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Artist Mungo Thomson explores the nonsound of Crickets

by Alexander Varty on July 8th, 2015 at 10:27 AM

If you want to hear the music better, don't bug the performers. That's because François Houle, Mark McGregor, Llowyn Ball, and Martin Fisk aren't just playing cricket songs transcribed for clarinet, piccolo, violin, and percussion: they're taking on some of the insect's behaviour as well.

As anyone who's ever tried to evict a cricket knows well, the noisy creatures go mute when a possible predator approaches, resuming their song once the danger recedes—and here artist Mungo Thomson has asked the musicians to do the same.

Crickets, which Vancouver New Music and the Contemporary Art Gallery will present in downtown's Emery Barnes Park this weekend, is one of a series of works that the Los Angeles-based Thomson has based on aspects of the natural world.

"I've always been interested in things like field recordings, and background information in general, and in the formalization of field recordings in certain kinds of avant-garde work, and the use of animal sounds in new-age music," he tells the Straight from LAX, where he's waiting for the flight that will bring him north. "But this project started with hearing a cricket and wondering what the physiology of that sound is, and wondering whether a human could reproduce it.

"I also became really interested in crickets as this kind of nonsound, like the sound that you hear in an empty house," he adds. "Culturally, they sort of stand in for silence—you tell a joke, and the room is silent, and 'crickets' is the shorthand for when there's no response. So I was interested in it becoming a performance of that sort of thing—the sound of a silent audience being played for an audience."

Working with composer Michael Webster, Thomson has developed versions of Crickets that involve up to 17 human performers. His initial intent, however, was to make installation art that featured recordings of crickets from around the globe.

"I did an exhibition in China, where they have this whole tradition of keeping crickets," he explains. "I collected a bunch of Chinese cricket cages and hung them in the exhibition hall with an iPod Shuffle and minispeaker inside, each playing one solo. It ended up being an ensemble performance, because there were 11 of them in the room, and then the idea of doing this live just sort of came naturally."

Playing quiet cricket music in a busy urban park is part of a larger project of redirecting viewers' attention "to things that you're more generally inclined to ignore", Thomson says. In his sculptural and installation works, some of which can be seen at the Contemporary Art Gallery through August 30, he reinvents U.S. coins as portable works of art, for instance, or uses Time magazine's distinctive cover format to address how the mass media shape perception.

"I've just always been interested in how we learn to not see things," he says.

As serious as his intent may be, however, Thomson recognizes that asking human virtuosos to imitate insects is an undeniably absurd undertaking. "It's an interesting and sort of ridiculous endeavour," he admits, laughing. "That's something I do a lot: take a ridiculous idea very seriously—and in terms of production, I really try to deliver on it."

Vancouver New Music and the Contemporary Art Gallery present Crickets at Emery Barnes Park on Friday (July 10).

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