

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

PDF Contents:
01. Transcript
02. Notes
03. Acknowledgments
04. 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, 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 #21

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 #21** our survey of the incorporation of exotic instruments into western musical vocabularies moves from the Caribbean to East Asia, considering, en route, the curious case of world music as a commercial and ideological category'.

01. Transcript. Studio version

[Gregorio Paniagua, 'Anakrousis', 1978]

In the last four programmes we have focused on the incorporation into domestic contexts of exotic instruments, and the significant reverberations this engendered throughout the musical community. But today, the shuffling of cultural codes is a commonplace and attracts little comment. So, where should we locate what is now called world music in our history of probes and appropriations? I think, on the margins, and I'll try to explain why.

This series has set out to explore some of the strategies, experiments and investigations through which musicians and composers have tested ways of extending or redefining the vocabulary or syntax of music. I have taken European understandings and paradigms as my starting point, because theirs is the history I am attempting to unravel¹– and also because it's the only history I know. Other musical cultures may be deeper, more subtle, or more eloquent – but they are also – to us – more opaque. It will always be a question, *if* they attract us, *why* they attract us; it's certainly not because we understand them. So, what interests me about our engagement with ideas or instruments from other cultures is the way we deploy them in pursuit of the reinvigoration of our own aesthetic and expressive endeavours. What signifies is the way the things that we assimilate are changed – and how they in turn change us. That's why the idea of world music – as distinct from the inexorable mutation of local music, through a slow process of assimilation and contagion – is such a vexed issue. After all, rock music is world music now Western orchestral music is world music; all music circulating as commodities is effectively world music – but that's not what the people who use this term want it to mean. In fact, these are meanings that they want to *exclude*. So what do they want to mean?

The term itself was first coined by the ethnomusicologist Robert E. Brown, who believed that peace and understanding would follow if the peoples of the earth could share their many different musics. To facilitate this he established, in the early sixties, both undergraduate and doctoral world music programmes, inviting visiting musicians from abroad to teach and perform at his faculty at the Wesleyan University in Connecticut. This was an initiative wholly in tune with the spirit of the times since, in the world outside his institution, the same cross-fertilisation was already happening in practice – especially in the jazz community, and most strongly in the *avant-garde* black jazz community which, by then, had become a significant force in the integration of instruments, aesthetics and philosophies from other cultures. And they were also – especially in their response to the study of Indian classical music – unashamedly asserting a newly discovered *spiritual* dimension in the coming together of disparate cultures.



[Liam Teague]

[John Coltrane, 'A Love Supreme' (excerpt), 1965; Alice Coltrane 'A Love Supreme', 1971; Pharoah Sanders, 'The Creator Has a Master Plan' (excerpt), 1969; Rufus Harley, 'King' (excerpt), 1970; Don Cherry, 'Tibet', 1974]

By the late fifties, ethnographic research was no longer restricted to a handful of academics and musicologists, but had been placed firmly in the public domain by specialist record labels like UNESCO, Ocora, Le Chant du Monde and Folkways. Once obscure and precious, now recordings of the world's music were circulating freely – and musicians from all disciplines, including the emerging body of non-idiomatic improvisers, were listening and being inspired by it. 'Open your eyes and your ears and you're influenced', as Bob Dylan once remarked. Motives may have differed: study, pleasure, general interest, research... but the results were everywhere – in modal structures, drones, rhythms, the use of exotic colour, new performance techniques, samples and the incorporation of unfamiliar instruments. Over the next thirty years, both the record market and the tour-circuit for non-Western music grew – until, by the mid eighties, all the threads came together under the label of 'world music' – which was now understood, primarily, as a marketing category that brought folk, ethnic, and non-Western art music together with a variety of cross-cultural hybrids, loosely predicated on a vaguely formed paralinguistic notion of universal musicality.

