

Blackmore



Simon Blackmore: Three Sound Works

Curated by Richard Klein

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The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum



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Embedded in the history of communication, particularly the subset of that history involving music, is the complex issue of translation. From the development of the first written musical scores in the ancient Middle East, 4,000 years ago, to the invention of the optical digital audio disc—the CD—in the 1970s, the translation of musical information from one medium into another has been a significant part of the unfolding of civilization. Technology has played an increasing role in music over the past century, going beyond Edison’s simple conversion of vibrations in the air into their sculptural analogs on wax to an evolutionary process where technology itself has influenced and shaped the music being made. Each technological development has been accompanied by outcries lamenting the death of something important. In 1906, American composer John Philip Sousa testified before Congress, stating, “These talking machines are going to ruin the artistic development of music in this country,”¹ a position that echoes the present outcry that the growth of downloading has made it harder for musicians to make a living.

For artist Simon Blackmore, the nature and history of musical translation and its relationship to technology has provided a rich area for inquiry. This exhibition brings together three related works that use the language of music to convert one form of information into another: *Weather Guitar*, a Flamenco guitar that “plays” to changing weather conditions; *Audio Monitors*, a pair of speakers on stands that don’t broadcast sound, but rather listen and report on the environment; and *Sticks*, a computer-based piece that utilizes the artist’s musical version of ASCII, an early binary computer code, to transmit text messages.

It perhaps should come as no surprise that Blackmore is himself a musician, but his choice of instrument might come as a shock: acoustic guitar. The artist has played the Flamenco guitar, one of the most traditional of instruments, for many years, and has recently spent time in Spain to perfect his technique.² But he also creates experimental music as part of the Owl Project, a collective of artists who have performed internationally on sculptural electronic instruments of their own design. It is in this clash between the old and the new that Blackmore’s main interests lie, and the works in this exhibition all speak of the artist’s efforts to humanize technology, grounded by an attitude of playful subversion

For over a decade, Blackmore has worked primarily with sound as both subject and object, building performative and interactive sculptures that revel in the DIY ethos that one usually finds in the hobbyist’s basement workshop or the school science fair. In looking at Blackmore’s work, one might be reminded of Steve Wozniak’s prototype Apple 1 computer from 1976, which utilized a GE television as a monitor and had hand-soldered components mounted on what looks like a kitchen cutting board—a remarkably matter-of-fact assemblage that had not yet been subjected to the forces of commodification. The hand-made aesthetic of Blackmore’s work, however, is not just about revealing the inner workings of things that are usually invisible, but rather an attempt to tackle the more philosophically thorny question of our increasingly complicated relationship with machines and the power they hold over us.

Romanticism, a movement that was primarily a reaction against the scientific rationalization of nature, was first defined in relation to literary criticism at the end of the eighteenth century and quickly became the dominant aesthetic in painting, literature, and music. For romantic painters like Turner, Géricault, and Constable, the depiction of weather became a central emotional element, and their work reveled in the power, unpredictability, and cataclysmic extremes of weather phenomena. While romantic painters were expressing the awe, joy, and fear inherent in changing weather conditions, the new science of meteorology was quickly emerging. The invention of the telegraph in 1835 ushered in the modern era of weather forecasting, and the growth of the industrial revolution that it was a part of helped put a nail in the coffin of the Romantic Movement and set the groundwork of the modern world. But while in the first decade of the twenty-first century impressive new

technologies such as satellite imaging and Doppler radar provide highly detailed versions of atmospheric phenomena, our everyday lives still seem to be strongly governed by the subjective emotionality of weather.

