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# Sound Art in Cork: A Brief History

by MICHAEL DALY

In America, Nashville is sometimes referred to as 'Music City, USA'. Would it be unreasonable to apply the same title to Cork city within Ireland? It bears repeating – Cork is a small place. It would be considered a town rather than a city by the criteria of many other countries but there is no doubting that despite its size it more than punches above its weight musically speaking. The list of outstanding musicians and bands that have lived and played here over the last 40 years and more is long indeed. But what really sets the city apart, I think, is the sheer diversity of music on offer. Whatever genre of music you like, be it Rock, Bluegrass, Classical, Hip-Hop, Irish Trad, Jazz or all of the above, then there are plenty of opportunities to hear that music being performed live and quite often free of charge. Go for a walk downtown on any night and just open your ears; the streets are buzzing with music.

And happily for those with 'open ears', the city has also witnessed in fairly recent times the appearance of a thriving community of musicians who practice a form of music that, while it could be considered to lie outside the 'mainstream' music world, nevertheless has a tradition and history all of its own. The Sound Art/Improv scene is flourishing in Cork these days and there are a growing number of local and international artists working within the city and performing their work regularly to sizeable audiences. The musics of Sound Art and Improv can be seen as being quite distinct from each other, however there is a large crossover evident here in Cork and artists frequently work between the two areas. What's more, the scene here is attracting attention on an international level and continues to go from strength to strength.

But what are Sound Art and Improv? A strict definition of Sound Art is difficult and beyond the scope of this article, since there is still a lot of debate amongst art theoreticians as to its precise nature. Suffice to say, that it is generally a form of music with a defined visual aspect that focuses on the physical act of listening and the nature of sounds in themselves. The phrase 'Sound Art' was coined in the early 80s to describe pieces by visual artists who were producing conceptual works involving sound, and it grew out of various 20th century artistic movements such as Dada, Performance Art and Fluxus in particular (Fluxus was an art movement active in the late 60s and 70s, which was highly irreverent and questioned traditional art making practices in a humorous and provocative way). 'Improv' refers to improvised music which is performed freely, 'in the moment' and without rules.

The scene in Cork has no one particular 'sound' as such and the music's scope is very broad – practitioners may perform using electronics, noise, machinery, the spoken word, self-made instruments, or indeed silence, to make music. Since this music is sometimes made by people from an art rather than a music background, elements such as video, sculpture, and physical performance are all utilized during concerts and there is often a conscious effort to engage the audience visually in some manner.

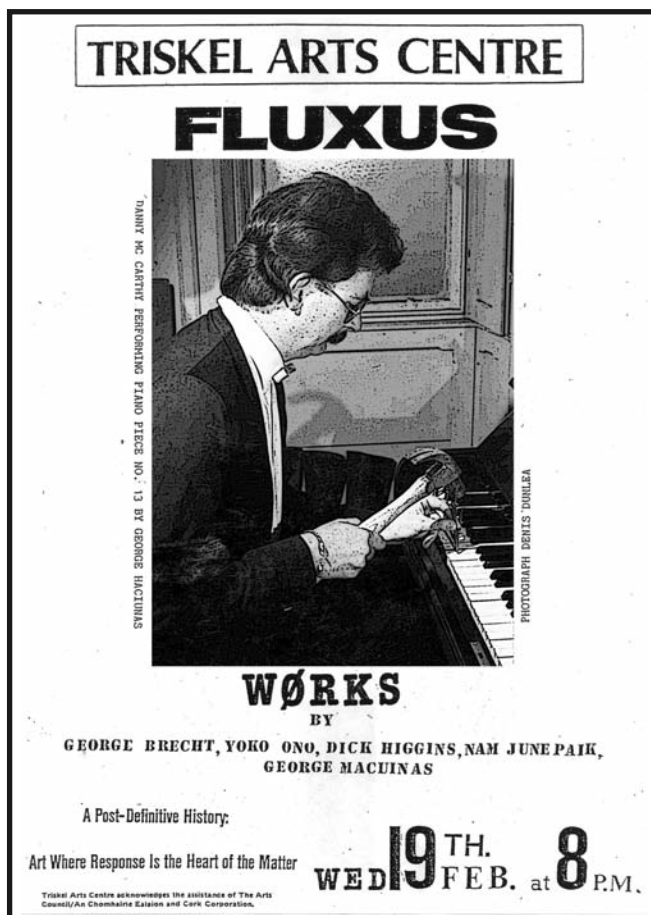
In Cork the first Sound Art related evenings were put on in the early 1980s by the artist and founding director of the Triskel Arts Centre, Danny McCarthy. An ardent admirer of the Fluxus group, McCarthy had read about the work of its foremost artists for years but never actually heard them performed, so he decided to organ-

ize a night and have the pieces presented by both himself and other Cork-based artists in the Triskel. The event was well postered around the city and drew a strong crowd. The audience that turned up did not perhaps know anyone on the bill aside from Yoko Ono but may have guessed they were in for something unusual as the poster depicted McCarthy hammering nails into a piano.

