The Music Of Gordon Monahan

Metaphysics and Mechanics:

Monahan’s early interest in electronics and recording, his knowledge of physics and traditional piano technique (facilitating his radical departure from it) and his experience as a flashtical performer influence his work. He often handles recording equipment and instruments in the most primitive way possible. “I like to work with primitive technology that has a raw sense to it ... and if I can plug something in that’s going to have a life of its own and do something unexpected ... then I’ll make music out of it.”

Yet Monahan’s versatility as a composer encompasses a broad range of raw materials, from homemade instruments and junk from Active Surplus to sophisticated digital studio recording equipment and video. His music can be direct and primitively produced, yet ethereal and foreign as made sound. It occupies a space between sound and music, raw invention and discovery. The performances embody process and ritual. The recordings are double feedback systems where electronically generated sound may be acoustically manipulated or vice versa and recurred in such a way that naturalness and interference are equal. Neither domain of sound evolves clearly from the other and both feed back into a whole which is integrated, heterogeneous and anti-hierarchical in its tonality.

Monahan’s final project at Mount Allison was a piece of electronic music based on the complex and infinitely varied tidal patterns of the Bay of Fundy. Tidal Resonance at 45°N 66°W was an early reconciliation and synthesis of seemingly polar interests: synesthetic music and the perpetual forces of nature. When the piece was realized in 1983 at the Newfoundland Sound Symposium in St. John’s, NL, speakers were put down on the beach and the electronic sounds arising from the patterns were played back, blending into the environment from which they had originated. This cyclical source manipulation and recapitulation and other circular patterns have since become characteristic structures in Monahan’s work.

Monahan’s ongoing work with acoustic piano produced two pieces which were recorded on his first album (1986). Piano Mechanics and the related Large Piano Magnified. Unlike his other work, Piano Mechanics is scored, the performer carrying out tasks dictated by the composer. The piece simulates the formal gestures, sounds and mechanics of machinery and the demands it makes on the performer are like something out of Lang’s Metropolis. Is it “a catalogue of actions and activities which address the production of isolated acoustical resonances at the piano... One’s duty with Piano Mechanics is to induce the piano to play like a machine... to serve the action by playing as hard as one can. Sometimes the fingers may bruise and blend as you hammer the key repeatedly...”.

Young Gordon was born in Kingston, Ontario in 1956 and grew up mostly in Ottawa. He began playing piano at age eight, and at twelve started a rock group where he played electronic organ and recorded. He later studied physics at the University of Ottawa, then transferred to Mount Allison University in Sackville, N.B. to study piano performance. At Mount A, he also acted with a campus theatre company.
Although the piano here is in no way "prepared" or electronically reinforced, the sonorities elicited by direct and often brutal string, keyboard and pedal techniques are powerful and unprecedented. John Cage has described them as "absolutely astonishing. He produces music by playing the piano keyboard, Without anything electronic be produces in fact what one associates with electronics... What happens is that the piano under Gordon Monahan's performance of it produces sounds that we haven't heard before."

Piano Mechanics is usually independently known anything about electronic music. I don't think I would have gone to the aesthetic limits that I did with Piano Mechanics."

The final score for Piano Mechanics (fig. 1) was completed in February, 1986 and exhibited at the Music Gallery with photographs of Monahan's performance by

tive, potential energy, to be discovered and reproduced by man. The notion of music as the condition of Oracles, common to ancient Greek and Eastern religions, was outsourced by Johannes Koppinger, the neo-Psicotists and Cage, and holds great appeal for Monahan.

The ritual effects produced by the aeolian piano are tranquil, spiritual and subliminal, not unlike those which electronic composers strive for through synthetic means. A 1986 version of the piano produced in Toronto and recorded on video, Monahan integrated the installation and performance bases of his work. A small, untuned object was drawn to watch his careful, stern manifestations of the rather different piano, reinforced and strapped to a tree with wires bathed aggressively against the front and back of the exposed soundboard. By plucking and dampening the wires and leaving against the wires and the instrument itself, he produced subtle variations in the sound. Throughout, the atmospheric conditions of air pressure and wind velocity determined the nature and intensity of the music. These effects are left unaltered in the recording. The music co-exists with the sound of the wind — source, antagonist, integral element.

Monahan moved to Toronto in 1980 and on the suggestion of Holowina

Toronto photographer David Hlynsky. This is one of several visual collaborations which Monahan has been involved with. The recording is manipulated real-time tapping of a performance by Monahan where the camera is fixed on the object and pull of sonorities described by Cage are clear and vivid.