Blackmore's *Weather Guitar* is a Spanish Flamenco guitar that has been transformed into an interpreter of current weather conditions via an electronic interface with a set of exterior-mounted weather instruments. The outdoor sensors, crafted by the artist, measure wind speed, direction, and light intensity. Mounted on the neck of the guitar are a series of motors ingeniously attached to small plucking mechanisms that attack the strings when activated by an electronic interface. This interface translates wind speed and direction into what notes are played, in what patterns, and at what speed. For instance, a small, rotating anemometer that is part of the instrument array directly translates the number of revolutions per minute into the number of notes played per minute. There is no attempt to conceal what is going on, and the various components have been assembled in the most straightforward manner. The guitar itself is tuned to *rondaña* tuning,³ which was invented by Ramón Montoya, an early pioneer of solo Flamenco guitar, and Blackmore's mechanical interface has the instrument "perform" in the key of C-sharp Phrygian, which is used with this tuning method. The sounds produced vary from simple, repetitive melodies to more dynamic rising and falling arpeggios that suggest classical music. Blackmore's circuitry and mechanism have a certain degree of intentionality built into them, so the sounds generated are not purely governed by chance, a situation that parallels certain late-modernist compositional techniques. Does the work capture some of the emotional essence of the prevailing weather? Perhaps. But an interesting question is raised by *Weather Guitar*: if Vivaldi hadn't entitled his set of four violin concertos *The Four Seasons*, would a listener naturally understand that each movement illustrates the changing moods of the atmosphere? Music is ultimately abstract, and although some of it is clearly "happy" or "sad," much of our reaction to it is culturally determined. I think we can all agree that the plaintive notes *Weather Guitar* emits on a calm day do honestly reflect atmospheric lassitude, while the speed metal-like riffs generated on a blustery afternoon speak of dramatic instability. Ultimately, Blackmore's sculpture creates analogies that are romantic, lo-tech cousins to the synthetic, color-coded rain bands that appear on Doppler radar images.

Directly across the gallery from *Weather Guitar* are two objects that are simple and understated by comparison. The work entitled *Audio Monitors* appears at first glance to be just that, two audio monitors of the type that one might find in a recording studio or an audiophile's den. When one focuses on them, however, something is amiss: their uniform wooden enclosures have no apparent apertures. They are strangely silent, and one is tempted to lean into them to detect something—anything. The world is full of audio devices, and as a rule they are not mute, but blare sound of one sort or another—usually music—whether we want to listen or not. But *Audio Monitors* is not broadcasting; rather it is listening, counting down via numeric digital readouts the seconds and minutes of silence, only stopping at 4' 33", the length and title of John Cage's iconic silent musical composition.

Cage's premier of 4'33" in 1952 caused quite a stir in the music world and quickly became a landmark in the evolution of twentieth-century music. On one level, *Audio Monitors* might be looked at as an homage to Cage's influence (the centennial of his birth was celebrated in 2012), specifically the way his experimentation laid the groundwork for both conceptualism in the visual arts and the evolving genre of "sound art," a movement that transferred the aesthetics of sound from the concert hall into the gallery and museum environment. But the experience of *Audio Monitors* goes beyond Blackmore simply marking his respect for Cage, and raises all sorts of interesting questions about the aural landscape we inhabit as well the nature of musical performance.



Sticks (installation detail), 2013
Courtesy of the artist

4' 33" has slowly become part of the contemporary musical repertoire, being performed by symphony orchestras as well as rock acts such as Frank Zappa and Wilco (iTunes offered it as a free download on April Fools' Day in 2009). Since the basic idea behind 4' 33" is that the musician(s) performing the piece do nothing for four minutes and thirty-three seconds, so that the audience can appreciate the aesthetics of ambient sound, can *Audio Monitors* be looked upon as Blackmore's robotic adaptation of the work? If the original point of 4' 33" was to focus attention on the natural aural environment, then *Audio Monitors* might be considered from a surveillance perspective, as a monitoring device that simply alerts the listener to the ongoing performance of the piece. On the other hand, *Audio Monitors* acts as a reminder that the world is increasingly noisy and that sonic distraction is the norm. Cage realized early on that silence was quickly retreating from everyday life: in 1948 the composer gave a lecture where he indicated his interest in selling a silent composition to Muzak, so as to disrupt their increasingly prevalent sonic wallpaper.⁴ Is Blackmore's *Audio Monitors* a tombstone for silence, or is it a quietly mad celebration that focuses our attention on how interesting every sound really is?

