

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 #24

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 #24, toys, music boxes and balloons find new roles in contemporary compositions, pop performances, film scores and jazz improvisation, as composers explore alternative acoustic sources for extended, non-electronic, sounds.

01. Transcript. Studio version

[Gregorio Paniagua, 'Anakrousis', 1978]

In the last programme, we traced the fortunes of the toy piano from its first appearance in the world of experimental music under the hand of John Cage, at Black Mountain College in 1948, through its occasional resurfacings – notably in works by Mauricio Kagel and George Crumb – to its revival in 1969 by Jeanne Kirstein, who performed, and more importantly, recorded Cage's original 'Suite for Toy Piano', thus triggering a second wave of toy piano works in the seventies that took in a quartet of British minimalists, a French fringe recording artist and a maverick female American composer – before sinking back into the undergrowth for another twenty years. The critical linking figure seems to have been the German pianist and composer Bernd Wiesemann, who took up the toy piano in the seventies and went on to become its first specialist performer to commission, as well as write, new works and who, in 1993, released the first CD devoted solely to toy piano repertoire. Here are two short pieces from that CD – the second and fifth *Epigrams* of Andreas Kunstein.

[Bernd Wiesemann, 'Zehn Epigramme II and VII' (1993)]

The third and most visible wave was kicked off a decade later by the Singaporean pianist Margaret Leng Tan, who is perhaps still regarded as the Wanda Landowska of the toy piano. Although she had worked closely with Cage since 1981, she only approached the toy piano after the composer's death in 1992 when, at his memorial concert, she decided to play the 1948 'Suite for Toy Piano'. She bought her first toy piano in a thrift store, especially for this performance – and then, like nearly all her fellow toy pianists, started to collect them. She also began writing and commissioning new pieces, and within four years had recorded the first of her *The Art of the Toy Piano* CDs, a mixture of adaptations of regular piano music, transcriptions of popular songs and new works. This is from volume two, containing, for the most part, new works. Called 'Chooks', an Australian term for chickens, it's is part four of Eric Griswold's suite, 'Old MacDonald's Yellow Submarine', written in 2004.

[Erik Griswold, 'Chooks' (2004). Played by Margaret Leng Tan]

By this time – the early nineties – toy pianos were already quite hard to find, since their place in children's toy-boxes had long been usurped by a sparky new generation of toy electronic keyboards – and it was Leng Tan's many performances, recordings and determined advocacy of the toy piano that did much to revive its fortunes – alongside the fortunes of the original nineteenth century toy piano company, Schoenhut – who stepped up production and began actively to support new repertoire for the instrument, and to promote its art world players. It was from this point on that the music community at large began to accept the toy piano as a regular concert instrument. And it will be very



[Isabelle Ettenauer]

noticeable in the next examples, how thinking about the instrument changed, making extreme technical demands – not only on the players but also on the instruments, which had quickly to evolve to meet the complexities of the new repertoire.

This piece, for example, was commissioned by Margaret Leng Tan in 1995, and was the American composer Stephen Montague's first composition for the instrument. It has since become a standard in the toy piano repertoire. This is a live recording by the Chinese pianist Ju Ping Song of Steven Montague's 'Mirabella'. You will immediately hear how well this toy piano responds to Song's impressive execution.

[Stephen Montague, 'Mirabella' (excerpts), 1995. Played by Ju Ping Song]

The Austrian pianist Isabelle Ettenauer also started her toy piano career with a performance of Cage's 'Suite', in 1991 – in her case played on an ancient Bontempi. Like our other specialists, she then cast around for more instruments and other repertoire, and soon began commissioning her own. It was through Ettenauer that the composer Karlheinz Essl, who specialized mostly in hybrid pieces involving electronics or spatialisation, encountered the toy piano in 2005. After which he went on to compose a flurry of pieces – with ensembles, electronics and in multiples, releasing a full CD in collaboration with Isabelle Ettenauer in 2013, dedicated only to his toy piano works. Here's the first piece he wrote, in 2005, for real-time and recorded toy pianos. This is 'Kalimba', played by Isabelle Ettenauer, which has also become a staple of the toy piano repertoire.

