

Full interview with Simon Harper of Channel 4's Ten4 Magazine, November 2006

Can you just talk me through your background in music, from how you first started out working with these kind of instruments through to the present?

My background is in improvised music and musique concrète (working with recorded sound in the studio). In 2000, I started the group kREEPA with trombonist Hilary Jeffery. The group began with an emphasis on combining acoustic instruments with extreme electronically generated sounds in live situations. kREEPA, along with my general interest in design, was the catalyst for many of the devices and instruments I have subsequently built. Having a PhD in electronic music and 'noisy' collaborations, most notably with Nic Bullen (ex-Napalm Death), has led to me being often referred to as Dr of Noise. I am also known for my 'axe-murdering' bass and extended electronic sounds in the group Sand (Soul Jazz Records).

What kind of methods do you use to create or modify instruments, and produce new sounds?

Probably the best way for me to answer this question is to direct you to the Dirty Electronic Manifesto I have been working on (see attached Dirty Electronics Manifesto). The Dirty Electronics Manifesto has grown out work I have done that has sought to describe an approach that exists within electronic music. The idea of 'dirty electronics' was first discussed in an article I wrote entitled 32kg: Performance Systems for a Post-Digital Age and expanded upon in the follow-up paper, Dirty, Dirty Electronics.

"A development and interest in what could be described as 'dirty electronics' has taken root. These electronic instruments and working methods are directly opposed to those of a mass produced digital culture and may include some of the following characteristics: designer trash (deliberately made to look beaten-up or broken), ugly, cheap, heavy, hand-made, designed to be handled or to come in contact with the body, ready-mades, hacked, bent, feedback and kitsch." (Richards, J. "32kg: Performance Systems for a Post-Digital Age." NIME06 Proceedings, IRCAM, Paris, 2006).

Typically, what kind of instruments do you use? And what do you do to them to alter the sounds you can produce?

I construct modular environments where many things are interconnected. My instrument is really more like a network, or many instruments combined. Because of my work with the group kREEPA and my use of feedback, I came up with the term kleepback to describe the instrument/process: sound creeps back. I can build a new instrument/device and add or swap it with what is already in the system. Gesture, touch, physicality and the human body are central to my instrument design. I think a lot about ergonomics and how an instrument looks as a work of art or sculpture in its own right. There are a few standalone devices, but I am mainly thinking in terms of the 'whole' instrument.

Bastardisation of various forms of technology features heavily in my approach. Off the shelf equipment is plugged together the 'wrong' way, and ins and outs are fed into each other. Electronic circuits are made from scratch using such techniques as dead-bugging (electronic components stuck with superglue on their backs, their 'feet' connected) then reversed engineered. The distinction between circuit bending and circuit design becomes blurred. Trial and error procedures are the norm.

What also typifies my instruments is the use of systems that have a degree of instability. Therefore there is certain unpredictability in regards to how the instrument responds, which also results in chance elements. But, like many complex system, say for example the weather, there is some predictability in the system's behaviour. It is a two-way process between the will of the player and the response of the 'machine'. This is ultimately what makes 'playing' the instrument interesting.

Of these instruments, which is your favourite to use?

Pseudophone and the meat mincer (see images attached). The pseudophone is an incredibly simple instrument that is made from an oscillator, miniature loudspeaker, bolt hand-grips and a baked bean can. The instrument is played by gripping one of the bolts, whilst the other hand cups the opening of the tin to produce a harmon-like mute effect. Squeezing the bolts and tin changes the pitch of the instrument through using the conductivity of the human body. This instrument works well independent of the creepback. I carry it around. It is so portable and self-contained. You don't need a PA or any other gear. I have given quite a few impromptu performances with this instrument. It has also been great as a device for building in workshops, where participants are interested in learning about electronic instruments and alternative ways of performance.

The meat mincer is an 'evolved' sound object of which the mechanical properties and physical material of the mincer are exploited. The turning mechanism is used as a switch and way of creating variable resistance, and contact microphones capture the sound of the mincing. The meat mincer is used with a LFO (low frequency oscillator) to modulate other sounds generated by the creepback. What goes in the mincer in performance is also used for dramatic effect!

What music or performers inspired you to take this approach?

David Tudor, born in the US in 1926, who pioneered a DIY approach towards working with electronics and sound. He also coined the phrase 'composers inside electronics' which reflects my approach. The instruments I have made are not just influenced by musicians. For example, the architecture of Richard Rodgers, constructivist sculpture, imagery in Fritz Lang's films, the art works of Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, and the novels of William Gibson have all contributed to some of my ideas on design.

Are there any other contemporary musicians that you feel an affinity with, in terms of what they're doing and the music they make?

Nic Collins, Tom Bugs, Brian Duffy, Merzbow, Nic Bullen, Toshimaru Nakamura, Jem Finer and John Bowers.

What are you working on at the moment?

I am always looking to develop the kreekback. I am exploring ways of using the thresholds of the system. By this I mean the point between stability and instability. This is often where the richest and most rewarding sounds can be found. A switch, a change in resistance or voltage, a modulation etc. can all push the soundworld somewhere else. I am interested in controlling such nuances in a demonstrative way: there is a clear connection with the actions/gestures of the performer. Making visually exciting objects is also important. These are areas I am working on at the moment. So, the Automaticiser is a copper plate etching that doubles as a touch controller. By touching the surface with the hand different connections and resistances are created. This controls how signals are sent around the kreekback. The interface is very sensitive, and as its name suggests, makes use of automatic procedures, not only in the way it was created, but also in performance (see attached image). I am also working on exploring dramaturgy in performance. I recently did a concert entitled Night of the Waxworks that had lots of candles in modified candelabras that detected different levels in light to produce different resistances, which in turn ran the kreekback. Lighting candles, blowing them out etc. was all part of the performance. Other work includes what I call 'still life' instruments: a collection of objects that are also part of a sound generating device. My Autumn Still Life is made up of conkers, nuts, leaves and bark that are all wired together to produce/influence an electronic sound generating circuit.

What are your plans for future experiments or projects?

I am a contributor to the new label Monium set-up by Nic Bullen that is an organisation focused on the exploration of the nexus between electronic and acoustic music in sound, performance, film and text. There are current and forthcoming releases on this label that feature the kreekback and most of my instruments. More releases are planned. kREEPA vs. Black Galaxy on the Austrian label Charhizma; and the new Sand album on Soul Jazz Records, where there are some cameo roles from the kreekback. Generally my plans are to keep experimenting and creating. The process of just making these instruments is integral to me as a musician.