

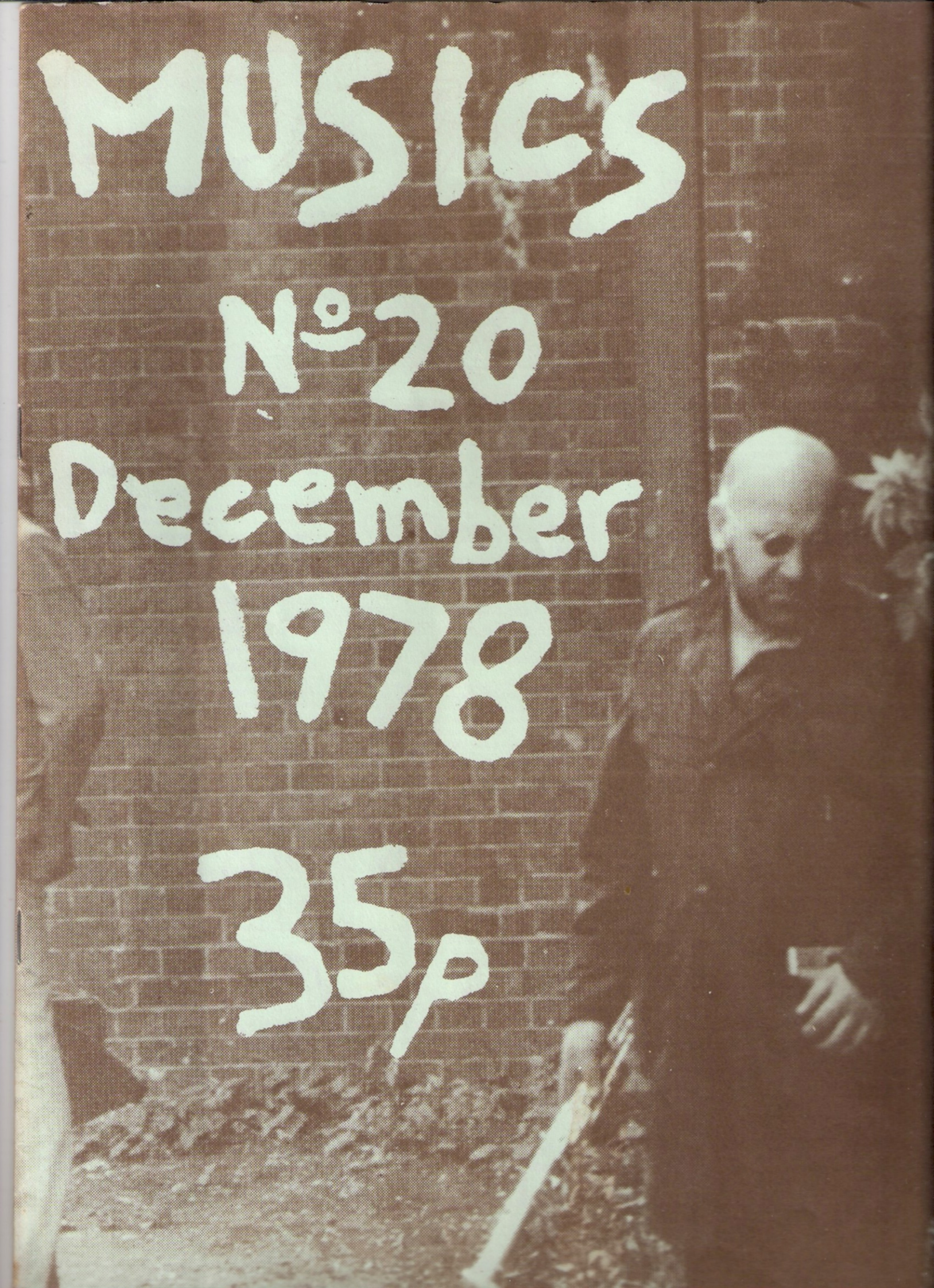
MUSICIcs

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FOUND SOUNDS

The Museo del Belles Artes in Mexico City is one of the classic examples of architecture of the Art Deco period, lavishly constructed from marble, limestone, copper, glass, bronze and brass. With a massive interior vestibule topped by a copper dome, balconies project from the marble staircase and form the entrances to a series of large rooms. Once the centre of cultural life in the city, the ageing building is pensioned off into providing recital space for visiting virtuosos and allowing native painters to display their appallingly derivative work. Remarkably, several murals by Rivera and Orozco survive in splendour along side these decadent facades. The place is hushed; should someone cough, the sound reverberates with around the interior.