[Karlheinz Essl, 'Kalimba' (excerpts), 2005]

The American pianist Phyllis Chen took up toy piano in 2001, first programming Cage's 'Suite', Montague's 'Mirabella', Wendy Mae Chambers' 'Mandala' and a piece written for her by Gregg Millar. After that, it took a few years – and a bout of tendonitis – to make the instrument her central concern. In 2007 she launched the UnCaged Toy Piano – a biennial competition and call to composers for new repertoire, which has so far elicited at least 200 original works. And, in 2011, she organized the first three-day UnCaged Toy Piano Festival, at which new works were premiered and new performers showcased, and which has now become a regular event. Here is one of her own solo pieces for the instrument, 'Double Helix' for toy piano and bowls – both played by Phyllis in real time.

[Phyllis Chen, 'Double Helix' (excerpt), 2009]

In a parallel life, the toy piano was also adopted by a number of performers as an improvising instrument. The British pianist, Steve Beresford, for instance, often included one in his menagerie of accessories, and he later became a member of the Berlin Toy Bazaar, an improvising group – all of whom played toys (we'll meet them in PROBES #24). Chris Burn, another British pianist, took up the toy piano as an improvising instrument in the early eighties. He even played in a toy piano duo for a while, as the Toy Boys, with Richard Sanderson. Here's an excerpt from 'Related Activity', from the CD *Still Point*.

[Assumed Possibilities, 'Related Activity' (excerpts), 2001]

And of course pop music found many uses for the toy piano, mostly as colour, but sometimes as a lead instrument, as here in 'Hitsville' by the Clash, recorded in 1980.

[The Clash, 'Hitsville' (excerpt), 1980]

And no horror film involving evil children or haunted nurseries is allowed not to have either a toy piano or a music box tinkling away on its soundtrack. Yann Tiersen's music for the 2001 French romantic comedy, *Amélie*, however, uses the instrument to signal an unambiguous, sunny, optimism.

[Yann Tiersen, 'La Rede Couvert', 2001]

[Gregorio Paniagua, 'Anakrousis', 1978]



[Colleen]

Birdcalls were a common feature in all the historic toy symphonies, and the contemporary musician who made these his own is the American composer and saxophonist, John Zorn – who once routinely used a tabletop full of them to highly musical effect. Here's part of 'Togawa', from his 1985 recording *Classic Guide to Strategy, Volume 2*.

[John Zorn, 'Togawa' (excerpts), 1985]

And, in passing, here's the American composer Kyle Gann, bringing birdsong and toy pianos together in his miniature setting of Kenneth Patchen's 1959 poem 'And What With the Blunders'. The melodic material is all derived from Patchen's reading, which reveals itself only later in the piece.

[Kyle Gann, 'So Many Little Dying's' (excerpt), 1994]

Our last call, as we leave even quasi-instruments behind, will be music boxes, and I'll just mention a few substantial examples. Music boxes anticipate recording systems inasmuch as they can store and exactly repeat the same material, but the material, of course, is programmed, not captured. Its basic mechanism – a revolving drum with raised pins – has been used to drive all manner of automated devices since at least the ninth century AD, but the music box, as we know it, is a relatively recent invention, emerging in the late eighteenth century in tandem with musical snuff-boxes. For a long time they were exclusively the provenance of watchmakers, mostly from Switzerland, which is where, in the village of Sainte-Croix, the earliest known stand-alone music box was made in 1811. I only mention Sainte-Croix because that was also where the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen went 163 years later to have 12 melodies based on the 12 zodiac star-signs programmed into a set of 12 mechanical music boxes for his series 'Tierkreis'. This is the box made for Capricorn.

[Karlheinz Stockhausen, 'Tierkreis: Capricorn', 1974]

In 2001, the American composer John Morton, who had studied with Morton Subotnik and was writing for conventional orchestral resources, was asked by his wife, a sculptor, to work with her on a commissioned gallery piece involving music boxes. He began by dismantling and modifying all the music boxes he could find, researching their possibilities, before going on to devise a range of multiple mechanisms and customised performance devices with which he has produced, to date, two CDs. This is an excerpt from one of them, 'Outlier', released in 2001.

[John Morton, 'Outlier' (excerpts), 2001]

The French composer, singer, small instrument and string player Cécile Schott, aka Colleen, also made a mini-album in 2006, based only on music boxes. Here's 'Charles' Birthday Card' from that album.

[Colleen, 'Charles' Birthday Card' (excerpt), 2006]

And, working with Isabel Ettenauer in 2009, Karlheinz Essl made this, 'Pandora's Revelation', for music boxes and real-time processing.

