Music from Everywhere: the Sound Art of Gordon Monahan

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Essay from the catalog 'Music from Everywhere' accompanying Monahan's solo exhibition at the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre, Guelph, Ontario, Sept. 11 - Dec. 18, 2005

Over the past several decades, live events have become increasingly mediated by electronic technologies. At contemporary rock concerts and sporting events, audience members often spend more time watching images of the performers on enormous video screens than they do watching the performers themselves. Lip-synching and real time pitch-correcting technologies have drastically altered what it means for a singer to perform "live." The work of sound and intermedia artist Gordon Monahan similarly blurs the lines of distinction between the live and the electronically mediated. However, instead of highlighting the mediatized aspects of live performance, Monahan encourages us to see the "live" qualities of electronically-mediated performance and mediatized audio-visual environments.

One way in which Monahan creates a sense of liveness is through an emphasis on the physicality of performance. This is evident in *Speaker Swinging* (1982), one of Monahan's earliest and best-known pieces. Loudspeakers attached to two-and-a-half-metre-long cables are hooked up to sine tone generators and are then swung in a circular fashion by three performers. Although the loudspeakers broadcast simple sine tones, the most basic of sounds, the movement of the speakers throughout the performance space sculpts the sound into something much more complex. The circular trajectory of the speakers causes the audience to hear a dramatic Doppler Effect, a shift in the perceived pitch of the electronically-generated tones as sound waves reach the ears of the audience members at different rates. It is only at the end of the piece when the performers stop swinging and hold the speakers still that the audience hears steady sine tones despite the fact that these tones are broadcast continuously throughout the performance.

The radical transformation of sound in *Speaker Swinging* is accompanied by an equally astonishing visual transformation. Midway through the piece, the lights in the performance space are shut off. A few seconds later, small lights attached to the orbiting speakers are turned on, cutting dramatic arcs of light into the darkness. During this portion of the piece, the speakers play sine tones equivalent to the resonant frequency of the room in which the piece is being performed. This sets up a series of standing waves that create a visceral response in the listener—a slight pressure and tickling effect on the ear drum and ear canal. The piece thus incorporates a sense of physicality and liveness at both the level of production and reception although the sound is electronically generated.

An early piano piece by Monahan entitled *Piano Mechanics* (1981-86) also has an important physical dimension. In each section of the work, the performer plays the piano in a highly physical manner, often varying the articulation of a single repeated action. This approach elicits a variety of surprising sonorities from the instrument, sonorities that one would normally think are electronically generated or at least electronically processed. This is another recurring theme in Monahan's work – a kind of ontological instability between acoustic and electronically-mediated sound sources. The piece uses live performance to explore the degree to which contemporary perceptions of sound have been shaped by mediatized sound sources. As Monahan describes it, *Piano Mechanics* is a "post-electronic work for acoustic piano."

Another work that blurs the distinction between live and electronic sound is *Long Aeolian Piano*, a piece that Monahan first developed in conjunction with celebrated Canadian photographer Thaddeus Holownia in 1984. In this outdoor installation, thirty-metre-long piano wires are stretched horizontally across the landscape and through an upright piano. The wires are automatically excited by the wind, producing "aeolian" tones that are amplified by the piano's soundboard. As with *Piano Mechanics*, many people think that the sounds produced in *Long Aeolian Piano* are electronic although the piece is, in fact, entirely acoustic. Part of the illusion relates to the surprising volume levels that the piece is capable of reaching: on a windy day, the *Long Aeolian Piano* can be heard up to 700 metres away! The sound of the installation also changes continuously; a slight shift in the wind's direction or intensity results in changes in the harmonic content of the sound, a phenomena that leads many onlookers to assume (in the absence of a human performer) that the sounds they are hearing must be electronically produced. In this way, *Long Aeolian Piano* challenges the audience's assumptions about what constitutes "live" sound and "live" performance. Monahan's experiments with "aquaeolian" tones similarly challenge dominant assumptions regarding sound production. In *The Aquaeolian Whirlpool* (1990) and *Aquaeolian Music Room* (1991), a series of ethereal, electronic-sounding drones are produced by the movement of water over long piano wires. Once again, Monahan reminds us that music can be found virtually everywhere, even in the most unlikely of places.

Monahan further explores the blurring of acoustic and electronic boundaries in *Music From Nowhere* (1989). In this work, loudspeaker components are removed from multiple speaker cabinets and are replaced with a variety of acoustic sound-generating devices including vibrating metal plates, dripping water systems, and mechanically-activated bells. When confronted with a room full of speaker cabinets, most visitors assume that the sounds they hear have been previously recorded; yet there are no actual loudspeakers in the room. Sounds are created instead in real time through acoustic means. Rather than a conduit for electronically-mediated sound, the speaker becomes an autonomous sound-generating device. The back of each cabinet is fitted with a Plexiglas window that enables curious viewers to discover that the sound they believed to be previously recorded and electronically mediated is actually being performed "live," although the performers in this case are a series of machines.

