Gordon Monahan: Machines and the Sounds That Give Them Life

by Peter Garland

Part I: Scenes from a Documentary History (A Slightly Humorous Perspective)

Image: In Mary Shelley's novel Frankenstein, the monster, pursued relentlessly by its scientist-creator, is last seen in northern Canada, heading towards the Arctic, where he disappears in the shrouds of literature and myth...In the twentieth century, he re-emerges in popular culture, played by Boris Karloff - an image imprinted in everyone born from the 1920's onward. From this we understand that he was not an inherently bad creature; but rather, misunderstood by a fearful humanity (like the modern artist?); and perhaps cursed by the arrogance of his creator, who brought inanimate matter to life, without love or lactation, usurping God, in his scientific laboratory in Germany. Electricity is the new invention that makes this possible, at least in the popular movie version.

Image: Around 1870, in the book Les Chants de Maldoror by the mysterious Uruguayan author Isidore Ducasse, alias Le Conte de LautrŽamont, there happens an encounter that has world-wide cultural reverberations: "As beautiful as the unexpected meeting, on a dissection table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella." A half century later, this sparks (a term from electricity) a movement in France and Germany, that will transform the twentieth century: surrealism. In 1923, artist Man Ray (Ray? Are we talking about electricity again?) creates an 'objet d'art' by sticking an image of an eyeball on the pendulum of a metronome. He calls it the Indestructible Object. (In the 1960's in Germany a Hungarian composer named Ligeti composes a work for 100 metronomes.)

Image: If memory serves me well, Thomas Edison's laboratory was in New Jersey, not so far from New York City (and by extension, Canada). In the 1980's, Gordon Monahan spent an extended period living in New York City. And the other great American pioneer of electricity and its usage beyond the previously imaginable, Alexander Graham Bell, was Canadian!

Image: Shortly after the Russian Revolution, a young scientist by the name of Leo Theremin meets with Lenin. What do they discuss: electricity. In the 1930's Theremin is sent to the United States; we now know in the capacity of an industrial spy (with the supposed demise of the Cold War, this is the type of spy the FBI today is most on the lookout for...). In the United States, he makes friends with, among others, the composer Henry Cowell and the scientist Albert Einstein. He invents an instrument, the Theremin, metal rods that produce sound, mysteriously activated by hand motions with no apparent visual cause and effect relationship. Again, the marvel of electricity!

Upon his return to Russia, on the eve of the Second World War, he is imprisoned by Stalin, paranoid of any intellectuals with foreign contacts and exposure, in a secret laboratory with fellow scientists. He does not re-emerge until almost half a century later, even though he had been quietly rehabilitated in the Soviet Union. This laboratory (we know little about it) is credited with many of the Soviet technological achievements, including the advanced bugging devices that ruin the new US Embassy being constructed in Moscow in the 1980's.

Image: In the 1930's, two young composers on the West Coast of the USA, Lou Harrison and John Cage, begin to build their own personal ensembles out of scrap material salvaged from junkyards, such as automobile brake drums, sheets of metal, wash tubs, or any kind of affordable ethnic instrument (gongs, cymbals, etc.) that they can find in places like San

Fransisco's Chinatown. Previous percussion music (with a very brief history that only begins in 1930 with Amadeo Rold‡n's Ritmicas) had more or less limited itself to Western orchestral percussion (Rold‡n being an exception, using instruments of his native Cuba; and Henry Cowell, using a set of rice bowls in his Ostinato Pianissimo; and of course, Var□se, with his sirens...). In Harrison's words, they created their own orchestras, and "we simply bypassed the Establishment." Junk, the detritus of an industrial culture that had created the concept of 'planned obsolescence' had been salvaged by these two composers, and incorporated into art.

Flashback: Earlier, in the 1920's, German artist Kurt Schwitters had followed a similar inspiration, in the creation of his installation work, the Merzbau. Western civilization's momentum had accelerated to a point where there was now such a thing as a 'throw-away culture'. And artists and musicians were ready and waiting.

Image: In 1939 John Cage, asked to write music for a dance performance, finds himself hard-pressed to come up with a piece. There is a piano, but no room at all for the kind of multi-instrument percussion ensembles that he has been working with. Probably influenced by Cowell, he comes up with a totally bizarre idea - he will make a percussion orchestra out of the piano! So, Cage puts coins, metal screws, rubber erasers and other mass-produced objects of industrial culture between the strings of the piano, opening up a hitherto-unimagined world of sound possibilities. Not only is this (like the earlier percussion pieces) a precursor of electronic music (cf. Cage's essay The Future of Music: Credo), but it is a marvelous wedding of high and low culture, the world of 'classical' music meeting the industrial, proletarian world of nuts and bolts.

