

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 #23.2

## 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. This auxiliary digs deeper into the many faces of the toy piano and introduces the fiendish dactylyon.

### 01. Playlist

00:00 Gregorio Paniagua, 'Anakrousis', 1978

00:04 Margaret Leng Tan, 'Ladies First Interview' (excerpt), date unknown

Pianist Margaret Leng Tan was born in Singapore, where as a gifted student she won a scholarship to study at the Julliard School in New York. In 1981 she met John Cage and worked with him then until his death in 1992. It was at a Cage retrospective later that year – when she decided to play the 'Suite for Toy Piano' in memoriam – that she entered a new phase in her career and became a toy pianist specialist, commissioning new works and recording whole CDs devoted to the instrument.

01:10 Toby Twining, 'An American in Buenos Aires (A Blues Tango)', 2001

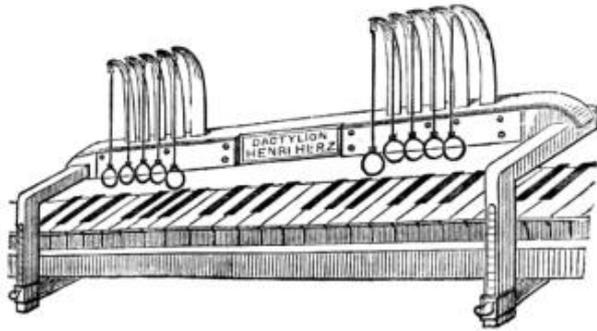
Born in Texas, with roots in country-swing and gospel, the singer and composer Toby Twining wound his way through rock and jazz bands to become best known as a composer and performer of experimental vocal music – with a special interest in microtonal harmony. But he also still composes for conventional instruments. This short piece mixes concert and toy pianos, both performed here (simultaneously) by Margaret Leng Tan.

02:17 E, 'Symphony for Toy Piano in G Minor', 1992

E is a name used by Mark Oliver Everett, singer, songwriter, guitarist, keyboardist – and sometimes drummer – of the band Eels. Under his single letter name he writes songs about 'death, loneliness, divorce, childhood innocence, depression and unrequited love'. This track appeared on his first solo release *A Man Called E*.

02:36 Nathan Davis, 'Mechanics of Escapement' (excerpt), 2013

An American composer, percussionist and teacher, Davis focuses on timbre in his works, which often involve electronics. This piece, commissioned by toy pianist Phyllis Chen, mixes toy piano and customized clock-chimes (like the tines of a toy piano, long, resonant, metal rods). The chimes are mounted on high poles and spaced around the auditorium; and they are sounded by the pianist using long strings attached to her fingers. Davis was inspired, he said, by the machine Robert Schumann built to strengthen hands. Using wire and – probably – weights or springs, his machine pulled his index and middle fingers upwards and backwards (see the diagram of the contemporary 1836 Dactylyon, for the principle). In spite, or because of this Schumann's hands deteriorated further and, the story goes, that this foolhardy device ultimately destroyed his chances of becoming a concert pianist. Taking history into account, it's more likely that it was the syphilis – and its mercurial treatment – that had caused his weakness in the first place and it simply progressed in its continuing deterioration. And because I know you'll be fascinated – he did experiment with other ways to strengthen his fingers too; the grisliest of which was putting them into the 'thoracic or abdominal cavity of a freshly-slaughtered animal and holding them there as long as the natural warmth lasted.' The Taiwanese/American pianist and composer, Phyllis Chen, took up the toy piano in 1998 and never looked back, joining Margaret Leng Tan in cheerleading for the instrument and both



[The Dactylion]

commissioning and composing new works for it and, in 2007, establishing the UnCaged Toy Piano Composition Competition – which has, to date, added some 200+ works to the repertoire. In 2011, she launched the UnCaged Toy Piano Festival, which for three days every two years showcases both new works and dedicated toy piano-players.

**04:07 Bernd Wieseemann, 'Bauhaus Suite' (excerpt), 1994**

Some years before Margaret Leng Tan's conversion to the toy piano, the German pianist and composer Bernd Wieseemann was the first specialist performer to commission, as well as write, for it. He also released the first CD devoted solely to toy piano repertoire, in 1993.

**05:09 Snow Town, 'Playing Dulcitone' (excerpt), 2012**

Here's what the dulcitone – a keyboard instrument designed by Thomas Machell in Glasgow in the 1860s – sounded like; played here by Masashi Yamanaka. Both Vincent D'Indy and Percy Grainger scored for the instrument, though it never really caught on – partly because it was extremely, quiet. The more recent Fender Rhodes piano is, in effect, an amplified version off the dulcitone – and that did catch on big-time, in the seventies – a quarter of a century after its invention.

