

Sculptor? Composer? Both?
Neither? British artist
H a r o o n M i r z a fuses
sound and installation into
indivisible wholes and – at
a time when each new
musical work seems no more
than a drop of water in an
ocean of downloads –
redeems the specificity of
individual musical pieces
by exploring their physical
trace as sculptural works of
art. But does that leave us
with something new or
merely expose the twin
deficiencies of music and
purely visual works of art?
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WORDS: MARTIN HERBERT



OVER THE PAST FEW DECADES, Johann Pachelbel’s Canon in D major has served as the melodic reference point for all kinds of left-field musical moves. When Brian Eno copyrighted ambient music with *Discreet Music* (1975), there was the Canon – subjected to whispery algorithmic permutations that rendered it almost unrecognisable. When the 1984 film *Electric Dreams* called for a duet between a cellist and Edgar the sentient computer, there was the Canon, 8-bit bleeps and all. Needless to say, there’s a Korean hip-hop version, too. Even so, it’s arguable that no one has dismantled and rebuilt Pachelbel’s beatific baroque composition more dramatically than Haroon Mirza. Others have made music out of the 300-year-old tune; the thirty-three-year-old English artist also turned it into sculpture.

Improvised into shape while Mirza was enrolled on a design MA at Goldsmiths (after first training as a painter and then making looped animations and photographs of seascapes that explored a kind of digital photorealism), *Canon Remix* (2006) sits casually on the floor, a tangle of cables and ingeniously hacked and tweaked everyday objects. A semideconstructed Discman, containing a CD in which the artist has separated the opening notes of the Canon onto individual tracks, rests precipitously on the lip of a black bucket of water that’s being bombarded continually with ultrasonic vibrations. The switching device for the portable CD player’s skip function dangles into the effervescing liquid, whose movement shuffles the tracks randomly; the resultant fragmented version of Pachelbel is percussively augmented, meanwhile, by other soundmaking “bits and bobs” (in Mirza’s words), including an exposed, upturned, thrumming loudspeaker containing a rattling handful of coins.

Here, the optical and auditory are inextricable within a closed loop of pure functionalism: *Canon Remix* sounds how it does because of how it looks, and it looks that way in order to create those sounds. “In a way, I wasn’t thinking about these works as artworks”, says Mirza, sipping tea in his austere live/work pied-à-terre in East London, a perk of a fellowship (his other, busier studio is in Sheffield). “They were prototypes for things you might want in your house; instead of a hi-fi system, you’d have this thing for one piece of music. Music is so accessible now; you can download anything you like, but you’re so far removed from how the thing was created. With my work, I very rarely record the sound separately: you have to be there to hear it.” What might seem a retrograde idea in an age of instant downloads is, rather, a formula for a different kind of connectedness.

From this breakthrough point, Mirza’s aesthetic – and conceptualising – would quickly expand, via audiovisual compositions often using items sourced from the artist’s then-local market in Deptford, South London. (The interest in obsolescence they suggested was an upshot of pure pragmatism, he says: the outmoded tends to be inexpensive.) So the continuous overlapping metronomic pulses of *Open* (2007) apparently derive from the electromagnetic interference between the work’s combination of a landline telephone, an LED sign and a string of coloured fairy lights. “Most of my music is the sound of electricity”, notes Mirza. Elsewhere, he’d create miniature abstract concertos of clicks, pops and hums from the tetchy interaction of flashing lights, loudspeakers and the extended aerial of a radio spinning on a turntable and passing near a dangling illuminated lightbulb (as in various versions of *Sanctuary*, 2009), or forge a



beat from a run-off groove’s intractable clunk. In each work, the dispersion of objects resolves into visual order when we see what it ‘does’, and the sound it makes resolves in turn, however briefly, into stutteringly syncopated musicality – reflecting modernist composer Edgard Varèse’s dictum that ‘music is organised sound’.

What we realise amid these flickeringly resolved works is that, first of all – and unexpectedly – there isn’t a comfortable category for such an interstitial art-into-music position. Historically the crossover between art and music, from Luigi Russolo’s futurist noisemaking machines, or *Intonarumori*, to the works of John Cage and Max Neuhaus, has been occasioned almost entirely by musicians and composers encroaching on the visual. Mirza is coming from the opposite direction and bringing a different audience with him. This could easily reduce to a bit of formalist territory-claiming. Instead, in a number of cases, his works become roomy containers for stacked inferences.

