

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. www.ccutler.com/ccutler

PROBES #33.2

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 PROBES #33.2, we'll find the Theremin at work in art ensembles, symphony orchestras, a jazz group, rock bands and on film and television scores – both alone and in quantity –, and there's a rare sighting of Nikolai Obukhov's *Croix Sonore* from his extraordinary *Third and Last Testament*.

01. Musical references

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

[00:05 Andrey Smirnov on Theremin's Harmonium (excerpt), 2020]

Andrey Smirnov is the author of the indispensable *Sound in Z*, which documents the many groundbreaking sound experiments essayed in the early years of the Soviet Union – when radical visions were allowed to flourish. He is also the founding director of the *Theremin Center* for Electroacoustic Music in Moscow and a senior lecturer at the Center of Electronic Music at the Moscow State Conservatory and the Rodchenko School of Art. In this clip he is showing Lydia Kavina Leon Theremin's 1960s rebuild of his 1926 microtonal and polyphonic harmonium.

[01:34 Marc Wilkinson, 'Angel Naked' (excerpt), 1971]

One of a host of horror and sci-fi movie soundtracks haunted by the Theremin. The Australian composer Marc Wilkinson was born in Paris and studied composition in America at both Columbia and Princeton – as well as taking private lessons with Edgar Varèse. One of the first independent composers to make use of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop he was also resident composer and musical director for the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre, in London – where he produced two highly regarded scores for Peter Shaffer's 'The Royal Hunt of the Sun' and 'Equus'. It was also at the National Theatre that he met Piers Haggard, just about to direct his first feature film: 'Blood on Satan's Claw'. This is from Wilkinson's soundtrack for that film; one of many cues that features the Theremin.

[02:29 Jamie O'Callahan, 'Theremin Concerto' (excerpt), 2004]

Welsh-Irish minimalistic composer, keyboardist and string player, now resident in the Netherlands, who started out with new wave ambitions but then went back to university to train more formally and is now involved in commissions, collaborations and the new age project *Colour of Time*. The thereminist is Sayoko Takaki.

[03:28 Randy George, 'Something About Us' (excerpt), 2008]

Los Angeles based thereminist and performance interface specialist, Randy George, using a synthesiser and a looper, sets up this Daft Punk track in realtime and then animates it with this neatly implemented, light-touch theremin solo.

[05:08 Fazil Say, 'Universe Symphony' (excerpts), 2012]

Turkish child prodigy and now prolific composer, especially of large-scale orchestral works, often including traditional or unconventional instruments and themes derived from Turkish folk or regional folk music. 'The Universe', his third symphony, premiered in 2012, supplements the orchestra with a Waterphone, a Daxaphone, Log, Hapi and UFO drums, a kalimba, a wind machine – and quite a lot of theremin, played here by Carolina Eyck. The low grumbling noises are the Daxaphone (see PROBES #32).



[Sayoko Takaki playing a theremin. Source: ayamomose.com/works/363/?ja]

[06:57 Louis Febre, 'Alien Trespass' (excerpt), 2009]

Mexican composer, now resident in Los Angeles – and a prolific composer for television and film ('Smallville', 'Charlie's Angels', 'Desperate Housewives' and countless others), whose score for the sci-fi parody 'Alien Trespass' gathered more praise than the film itself. The Theremin here is played by the redoubtable Rob Schwimmer.

[07:41 Harry Lubin, 'The Duplicate Man (Outer Limits)' (excerpts), 1964]

American composer, arranger and pianist whose career began in 1925, when he became the piano accompanist for the legendary Russian opera singer Fiódor Chaliapin. He then worked extensively in theatre, film and radio, winding up in television where he became famous for his excellent and highly modern scores for 'The Outer Limits' and 'One Step Beyond'.

[09:12 Aldo Piga, 'Il Mostro dell'Opera', 1964]

Much under-rated Italian-American composer who started out as composer of popular songs and then shifted to film scoring, composing for more than a hundred films – mostly low-budget potboilers – in the late 1950s and on through the 60s. This is from his score for *Il Mostro dell'Opera* (*The Vampire of the Opera*), directed by Renato Polselli.

