

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

PDF Contents:

- 01. Playlist
- 02. Notes
- 03. Links
- 04. Credits and acknowledgments
- 05. Copyright note

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.
www.ccutler.com/ccutler

PROBES #29.2

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 new episode, composers and performers expand their classical, contemporary, avant garde, jazz, rock, electronic and installation art vocabularies by incorporating real or virtual collaborations with wildlife, soundscapes, insects, amphibia, birds, whales and wolves. And we learn what a whale has in common with a nightingale.

01. Playlist

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

[00:05 Bernie Krause, TED talk (excerpt), 2013]

An American musician and pioneering soundscape ecologist, Krause (b.1937) studied violin and classical composition, finally settling to the guitar and playing on many jazz, folk and pop sessions before joining The Weavers in 1963. When The Weavers broke up, he moved to San Francisco where he studied electronic music, met Paul Beaver and formed the duo Beaver and Krause – signature early adopters, promoters and soon go-to session guys for the newly developed Moog synthesiser. For six years they played on everyone's records and countless film soundtracks – as well as releasing their own LPs, notably *In A Wild Sanctuary*, released in 1969, the first to fully integrate natural soundscapes into sonic works. After Beaver's death in 1975, Krause began to concentrate increasingly on recording and archiving the wild natural soundscapes of the world – for use in music projects, museums, aquaria, zoos, feature films – and on over 50 albums of rare habitat recordings. In the archive there are now over 5,000 hours of recordings. He remains active in matters pedagogical and ecological, has written books, lectured and mounted installations illustrating the evolution and depredation of natural soundscapes. In a grim echo, all his archives and equipment – along with the family home and contents – were destroyed in a wildfire, in 2017. The audio survived, backed up elsewhere. This is an excerpt from a TED talk he gave in 2013.

[02:36 David Rothenberg, 'Treehop' (excerpt), 2013]

Musician and writer David Rothenberg is a professor of philosophy and music and has specialised in making a case for the musical qualities of insect sounds, releasing a number of books and CDs to this end. As a composer and jazz musician he says he was influenced by the American jazz saxophonist Paul Winter who, in 1975, made musical attempts to 'communicate' with whales from the Greenpeace V – part of an anti-whaling publicity drive. Thereafter, Winter went on to incorporate whales, wolves and birds into his music – influentially in his 1978 LP, *Common Ground* – and he has pursued that idea since. Rothenberg took a more academic approach, writing books on animal musicality and, in his recordings, widened his species attention: 'Treehop', for instance is taken from the CD accompanying his book on insects, *Bug Music*. On this track he's accompanying a manipulated recording of three-humped treehoppers (they're related to cicadas). Mostly he uses captured sounds as source material – which he electronically manipulates, so there's no conceivable dialogue at work – but occasionally he gets out in the field and plays along with real critters.

[04:28 Graeme Revell, 'Variation on the Sakura', 1986]

The New Zealand musician and composer, Graeme Revell (b. 1955) was a classically trained pianist and French horn player who entered public consciousness, in the late seventies, as co-founder of the Australian industrial/electronic group SPK. When the band broke up in 1988 he moved to



[Annea Lockwood]

America and began to compose – very successfully – for mainstream film and television. This track comes from *The Insect Musicians*, released in 1986 – an album made entirely from insect sounds (and, interestingly, pre-dating Bernie Krause's technically similar *Gorillas in the Mix* by two years). On this track, we hear – very transformed (see main programme) – tsetse fly, death's-head hawkmoth, bog bush cricket, screech beetle, a queen bee laying eggs, and 35 other insect sounds.

[05:57 Bernie Krause/Richard Blackford, 'Song of the Musician Wren' (excerpt), 2014]

The British composer Richard Blackford, known best for his work in film and television, was intrigued by readings from Krause's *The Great Animal Orchestra* and contacted the author. They met and agreed to collaborate on a symphony for orchestra and field recordings. Blackford selected soundscapes from Krause's archive and used them to inform his compositions. This movement is worked around the song of the African musician Wren, the Potoo and the Piha, set in their environmental context.