Had something changed in twenty years? I offer two observations; first: that at the level of the *market*, on which it mostly operates, this is little more than a Darwinian selection system that rewards those who produce whatever Westernised ears find most amenable; and second: that the *de facto* universal musical language that emerges, tends to gather around a dominant Western norm, just more colourful and exotic – and definitely more virtuosic. I don't say this is a good or a bad thing – as with all cross-pollinations, important new hybrids have emerged. However, it's arguable that where cross-cultural sports – like reggae or salsa, or jazz, or the blues – grew directly out of local communities, and served those communities, World Music, in its current form, is more extraterritorial – and predicated too strongly not on a community but on a marketplace. The negative case would be to say it's not a culture because it has no root; that it doesn't deal in innovation but novelty; that it's a projection rather than an eruption – and that it grows from its surface and not from within. The positive case would be to argue that, yes, a new, extraterritorial culture really *is* emerging from this great coming together, and that it really *does* represent something meaningful and real. What is unarguable is that the world music brand has created a forum in which unusually skilled musicians are able to present music that ranges from great to mediocre – exactly, in fact, like every other kind of music. World music has become, like Franz Kafka's *Nature Theatre of Oklahoma*, a show in which there is a place reserved for everyone.

Now, I could easily have presented my next example as a *folk* instrument, since its use and evolution is as grass roots as it gets. Or I could have called it an *invented* instrument, since it didn't exist before 1930. But, because of the way we generally interpret it, I'll include it here as an *exotic* instrument. Born in Trinidad out of necessity, when other forms of percussion were banned, the steel pan was, typically, made from a discarded oil drum, cut and hammered to produce a range of chromatic pitches. It was built in families – from bass to soprano – and assembled in popular orchestras to play music for dancing. And sometimes, in more exotic mood, it might also interpret Western art repertoire. Here, for instance, is Camille Saint-Saëns' 'Aquarium', part of his 1886 suite 'The Carnival of the Animals'. The original was scored for two pianos, flute, violin, viola, cello and glass harmonica.

[Esso Trinidad Steel Band, 'Aquarium' (excerpts), arranged by Van Dyke Parks, 1971]

And just as the instrument recognises art, so art recognises the instrument. Especially in the form of the concerto, of which there are several. Here's an extract from one of them by the American composer Jan Bach. It's played on this 1995 recording by the Paganini of the steel pan, Liam Teague.

[Jan Bach, 'Concerto for Steel Pan' (excerpt), 1995]

It's in more sympathetic company here, alongside a piano, percussion and



[Wagakki Band]

Senegalese kora. This is the American pan player Andy Narral, making a guest appearance with the all-African Kora Jazz Band. The song, 'Oye Como Va', is Puerto Rican.

[Kora Jazz Band, 'Oye Como Va' (excerpts), 2011]

In a rather different context, here's the great Van Dyke Parks, who uses steel pans a lot, usually quite subliminally mixed in with harp and harmonica to achieve subtle shades of orchestral colour. This is 'After the Ball', from the 1984 album, *Jump*.

[Van Dyke Parks, 'After the Ball' (excerpts), 1984]

The German composer, Hans Werner Henze used steel pans in a great number of his works, employing them routinely in his, often enormous, percussion sections. Here they are in a quartet piece, 'El Cimarrón' – the runaway slave – which is scored for guitar, flute, percussion and voice.

[Hans Werner Henze, 'El Cimarrón' (excerpts), 1970]

The French spectralist, Gérard Grisey also made frequent use of the steel drum. Here it is on his 1978 work, 'Quatre Chants Pour Franchir Le Seuil'.

[Gérard Grisey, 'Quatre Chants Pour Franchir Le Seuil' (excerpt), 1997-8]

Obviously, the more connected the world has become, the less viable it is to approach it as a disparate set of exotic locations. Back in the late nineteenth century, Western instruments and Western music were as alien to Indonesians as the Gamelan was to Parisians. And, it must be said, non-European cultures assimilated European culture far better, and far more quickly, than we assimilated theirs. But a century on – after two world wars, sixty years of routine air travel, the establishment of planet-wide markets and the growth of universal mass-communications – the globalisation of music is now pretty far advanced. And, as the music that surrounds them becomes increasingly mediated and dissociated from discernible human action, so listeners today seem to be less curious and less easily impressed than they were fifty years ago. Sound coming out of loudspeakers is not unlike CGI on cinema screens; it makes us believe that the impossible is normal, and it kills curiosity. Where a great cinematic shot would have been a puzzle and a wonder – because we could identify with the human ingenuity that managed to set it up – now, the chances are it's just computer graphic imaging. And that belongs to the world of machines, not the world of human achievement. Don't get me wrong, the results empower human imagination, but we process these results in a different way. Playing accurately at speed is one thing; playing slowly and then speeding up the recording is another – and programming the whole thing from scratch is something else again and, each step on this journey diminishes our collective engagement as a species, privileging result over process, consumption over production and selection over intention. 'Between the idea and the reality; between the motion and the act, falls the shadow'.