An Editorial Interjection: Much has been said about how this act of Cage's transformed the piano. What I would like to point out is how this transformed the function and concept of nuts and bolts, sheets of paper, etc. All of a sudden, despised, ignored objects of Western civilization were sharing the same musical stage where the likes of Rubinstein and Horowitz had reigned supreme. The dignity and elegance (and ego-less humility!) of a common screw, previously relegated to a working class function. The elitism of the 'well-tempered clavier' gives way to the twentieth century egalitarianism of the 'well-prepared piano'. Perhaps, in addition to a musical revolution, a social revolution had been achieved?

The unexpected meeting, in a piano, of an eye-bolt and an eraser - is this not a fulfillment of a revolution prophesied by surrealism? The eroticisation (artistic beauty, astonishment) of the everyday object?

We now fast-forward to the year 1989, and the collapse of Brezhnevism/Stalinism in Eastern Europe. The previously unthinkable occurs, and the Berlin Wall comes down, and eventually the two Germanies are reunited. With that comes a standardization of technologies, based on that of the politically victorious West. Suddenly there is a flood of discarded machinery, electronics and other Eastern Bloc products. Nowhere is more of this to be found than around Berlin, a once-divided city formerly surrounded by East Germany.

In 1992 a young Canadian composer named Gordon Monahan moves to Berlin. He has been influenced by Cage, and knows him personally. He has a bit of the scientific acumen of his countryman Alexander Graham Bell, and a lot of the wild imagination of Dr. Frankenstein. With his collaborators Laura Kikauka and Bastiaan Maris, he begins to collect this discarded technology, storing it in a shed in a squatter area of East Berlin. This space, crammed from floor to ceiling with gadgetry, has something of the character of Leo Theremin's secret Soviet Laboratory, and the artistry and humour of Schwitter's Merzbau. (Kikauka's influence

is very pronounced in the aesthetic presentation, in that she had created a similar Merzbau-like environment with her home in Canada, calling it The Funny Farm. Anyone who ever visited her and Monahan's apartment in Charlottenburg got a taste of that!) A common pickle, as found in any food market, is connected to two wires, and the electricity is turned on. Like Frankenstein's marvelous creation, the pickle seems to come alive, lit with an inner glow as if new life has been injected into dead vegetal matter. They open their space to the public one night a week, set up a bar, and one of Berlin's most colourful cultural landmarks, The Glowing Pickle, is born. As beautiful as the unexpected meeting, on Brunnenstrasse, of a massage machine and a fourteen-track Tesla tape recorder!

Part II: Invention, Freed from Necessity ('Necessity is the Mother of Invention')

Gordon Monahan works in the artistic area where musical composition, performance, instrument building, installation art, and electronics all intersect. I first learned about his work in the mid-1980's when, having written pieces in the early 1970's for bullroarers and pianos played with wooden boards, I heard about this composer who swung big loudspeakers like bullroarers, and took a kind of deconstructive approach to the piano that put more terror into the hearts of keyboard purists than my pieces ever had. Like my own attitude, the approach seemed extremely musical, and not intended for mere shock value, however dramatic the visual performance or aural result was. In a conservative decade when third-generation copies of 1960's-70's minimalism were in fashion, such works seemed radical and refreshing. We met briefly at the 1986 New Music America Festival in Houston; but it was not until 1993, when we found ourselves guests of the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (D.A.A.D.) and actual neighbours in Berlin, that I got to know Gordon personally and learn more about his music. It was then that my appreciation of his work - based previously on one score and one recording, and the kind of word-of-mouth information that passes between musicians - blossomed into surprise, delight, and admiration.

Gordon acknowledges several main influences on his development, principally among them John Cage. Gordon met Cage in the early 1980's when he played the first book of the Etudes Australes for him (people may be unaware that Gordon is an excellent pianist, in traditional terms), and later Cage gave advice on the development of the score for Monahan's Piano Mechanics. Gordon's approach to the piano in both that piece and the subsequent This Piano Thing places him squarely in the lineage of Cage, and of Henry Cowell. One thinks of pieces like The Banshee and Aeolian Harp by Cowell where he played directly on the strings of the piano, thereby completely redefining the character of the instrument. As I said earlier, Cage extended this with his invention of the prepared piano and with a piece like The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs, where the pianist does everything except play on the keys. Cage was also a pioneer of electronic music, and of live-electronic music, in pieces like the Imaginary Landscapes from the 1940's, the tape piece Williams Mix (1952), and the live performance Variations series from the early 1960's. In the latter Cage extended his earlier prepared piano work, by placing microphones and other electronic gadgetry inside and around the piano. The piano now represented a broad field of sonic possibilities (for which it is uniquely capable, because of its polyphonic nature, its physical size, and presence onstage). One can both see and hear this in performance of those two major piano works of Monahan's from the 1980's, but he has put his own stamp of originality and creativity on the music; in the words of Village Voice critic Kyle Gann, This Piano Thing is one of the only prepared piano pieces that do not sound like Cage's. That is no small achievement.