[Karlheinz Essl, 'Pandora's Revelation' (excerpts), 2009]

[Judy Dunaway, 'Vitreous Detachment' (excerpts), date unknown]

In 1824, the British scientist, Michael Faraday, father of the electromagnetic field, the principle of electromagnetic induction, diamagnetism, the laws of electrolysis and the electric motor, crowned the list of his creations with the invention of the rubber balloon, a multi-purpose device which, by the late nineteenth century, was finding regular employment in American vaudeville shows as a novelty musical instrument. The first balloon recording I could find, however, was this, by jazz saxophonist Yusef Abdul Lateef, who – I assume – was using his balloons in vaudeville fashion on this short track, 'Love and Humour', recorded in 1957.

[Yusef Lateef, 'Love and Humour', 1957]



[Judy Dunaway. Photo: Dani Cantó]

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Next up, seldom mentioned but with an extraordinary curriculum vitae, is this from Joseph Byrd, the Zelig of sixties music. Byrd started out in pop and country bands in his hometown Tucson, Arizona, before moving to New York, in 1960 to study with Morton Feldman and John Cage. He was Cage's last student, and in no time had teamed-up with Charlotte Moorman and become closely involved with the Fluxus movement and composer La Monte Young who, in 1961, organized the first concert of Byrd's works in Yoko Ono's loft – the site of a great many extraordinary events in those years. By this time, Byrd was also studying electronic music with the legendary Richard Maxfield, holding down a job as composer Virgil Thompson's assistant and leading his own concert recital at Carnegie Hall. In 1963, he moved out to the west coast, to continue his studies, also finding time to join the Communist Party, co-form the New Music Workshop with trumpeter Don Ellis, and begin to drift over into rock which, by late 1966 was beginning to sound like the most interesting game in town. By 1967, he and singer Dorothy Moskowitz had formed the now legendary United States of America, concocting a unique mixture of psychedelic pop and electronics, who released just one impressively left-field record, followed soon after by Byrd's own uncategorisable *American Metaphysical Circus* LP, released, amazingly, on the CBS Masterworks label. A string of film scores and record productions later, he took up a parallel career teaching music history and theory in Eureka, California. The following piece, composed in 1961, was first performed by a group consisting of Byrd himself, La Monte Young, Jackson MacLow, Yoko Ono, David Tudor, and the West Coast poet Diane Wakoski. Scored for 'antiphonal rubber balloons', this is Joseph Byrd's 'Prelude to *The Mystery Cheese-Ball*'.

[Joseph Byrd, 'Prelude to "The Mystery Cheese-Ball"' (excerpt), 1961]

By the sixties, balloons had shifted from the music hall to the concert hall – at least as far as the experimental music community was concerned. There's a picture in Michael Nyman's indispensable *Experimental Music*, for instance, in which pianist John Tilbury is shown with Francine Elliot and David Bedford, both playing balloons in a 1969 performance of Cornelius Cardew's 'Treatise'. Unfortunately, there's no recording of this, but there is of David Bedford's 1973 composition 'Balloon Music', scored for any number between two and a thousand balloons. This live version, by the legendary contemporary ensemble Die Reihé, features fourteen of them.

[David Bedford, 'Balloon Music' (excerpts), 1973]

Guitarist and banjo supremo, Eugene Chadbourne used balloons a lot – as we heard in PROBES #6 – and it was seeing him in the late eighties that led guitarist and singer Judy Dunaway to probe further, and eventually to adopt the balloon as her primary instrument. Here are just three of her approaches. First for balloons only:

[Judy Dunaway, 'Demo' (excerpt), date unknown]

And here she is with bassist Ilya Komarov and drummer Trixa Arnold as lead balloonist in the group Shar. This was recorded in 2001.

[Shar, 'Chromotom' (excerpts), 2001]

And here's an excerpt from her 22-minute composition for balloon and string quartet, written in 2006.

[Judy Dunaway, 'String Quartet' (excerpt), 2006. With the FLUX Quartet]

[Gregorio Paniagua, 'Anakrousis', 1978]

In the next episode we put aside childish things and hit the kitchen, the garage, the garden and the workshop.

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



[David Bedford]

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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www.turners-site.com
www.muziekweb.nl/Link/CFX0490/Music-box-32-composities-voor-muziekdoos

04. Acknowledgments

Thanks to: Brian Brandt, Chris Burn, André Chaudron, Phyllis Chen, Laura Kuhn, David Petts, Margaret Leng Tan, John Tilbury, Ulrich Krieger, Lexa Walsh, Roger Turner, Judy Dunaway, Jonas Vognsen, Charles Vrtacek.

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