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Gordon Monahan

Theremin in the Rain

C3R CD

Theremin in the Rain is cosmic boffin music. Despite this album's title, the theremin's sci-fi whoop is only occasionally featured, and despite a cover showing Gordon Monahan in lecturer's suit and tie, plus a set of impressively nerdy diagrams, the music is more fun than you would expect. Plunderphonics buccaneer John Oswald has produced, mixed and edited, and the soundworld of these unique pieces is rich and rewarding.

Originally a pianist working with John Cage, Monahan builds installations and apparently employs theremin to play them, in ways still unclear after staring at those diagrams. Suffice it to say that long piano strings, pneumatic air cylinders, raindrops and mechanical hammers are linked by MIDI triggers and Max/MSP patches. Perhaps because he was born in 1956, Monahan comes from a generation when it felt natural to build mechanical set-ups (rather than cyber-environments), and his music has a layered depth that stems from the sheer physicality and complexity of his machines. Motors are dragged along strings to generate harmonics, or drops of water fall on amplified percussive plates. On the title track, it sounds like there's not only a theremin, but possibly a low flying jet and a motorbike out in the downpour. The most gloriously barmy of the ten pieces, "Aerial Drop", conjures up a gamelan saluting a flypast by the Indonesian air force. Monahan's tendency to favour low end pitches creates a cosmic vibe, held in a nice tension with his more cerebral, Cageian instincts. Closer "Wavelength" is a beautiful passage of calm after the brainstorm.

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