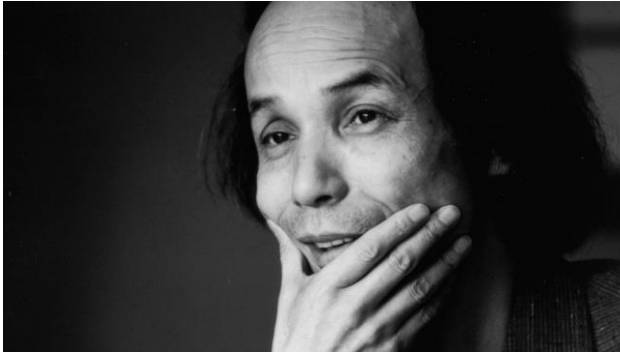
[T. S. Eliot, 'The Hollow Men', 1925 (excerpt)]

[Wagakki Band, 'Tengaku' (excerpt), 2014]

In the fields of art and pop, Japanese instruments have been probed mainly not by Western composers, but by Japanese.

[Wagakki Band, 'Tengaku' (excerpt), 2014]

Until American gunboat diplomacy forcibly opened Japan for trade in the mid nineteenth century, the country had been closed to the West for over 200 years. Western orchestras, funded mostly by private patrons, appeared for the first time in the late 1870s. Fifty years later, they were being run by universities, radio stations and large department stores and, by the late fifties, Western music, Western instruments and Western tuning had been embraced and mastered, to the extent that, on a technical level, Japanese composers and performers working



[Toru Takemitsu]

in the Western tradition were the equals of any other nation in what had become, *de facto*, a world music. Toru Takemitsu for instance, had studied Western the extent that, on a technical level, Japanese composers and performers working in the Western tradition were the equals of any other nation in what had become, *de facto*, a world music. Toru Takemitsu for instance, had studied Western composition, worked in electronic and tape studios and was involved with groups like Fluxus and the New York School of composers; in other words, he was working at the leading edge of the international art avant-garde. He has said himself that it was largely in response to John Cage's interest in the zen branch of buddhism – and Japanese art in general – that he turned back to examine his own culture. And his first attempt to bring traditional Japanese instruments – in this case the shakuhachi and the biwa – into the Western orchestra, was the immediately successful 'November Steps', premiered in 1967. Since the biwa and the shakuhachi belong to different traditions, and are *never* normally played together, Takemitsu had first to develop two systems of graphic notation – one for each – and then synchronise these with the Western stave notation used to animate the orchestra. He had already sketched out the method in 'Eclipse', written the year before, only for biwa and shakuhachi.

[Toru Takemitsu, 'Eclipse' (excerpt), 1966]

Six years after the premiere of 'November Steps', Takemitsu wrote 'Autumn, Into the Fall After a Little While', again for biwa, shakuhachi, and now orchestra. I'll play a little of that, since it's less well known and, I think, more successful than 'November Steps'.

[Toru Takemitsu, 'Autumn, Into the Fall After a Little While' for biwa, shakuhachi and orchestra (excerpts), 1973]

Unhappily, there seems to be no existing recording of the piece Karlheinz Stockhausen wrote for the Imperial Gagaku Orchestra, in 1977, but I can play a little of Takemitsu's 'In an Autumn Garden', which was also written for the Gagaku Orchestra two years later...

[Toru Takemitsu, 'In an Autumn Garden. Strophe' (excerpt), 1979]

And here's a stunningly persuasive work by Yoshiro Vladimir Irino, the first Japanese composer to use Schoenberg's twelve-tone system. This was written in 1973, for orchestra and two shakuhachis. I'm only sorry I can't play more of it. He called it 'Wandlungen', which in German means 'transformations'.

[Yoshiro Irino, 'Wandlungen' (excerpts), 1973]

And here's the British shakuhachi player Clive Bell, a long-time student of the instrument – which he uses only in non-traditional settings, but from a deep grounding in traditional technique.