Music From Nowhere both celebrates and critiques commodified forms of mass culture. By replacing loudspeakers with a series of mechanized sounding devices, the work points to the constructedness of musical recordings and to the industry that surrounds their production. At the same time, I cannot help but sense that Monahan takes pleasure in presenting this assortment of speaker cabinets which date from the 1940s through the 1970s. Many of the speaker cabinets have a kitschy retro quality that is very much in keeping with other aspects of Monahan's creative practice. Consider, for example, Monahan's now defunct faux pop-band, Fuzzy Love, a group that earned a sizeable cult following in Berlin by performing lounge cover versions of material ranging from the Beach Boys to Nirvana. Consider also the *Schmalzwald*, a conceptual art project co-created by Monahan and Laura Kikauka that became a popular Berlin club from 1996 to 2000. A pun on the German *Schwarzwald* (the Black Forest), the *Schmalzwald*, as its name implies, was dedicated to the presentation and development of extreme examples of kitsch culture or *schmalz*. Included in the *Schmalzwald's* "retrogressive" decor was a theremin that bar patrons could interact with at will. The theremin (always highly amplified), like the *Schmalzwald's* atmosphere in general, offered patrons a chance to experience not entertainment, but "irritainment" in Monahan's terms.

Kitsch elements also figure prominently in *New and Used Furniture Music* (2003), a multi-media performance piece by Monahan. In this work, a theremin is used to control computer patches that activate a variety of mechanical instruments including large metal thunder sheets, long amplified piano wires, and amplified water droplets. One of the amazing things about the theremin, of course, is that it is performed without physical contact between the performer and instrument as if by magic; the sound is controlled by the performer's movements, through body capacitance picked up by changing proximity to the instrument's antennae. The theremin thus adds a performative dimension to *New and Used Furniture Music*, emphasizing once again the role of physical gesture in electronically-mediated performance. The theremin is also played on its own a few times during the piece (without controlling other elements of the installation) thereby yielding the instrument's characteristic electronic saw-tooth waveform. The theremin solos add another sonority to the dense audio mix, a mix that includes acoustic sounds (such as the vibrating metal sheets), amplified sounds (the long piano wires and water droplets), and electronic sounds (the theremin).

A similar layering process is at work in the piece visually as well. Throughout the performance, two stagehands use video cameras to capture details of the mechanized aspects of the performance/installation. These details are projected onto a screen behind the performance space giving the audience clues about the origins of certain sounds, a way into the work akin to the Plexiglas windows in *Music From Nowhere*. However, these images are complicated in *New and Used Furniture Music* through the use of a video mixer that continuously blends images from the two cameras, creating an abstract video ballet of details drawn from the performance. Once again, many audience members assume that portions of the video component are pre-produced; however, all of the images are captured "live" in real time during the performance. One of the results of all this sonic and visual layering is that audience members must play an active role in constructing the form of the piece as they navigate their way through multiple sources of audio-visual information.

The dripping water system in *New and Used Furniture Music* is the focus of Monahan's remarkable installation *When It Rains* (2000). In this piece, a complex titration system of plastic tubing and valves is suspended several metres above the gallery floor. The water valves are controlled by a series of MIDI triggers that cause the valves to open just long enough for droplets of water to form. The water droplets then fall onto a series of amplified household objects suspended below: plastic plates, pieces of stainless steel, vinyl records, etc. In the current incarnation of the work, motion sensors trigger the playback of numerous pre-programmed musical compositions written specifically for the installation.

One of the extraordinary things about *When It Rains* (in addition to the visual beauty of falling droplets of water) is the installation's degree of musical precision. The water droplets produce a series of intricate rhythmic compositions that sound at times like a distorted gamelan ensemble and at others like urban techno music without the driving bass. As in Monahan's aeolian and aquaeolian pieces, natural forces (in this case water and gravity) are used to create sounds which draw on the listener's aural memory of electronic sound. The audience is once again confronted with the question of what is real and what is synthesized; the sound of each amplified object imitates electronic sound sources normally associated with synthesizers or digital sampling technology. However, in *When It Rains*, electronic wiring and digital circuitry is replaced by a gap of one to two metres, the distance that the water droplets fall before striking the suspended objects below. This gap is not unlike the space opened up by Monahan's work in general: a space between the natural and the technological, between the sonic and the visual, between the live and the mediatized.

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July 2005 (revised Jan. 2008)