[08:01 Les Baxter, 'Frogs' (excerpt), 1972]

A conservatory-trained pianist the American composer Leslie Thompson Baxter (b. 1922) also played tenor and baritone saxophone (with the Freddie Slack big band) – and worked as a singer with Mel Tormé and Artie Shaw – before becoming, in 1950, an arranger and conductor for Capitol records. He also scored for film and was soon releasing records with his own orchestra. 'Unchained Melody', in 1955, was his first million-seller. The genre now known as exotica was closely associated with Baxter. Indeed the name was taken from the Martin Denny LP *Exotica* – made with another founding exotacist, Arthur Lyman – and featuring 5 out of 12 Baxter compositions, the most famous of which, 'Quiet Village', is the quintessence of the genre. In the sixties he tried forming a folk group (an early gig for David Crosby) and went on to compose numerous soundtracks, particularly for horror and B-movies. This one is from the soundtrack of *Frogs*, released in 1972 which is constructed almost exclusively from recordings of frogs – slowed down and assigned to synthesiser keys – then played and re-recorded by Baxter himself.

[09:36 Jim Nollman, 'Froggy Went a Courting' (excerpt), 1973]

The American composer, conceptual artist, author and environmental activist Jim Nollman developed the idea of *interspecies music* in the seventies. He made this recording – for a thanksgiving-day radio broadcast – in 1973, surrounded by 300 turkeys. He says they responded to his pitches and amplitude. He went on to record with wolves and orcas, in 1981 releasing *Playing Music With Animals* on Folkways. Nollman sets the pattern for Winter and others who came after him, although he insists always on playing *with* his animal companions in real time, more concerned with the communicational aspects than the aesthetics of the end result. He also directed one of Greenpeace's first overseas projects in Japan, to end the slaughter of dolphins. Interspecies, which he founded in 1978, sponsors artists' efforts to communicate with animals through music and art.

[11:12 Lisa Walker, 'Tenakee Feeding Call' (excerpt), 2001]

A trained classical violinist, the Canadian composer and performer Lisa Walker is another student of whales, and build music around their vocalisations. This is from her 2001 release *Grooved Whale*, a studio-based confection of her own violin-playing – recorded underwater – with whale recordings and electronic sounds – assembled into ambient new-age audio wallpaper.

[12:10 David Rothenberg, 'Whales and Nightingales' (excerpt), 2007, possibly earlier]

An intriguing observation by Rothenberg – taken from a YouTube clip (oddly filed under the category 'comedy').

[14:02 Maciunas Ensemble and Canary Grand Band, 'Live With the Birds' (excerpt), 1997]

The Maciunas Ensemble, named after Fluxus maestro George Maciunas, was founded in 1968 by Paul Panhuysen, Remko Scha and Jan van Riet. Panhuysen, a Dutch composer, visual and sound artist, also founded and directed the famous Het Apollohuis, an art space in Eindhoven that, all through the eighties and nineties, mounted a breathtaking parade of cutting-edge artists, presenting sound installations, sound sculptures, concerts of electronic and experimental music and of free improvisation. A large cage of canaries – permanent Appollohuis



[Humpback whale]

residents – were so inspired during a recording in which the band were bowing, stroking and tapping pieces of amplified aluminium (suspended on rubber bands to allow pitch shifting) – that they joined in – and continued to do so in ‘an often very loud and competitive way’ Panyhausen wrote, ‘for more than an hour’. Here’s an excerpt.

[15:30 On Fillmore, ‘Checking In’ (excerpt), 2009]

On Fillmore is a side project of the American drummer Glenn Kotche – who uses, in addition to normal percussion, home-made instruments and scrap metal and is best known for his work in the band Wilco – and bassist Darin Grey. Here, with birds.