**07:54 Christopher Hobbs, 'Working Notes' (excerpt), 1969**

A composer and a pioneer of British systems music, Hobbs was Cornelius Cardew's first student in 1967 at the Royal Academy of Music, and worked with Cardew thereafter both in the group AMM and the flexible collective, the Scratch Orchestra. In 1968, he set up a distribution service for experimental scores – the Experimental Music Catalogue – and between 1969 and 1973 was active in the minimalist/process-based Promenade Theatre Orchestra, a quartet that comprised four toy pianos and four reed-organs, with occasional percussion or winds. Working Notes was an early composition for the PTO that Hobbs described as 'a rather nice piece'. I concur.

**09:34 Ross Bolleter, 'Hymn to Ruin' (excerpt), 2010**

The Australian composer, performer and Zen master, Ross Bolleter – also president of the World Association of Ruined Piano Studies (WARPS) – studied music theory at the University of Western Australia in the early sixties, going on to compose and improvise in all manner of contexts thereafter – often with an accordion or a prepared piano – well into the late eighties when he discovered ruined pianos and decided to dedicate himself to their musification. By 'ruined' he meant pianos that had been wholly abandoned or left out in all weathers – often for decades – that were not so much interestingly compromised as irredeemably transformed by the depth of their deprecation. Where Cage's preparations were limited to the planned cosmetic addition of nuts, bolts, screws, plastic roofing felt and rubber, Bolleter's summed the chaotic and random effects of age and elemental forces. 'Hymn to Ruin' was commissioned by Margaret Leng Tan, whose part is played here on a ruined toy Schoenhut that she rescued from a trash bin in lower Manhattan. Bolleter then added his contribution, in Australia, using a wrecked piano rescued from a shed on the Nallan sheep station.

**10:47 Michael Hearst, 'Jesus Christ Lizard' (excerpt), 2013-14**

An American composer, writer, producer and multi-instrumentalist, Hearst makes solo song albums, records group projects and writes both film-scores and children's books. His work is usually thematic and programmatic – 'The Planets', 'Songs for Unusual Creatures', etc. He is also drawn to unusual instruments. At the premiere of his composition 'Secret Word' for the Kronos Quartet, for instance (2012), he played claviola, theremin, and daxophone with the quartet, as well as conducting a toy instrument orchestra. 'Jesus Christ Lizard' is one of the 'Unusual Creatures', and is played here by Margaret Leng Tan.

**11:33 Hugh Shrapnel, '4 Toy Pianos' (excerpt), 1971**

Like Christopher Hobbs, op cit, the British oboist and composer Hugh Shrapnel was a student of Cornelius Cardew's, a member of the Scratch Orchestra – and a co-founder of the Promenade Theatre Orchestra – for whom this piece was composed. Along with a number of his contemporaries, including Cornelius Cardew and Keith Rowe, he took up with the Enver Hoxha faction of Marxist-Leninist thought in the seventies, expressed musically in the – I suppose – folk-rock ensemble, People's Liberation Music. Here, however, he is in less didactic mood.



[The dulcitone]

**12:50 Angelica Sanchez, 'Crawl Space' (excerpt), 2011**

An American jazz pianist, composer and music teacher, who occasionally plays the toy piano.

**14:30 Pascal Comelade, 'Ball de l'Àliga', 1997**

The French composer and performer Pascal Comelade has been using toy pianos – and other toy instruments – extensively, in mixed orchestrations, since the late seventies (on some 50 recordings), and with his band, the Bel Canto Orquestra. We'll be hearing more from him...

**15:50 Hans Zimmer, 'Davy Jones Theme' (excerpt), 2006**

The German film composer Hans Zimmer uses music boxes in several scenes of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise sequel, *Dead Man's Chest* – especially for the 'Davy Jones Theme'.

**17:18 Mike Ewanus, 'Projections' (excerpts), 1994, revised 1998**

Mike Ewanus is a Canadian visual, audio and radio artist who hosted a weekly radio art program (Dead City Radio) between 1992 and 1996 and, in 1995, curated the Radio Unbound festival in Edmonton. In his other life he designs for multimedia and print. 'Projections' is from his (only) CD, *Ballet Mechanique* – a collection of pieces made using music-box mechanisms found in music boxes, jewel cases, wind-up toys and various other novelty items, garnered over a two year period from Canadian thrift stores.

**18:27 Andrián Pertout, 'Exposiciones' (excerpts), 2005**

Pertout is a Chilean composer, now resident in Australia. 'Exposiciones', he writes, 'attempts to explore the equally-tempered sound world within the context of a sampled microtonal Schoenhut model 6625, 25-key toy piano and a complex polyrhythmic scheme.' This version is an arrangement for tape (CD) and toy piano, premiered by Phyllis Chen. The score is dedicated to Frank Zappa.