From the ringing of church bells to mark the hours, to battlefield drumming, to the dots and dashes utilized by telegraphy, rhythmic patterns have allowed humankind to communicate at a distance throughout history. But as technology has advanced and become more complicated, the rhythmic nature of communication has become less and less obvious. The last vestiges of everyday awareness of the rhythm buried in digital technology disappeared a decade ago when our computers and fax machines stopped making the soft chirping that indicated the transmission of data. Now, we all carry smartphones and tablets that offer no hint of what is

going on, and the torrents of encoded information that we receive every day arrive silently. Simultaneous to this development has been the simplification of the human interface with digital communication. As the percentage of the population that uses digital technology has increased, the percentage of users that actually know and use programming codes has rapidly decreased. In the 1980s, if you were engaged in any serious endeavor that used computers you probably knew BASIC or DOS, while in the present day anyone can create a website from user-friendly templates that don't offer a hint of the underlying HTML codes.

For *Sticks*, the most recent work in this exhibition, Blackmore has retro-engineered ASCII⁵ (pronounced ASSKEY), an early computer code, from a binary system to a system of musical notation. Blackmore's version of ASCII is rhythmic and percussive, allowing the user to translate standard keyboard characters into short seven- or eight-beat percussive riffs that can be read by a software program he developed. For transmission, two wooden sticks are provided, which Blackmore cut from the limb of a tree. This system, which needless to say only the artist has mastered, translates text messages into percussive performances that can be reinterpreted back into text only by a computer running Blackmore's program via an external microphone. Since the artist can't be continuously present at the Museum, in this exhibition Blackmore appears on a video "playing" his version of ASCII, with the coded messages being deciphered by a microphone equipped computer on the other side of the gallery. One of the first texts that Blackmore sent via *Sticks* was "hello world," a phrase that references the Hello World program,⁶ one of the simplest codes possible in most programming languages. The phrase is often used to verify that a language or operating system is functioning correctly.

Sticks is Blackmore's tongue-in-cheek response to the growing distance between us and the technology we use. Based on what is perhaps the most ancient form of musical performance—the pounding together of two sticks—the work is a desperate and comical attempt to humanize text messaging. Blackmore's version of ASCII is unlikely to catch on as a popular app on smartphones anytime soon, but it does pull back the curtain to reveal that the wizard isn't as mysterious as is generally assumed.

Richard Klein, exhibitions director

Simon Blackmore, born 1976, Honiton, England
Lives and works in Manchester, England

Works in the Exhibition

All dimensions h x w x d in inches

Weather Guitar, 2005

Flamenco guitar, custom weather instruments, electronics, motors, cables
Dimensions variable