[Clive Bell, 'June in Tottenham' (excerpt), 2012]

What is true of Japan is also true of China – and the most intriguing work with indigenous instruments there is being done by Chinese composers, using modified Western compositional forms. Here's a piece by Tan Dun, who is already well known in the west. He's a composer we'll meet again in several other contexts. This extract is from his 'Concerto for String Orchestra and Zheng'. A zheng – like the Japanese koto – is a species of zither with moveable bridges.

[Tan Dun, 'Concerto for String Orchestra and Zheng' (excerpts), 1999]

There's a substantial body of contemporary chamber music written only for Chinese traditional instruments. This, for instance, is from Zhu Lin's impressive 'Transcendence', for 7 performers, recorded in 2004.

[Zhu Lin, 'Transcendence' for seven performers (excerpt), 2004]

Actually I'm going to play another extract from this; it's so great.

[Zhu Lin, 'Transcendence' for seven performers (excerpt), 2004]



[Cassiber]

And this is Chen Yi, with a solo piece for pipa, which is, essentially, a four-string lute.

[Chen Yi, 'The Points' (excerpts), 1991]

By contrast here's some Western writing for the pipa, an instrument that, interestingly, several people have probed – including Terry Riley, Philip Glass and Lou Harrison. This extract here is from Lou Harrison's 'Concerto for pipa with string orchestra', a very recent composition, from 1997.

[Lou Harrison, 'Concerto for Pipa with String Orchestra. Part IV. Bits and Pieces: Wind and Plum' (excerpt), 1997]

And here's an extract from Terry Riley's 2008 work, 'The Cusp of Magic', a fifty minute marathon for pipa and string quartet.

[Terry Riley, 'The Cusp of Magic, Part II. Buddha's Bedroom' (excerpts), 2008]

So. We can see several possible approaches that might be taken toward exotic instruments. Native players obviously approach from the *inside* – from a position of inherited and acquired cultural knowledge. Outsiders can only take this trajectory on the basis of deep study – which does occasionally happen. On the other hand, being *inside* a culture makes it impossible to approach an instrument freely – since the routines and reflexes and concepts already written into their bodies can never be unlearned; they can only be resisted. Insiders and outsiders, therefore, ask different questions, see different potentials, and make different contributions to the evolution of new musical practices.

Then there is what I might call analogue thinking; that's where one approaches a new instrument through an awareness of its similarities to an instrument one already knows. For instance, George Harrison's initial approach to the sitar was to treat it like a guitar with an amazingly different sound; a drum, at root, is a something you hit, a shakuhachi is a kind of flute, a santur is essentially a zither – and so on. We heard the way Takeshi Terauchi approached the electric guitar through his familiarity with the biwa – so you can imagine how a pipa player would approach a Western lute. Here then, we have another line of approach: not immersing oneself in a culture, but finding a personal relationship to an instrument. This is how Heiner Goebbels, for instance, approached the erhu – a one string Chinese violin. As a former cellist, he used the techniques he'd learned, without needing to take account of the culture from which the erhu came, or of the orthodox techniques required to play it formally. That means he could, more or less, start from scratch and find out how someone who thinks the way he thinks would use the instrument to make sounds that work. Here he is playing on 'Todo Dia', taken from the 1986 Cassiber album, *Perfect Worlds*.

[Cassiber, 'Todo Dia' (excerpt), 1986]

[Gregorio Paniagua, 'Anakrousis', 1978]

In the next programme we'll hear what else has been assimilated from the world's warehouse of instruments.

¹ Every known culture has a practice that we (not necessarily they) would call music, which is associated with social rituals. Agricultural communities, for instance, have religious music and folk music – and some have forms of secular art music too, all of which are linear, monophonic, and rooted in melody (and, sometimes, rhythm). Only literate Western societies have evolved in addition, a formal, intellectualised musical aesthetic that is predicated on writing, and primarily articulated through harmonic development – a convention that emerged in tandem with a social structure invested in commodity relationships, and that lives through constant upheaval and the multiplication of competing styles and genres.

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



[Emil Richards]

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. Acknowledgments

Thanks to Bob Drake, Dave Petts, Clive Bell, Yumi Hara.

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