Suddenly from outside, a flash and moments later a crack of thunder. Torrential rain beats on the copper and glass dome in a fusillade of percussion. The doors at the entrance swing and slam as the pedestrians rush for shelter. Squeals, shouts and stamping feet reach up from the base of the building as the tumult continues above. Museum attendants are observed carrying metal buckets up the stairs to the upper floor. They place them, apparently randomly, around the floor area and retreat in conceited confidence. The fury of the storm soon relents and reduces to a steady downpour. The first drop hits the bottom of a bucket; then the next hits another then the next, then another, then another, then another as the rain begins to seep through glass and copper dome with accelerating rapidity.

As the noise of the rain begins to recede, the sounds from the ensemble of unattended buckets begins to crescendo, creating complex rhythms as each bucket's respective drip speeds up and slows down according to the size of the hole in the roof. Before long the tone and reverberance emitting from each bucket alters as it fills with water which in turn alters the sound of the recital as it echoes round the building.

The rain gradually dies away and the sun streams through the windows; sometime later, not long after the last drip has landed, the attendants remove the filled buckets.

Few large vehicles in Mexico have an adequate silencer; most engines run most of the time at maximum revs; should a driver wish to protest (for any reason), the musical range covered by the warning horns is enormous. The only people who are paid to live with this are the police who, like most custodians in the Americas, look, and frequently are, extremely aggressive. However, the Mexican police seem to have created an outlet for their frustrations with the help of their regulation issue pea-whistle. By placing the forefinger of the supporting hand over the air vent of the whistle, the shape of the blast can be altered by a few tones. In co-ordination with breath control and tonguing then this simple tool is, with the many hours of practice a traffic cop is given, a musical instrument with a surprisingly wide range of expression.

The motorists, with their many hours of practice, have come to recognise the various sings/signs that underline or emphasise the precise intention of a particular arm movement or stick swing. Thus as the cop uses his body and one arm to give visual instruction, the other arm and finger and whistle give an audible accompaniment which intones the precision with which the motorist must execute his manoeuvre. The subtleties developed by the whistle players probably escape the motorist who disappears rapidly, but to the observing pedestrian the mood and the improvisational stamina of the player can be studied and appreciated, particularly towards the end of a ten hour shift - the bare faced aggression of the piercing, unmoving shriek, clipped at both ends - the amiable warble which flutters to the crescendo of a respectful nudge before, having completed its instructional task, departs off on a path of pure and joyful fantasy, before sinking beneath the accelerator pedals of the next line of waiting traffic.

A suburban section of the city. It is one in the morning and the streets are deserted and quiet but for the continuous and background drone from the streets.

The ground trembles. A rumble is detected. An earth tremor? Nearby tall buildings seem still and intact. The sound from the ground crescendoes and then dies like a passing

MICHAEL LEGGETT

underground train. A few days later leaving to catch a taxi, pandemonium in the street outside the house; car engines being revved madly, horns of varying hues being blasted, people shouting up the queue of stationary vehicles and being shouted back again.

A broken down tram on a main city thoroughfare a block away has halted all traffic in the vicinity. The police are playing their pea whistles as they direct as best they can, the angry evening rush hour crowd; a breakdown crew are frantically trying to repair an overhead cable. There are no taxis. We wait, and watch. As they attempt to hitch the tram's connector arm back onto the cable, vivid electric blue sparks lash back and forth with cutting swishes and cracks. Like a thunderstorm over a battlefield the cacophony is enormous and desperately people rush and scramble to hurry its abate. Finally the line is repaired and the first tram pulls excitedly away. Gradually the other trams stacked up behind, pick up speed and pass by. The ground trembles. The sound of the passing trams is heard through the feet.

A few days later being rushed along a similar highway during the continuous daytime bustle. The big single decker buses have automatic which have the engines revving almost at maximum for most of the journey and at any one time on these eight-lane city highways these buses almost outnumber the numerous taxis; it seems too that all the brakes are designed to work on the rivets of the brake shoes. A blind youth feels his way along the aisle of the two pesos (sit-down) bus, as if searching for a seat. He stops abruptly and starts singing in a loud but pleasant baritone voice, a ragged tune to which he beats time with his white-painted aluminium stick on the floor of the bus. Vehicle and passengers career down the highway to the next intersection halt; more passengers get on as he continues with the versified song. Before the next stop is reached he halts as abruptly as he commenced and feeling his way around, makes a coin collection, and then alights. Moments later another blind man is glimpsed on the street outside an accordion slung round his neck, his head inclined to the

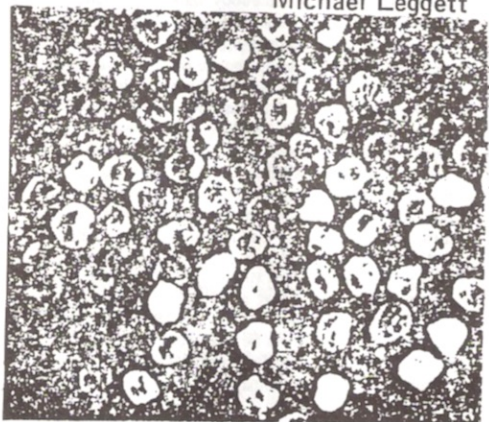
sky, an empty eye-socket echoing the soundless movements of his mouth; by his side an infant is clutching his coat, holding out a tin and gazing up with an open mouth at the people passing by.