**19:53 Karlheinz Essl, 'Miles to Go' for 4 amplified toy pianos (excerpt), 2012**

Karlheinz Essl is an Austrian composer, performer, sound artist, improviser, and professor of composition for electroacoustic and experimental music at the University of Music and Performing Arts, Vienna. 'Miles to Go' was a commission from the Philharmonie Luxembourg for the Toy Piano World Summit. Essl writes: 'I began to dismantle a 25-key table-top piano. I opened the case and removed the set of tines that are responsible for producing the characteristic chime-like sounds of the instrument. Then I changed its position so that the hammers were not hitting the rods. Instead, the metal bar to which they are mounted was struck to create a metallic noise without any pitches. To make these subtle sounds more audible, I connected a contact microphone to the sound board and amplified the signal with a small loudspeaker. A new instrument was born: a gamelan-like percussion orchestra at my fingertips! Along with those metallic tones, this modified instrument contained even more sounds: a dry wooden attack on the lowest key (where the hammer directly hits the sound board) and also a few notes that still produce the usual toy piano tones. Furthermore, the amplification became more and more important; not only to make the instrument louder, but also to achieve an aggressive expression more reminiscent of a thrash metal band than that of a children's instrument.'

**21:43 Karlheinz Essl, 'Whatever Shall Be' (excerpts), 2010**

Essl began to write for toy pianos in 2005 after being lent one by the pianist Isabel Ettenauer – with whom he went on to produce a small catalogue of toy piano works. 'Whatever Shall Be' – for toy piano, driedel, music box and live electronics (a dreedel is a four-sided spinning top with a Hebrew letter printed on each side, used in children's game at Hanukkah) – was commissioned by Phyllis Chen and, like 'Miles to Go', uses the inside of the toy piano, amplified and processed through a computer. The dreedel is spun on the soundboard, thimbles are used on the rods and, at the end, a music box – also played through the soundboard – plays the Italian hit 'Que Sera Sera', hence the title. In fact *all* the rhythmic cells, motivic materials and harmonic structures in the work are derived from this simple tune. That's composers for you. It's played here by Essl's long-time collaborator, Isabel Ettenauer.

**22:35 Phyllis Chen, 'Chimers' (excerpt), 2011**

'Chimers' was commissioned for the 2011 Mostly Mozart Festival. The title refers



[Phyllis Chen]

to the magic chimes from Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*. It features tuning forks, a toy piano, toy piano rods, a toy glockenspiel, a clarinet and a violin.

**24:58 The Residents, 'Diskomo' (excerpts), 1980**

The Residents were four American artists who achieved visibility and success in the middle of the seventies as a music group, becoming celebrities by refusing to reveal their identities (they always appeared in disguise, usually with giant eyeballs in place of heads). Their approach to music was unique and reflective; deconstructing, reinterpreting and distorting the cultural artefacts and attitudes they found around them. 60+ albums, numerous videos, DVDs, short films – and seven world tours – later, those artefacts and attitudes offer little to subtle commentary, but for a while The Residents could be devious and wry. Their 1979 release, *Eskimo* was (1) a fascinating and strange collection of unfamiliar sounds set in a fake alien landscape – half music and half moving-picture – and (2) a complex commentary/satire on western interactions with – and understandings of – exotic cultures. Some of its unfamiliarity came from electronics, some from the treatment and multiplicity of voices – as much foley work as musical composition – and some from the extensive use of invented instruments – and toys. 'Diskomo', released the following year as a 45 RPM 12" single compounded the joke by setting the *Eskimo* 'tunes' to a disco beat. The B-side, 'Goosebump' was entirely made using toys.

**25:48 Enric Morera, 'La Santa Espina' (arr. Pascal Comelade), 1906/1998**

Enric Morera (b.1865) was a Spanish composer and musician who wrote operas, symphonic works, choral works, stage music and a Missa de Requiem; above all he is remembered for his choral sardanas (Catalan circle dances), such as 'La Santa Espina', adapted for toys here by our old pal Pascal Comelade.

**26:55 Maxwell Anderson/Kurt Weill, 'September Song' (arr. Pascal Comelade, with Robert Wyatt), 2000**

This great popular standard, composed by the exiled German composer Kurt Weill for Walter Huston in the 1938 Broadway musical *Knickerbocker Holiday*, has subsequently been recorded by just about everyone from Bing Crosby to James Brown, Lou Reed to The Young Gods. But there's always room for one more.

**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](mailto:remegacorp@dial.pipex.com) with subject: Probe Me.

**03. Links**

[www.margaretlengtan.com](http://www.margaretlengtan.com)  
[www.tobytwining.com](http://www.tobytwining.com)  
[www.phyllischen.net](http://www.phyllischen.net)



[Margaret Leng Tan]

[www.bernd-wiesemann.de](http://www.bernd-wiesemann.de)  
[www.angelicasanchez.com](http://www.angelicasanchez.com)  
[www.residents.com](http://www.residents.com)  
[www.pertout.com](http://www.pertout.com)

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#### 04. Credits and acknowledgments

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