The installation *Adhān* (2009), for example, whose title comes from the Islamic call to prayer, is a multisection confab of the old and new (video projections, noisemaking used furniture triggered in part by a transparent cube containing condensing water). Its delicate interplay of clacks, guitar strums and cello is dominated by its video elements: a looped clip of Cat Stevens playing the introduction to a song in 1971, and a cellist performing a transcription of the Islamic muezzin call. “Cat Stevens – who I’d tried and failed to interview before making this piece – gave up music for Islam”, says Mirza. “There are schools of thought in Islam that see music as bad, as encouraging dancing, which encourages sex. I wanted to point towards this contradiction in the faith: music is embedded in Islam – in the muezzin call, even in the rhythm and music of everyday actions.” Previous commentators on Mirza’s work have hitched his own religious upbringing to his interest in coordinating sound, seeing the latter as an allegorical plotting of order onto chaos. “It’s obvious in a way. But I wouldn’t say it’s conscious. Quite early on, I rejected not just Islam but religious





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faith in general, because I don't think there could be one god. I don't believe in a singularity: a creative force has to be two or more elements. I think that, ultimately, is something that appears in my work."

It's certainly evocative of how one navigates Mirza's voluminous, dynamics-rich, prolix art, which sends its viewers spiralling between perceptual gaming, formalist elements, interacting reference points, and visual and auditory registers. The relatively sparse installation *An_Infinato* (2009) fashions an aleatory, spatialised composition from the arrhythmic flutter of bats' wings in video rushes from Jeremy Deller's *Memory Bucket* (2003; Mirza previously worked as Deller's assistant), the rumble noise of damaged offcuts from Guy Sherwin's rhythmic abstract film *Cycles #1* (1972/77) and a wandering music caused by dangling an electronic keyboard's sensors halfway into a dustbin of water with a pump in it. Despite the multiple historical and cultural markers here, Mirza sees building a formal construct to insert references into as "too easy", and running through all of his productions is a theoretical point about cultural production that feels larger than the religious or formal inferences elsewhere. The artist imbibed some Marshall McLuhan during his studies, and was struck by the late theorist's point about the 'ocular-centric' nature of Western civilisation:

"We rely more on what we see than what we hear, or smell, or whatever. McLuhan argues that this happened in two stages – first when we applied phonics, sounds, to objects, and second when we started writing – but that previous to this, visual and acoustic space was one perceptual mode, and now they've separated. And art, from its use in the Church to its adoption by the bourgeoisie and elevation as a superstructure, in Marxist terms, has a lot to do with that separation... So one of my things – it's not something I can do, it's not going to change anything, but I can do it in my practice and for myself – is to somehow think of acoustic space and visual space as one thing." This is no small conception of art – even when hedged about with caveats about its possibility. A newspaper, Mirza continues, paraphrasing McLuhan, is a form of acoustic space, a three-dimensional one –

material arriving from all over the world and landing in one place – and that's how his body of work feels too, in its determined refusal of a cardinal centre. Mirza, the market-stall rummager and denier of singularities, seems to want nothing blacklisted from his practice: from registers of making, to material culture, to the art of others.

This last aspect also plays into his awareness of the organic, delicate nature of artmaking. Having recently signed to London's Lisson Gallery and already received his share of plaudits – a few days after our conversation, he'll be awarded the Northern Art Prize ('Mirza combines old and new technology to create multi-layered installations which offer detailed examination and reflect the complexity of the modern world', in judge Mark Lawson's masterfully nebulous summing-up) – he seems intimately aware that an art career can become an inspiration-sapping treadmill. Hence Mirza's taste for collaborations, and his idea of the 'reverse readymade'. "It's about working with other people's art as any other material: if I'm using a table, it's the same as using a painting. I feel like I've built a language, a technical language and an aesthetic language, and in a way I could explore any subject using it. But that's not enough: it needs to develop and grow."

In his debut show at Lisson, the vivifying collaboration will transpire across the veil. Having rifled through the gallery's archives and lit upon sets of instructions for installing work by the late minimalist artist Fred Sandback, he's using those and replicating them with different – and more characteristically Mirza-esque – materials. So the install will include LEDs and UV lights, and, surely, it'll be musical; or you'll come to hear it that way. "For a long time", muses Mirza, "I found it really difficult to say to anyone that I was making things to make pieces of music. But that's the only way that I can rationalise it – otherwise I can't talk about it. If I was interested in making music on its own, I wouldn't be in a cold studio all the time. I'd be in my bedroom, or a warm studio! So there's something lacking in music –" He thinks about it, finds the shorthand. "But at the same time, there's something lacking in sculpture."•

An exhibition of work by Haroon Mirza is on view at Lisson Gallery, London, to 19 March

WORKS
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

An_Infinato, 2009, mixed media

Open, 2007, mixed media

Canon Remix, 2006, mixed media

Sanctuary, 2009, mixed media

Adhān, 2008, mixed media

all images
Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery, London