

Curatorial > PROBES

With this section, RWM continues a line of programmes devoted to exploring the complex map of sound art from different points of view organised in curatorial series.

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, The Science Group and p53 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 regularly 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...), The Artaud Beats and The Artbears Songbook. Adjacent projects include commissioned works for radio, various live movie soundtracks, Signe de Trois for surround-sound projection, the daily year-long soundscape project Out of the Blue Radio (for Resonance FM) and p53 for Orchestra and Soloists.

He founded and runs the independent label ReR Megacorp and the art distribution service Gallery and Academic, is editor of the occasional sourcebook Unfiled, author of the book File Under Popular – and many articles and papers published in 16 languages. He was on faculty for a while at the Museum School in Boston and lectures irregularly on theoretical and music related topics worldwide. He has appeared on over 160 recordings.
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PROBES #28.2

Auxiliaries

The PROBES Auxiliaries collect materials related to each episode that try to give a broader – and more immediate – impression of the field. They are a scan, not a deep listening vehicle; an indication of what further investigation might uncover and, for that reason, most are edited snapshots of longer pieces. We have tried to light the corners as well as the central arena, and to not privilege so-called serious over so-called popular genres. In this episode Beethoven is re-orchestrated with power tools and a variety orchestra partners with canteen equipment while radios, gramophones and telephones explore their new vocation as performing instruments, and become the subjects of formal composition.

01. Playlist

[00:00 Gregorio Paniagua, 'Anakrousis', 1978]

[00:07 Grand Wizard Theodore. From an interview by Dan Del Fiorentino, in NAMM Oral Histories, 2012]

Established in 1901, NAMM is the acronym of the National Association of Music Merchants, a not-for-profit association, one of whose activities is to collect oral history testimonies in the form of podcasts from musicians, equipment developers, educators, industry workers, and the like – there are some 3000 of them to date.

[01:44 Penguin Cafe Orchestra, 'Telephone and Rubber Band' (excerpt), 1981]

The Penguin Cafe Orchestra was founded by the classically trained English guitarist, composer and arranger Simon Jeffes, in steps, between 1972 and 1974. They released their first record and played their first major concert in 1976, after which, with changing personnel, it toured and recorded until Jeffes' untimely death in 1997. The music – which was mostly made with acoustic string instruments (guitar, cuatro, ukulele, violin, cello, viola), keyboards (accordion, electric piano, harmonium, dulcitone) and small percussion – fell between being quaint, quirkily experimental, ethnic/folkish, and classical-minimal. 'Telephone and Rubber Band' is probably their most famous recording – based on a fortuitous recording (made by Jeffes on his answering machine) of an anomalous sounding of the ring tone and the engaged signal simultaneously – which he subsequently accompanied with a twanging rubber band. It was adopted as a TV theme tune in Argentina, appeared in British Telecom advertisements in Britain, and featured in two mainstream Hollywood movies.

[03:18 Giorgio Battistelli, 'Experimentum Mundi' (excerpts), 1981]

Art and Life. In this 'Imaginary Musical Work' sixteen ordinary work tools confront the audience from an empty stage. Then sixteen aproned and overalled craft workers (not musicians) and an actor enter. The actor reads descriptions of the tools being used, from Diderot and d'Alembert's great enlightenment encyclopedia, while the workers get on with their work – in a planned and orchestrated way. Trades features are cooper, carpenter, pastrycook, mason, toolmaker, stonemason, cobbler and knife-grinder. Giorgio Battistelli is an Italian composer, who studied with student Stockhausen and Kagel and who now specialises in music theatre.

[04:37 Michel Magne, 'Self Service' (excerpt), 1959]

Michel Magne was a French film and experimental music composer, who also wrote – and made orchestral arrangements of – songs for Juliette Gréco. In 1969, he set up the Chateau d'Herouville studio, used by the likes of Elton John, Pink Floyd, Magma, Terry Riley and David Bowie. 'Self Service' appears on his prescient LP, *Musique Tachiste*, in which, impressively, Magne mixes found sounds, industrial noise and piano jazz with avant-garde orchestral writing (and plays the cimbalom. 'Self Service' features... cutlery, of course.