[16:23 Jonathan Harvey, ‘Bird Concerto With Pianosong’ (excerpt), 2001]

The prolific British composer, author and teacher, Jonathan Harvey worked extensively with electronics in the eighties, at IRCAM in Paris and, amongst other things, did much interesting work integrating electronics and conventional musical resources, of which this is an example. ‘Indigo bunting, orchard oriole, golden crowned sparrow – these are some of the 40 colourful Californian birds whose songs and cries sparked the ignition of this work... “Real” birdsong was to be stretched seamlessly all the way to human proportions – resulting in giant birds – so that a contact between worlds is made. When I started to transpose them and slow them down to our natural speeds of perception they began to reveal level after level of ornamentation – baroque curlicues and oriental arabesques. They were put on a triggering keyboard and combined in dialogue with instruments – particularly solo piano, [which] connects closely by playing [the] birdsong samples and [the] piano simultaneously... Birds also use quasi-electronic frequency modulation in their cries and songs. I took their hint and copied their tricks in the electronic modulations of the orchestra.’

[17:52 Céleste Boursier-Mougenot, ‘From Here to Ear’ (excerpt), 2010]

Boursier-Mougenot is a French sound and installation artist, and trained composer, who works with a variety of materials (his floating bowl piece will appear in Probes 30). ‘From Here to Ear’, an installation that uses birds to generate sounds by landing on or pecking at things, dates back to 1999 when he let a gang of zebra finches excite the strings of an open piano. The most common iteration today – following its success at the London Barbican in 2010 – puts 40 or so zebra finches in a space with a number of plugged in and amplified electric guitars. When the birds touch the strings, the guitars make sounds.

[19:18 Virginia Belmont/Franz Schubert/Canaries, ‘Ave Maria’ (excerpt), 1825/1960]

Virginia Belmont entered show business at the age of nine, and was later proclaimed World’s Champion High Kick Terpsichorean Dancer by no less an authority than Florenz Ziegfeld, in whose Follies she was performing. It was there, in the early 1930s, that she met Joseph Belmont (b. 1876), who had been famous in his youth as a whistling performer, bird impressionist and baritone – in fact before the turn of the century he had been one of the most popular American recording artists and was known as The Human Bird. Trouble with his teeth had ended his singing career and for the follies he was presenting a ‘Canary Opera’, performed by his school of singing birds. I’m not making this up. Virginia married the considerably older Joseph and they opened a bird shop in Rockefeller Center, New York, where she regularly performed with her own birds. She also toured America with some of her Mynah birds. Of herself on the liner notes of her self-produced LP, in 1960, she wrote: ‘she has a gift of magic with people and pets. They feel her warmth and enthusiasm immediately when in her presence, and she has an uncanny ability to heal them when they come to her’. ‘Ave Maria’ is the concluding track on the LP and features her canary chorus, a pipe organ and the human voice of George Sawtelle.

[21:34 Bernie Krause/Richard Blackford, ‘Elegy’ (excerpt), 2014]

The third movement of the symphony (see above) in which wolves howl microtonally, supported by four French horns. A bassoon extends the call of a Minnesota beaver.

[22:02 Beatrice Harrison, ‘Londonderry Air’ (excerpt), 1924]

Beatrice Harrison (b. 1892, in India) was a celebrated British cellist, who premiered many important works, especially those of Frederick Delius – and was frequently on the radio in the early days of the BBC. On warm evenings, when she rehearsed in her Surrey garden, the local nightingales sang along and, amazingly



[Nightingale]

for the time (1924), she managed to persuade the BBC to come down and do a live broadcast from her garden – with the birds. It was so popular with the public that the experiment was repeated the following month and then every spring for the next twelve years. The BBC say that Beatrice and the nightingales received some 50,000 fan letters from around the world, and the broadcast also laid a small way-stone on the path of the evolution of experimental radio.

