and Tan Fantasy', recorded in 1932.

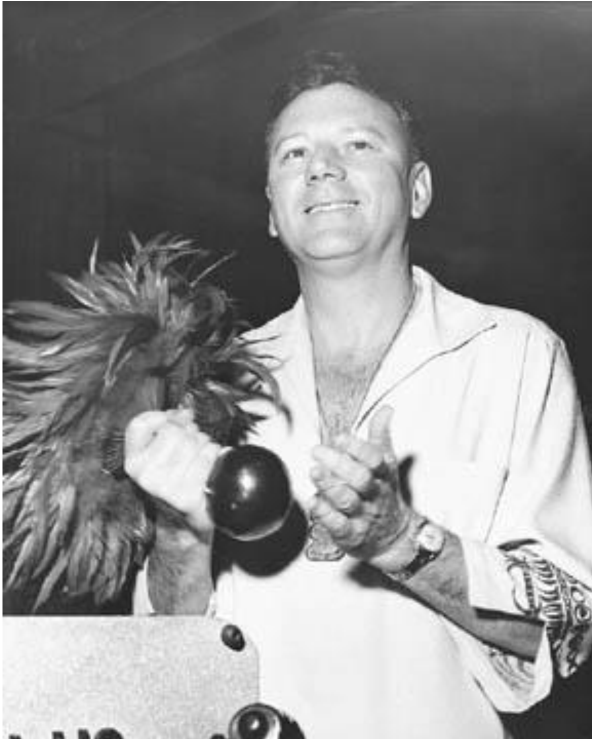
[Duke Ellington, 'Black and Tan Fantasy' (excerpt), 1927. Trombone solo by Joe 'Tricky Sam' Nanton]

[Footsteps]

Economic recovery after 1945 was achieved in the West in part through the massive expansion of domestic consumerism, which went hand in glove with the pursuit of technological innovation. What we now call youth culture was just one incidental consequence of this development, as was the technologisation of the home environment through a seemingly unstoppable proliferation of electrical gadgets and labour-saving devices. Since women did the housework, most of this technology was aimed at them. Accordingly, vacuum cleaners, fridges and washing machines were thoughtfully designed with simple press-button controls. Hi-fi, however, being linked to cerebral rather than manual processes, and designed to occupy, rather than save, time, was seized upon by men as worthy of their serious attention. Manufacturers, seeing the way the wind was blowing, gave them glowing lights, calibrated meters, non-intuitive controls and plenty of complicated technical data.

[Juan García Esquivel, 'Mucha Muchacha' (excerpt), 1961]

Very soon a tailored music evolved that was directed specifically toward the hi-fi aficionado – settling into what has retrospectively been called lounge, bachelor pad or space-age pop. Its roots were in Latin, jazz, swing, and light romantic orchestral music, and its leading figures tended to be arrangers rather than composers. Whatever the outward form, they were universally hypnotised by the dramaturgy of *sound,* and collectively they pioneered a variety of new studio techniques that set the pattern for much future recording. An early pioneer was bandleader Martin Denny. Formally trained, a convert to Latin rhythms and a collector of exotic instruments, Denny fell into the form almost by accident. But he recognised a good thing when it happened. And what happened was this: in


[Martin Denny]

1958, Denny's small ensemble was resident at The Shell Bar in Honolulu. Right next to the bandstand was a pool. When the band played, the bullfrogs croaked. When the band stopped, the bullfrogs stopped. The next day, when the band played the same tune again, the same thing happened, but this time the band joined in, adding their own fake tropical birdcalls. One more day and someone in the audience asked Denny to play the bird and frog arrangement. So Denny sat down and wrote it all out, giving the band the birdcalls and imitating the frogs himself with a kind of guiro. And that was that: a minimal arrangement, a mildly Latin feel and some cocktail jazz harmonies – all doused in a simulated tropical ambiance... When it was released, it sold a million copies. And clearly, it wasn't the tune that made it a hit; there's nothing here but percussion, atmosphere and some piano chords. Here's an excerpt. This is Denny's reworking of fellow exoticist Les Baxter's 'Quiet Village', a recording so influential that the genre that coalesced around it took on the LP's name: *Exotica*.

[Martin Denny, 'Quiet Village' (excerpt), 1958]

And here's the track 'Exotica', a much more sophisticated version of the same concept once it had had time to crystallise in the culture's collective mind. It's worth noting too that Denny only uses percussion instruments in this song. And a little bass. It was a combination he would repeat on many occasions.

[Martin Denny, 'Exotica' (excerpt), 1958]

Here again, only percussion – and increasingly more exotic percussion. This is 'Primitiva', also recorded in 1958.

[Martin Denny, 'Primitiva' (excerpt), 1958]

At the same time and from the same direction, other arrangers and bandleaders were adopting the same general formula, channelling the South Seas, Africa, Polynesia, Ancient Mexico – or at least imaginary constructs of these places – but all consciously audio-genic and exploiting to the full the new sonic potential of improved recording processes and more sophisticated home hi-fi. *Timbral* variety was their lodestar – with audio production focused on clarity, separation and bizarre juxtapositions of increasingly exotic instruments. Klangfarbenmelodie experiments were taken to extremes – and though these were almost uniformly high kitsch productions – excessive and often tasteless – some were also highly imaginative and technologically innovative. Their influence was universal; not that anyone who wanted to be hip in the sixties would ever admit to listening to anything so hideously uncool. But when you hear the young Brian Wilson in his glory, you hear the obvious influence of Juan Esquivel. Let's listen to the master at work: this is Esquivel's 'Cachita', recorded in 1961.