The Conet Project

Recordings of Shortwave Numbers Stations



[The Conet Project, 1997]

[05:59 Woody Phillips, Richard Wagner, 'Ride of the Valkyries' – arr. Woody Phillips (excerpts), 1851/1998. For Dremel (rotary grinder), various power drills, a large drill-press motor, table saw, jointer, 2 x 4s, and a 50-gallon drum]

[07:32 Robert Burns, 'Auld Lang Syne' – arr. Woody Phillips (excerpts), 1788/1996. For vacuum cleaner, broom, musical saw, mandolin, jig saw blades (plucked), table saw, 2 x 4s and metal pipes]

[08:08 Jehan Tabourot/George Ratcliffe Woodward, 'Ding Dong Merrily on High' – arr. Woody Phillips (excerpts), 1560/1924/1996. For metal pipes, anvil, ratchet, hammered dulcimers, cellos, electric drills, hammer and saw]

These three tracks are taken from two remarkable CDs by Mr. Phillips: *Toolbox Classics* and *Toolbox Christmas*. In his other life he is the composer and cellist Barry Phillips, conservatory trained, and Ravi Shankar's composition assistant for 15 years; now touring the world with the Anoushka Shankar Project, as well as arranging and producing records mainly of Northern European folk music. He won a Grammy for his engineering and production work on Ravi Shankar's *The Living Room Sessions Part 1*. A man of many parts.

[09:20 The Conet Project, (excerpts), 1997]

In 1997, out of nowhere, so to say, came a 4-CD set called *The Conet Project: Recordings of Shortwave Numbers Stations*. Number stations, which broadcast voices reciting numbers – generally understood to be governments communicating with spies abroad – were, although familiar to every shortwave enthusiast, never mentioned in public discourse, not even in spy fiction. It was the British electronic label Irdial Discs release of this well-documented set of recordings that put numbers stations on the public map, leading to articles and much press speculation. Since then, samples have appeared in films and music albums – and, notably, in 2007, the German sound artist Trimpin's *4Cast Unpredictable*, a collaboration with the Kronos Quartet, which incorporated number station broadcasts, captured in real-time.

[11:13 Aki Peltonen, 'Orchestra, Accordion and MW Radio #1' (excerpts), 2005]

Finnish composer, arranger, performer and sound engineer, Aki Peltonen playing the accordion he learned as a child – when the musicality of the radio first attracted him: 'the accordion was so heavy I couldn't keep it in my lap. So I played it on my knees on the floor. We had a valve radio then and I still remember the wonderful effect when I twisted the station-selector', he answered when I asked, why a radio?

[12:53 Karlheinz Stockhausen, 'Kurzwellen' (excerpt), 1968]

This was Stockhausen's first composition for shortwave radios. It requires six instrumentalists to react in highly specified ways to unforeseen material which is generated in real-time by the radios – also controlled by the performers, who then transform and develop the sonic material delivered by the radios, according to indications given in the score. At the premiere (and on this recording) the instruments used were piano, electronium, a very large tam tam and an electric viola, with four radios.

[13:58 John Cage, 'Imaginary Landscape No. 4' (excerpts), 1951]

This was Cage's first fully indeterminate (aleatoric) work composed using the I-Ching. It was scored for twelve radios and twenty four performers, with one performer controlling the frequency settings and the other amplitudes and timbres. Why radios? Cage said: 'My thinking was that I didn't like the radio and that I would be able to like it if I used it in my work.' Twelve of them because of the twelve tones in the octave and the twelve disciples, he told Charles Kostelanetz. It was so late (after midnight) when it was premiered (at Columbia University in 1951), that there were hardly any stations still broadcasting, rendering the work practically silent. Subsequently, Cage resigned from the Columbia New Music Society, apologising for his poor programming of this concert (contradicting somewhat his claims of complete acceptance of how things fell out on the night).

