

# The Isle is Full of Noises

**Tim Souster**

by **Dan Goldstein**

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*...was the title of The South Bank Show's much-criticised electronic music extravaganza of a couple of months back. Here the programme's musical consultant, composer Tim Souster, argues the case in favour of the show's content.*

**Tim Souster, avant garde composer, soundtrack writer and new-found TV star, hits back at his critics.**



Before the start of the decade, few people outside the academic and avant garde music field had even heard of Tim Souster. His name became half-famous after he helped write the music for Douglas Adams' *Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* on Radio 4, but his face didn't become widely known until a month or two ago, when he

appeared on the South Bank Show's electronic music extravaganza, *The Isle is Full of Noises*.

## **History**

Like many avant garde composers, Souster found himself immersed in the conventions of classical training at an early age. The only chance he got to expose himself to other forms of music was when he could sneak into the family bathroom and tune into Radio Luxembourg, though that only lasted a short while before his mother discovered what he was doing and promptly confiscated his radio.

'I suppose that was what attracted me to rock and jazz initially - the fact that it was forbidden. But I did the decent thing and studied Music at Oxford, and subsequently did a postgraduate degree in Composition.

'I was a contemporary of Hugh Davies, and it was he who built me my first piece of electronic equipment - a ring modulator with two inputs and one output. It must have been about 1968, and I started off by feeding records of ethnic and folk music into the circuit, with somewhat unpredictable results. Shortly afterwards I bought a sinewave oscillator from an Army Surplus place in Lyle Street - the thing was indestructible, built like a tank - and a grotty old Selmer 50 watt amp that was so loud it could kill a man at 100 paces...

The initial motivation for writing electronic music was hearing Stockhausen, and also experimental rock bands like the Soft Machine.'

But rather than incarcerate himself within the confines of a recording studio, Souster opted to take his new-found enthusiasm for electronics to the people. During the time he was Composer in Residence at King's College, Cambridge, he formed a revolutionary avant garde performance group by the name of Intermodulation: the other founder members were composer Roger Smalley, who'd

occupied the King's post before Souster, and Andrew Powell, who subsequently found a little fame and not inconsiderable fortune as a composer/arranger in the progressive rock arena.

Intermodulation were ground-breakers. They wrote music in a huge variety of styles and for just about any combination of instruments they could think of: boundaries were few and far between. One of their pieces, a monstrous 73-minuter by the name of 'World Music', involved quadrophonic sound rotations to simulate a satellite orbiting the Earth, and required one of the group's then members, Robin Thompson, to play soprano sax, bassoon, electric guitar and electric piano at intervals during its length.

But such technical and musical complexity has its drawbacks, as Souster himself is only too aware.

'We had a remarkably good track record with electronic reliability in both Intermodulation and OdB, the second group I was involved with. There was one occasion during a performance of 'World Music' when one of the speakers around the room went down. It was a bit embarrassing because you got a sudden attack of drastic minimalism by cross-fading into complete silence, so we had to stop. We traced the fault afterwards to a bad join in that particular speaker cable, but there was no way we could have known that at the time. Luckily, that sort of thing happens less and less these days with the increased quality of the electronic gear that's available. Mind you, there are still people snatching defeat out of the jaws of victory and producing really duff concerts, even now.

The really negative aspect is that if you write music specifically for a certain combination of musicians, as I have, it restricts the future performability of the piece. If you write things for strange combinations or certain groups of individuals you're always going to be restricted, and it's only now that we're getting away from that with groups like Electric Phoenix, for example. They're the first proper electronic ensemble that actually commissions people to write music for them and will then take it to different countries, giving maybe 30 performances of it instead of the usual one or two.

I wrote a piece for them that they've played in Britain, the US, Canada, Scandinavia - all over the place.

'One of the problems with my own stuff is that it's difficult to get Publishers interested in putting money behind and promoting music that's written for odd combinations of instruments. But again, that's all beginning to change now.

## **Turning Pro**

Yet in spite of his having received a good deal of critical and public acclaim during his years with Intermodulation and odB, it wasn't until the collapse of the latter assemblage that Souster decided he'd free himself from the bonds of academic convention and go it alone. Up until that time, he'd succeeded in taking up research posts at Schools and Colleges in places as far afield as Berlin and California, but there came a time when academic achievement simply wasn't enough.

'It was when I came back from America that I decided to take the plunge and start off my own studio in earnest, and try to actually *live* from my writing alone. I knew I'd like to carry on doing serious concert music, but although there are a very few people who can live entirely off writing serious music, I'm not one of them. My kind of concert music simply isn't mainstream enough for me to be able to do that, so right from the start, I've had to do whatever commercial work has been necessary to allow me to continue working on serious projects.