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

This is an achievement of masterful artifice; a perfect illusion, since every part of it is exaggerated and artificially projected into an imaginary space where our ears are impossibly close to all the instruments at once and the instruments themselves are widely separated or leaping about. It's physically impossible – so there's nothing *real* about it. In fact, the old idea of hi-fidelity as an accurate representation of a real performance has now been completely turned on its head. It is the *unreality* that is the essence of the new hi-fi and, also, arguably, its greatest achievement. Just listen to The Three Suns' 1961 arrangement of Juan Tizol's classic, 'Caravan'.

[The Three Suns, 'Caravan' (excerpt), 1961]

And before we leave, here's Juan Esquivel again, with his arrangement of Billy Strayhorn's 'Take the a Train', a masterclass in juxtaposed extremes.

[Juan García Esquivel, 'Take the a Train' (excerpts), 1960]

We arrived here, following the gradual emancipation of percussion – because percussion was a major beneficiary of all these technical and musical developments. In fact, percussionists had never had so much work. Arrangers were booking them in teams and piling up their parts in layers – bright, clean and
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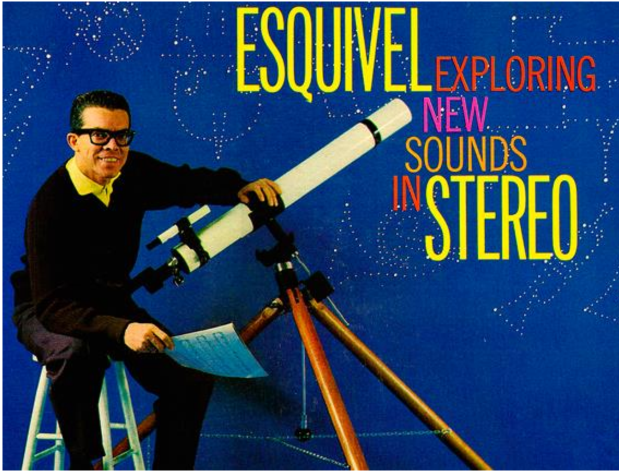

[Juan García Esquivel]

pingy, with maximum stereo separation. Hi-fi was a medium of maximum sensation, and it loved percussion.

[Footsteps]

Probably the purest exponent of percussive hi-fi was Enoch Light, a classical violinist, bandleader and recording engineer who went out of his way to set new benchmarks for clarity and ping-pong stereophony. In 1960 he released *Provocative Percussion* on his own Command label. It was an unexpectedly enormous hit in spite of having little radio play – because radio was exclusively mono at the time. For Light, this first release was proof of concept, and over the next two years, he released three more *Provocative Percussions*, four *Persuasive Percussions*, an *Off-Beat Percussion* and a *Pertinent Percussion* – not to mention the scores of releases that didn't actually have the word percussion in their titles. Here's what nearly all of them sounded like:

[Enoch Light / Terry Snyder and The All Stars, 'Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps' (excerpt), 1961]

For 1961, this is an impressive sound, and the stereo is exacting – but beyond demonstrating the tightness of your hi-fi system it's hard to understand the allure, because it's so lifeless. In fact it's not unlike contemporary tracks made with library samples, except that occasionally it's out of time. In spite – or perhaps because – of that, they sold and sold, satisfying, I presume, the hi-fi side of hi-fi rather than the musical side. It's also significant that Light marketed his LPs as Art objects: they came in expensive gatefold sleeves – rare as hen's teeth at the time – and with cover designs by the exiled Bauhaus artist Josef Albers. And each of them had a substantial booklet sewn into it, filled with explanations and copious technical notes. Light himself was extremely serious about sound, constantly experimenting with new microphone placings and new spatial arrangements for his performers; he recorded his LPs on 35 mm sound film instead of standard tape and, as early as 1971, he was a leading pioneer of commercial quadrophonics. And to be sure that serious audiophiles could calibrate their home systems to get the best out their record purchases, Light's Command label released a series of very earnest test records, full of stuff like this:

[Project 3 Stereo Test Record (excerpt), 1967]

[Footsteps]

Ah, our guests are arriving, so... we'll be back next month with tales from the African diaspora.

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. Links

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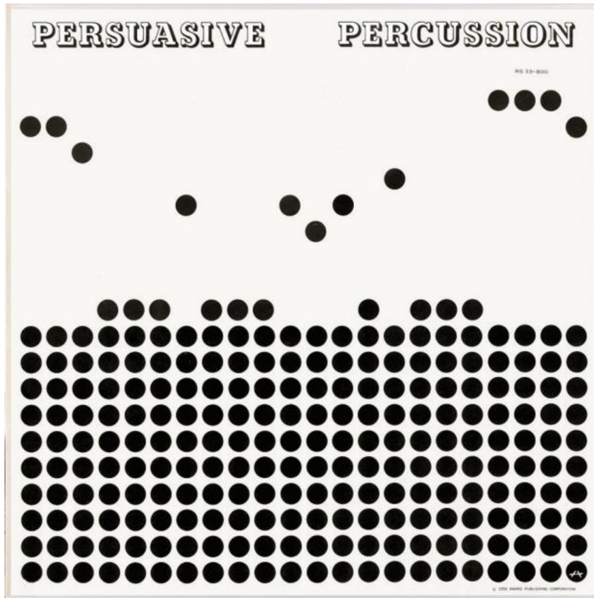

[Persuasive Percussion]

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04. Acknowledgments

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