[15:30 Velimir Khlebnikov, 'The Radio of The Future' (excerpt), 1921/2006]

Khlebnikov (b.1885) was a writer, poet and leading cubo-futurist. *The Radio of The Future* was an essay he wrote late in his life, that anticipated and rhapsodised the universalising social and artistic possibilities of the new



[Christian Marclay, 'Telephones', 1995]

radiophonic medium, which he believed would unite all humankind. This short realisation was made – using the sound references made in the article – by Miguel Molina and Leopoldo Amigo in the sculpture department of the University of Fine Arts, Valencia for the CD *Baku Symphony of Sirens: Sound experiments in the Russian Avant Garde, 1908-1942*, in 2006.

[16:46 Albert Marcour, 'Telephone']

[17:43 Christian Marclay, 'Telephones' (excerpts), 1995]

A Swiss/American sound, visual, moving image and installation artist, Marclay studied in Geneva, Boston and New York – and was increasingly drawn to Duchamp, Fluxus and Beuys – but he first came to public notice in the late seventies as part of the New York Downtown scene as a turntable-player – in parallel with, but not in linear descent from, the DJ and scratch culture that was emerging in America at the same time. Art turntablists – as opposed to DJ turntablists – all pretty much trace their descent to Marclay. Over the last forty years he has delineated his own semiotic territory by way of a wide spread of visual, installational, sculptural, aural, moving image-based and conceptual works which, however disparate, follow a thread that winds through some tangible, tangential or cultural association with sound or sounding. Polysemic and highly focused, his aural and visual productions often incorporate (or are completely formed from) found materials and species of collage. *Telephones* is a sound film made exclusively from clips of scenes in Hollywood movies that feature telephones.

[18:59 John Cage, 'Imaginary Landscape No. 5' (excerpt), 1952]

This was John Cage's first work for magnetic tape. The score was derived using chance procedures (the I-Ching) and is to be realised using 42 phonograph records. The work consists of 3-inch – or one fifth of a second – units that have to be edited together, in eight layers, according to very specific time and dynamic-level indications. The choice of records, however, is left to the performer (the tape assembler). Cage's version was put together with the help of David Tudor, and Bebe and Louis Barron, for choreographer Jean Erdman's dance performance, *Portrait of a Lady*. For this, he used the jazz records that Erdman kept in her studio to accompany improvisation dance exercises. It was written, assembled and premiered in 1952.

[20:12 Pierre Bastien, 'Sinetic Santic', 1999]

French composer and instrument builder who, in 1987, decided to concentrate his musical energies on his growing orchestra of Mecanium – musical automata made with Meccano parts and powered by gramophone turntables or electric motors that play a wide variety of percussive and stringed instruments. In performance these are usually accompanied by a human player (or players), but they are often also set up as installations on their own. On this track you hear two mechanized steel drums, a real trumpet and one or two prepared record players.

[21:27 Kurt Weill, 'Tango Angèle' (excerpt), 1927]

'The Czar has his Photograph Taken' was a zeitoper – that's a short-lived and now more or less lost genre of music-theatre, popular in Weimar Germany in the 1920s, which took a satirical approach to contemporary life and politics – and often featured some sort of technology or machinery. The music leaned toward popular tunes and jazz. What was notable in this production was the inclusion of a working gramophone on the stage, which was both part of the action, and part of the score. When the false Angèle needs to distract the Czar, she puts on this recording – a promise of pleasures to come – while the Czar is asked to look away as she undresses (in fact, she and her fellow plotters are skipping out through the window). Weill wrote and recorded 'Tango Angèle' specifically for this scene, and it's one of the earliest examples of pre-recorded music being used in this way. When released commercially, it became Weill's first best-selling record.

[21:57 Woody Phillips, 'Also Sprach Zarathustra' (excerpt), 1896/1998]

[23:26 The (EC) Nudes, 'Radio' (excerpt), 1993]

The (EC) Nudes was a short-lived trio (1993-4; one CD) formed between American composer, saxophonist, bass player and singer Amy Denio, Swiss composer and guitarist Wādi Gysi and myself (in concert, the American composer and bassist Bob Drake was added). I had used radios since the mid seventies, on and off, and one seemed appropriate here.



[Tod Dockstader]

[24:38 Christian Marclay, 'Black Stucco' (excerpts), 1989]

Three turntables.