'My situation still isn't altogether satisfactory, because if you turn your hand to different sorts of musical writing, you get known as being a jack of all trades and master of none. I don't think I come into that category, but it's all too easy for people to form that impression. If you write library and TV music in addition to string quartets, people throw their arms up in disgust: they just don't understand the situation.

'Personally, I rather like turning my hand to different sorts of music because you can get interesting cross-fertilisations between them. One can learn an awful lot of technical things from doing music for commercials, for example. Working with such discipline and such intensity, making something last exactly 28 seconds, is certainly a valuable experience. I've had a couple of utterly mind-crunching sessions, one in which I worked through the night until 4pm to get a score fully mapped out to the tenth of a second and recorded so that the Director could hear it - and when I played it to him, he loathed it. So I just had to start all over again.'

In fact, that episode is one of many memorable adventures Souster has experienced at the hands of an advertising film director revelling in the name of Lester Bookbinder. It was for him that the composer wrote the matchless collection of sound effects that decorated the Alberto Balsam Jojoba commercials of a year or two back, though Souster himself reckons his greatest work with Bookbinder will never be witnessed by the public...

'Lester was mad-keen on my *Spectral* piece, which imitates the song of the hump-back whale. He made a commercial for Hitachi electric razors using that piece, and he'd listened to it so intensely, he'd managed to tie the image of a winking eye reflected in a razor blade exactly with a modulated pizzicato in *Spectral*. The finished film was really quite extraordinary, but when it went back to the Japanese, they hated it. In the end I think they put Holst's *Planets* on it instead, though I really couldn't think of anything less appropriate. It had been a marvellous piece of irony on Lester's part, because the Japanese are one of the few nations still hunting whales, but I don't imagine it'll ever be shown now.

'Lester's always wanted music that's as unconventional as possible - some of the things I've written for him haven't been nearly weird enough - and now he's experimenting with sound himself. He's got an Emulator, and I don't think he's going to be the only Director to start doing things that way. After all, as the equipment gets better and gives you more and more direct control over sampling sound effects and so on, the more the people involved with visuals are

going to want to get closer to the sound elements. And who can blame them? You can't say it's unjust or anything, because in the case of certain sorts of soundtrack, it's irrelevant whether the guy manipulating the sounds is a musician or a Director.'



At this point, both interviewer and interviewee start entertaining visions of the world's soundtrack composers joining dole queues *en masse*. We dismiss the possibility simultaneously, but it leads us on to the thorny topic of just how most film and television soundtracks are commissioned, and the headaches composers have to face as a result.

'Film music is still done as an afterthought in the majority of cases, at the last minute and when almost all the budget has been used up. Then there's a sudden panic and it all has to be finished by Tuesday, and the film companies wonder why the results aren't ideal half the time. It's such a short-sighted attitude, and it's really up to us as composers to get our message across. There have been a few exceptions where the Director has been particularly sensitive to music and let the soundtrack be developed side by side with the rest

of the film. Apparently, the music for the end of the first version of *Close Encounters* was written first, and Spielberg actually edited the film to fit this great chunk of symphonic music. That's something that ought to be done more often, I think, to eliminate the phone-call-two-days-before-screening syndrome.'

## **Studio**

When E&MM last featured Tim Souster back in May 1981, he'd moved his centre of operations from Cambridge to London's Camden Town. Now he's back in Cambridge, with a pleasant semi in a quiet part of town and a recording studio in his garden shed. That studio's equipment list has grown considerably over the past couple of years, due partly to *Hitch-Hiker's Guide* royalties and partly to some lucrative audio-visual work, which might be unremittingly mundane (the worst example featured the upper echelons of Metal Box Company management discussing export prospects to the Solomon Islands) but does at least pay well.

So whereas the studio of '81 was a simple eight-track affair with a Serge modular synthesiser as its centrepiece, Souster's current set-up is a Tascam-based 16-track with a full complement of contemporary synthesiser technology. The JP4 of four years ago is now a JP8, the Minimoog has been replaced by a DX7, and a BBC Micro has added music to its range of activities thanks to Souster's recently-acquired Music 500 add-on.

As it happens, Souster has already put the 500 to good use by writing a new piece, 'Work', for piano and appropriately-equipped Beeb. The piece received its premiere performance last month at the Cambridge College of Art and Technology, and will be doing a round-trip of the avant garde music circuit later in the year. The composer is pleased with it, though he's at pains to stress his experimentation with computers is at nothing more than an embryonic stage.

'I'm very interested in the concept of the synthetic performer. I wanted to set up an electronic system that was responsive to and interactive with the human performer, but there simply wasn't the time to do that with 'Work'. But the structure of AMPLE should make it possible to make the computer respond to certain strategies and take its own decisions accordingly.