[10:20 Konstantin Kovalsky and Vyacheslav Mescherin's ensemble of electromusical instruments, unidentified television track, 1960]

After his meeting with Leon Theremin in 1921, Konstantin Kovalsky, a trained violinist who had injured his hand, took rapidly to the theremin, first becoming Leon's assistant and then the world's first professional thereminist, working throughout the Soviet period, he gave more than 3000 solo concerts, did a great deal of film soundtrack work and – as here – performed regularly with the composer Vyacheslav Valerianovich Mescherin's Orchestra of Electronic Instruments, a permanent ensemble established in 1957 in the music department of Soviet State Radio to play space-age pop and easy-listening music with electronic organs, early synthesisers, amplified instruments and, of course, a Theremin. For three decades the orchestra appeared regularly on radio, television and on the soundtracks of cartoon films. Yuri Gagarin was a fan – and Mescherin's electronic sound recording of 'The Internationale' was carried into space on the first Sputnik.

[11:36 Roque Baños López, 'The Machinist Soundtrack' (excerpts), 2004]

Spanish saxophonist, pianist and composer who, after graduating from the Berklee College of Music, in Boston scored numerous Spanish, British and American films, winning a best original score for *Evil Dead*. Lydia Kavina plays the heavily featured Theremin on his score for Brad Anderson's *The Machinist*.

[13:31 Andrey Smirnov, Rhythmicon demo at Loop 2017]

[15:02 Masami Takeuchi and Matryomin ensemble Mable and Da play Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy' (excerpt), 2019]

In 1993, the instrumentalist and musicologist Masami Takeuchi went to Moscow to study the theremin with Lydia Kavana, and then brought the instrument back to Japan, where he established a Japanese theremin school, now the world's largest. In 2003, he founded the Takeuchi Theremin Institute and launched the Matryomin – a small Theremin in the form of a matryoshka doll – which is what we hear here. With his large classes of students – in the hundreds – and the simplicity of the Matryomin, the sound of massed theremins, each tuned to a slightly different pitch, offers new sonic possibilities to an old technology – as you can hear in this live recording of 289 Matryomins playing Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy' at the Design Creative Centre Kobe, in September 2019, winning the ensemble its place in the 'Guinness Book of Records'.

[16:20 Nikolai Obukhov, 'Third and Last Testament for 5 voices, La Croix Sonore' (excerpt), 1946]

Born in April 1892, Obukhov remains a largely unsung (literally) and forgotten genius of Twentieth century music; or at least a man of remarkable vision and ambition. Fleeing Russia in 1918 with his wife and two children he settled in Paris where he studied with Maurice Ravel – who also found him a publisher and provided financial assistance for his family. In 1926 he unveiled the Croix Sonore – essentially a Theremin in the shape of a cross and orb which he went on to score into many of his compositions. While working on highly distinctive



[Philip Dadson's *Atau Tangi*, wind powered instruments/installation]

compositions steeped in religious mysticism and developing his own unusual system of notation, refining his idiosyncratic 12-tone chromatic musical language and exploring the possibilities of early electronic sound, he continued to earn his living as a bricklayer. Obukhov was also one of the first composers to ask singers to scream, whisper, shout, groan and whistle. He was attacked and mugged in 1949 by a gang of thugs, who made off with a portfolio of manuscripts which included the definitive copy of his masterwork, *The Book of Life*. He lived five more years as an invalid and left numerous manuscripts behind, only a few of which have been published. I don't know why. Fortunately, you can find a few recordings online, enough at least to get the measure of his originality and power. Of his epic work, *The Book of Life* – intended to be performed once a year, over a day and a night, in a specially constructed cathedral – only the prologue, seems to have been performed during his lifetime. This score, like the work itself, is vast – some 2,000 pages in the copy deposited in the Bibliothèque Nationale, in Paris – with fold-outs, collages and some performance markings apparently in the composer's own blood. The *Croix Sonore* survives too and is on display at the Musée de La Musique, in Paris. I strongly recommend searching out his work on record or online.

[18:18 Carolina Eyck, 'Nukkuva Luohla (Sleepy Dragon)', 2016]

German composer and instrumentalist Carolina Eyck took up the Theremin at her father's suggestion (he was in a German synth band) taking instruction from Lydia Kavina, while at the same time continuing to study piano, violin and viola in Sweden. A shoulder injury settled her onto the Theremin (mirroring Konstantin Kovalsky's similar decision after he'd sustained a serious injury to his hand). By the age of 16 she had developed a new and more precise playing technique which she called 'the 8-finger position', which allowed performers to 'tune the Theremin to their hand and rely on finger positions rather than having to correct notes after they become audible. In the past she said 'players would be approximate, maybe adjusting their tuning with vibrato – in the 1920s and 30s the fashion was to play with a lot of vibrato. I prefer to keep the sound pretty straight, so it's more important to hit the note bang-on. And that requires precision.' Her method has since been widely adopted – and has changed the way the Theremin is thought about by composers. In 2006 she published *The Art of Playing the Theremin*, the first formal manual written for the instrument. Otherwise, she plays classic – and new – Theremin repertoire with the world's orchestras and has had new works written for her – all adding fuel to a modest theremin renaissance. She also performs alone with her surround-sound Voice and Theremin project and has released a number of CDs of orchestral works, collaborations, improvisations as well as collections of her own compositions – of which this is one, taken from her CD *Fantasias for Theremin and string Quartet*, made with the American Contemporary Music Ensemble.