The same suburban section of the city. It is one in the morning and the streets are deserted and quiet but for the continuous background drone from the streets.

A shrill shriek pierces the surrounding residences and gardens of the pleasant bourgeois neighbourhood. No-one moves. Again the shriek, this time apparently closer. A child? A terrified woman? The street remains deserted. At intervals of half a minute the shriek is heard, sometimes louder than before, sometimes softer and more distant - it seems to circle inexorably the entire area, sometimes fading from hearing completely. Over a period of several nights and throughout the darkness hours, this continues.

The shriek approaches again, its urgency and sense of forboding just as insistent as on the first encounter. The low throb of an engine emerges from the background drone and the dipped headlights of a car approach along the street. A large, late '50's' American model in gleaming condition emerges from the gloom, the driver's arm resting on the retracted window as he guides the car precisely along the centre of the road. His companion leans out of the other retracted window. In his mouth he holds a cop's pea whistle. As they pass, the player forms his cheeks into a balloon and lets go a piercing blast.

Michael Leggett



WHISTLES AND SOULAKS accompany a walk along the beach at Eigg. Sand grains, such as those above (magnified some 15 times), make a note about 2 octaves above middle C. (A notch ridge way. Robin Burton)



SINGING SANDS (Isle of Eigg)

Singing sands are susceptible to changes in atmosphere. On a hot dry day walking over the singing sands of Eigg can be noisy. When it is damp the sands are silent and it is hard to believe they could ever be otherwise.

Camus Sgiotag, as it is named on the map, is only one of many beaches where singing sands occur. There are at least thirty three in Britain and several more in various parts of the world. The sound is caused by the physical properties of the grains of sand which in turn are caused by their topographical location. Where one coastal drift along the sea bed moves away from another a sand watershed or 'bed load parting' is left. The sand within this limited area is moving against itself rather than being transferred around the coast. The grains are likely to become well rounded with a high degree of size uniformity. When pressure is supplied the resulting series of little impacts amount to a steady note.

The sound is short and monotonous. It cannot be varied by striking the sand in different ways, although the volume corresponds to the quantity of sand employed and can give an impression of different tones. There are no poems or legends associated with the singing sands of Eigg. Locally the beach is known as 'Trigh na Beigel'—sounding sands—a more exact name.

Similarly straightforward is the name itself, 'eigg' being the gaelic word for notch. Geologically the island consists of two crenellated ridges with a faulted depression or 'notch' running between them.

Although the acoustic properties of the sand are limited the physical appearance of the bay is staggering. Camus Sgiotag is backed by hollowed out rock formations, caves, tunnels and galleries. There are deep crevices in the cliffs and the coastline is cut by thinly striated planes of razor sharp rock descending from the overhung cliffs into the sea. The rock pools are unique, each one containing sea life not found elsewhere.

Below the high watermark grains of black sand leave odd tide marks on the beach which is virtually white. Cows and bulls laze around between large rocks. The last hour or so of the sunset is hidden by the mountains of Rhum which rise out of the sea, due west of Camus Sgiotag.

On the cliffs of Beinn Bhuidhe, facing away from the singing sands, we overlooked another stretch of coast from which came strains of music at sea level. The purity of tone was sustained over some distance from the source. The sea was transparently green, reflecting the light from the surface onto the sea bed. There were rocks in the water which seemed to be close to the source of the sound but not the cause of it. A boulder on the grass at the foot of the cliff had a vertical crack in it through which the wind might drill but the popular explanation favoured shearwaters, seacliff birds which are known to live there—although these are usually only heard at night.

On our last morning on Eigg I went to the singing sands with a friend to record her telling a local story of a maiden who was spirited away in one of the mountain lochs. It didn't seem appropriate to record the tale on the singing sands but we were pressed for time and couldn't go as far as the mountain loch itself. It was a grey day and we did not expect the sands to sing but when we played back the recording her voice could not be heard either.

Another friend who started out with us and was last seen heading for the rocks at the far end of the singing sands, telephoned while I was writing this article. He said that he hadn't realised we had reached the singing sands because there was nothing to be heard. He had continued right round the coast of Eigg, always thinking that they must be further on. He telephoned to say that he had found our recordings of the sands, inadvertently left on the island.

Annabel Nicolson