'What the piece turned out to be was a sort of duel between man and machine. There was an interesting contrast between the musician getting a piece of music and phrasing it the way any trained pianist would (but which a computer finds great difficulty in doing), and churning out random chords very rapidly *ad infinitum*, which a computer excels at but which a pianist has extreme difficulty keeping up with.



The other exciting thing is building up networks of dissemination. If



you create a complete artistic package like *Ghostbusters* or *King Lear* or a symphony, you're laughing because you've got a fixed article that people can only respond to in a passive way. You refine it as far as possible, of course, which is where hi-fi and video come into it. And you can have a copy of *King Lear* with no typesetting errors in it, which means you've got a perfect object. But it's still just that - an object.

'Douglas Adams (the *Hitch-Hiker's Guide* author) is often going on about the idea of interactive literature: his computer game tries to go some way towards achieving that because it involves the user so much. I'm sure that's not a new idea, but the computer is an ideal medium for the dissemination of art through a sort of modular audience network, because it can store all the various permutations. It's a very exciting development, and I'd love to do more with it in musical terms.'

## **Technology**

So, with a studio whose high sound quality continues to surprise its user and whose range of hardware has proved itself capable of coping with the most demanding performance situations, Souster only has one or two things left on his list of technological avenues worth following up.

'I need a sampling machine, though at the moment I can't afford one. I'm impressed by both the Emulator II and the Powertran MCS1. Having experimented with synthesised sound for so long, I'd like to get more into the sampling of concrete acoustic sounds, a proper miking technique, which is a fantastic art. Sampling enables you to inject that richness of acoustic sounds into electronic music: things sound a lot more interesting if you can add the enormous complexity of acoustic sounds to the simplicity of electronic ones.

'It's unfortunate, but you can already hear lots of sampling clichés in pop music, though I suppose that's a result of the highest technology being in the hands of the entertainment industry, where

there's so much pressure to produce something people are already familiar with.

'But what is exciting is the prospect of generating a composite sound that isn't a banal, obvious concrete sound and isn't a plastic synth sound, either. Psycho-acoustically, that's fascinating because the brain is constantly teased as to what area it's actually in.'

And as well as his potential addiction to the sampling drug, Souster is also anxious to link as much of his current gear as possible to his BBC B, for reasons of synchronisation, automation and centralisation, if you get my drift.

But it's all got to be financed from somewhere, and Souster is under no illusions that life as a freelance avant garde composer is going to get any easier. He's in Australia for almost the whole of April to tour a piece for flugel-horn, synthesiser and tapes, and expresses some pleasure at the fact that the piece will also be played solo at IRCAM in Paris while he's thousands of miles away. Once that academic sojourn has been completed, it'll be back to whatever commercial, audio-visual and film work the composer can find.

And while his recent TV appearance on Melvyn Bragg's South Bank Show will have given Souster's publicity rating a welcome shot in the arm, not all that publicity will necessarily have been good. For *The Isle is Full of Noises* has had more detractors than admirers, the principal criticisms being that it lingered for too long on historical and academic developments, touched all too briefly on technological advances in the popular field, and failed to illustrate technology's downward cost spiral and subsequent increase in accessibility. I put those points to Souster and found, to my eternal surprise, that he agreed with all of them. What's more, he succeeded remarkably well in convincing a complete sceptic like me that the motives behind the programme were right, even if the results weren't quite what was originally intended.

'I set out to show the historical roots of electronic music, which a lot of people still think started when Rick Wakeman bought his first gold lamé cape: it goes back a bit further than that.

'I also wanted to reflect as much as possible of the good music that's being made in this country at the moment. Obviously the pop thing is important, but we didn't want to make another programme dominated by pop musicians, because you can hardly turn the TV on these days without seeing a pop player of some kind.

But the criticisms are valid, because the programme's coverage of the pop world was a little perverse. That came about partly because the Director, Bryan Izzard, was very anxious to feature Andy Mackay, and because although I'd have preferred to have a chat with one of the contemporary computer music producers like Trevor Horn or Steve Levine, those plans eventually fell through. So the ramifications of all that were that we had The Explorers, whose music didn't really incorporate the technological innovation so many others have got involved with.

'You can't please everybody. I didn't want to spend a lot of the programme explaining the workings of various different synths, because that's done already in other places - E&MM does it every month. So one isn't exactly short of ways of finding out these things. I was more interested in relating those technical points to the music itself - what's actually going on in the forefront of music today, and the reasons *why* people ever choose to use electronics in the first place.'

A pretty fundamental point, you've got to admit.