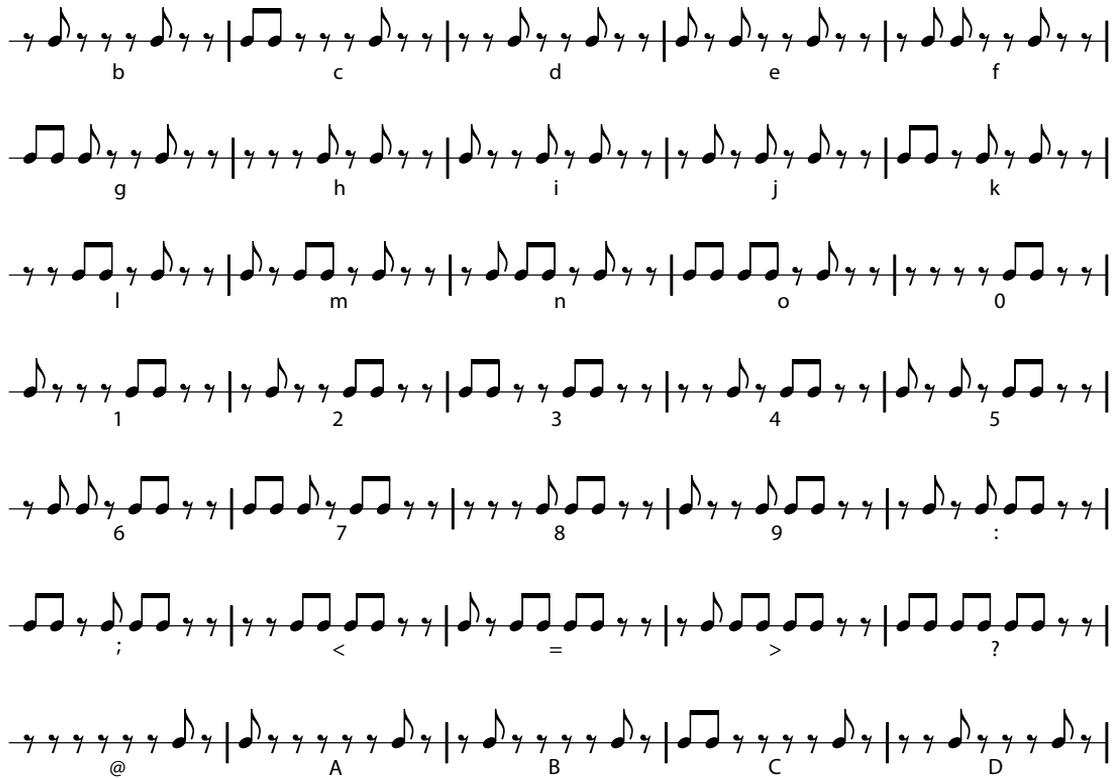
Audio Monitors, 2007–13

Oak cabinets, microphone, electronics, digital LED display, monitor stands
Two elements, each 11 x 7 1/2 x 7 1/2; stand height variable

Sticks, 2013

Two wood sticks, custom software, two Mac minis, two 42-inch LCD monitors, speaker, custom-made parabolic microphone
Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist



Detail of ASCII binary to music notation, 2012
 Courtesy of the artist

- 1 “Code, Law, Money and John Philip Sousa,” *LexTek Report* (blog for *Chicago Lawyer Magazine*), April, 12, 2011, <http://lextekreport.com/2011/04/12/code-law-money-and-john-philip-sousa/>
- 2 Blackmore started playing guitar early in his teenage years and has renewed his interest over the course of the past decade, studying in Spain with Flamenco masters such as Manolo Sanlúcar and Gerardo Nuñez. In 2012, Blackmore, along with other Flamenco enthusiasts, set up Flamencomanchester.com, an organization in Manchester, England, that promotes all things Flamenco.
- 3 Rondaña tuning has the strings tuned, from bass to treble, D, A, D, F-sharp, B, E. which creates sumptuous harmonies due to a conjunction of dissonances and deep bass tones.
- 4 John Cage, in *John Cage–Writer: Previously Uncollected Pieces*, edited by Richard Kostelanetz (New York, Limelight Editions, 2004), pg. 43.
- 5 ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange) was one of the first systems that translated the alphabet into a numeric code that could be used by computers. Based on both on nineteenth-century telegraphic codes and codes later used by teletype machines, ASCII is still the basis for most character-encoding systems used today
- 6 Hello World is so simple that, even with no programming experience, most people can learn it. Computer hackers frequently use it as proof that they have successfully hacked into a system that does not intentionally run any external software. The first known version appeared in a programming tutorial at Bell Labs in 1974.

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

258 Main Street, Ridgefield, CT 06877
Tel 203.438.4519, Fax 203.438.0198, aldrichart.org

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Weather Guitar (partial installation view, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK), 2005
Courtesy of the artist