As electronic technology advanced by leaps and bounds in the early 1980's with the development of computers and the MIDI system (Musical Instrument Digital Interface), this opened up new possibilities for Monahan, though in a more or less direct extension of his earlier work. Now, electronics could generate and control acoustical sound production, creating new rhythmic and timbral variety. Monahan here acknowledges the influence of Conlon Nancarrow, whose work with the player piano prefigured all this. Like the nineteenth-century popular street orchestrations of Europe, operated by mechanical, pneumatic means, Nancarrow in the late 1940's had attempted to develop a kind of mini-percussion orchestra connected to his player piano mechanism (and like Harrison and Cage with their percussion ensembles, with ethnic instruments that he had collected here and there, like Chinese drums, etc.). That proved unsuccessful, but Nancarrow went on to create his unique music with just player pianos, for which he is now so famous. It is interesting to note that in Monahan's latest work, such as what is being premiered at the Inventionen Festival, he employs both electronic and mechanical/pneumatic means to produce sound.

Two other more recent masters in this field have also provided inspiration - the composer Alvin Lucier and the German-American composer/inventor Trimpin (who developed the technology whereby Nancarrow's work could be played directly on regular concert pianos, and for whom Nancarrow has actually written his most recent piece). Lucier's works, where instruments seem to play themselves, such as the one for amplified solo triangle, combine inventive genius, musical beauty, and a kind of diabolical humour (relating back to the surrealist eroticisation of the object), all of which have had an influence on Monahan.

Trimpin's work is significant both for the sophistication of the applied science, and for the fact that many of his installation pieces and performances are constructed from salvaged material, like the earlier Cage/Harrison junk percussion ensembles. Advanced technologies tend to create new tyrannies of centralized information and academic specialization - places like IRCAM in Paris or the new music centers at the University of California-San Diego, Stanford University or M.I.T. are classic cases of this. There is a counter-tendency, embodied by people like Monahan and Trimpin, that demystifies this technology with elements of anarchic humour and references to popular culture. There was a fluorescence of this kind of do-it-yourself electronics and music composition around Mills College in California and the students of Robert Ashley in the mid-1970's, but this was superseded by the computer revolution. Now it seems to be re-emerging, which I view as a healthy tendency.

The West Coast of the United States is a center of the aerospace and computer industries, so it is no wonder that Trimpin has based himself there, in Seattle - to browse the junkyards, factories, and electronic surplus stores. Likewise, as I said at the beginning of this essay, Berlin is a central locale for the recently discarded socialist-bloc technology. Monahan has found himself in the right place, at the right time, and with the right collaborators, such as Laura Kikauka and the Dutch artist Bastiaan Maris, whose subversive imaginations seem the perfect match for Monahan's. To revert once again to that metaphor from electricity, when live wires are brought together, sparks fly - in this case, creative ones.

So for the Inventionen Festival, Gordon has assembled a MIDI-operated orchestrion of thirty-two Turkish finger cymbals (collected in Istanbul, when he did a concert there in the spring of 1993, much as Cage and Harrison once collected instruments in San Fransisco) that play themselves; or perhaps better, play with themselves (auto-eroticism!); six stainless steel sheets that wobble and are 'banged' (such metal sheets always remind me of John Cage's First Construction in Metal, which uses just such a metal sheet, unheard-of in

1939); five of his 'spinning metal machines'; roughly twenty automated drums and assorted percussion instruments; a belt of Turkish bells that shakes, rattles, and rolls...One thing that struck me in an earlier version of this performance that I witnessed in Amsterdam was the subtlety and quietness of some of the sounds - one is used to being somewhat bashed on the head by electronics and technology. There is a wonderful gentleness and implicit humour in some of Monahan's mechanical creations.

To top it off (if this invention does not turn out to be top-heavy!) is his and Maris's six-legged Virtually Intelligent Robot Utility System, which will be walking (sic) around during the performance, huffing and puffing pneumatically, and playing on two vertical monochords, mounted on its spider-like base. We can only hope that, like Man Ray's 1923 creation, this proves to be an 'indestructible object'.

Gordon has entitled this performance Sounds And The Machines That Make Them, but I think it is the inverse that is the source of amazement and pleasure in his work. Since the days of the Theremin, or for that matter the invention of the piano, we have had machines that make sounds. Now we have sounds that give machines life - controlled by electricity, to be certain; but like Frankenstein's monster, seemingly autonomous of their creators. These are machines, that via sound, come alive.

Arnold Schoenberg once complained of his student John Cage and complimented him at the same time, saying that he was not a composer, but an inventor - of genius. We now know that Schoenberg was not so much wrong, but had his terms reversed. Cage turned out to be an inventor, and a composer of genius.

Gordon Monahan inherits that tradition.

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