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WHERE I PLAY

JUL 2009

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MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Gordon Monahan

By Nick Storrington

Since the late '70s, Gordon Monahan has been making a career of extracting the unheard from pretty much anything he can get his hands on. A seasoned composer and performer, he's worked with string instruments played by wind, Theremin-controlled water droplets (which "play" various amplified objects) and even with fake speakers. While he is constantly discovering alarmingly distinctive sounds in unexpected places, he mostly eschews electronic effects, trading pedals and plug-ins for homespun mechanical gadgetry.

His battery of esoteric approaches might suggest stiff academic music that places concept well above content. But Monahan avoids the kind of annotated navel-gazing one might expect, instead drawing the listener into the core of sounds themselves, intoxicating listeners with both sheer force and myriad details. Unafraid of fun and spectacle too, he often delivers performances and installation pieces with an incisive yet impish sense of humour.

While the "mad inventor" tag gets thrown around fairly liberally when it comes to the weirder end of music, the label is quite apt when it comes to El Gordo. While some turn to synthesizers and software to find new sounds, Monahan is interested in "interfacing with physical mechanical devices" and builds many of his instruments from scratch using simple materials: motors, piano strings, tubing, magnets and contact microphones (like an electric version of a stethoscope).

His idiosyncratic method, of course, necessitates a radically different kind of setup than that of even your average experimental musician. "We have a separate workshop [for] anything like drilling or metal — we've got a metal cutter there and a drill press," he says about his home studio, appropriately dubbed the Funny Farm, just outside Meaford, ON. "[In] another building we store a whole bunch of electronic parts and supplies."

While the notion that someone would need power tools in the studio might sound a bit ridiculous, seeing one of Gordon's elaborate live performances would definitely clarify things. Although "ridiculous" might still be an appropriate adjective for his musical Rube Goldberg-esque machines. His 2003 piece *New and Used Furniture Music* uses a souped-up theremin, which controls (via an old beater Macintosh computer) a system of small robotic devices. As if by magic, water droplets fall in perfect rhythmic synchronicity on contact-miced saw blades, twelve-inch records, CDs, and plates creating a bed of percussive sounds. Sheet metal bends and quivers all by itself, producing crashing torrents of white noise, while long metal piano strings strung up above the audience hum and sizzle as they come into contact with motorized plectrums and magnets. The whole room quakes as though it were alive, resonating with dense slabs of noise.

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CONCERT REVIEWS JUL 2009

Broken Social Scene / Apostle of Hustle / The Happiness Project / Years / Jason Collett - The Courthouse, Toronto, ON June 17

This Arts & Crafts showcase/book launch for *This Book Is Broken* had the worst kept secret in Toronto: the re-appearance of Broken Social Scene (pictured). I mean, who doesn't play at a show dedicated to their brief, yet memorable, career? Jason Collett got the night going with aplomb and a Dy... Full Review



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The resultant music might actually almost pass for unreleased Autechre tracks, or something else from the more adventurous end of electronic, but the only electronic tampering involved is simple amplification.

Even the piano, in Monahan's hands, becomes an alien machine; his 1983 work, *Piano Mechanics*, is what he terms a "post-electronic work for acoustic piano," where the titular instrument is recast as a "machine to produce sound." Setting aside the familiar building blocks of melody, harmony, rhythm, Monahan built the piece on waves of sound produced through keying, striking and strumming the strings, and letting them ring through the entire instrument sympathetically.

"I don't think I would've composed that piece unless had worked with analog electronics about the same time, which started tuning my ears to listening to sounds from an analytic point of view. I extended my piano technique to bring those kinds of sounds out of the piano. There's a certain aspect of this sound I'm making now that sounds a little bit electronic... but how can I make it sound more electronic without using any electronics?"

And despite his deep investment in ferociously innovative sound-textures, Monahan is almost equally committed to his own warped brand of humour. His numerous forays into lounge music are certainly ample indication of this. "When I played piano when I was a kid, I actually think I subliminally wanted to learn to play the Hammond organ and do this kind of easy listening."

Music From Nowhere, one of his many installation pieces, also might elicit a few chuckles. Speaker cabinets are displayed in a gallery, but while it would seem you're listening to pre-recorded sounds, here's no actual speaker inside — you're listening to the whirrings and scrapings of some motorized device, obviously hand-crafted by Monahan himself. "It's a one-liner, but it's also about deconstructing what audio is, because it draws into question the false aspects of audio. Audio as a medium is a representation of reality. Anytime you start deconstructing a loudspeaker, you're deconstructing the device through which hear, listen to music."

Monahan hosts the Electric Eclectics Festival July 31 to August 2 near Meaford; more info at electric-eclectics.com.

WHERE I PLAY ARCHIVE