[25:55 Tod Dockstader, 'Piccolo and Feeder' (excerpts), 2005]

Tod Dockstader (1932-2015) was a man who very much went his own way, a pioneer of American musique concrète but not connected to any of the University electronic and tape-music communities. He studied painting and film at the University of Minnesota, before moving to Hollywood, where he became an apprentice film editor. Then he took up sound engineering and began to make electronic/concrete soundtracks for cartoons, as well as free-standing compositions for tape. In 1960 he released *Eight Electronic Pieces* – later used in Fellini's *Fellini Satyricon*. Four albums of his music were released in 1966 by Owl Records and, for a while, he was moderately celebrated. But when he applied to use the facilities at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Centre he was denied access by both Vladimir Ussachevsky and Milton Babbitt. Dockstader always believed this was the establishment snubbing the non-academic outsider (personal communication) and he certainly never received his due from 'official' historians. He continued to publish articles but, after 1966, there were no new releases, excepting two library records of film, radio and television music issued by Boosey & Hawkes, until 2004, when he began to work with the New York feedback artist David Lee Myers, producing two more CDs. Dementia overtook him and he died in 2015.

[27:11 Nicolas Collins, 'Devil's Music' (excerpts), 1985-6]

The American composer, performer and academic, Nick Collins went to Wesleyan University to study Indian music, where he met the experimentalist Alvin Lucier and rapidly detoured to follow the John Cage, Gordon Mumma, David Tudor, Robert Ashley, Sonic Arts Union route instead. He pioneered the use of microcomputers in live performance, designed and customised his own electronic equipment and figured out how to make processors and samples works as instruments. He went on to become artistic co-director at STEIM (the Studio for Electro Instrumental Music), in Amsterdam, editor-in-chief of MIT's *Leonardo Music Journal* and chair of the sound department of the School of Art Institute, in Chicago. He is also the author of *Handmade Electronic Music: The Art of Hardware Hacking*, a book on circuit-bending.

In *Devil's Music* he wrote: 'the performer sweeps the radio dial in search of suitable material, which is sampled in snippets of one second or less. These are then looped, layered and de-tuned. The stuttering circuit "re-rhythmitizes" the samples by retriggering and reversing the loops in response to accents in the rhythm of the ongoing (but usually unheard) flow of signal out of the radio – in other words, the radio material you don't hear is always governing the phrasing of the sounds you do hear, thus defeating the annoying periodicity of digital loops. The brevity of the samples is disguised by this constant shifting of the start and end points of the loop – a thrifty solution to the high cost of memory.' All sounds are taken from transmissions occurring in the AM, FM, shortwave and scanner bands at the time of the performance; no samples are prepared in advance.

[28:24 Penguin Cafe Orchestra, 'Pythagoras on the Line' (excerpt), 1993]

[29:25 Jean-Hervé Peron, 'Knacks', 2017]

Composer, bass player, guitarist, singer – best known for his work in the experimental German band Faust (1971 to the present day [2020]) and for his musical employment of chainsaws, pneumatic drills, cement mixers, leaf-blowers, welding equipment, angle grinders – and so on, here finds simple pleasure in an amplifier and a jack-to-jack connecting cable.

[29:44 Gregorio Paniagua, 'Anakrousis', 1978]

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,



[Nicolas Collins]

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.

For your listening pleasure I have, as always, been cavalier in editing the tracks together, overlapping them, making sometimes hard-to-spot joins, etc. – so, for the sake of clarity, I have prefaced each track with its start time.

Notification

If you want to be notified when a new probe goes up, please mail remegacorp@dial.pipex.com with subject: Probe Me.

03. Links

penguincafe.com
irdial.com/conet.htm
karlheinzstockhausen.org
johncage.org

04. Credits and acknowledgments

Recorded at Studio Midi-Pyrénées. Engineered by Bob Drake. Special thanks to David Petts, Aki Peltonen, Pierre Bastien, Christian Marclay, Bob Drake, Barry Phillips, Neil Hellman, Chris Wangro and Jean-Hervé Peron.

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