Some of the pieces on offer that night included a piece performed by Gunter Berkus called Guitar Piece where a guitar was kicked out of the auditorium into the street and around the block. Most people in the space followed Berkus on his journey along South Main Street, on to Tobin Street, the Grand Parade and back to the Triskel. Another interesting work presented that night was George Brecht's Danger Music which consisted of a person being shaved onstage. Berkus grew a beard in advance and a microphone was miked up to a razor

while McCarthy held an umbrella over both Berkus and the person doing the shaving, Tony Sheehan. McCarthy noted, 'we were all dressed up in suits etc, looking very respectable and all the works were presented in a serious manner which added greatly to the proceedings'. The general audience reaction to the night he reckoned was 'bemused, perplexed but positive'.

Over the next few years further nights of experimental music and performance art were programmed by McCarthy in the Triskel under the title 'Sound Works' and the numbers of people that attended varied from packed houses to a few evenings where there were more performers onstage than audience members. These events were regularly reviewed by the arts critic, Hilary Pyle, in *The Irish Times*, which provided a good deal of encouragement for the artists involved, especially since *The Cork*



Poster for the first 'Fluxus' concert held in Cork.  
Image: courtesy of Danny McCarthy

*Examiner*, at that time somewhat infrequently reviewed the performances. In the *The Irish Times* of April 2 1987, Pyle called one 'Sound Works' evening 'versatile and entertaining' and went on to describe a piece called 'Newgrange' by Bríd O'Brien, which was inspired by the prehistoric site where the artist drew comparisons between Indian and Celtic religious cults 'in slide images, her own commentary, her own yoga poses, performed with a superb Celtic mask and in an evocative blue leotard'.

Since then Sound Art has become firmly established in the Cork musical environment and there have been many festivals showcasing the form. One of these, the 'Intermedia' festival which ran from 1990 to 2002 in the Triskel, brought recognised sound artists from all over the world to Cork to perform including David Toop, Pan Sonic, Max Eastley and Scanner. Indeed, one of the most enjoyable exhibitions I have ever had the pleasure of going to formed a part of that festival in the year 2000, an exhibition of 'music sculptures' by the French artists the Baschet Brothers. At the opening of this show, most of the gallery-goers, I seem to remember, worked themselves up into a state of giddy excitement as they were encouraged by the brothers to play their beautifully made sound instruments, using things such as metal bars and jets of water to create various sounds, which hugely delighted children and adults alike.

Currently there are lots of Sound Art/Improv related events going on in the city. Upstairs in The Roundy Bar one can find 'Stetlab' a monthly night focusing on improvised music curated by Han-earl Park. Over in the Granary (usually) there is the 'Black Sun' weirdo/outer-limits music event run by Vicky Langan and Paul Hegarty, which features performances of a perhaps slightly more psychedelic flavour and whose aim is 'to present exciting performers to an Irish audience and give local weirdos an opportunity to play in a really cool setting'. And right by Shandon Bells itself on Chapel Street is 'The Guesthouse Project', a house that facilitates 'other kinds of artistic practice outside of the studio' and regularly hosts Sound Art performances. These also

sometimes double as Sunday lunches where guests are encouraged to participate by bringing food in to help make the dish of the day, as well as listen to the music of course. The Triskel is also continuing its long held support for Sound Art and programmes events frequently.

I asked the German sound artist, Roland Etzin, founder of the Gruenrekorder record label and former artist in residence at the Guesthouse Project, what was notable about Cork musically. He replied, 'For me Cork has an amazing creative atmosphere with an open mind for input from outside. There is a very good feeling about connecting and supporting artists and also a great chance for beginners to express themselves'. I also questioned Danny McCarthy about what makes Cork different from elsewhere in relation to Sound Art, and he suggested that the special thing about here perhaps is the lack of barriers between the various strands of experimentalism that occur. In Cork, sound artists, contemporary composers, experimental rock musicians and improvisers work side by side, whereas in other places the individual 'scenes' are possibly more separate and there is less of a synergy going on between the different musics. In any case what is beyond doubt is that Cork at this moment is a very fertile place indeed for those seeking to expand their musical horizons as both listeners and performers, and as McCarthy overheard recently during a conversation amongst some music lovers – 'THIS is Cork's golden age of Sound Art'. If that is the case then get out there and hear it while it lasts!

Some websites which may be of interest:

*The Guesthouse Project*, <http://www.theguesthouse.ie>

*Danny McCarthy*, <http://www.dannymccarthy.ie>

*Black Sun Music Night*, <http://www.myspace.com/solnigerire>

*Stetlab*, <http://www.busterandfriends.com/stet>

*Gruenrekorder Records*, <http://www.gruenrekorder.de/>

*The Triskel Arts Centre*, <http://www.triskelart.com>



Vicky Langan and The Quiet Club perform in the Triskel Arts Centre, December 2009

Photo: Patricia Klich