[23:34 Karlheinz Stockhausen, 'Mittwochs-Abschied' (excerpt), 1996]

This 8-channel piece, full of animal, insect and bird sounds, appears twice in 'Mittwoch aus Licht' from Stockhausen's 7-day opera 'Licht' – each day comprising a *greeting*, several dramatic and musical scenes and a farewell; the whole cycle lasting 29 hours – though each day, and the individual parts of each day, are free-standing works that can be performed alone. The whole cycle has never been staged in full, though each of the full days has been, some of them several times, as have the individual components. The structure of the entire cycle is derived from three counterpointed main melodies (or *formulas*, as Stockhausen calls them), which determine, in a manner extended from serial technique, pitches, dynamics, durations, timbres and tempos. Each of the melodies is associated in the drama with one of the three principle protagonists, Michael, Eve and Lucifer. Wednesday – colour: yellow – is the day of Cooperation and Reconciliation. The tape piece appears in it twice: once as the accompaniment to scene 2 – 'Orchester-Finalisten' – in which 11 performers, each with a different instrument swing slowly on trapezes above the audience (who lie on their backs on futons for this scene) – and perform short 'auditions', before all playing in an interleaved way together. The tape appears again, this time as an octophonic sound projection as the audience departs at the end of the day.

[25:08 Annea Lockwood, 'World Rhythms' (excerpt), 1975]

The New Zealand composer and performer Annea Lockwood (b. 1939) studied in Europe, settling in London in the early sixties where she premiered her highly influential (and original) 'Glass Music' (using only glass; see PROBES 30); also joining the Fluxus piano-torture trend with 'Piano Transplants' – burning, drowning, and burying pianos in various locations. Trained in (and for years a teacher of) electronic music, Lockwood charted a unique path through 20th century music, never quite fitting into any established genre. After she moved to New York, in the seventies, she began to work extensively with environmental sounds, interview materials, multi-channel installations, microphone manipulation and, electro-acoustic and indigenous instruments. Water has been a constant theme until the present day. 'World Rhythms' is a 10-channel tape composition using only untreated environmental sounds and a large tam-tam. The audience sits in a circle facing the percussionist – encircled from behind by the loudspeakers – each with its own unique procession of sounds.

[26:36 Olivier Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod, 'Untitled' (excerpt), date unknown]

Olivier Messiaen, one of the giants of 20th century composition, collected, transcribed and worked extensively with birdsong all his life. In this archive footage he demonstrates, with the help of his wife, pianist Yvonne Loriod, fragments of nightingale and corncrake vocalisation. I got this clip from Olivier Mille's 2002 *Arte* television documentary, *Olivier Messiaen: La Liturgie de Cristal*, but I don't know where Mille got it from. It's quite old.

[27:52 Evan Parker, untitled track from Evan Parker With Birds (excerpt), 2004]

Pre-recorded tracks of northern European birds (from 78s, LPs and CDs) were assembled. The recordings are by Geoff Sample, Charles and Heather Myers, Jean C. Roche, Myles North, Eric Simms and Ashley Wales.

[29:14 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



[Bog bush cricket]

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.

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 termegacorp@dial.pipex.com with subject: Probe Me.

03. Links

www.wildsanctuary.com
www.davidrothenberg.net
www.graemerevell.com
www.vitkovalucie.com
www.blackford.co.uk
interspecies.com
www.paulpanhuysen.nl
www.glennkotche.com
[/web.archive.org/web/20010602054953/http://www.vivosvoco.com/index.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20010602054953/http://www.vivosvoco.com/index.html)
karlheinzstockhausen.org
www.oliviermessiaen.org/messiaen2index.htm
www.evanparker.com

04. Credits and acknowledgments

Recorded at Studio Midi-Pyrénées. Engineered by Bob Drake. Special thanks to Dave Petts, Bob Drake, Jonas Vognsen, Massimo Simonini, Evan Parker, John Coxon.

05. Copyright note

2021. All rights reserved. © by the respective authors and publishers. Ràdio Web MACBA is a non-profit research and transmission project.

Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders; any errors or omissions are inadvertent, and will be corrected whenever it's possible upon notification in writing to the publisher.

