

Dusted Reviews

Artist: Gordon Monahan

Album: Theremin in the Rain

Label: C3R

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I'm still sort of mystified every time I see a piece of music performed on a theremin. The instrument's otherworldly whine is one thing. Watching footage of a thereminist (such as the instrument's first and greatest virtuoso Clara Rockmore) performing is even more striking. A great deal of this footage is to be found in the absolutely essential documentary *Theremin: An Electronic Odyssey*, a 1994 film that retells the uncommonly gripping, as well as uncommonly heartwarming, tale of the instrument's creation and popularization by Soviet ex-pat inventor Leon Theremin.

Throughout the film, footage is displayed of Rockmore standing before the instrument: a black pedestal, non-descript aside from a thin metal rod that spears out horizontally on one side, and one that sticks up vertically on the other. While her countenance reflects the wistful concentration of a professional violinist, her hands gesticulate the way you'd imagine a necromancer in the midst of a ceremonial incantation. She deftly manipulates the invisible electromagnetic fields generated by the machine with subtle, palsy-like tremors of her otherwise-still hands, augmenting the instrument's well-tuned warble as though its tone and vibrato is a projection of her mind.

Seeing a performance like this is striking in more than a few different ways. For one, it reminds you that the instrument – so often associated with Hollywood sci-fi soundtracks – was originally conceived as an instrument to be used in the performance of classical pieces by early electronic experimentalists to extend conceptual boundaries in an austere genre (right on through *Switched on Bach* and far beyond). On the other hand, it almost provides a metaphor for unbound creativity – a complex piece of music performed by engaging space, unfettered by keys or strings.

Now we employ those same concepts (of space's receptiveness to our movements) to create video games that tell us precisely where to put our feet and hands, thereby entertaining us as they restrict us. Viewed in this light, Gordon Monahan's *Theremin in the Rain* is a disc that focuses on exactly what *Dance, Dance, Revolution* isn't (a statement which, taken out of context, would sound really weird as a pull quote in an avant-garde composer's press kit). The cover of the CD, featuring a dramatically lit Monahan approaching his theremin like a snake charmer clad in a brown suit, has some New Age overtones. The disc itself, however, is far from laid back mood music. *Theremin in the Rain* is the audio generated by Monahan's sound installation. This installation, according to the disc's liner notes, is comprised of a complicated network of theremin-triggered sculptures exploring "the physical parameters of sound and space." As it's described: Water drops, piano strings stretch, various other objects linked to one another trigger and generate sounds all at the behest of Monahan. Backdrop videos project close-ups of the functioning of various tiny parts of the sculptures so that the watcher can be certain of where sounds are coming from.

The concept behind this, as conceived by Monahan, is described as follows;

“The technical set up for this piece represents a deconstruction of the ubiquitous computer music system, instead of controlling the playback of samplers and synthesizers that imitate real sounds, the computer is used to trigger tiny mechanical movements that are then connected to the audio system through contact microphones. So when a computer triggered water drop falls two metres from a valve to land on an amplified plate, the water drop is replacing a midi signal cable that would normally route these triggers to synths or samplers.”

The way I’m reading this is that in Monahan’s installation, the stage acts as the metaphorical guts of a giant synthesizer, and that Monahan is the brain of that synthesizer; as you watch the installation, the whole process of creating a sound from start to finish unfolds before you.

Simultaneously, the installation explores sonic environments, and in doing so plays upon and extends the same ideas of creative freedom that first inspired the creation of the theremin. Monahan, by waving his hands around in the air, sets off chain reactions that move and generate sound all around him. Creation of music through motion, by shifting unseen forces in the environment, is both the central idea behind the theremin as an instrument, and behind Monahan’s piece.

The main problem with *Theremin in the Rain* is that you can’t watch the installation unfold (an unfair critique for sure, given it is a CD and not a video). With only a short explanation of what’s actually going on, the disc becomes less of an obvious exploration of conceptual boundaries, and more of a work of environmental ambience. This is the kind of work where it’s much more interesting to be able to see what’s going on behind the scenes. The diagram included on the disc’s liner notes reads like a tech-industry flow-chart, and isn’t very helpful in giving the listener an idea of what’s actually transpiring.

That said, in purely aural terms, Monahan generates some quite interesting sounds, often (and I’d imagine quite incidentally) sounding as if *Selected Ambient Works* was comprised of natural sounds instead of synthesized ones – sometimes with hugely vibrating ethno-acoustic resonance, sometimes with early-Industrial metal-hammering thunderousness.

By Matthew A. Stern