[19:15 Jonny Greenwood, 'Open Spaces' (excerpts), 2007]

Outside his high-profile work with Radiohead, Jonny Greenwood has found his way into film scoring and orchestra work, following the logic of a life of catholic listening, a general enthusiasm for contemporary art music – and a yen to experiment with different ways to match his musical imagination to the affordances of new compositional technologies. And, in the noble tradition of rock musicians revivifying marginal electronic instruments, he has become an aficionado of the Ondes Martenot – playing it and scoring for it – as here, in his award-winning score for Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood*.

[20:49 Dmitri Shostakovich, 'Storm Scene, Storm Breaks', 1931]

This cue from the soundtrack of Leonid Trauberg and Grigori Kozintsev's film 'Odna' is almost certainly the first use of electronic sound on the soundtrack of a general release feature film. The part would almost certainly have originally been played by Konstantin Kovalsky but, although the film has been recovered, the sound on the reel containing this scene – a snowstorm – has not. So this is a reconstruction by Mark Fitzgerald made for a new recording of the original score by the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra in 2008. The theremin is played by Barbara Buchholz.

[21:45 Dmitri Shostakovich, 'L'Internationale' (excerpt), 1935]

From the soundtrack of Lev Arnshtam's *Podrugi (Girlfriends)*. Another reconstruction by Mark Fitzgerald. In this scene the girlfriends – who are nurses –



[Pamela Kurstin (now Stickney)]

retreat with wounded soldiers by train. Shostakovich is being quite enigmatic here. Celia Sheen plays the Theremin.

[23:23 Regis Campo, 'Dancefloor With Pulsing' (excerpts), 2018]

Regis Campo is a French composer, born 1968, who studied with Georges Bœuf in Marseille, Alain Bancquart and Gérard Grisey in Paris – and privately with both Edison Denisov and Henri Dutilleux. He has received many awards and his catalogue currently includes more than two hundred works for instrumental or vocal ensembles, string quartets, orchestras, and two operas. 'Dancefloor with Pulsing' was composed for Carolina Eyck and is, essentially, prog rock for orchestra, nicely orchestrated but pretty one-dimensional – a long vamp in 11/8 with some spaces for improvisation on the Ondes Martenot. It was premiered by the Brussels Philharmonic Orchestra in 2018.

[25:02 Masami Takeuchi, 'Glissando' (excerpt), 2021]

26:47 Pamela Kurstin (now Stickney), 'Autumn Leaves' (excerpt), 2010]

An American pianist, bassist and cellist, now with the Theremin as her specialist instrument. Apart from her solo work, she has performed and recorded with, amongst others, David Byrne, David Garland, Yoko Ono and Bela Fleck. Her trademark, possibly derived from the fact that she's also a contrabassist, is her Theremin walking bass technique, heard here with pianist Makoto Ozone. She left New York in 2005 and now lives in Vienna, where, in 2013, she formed Blueblut with Mark Holub and Chris Janka (see main programme).

[28:06 Lydia Kavina, 'The Internationale' (excerpt), 2008]

Granddaughter of Leon Theremin's first cousin, Lydia Kavina began to study the Theremin at the age of nine, taught by Leon Theremin and going on to become one of the world's best known players and teachers of the instrument. Apart from the usual repertoire, she is also a champion of new experimental music for the Theremin and composes for it. On film you'll hear her on Howard Shore's soundtrack for *Ed Wood* (Tim Burton), *EXistenZ* (David Cronenberg), and *The Machinist* (Brad Anderson – see above). This is from *The Spectre and The Sphere*, by Jesse Jones. She lives in Oxfordshire.

[30:07 Masami Takeuchi, 'Russian Medley' (excerpt), 2021]

[31:05 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, 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

colouroftime.com/compositions.html
www.randygeorgemusic.com/about



[Lydia Kavina. Source: Wikipedia]

www.theremin.ru
fazilsay.com
www.louisfebre.com
www.robschwimmer.com
www.carolinaeyck.com
www.lydiakavina.com
www.pameliastickney.com
javierdiezena.com
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04. Credits and acknowledgments

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