In New Brunswick, Monahan met photographer and teacher, Thaddeus Holowina. Long Aeolian Piano was first constructed in July 1984 on Holowina's farm in Jolleys and still exists there, "installed" in the environment. It is constructed using 100-foot wires strung at high tension between the soundboard of a piano and posts driven at various points in the surrounding field. The piece operates on the same principle as the ancient Greek aeolian harp, a large stringed instrument built out-of-doors. Wind blowing over the strings produces continuous, varied tones and overtones.

toward one of continuous sound source is an active work. A Magneto Attracor was an instrument worthy of sale, and rigged up on the display, a display Union Station in a loudspeaker, new piece, is captivatingly caught at the height, the end of the the needle on the disc, and the player to skip to the magnet playing "Bobby Christian, St. Aggs. The speaker is a magnet and placed by the mechanical process is repeated. Monahan, the speaker "tongue-in-cheek making sculpture that medieval weapon a musical studio system.

Speaker Swing is a process in Monahan's literally a tour of duty practices. Optimal whirl speakers scattered in a circle twenty-foot. The sounds created by six audio units, which gradually vary sawtooth waves, or prerecorded material, the live oscillators speed and to some of the swinging is
began to explore ways of making music using the Doppler Effect. This involved reversing his thinking away from a conception of responsive, mutable sound emitting from a stable source toward one of constant sound whose source is an active, mobile agent in the work. A Magnet That Speaks Also Attracts was an installation built with equipment worthy of any good garage sale, and rigged up in the Eye Forum Gallery, a display window in Toronto's Union Station in February, 1986. The loudspeaker, now the focus of the piece, is catapulted in mid-air and caught at the height of its trajectory by a magnet. The jet of this action causes the needle on the adjoining record-player to skip so the speaker lags in the magnet playing a now excerpt from Bobby Christian, Strings for the Space Age. The speaker is hauled off the magnet and placed back on the catapult by the mechanical system and the process is repeated. According to Monahan, the speaker catapult is a "tongue-in-cheek mechanical performing sculpture that is a combination medieval weapon system and modern musical studio system."

Speaker Swinging is the most recent process in Monahan's repertoire, literally a tour de force of his ideas and practices. Optimally, three performers whirl speakers overhead "dans-style" in a circle twenty-two feet in diameter. The sounds emitted through the speakers are produced live in performance by six audio-tape generators which gradually vary between sine and sawtooth waves, and segments of pre-recorded material are mixed with the live oscillators in process. The speed and to some extent the duration of the swinging is contingent upon the physical strength of the performers.

At the controls, Monahan modulates the sound, eventually aligning it with the resonant frequency of the hall. During this phase of performance when this unity is achieved and the acoustic resonance of the room itself comes into play, the audience in subject to physical as well as auditory sensations caused by the music. At this point the lights are suddenly shut off. After a few moments lights affixed to each speaker are illuminated and instantly a super-modulation of shadows is thrown wildly around the room. The listener's initial response is a strenuous attempt to reconcile the shock of sudden darkness and the hypnotic, sustained monotony of the sound. The secondary response involves the awareness of the spatial manipulations which Monahan exorcises. The dimensions of aural, visual and temporal space are transformed as the music progresses, stretching and undulating like a slow-motion replay of itself, or a drastically protracted note in vibrate.

In recording, these sensory phenomena (without the vibrations of resonant frequency) come through the speakers: without the elements of surprise and fear which Monahan seeks first, the effect is one of tranquility and illusion. The recent videotape of Speaker Swinging, produced in conjunction with Toronto designer Bruce Mau, seeks to achieve video equivalence of the piece in performance.

Gordon Monahan is currently living and working in New York. He continues to refine performances of Speaker Swinging and has now plunged into fluid mechanics, developing the basis for an aeolian piano using water currents instead of air ("aquaeolian" his term). Other ideas for sound sculpture continue to involve piano, pianotronics and wind phenomena, although his move to NY leaves him open to urban influences of the densest kind. As long as Monahan insists on re-examining aurality at its most fundamental levels and allows mechanics, electronics and the forces of nature itself to operate in concert, he will continue to evolve music which now rests silent, possible and profound.

SOURCES
Far, New York, v.12, no.4, June 1987.
Both Monahan's albums, Piano Mechanics/Large Piano Magnified (1986) and Long Aeolian Piano/Spiker Swinging (1987) can be obtained from Marginal Distribution, 27 Vine Ave., Toronto.
Monahan's videotapes, A Magnet That Speaks Also Attracts (1986), Long Aeolian Piano (1986) and Speaker Swinging (1987) are available through V/Tape, 553 Bathurst St., Toronto.

PHOTO CAPTIONS/CREDITS
Gordon Monahan, Speaker Swinging.
Photo, Reimer/Siegner. Page 8

Gordon Monahan and Thaddeus Holownia, Long Aeolian Piano (detail).
Photo, Thaddeus Holownia. Page 7

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