

# review music

this week's essential reading

'Has Shah Rukh Khan copied a Shah Rukh Khan lookalike?' by Tanul Thakur, The Caravan

'Vegetable vendors recognised Durga [Rahikwar's] mother in the market: "Namaste, mummy. How can we take money from you? You are Shah Rukh Khan's mother"'

## Soundtracks of design

Many people have seen a dish rack and, at some point or other, knocked pieces of metal together in a way that roused the sound of incidental chimes. Harry Bertioia might be alone, however, in having made iconic creations from experiences of the sort.

The easiest way to hear them is by way of *Sonambient*, a new 11-CD box set assembling albums that Bertioia made – in the spirit of a compound word he devised to evoke a sleepy sense of somnambulism and ambience as well – while recording his sound-sculptures in their natural habitat in his barn.

An Italian-born American artist active in the fertile middle of the last century, Bertioia is best-known for his work in furniture design, most notably a revered "Diamond Chair" that was conceived in 1952 and continues to be manufactured and sold around the world. Made up of a lattice-work of coated wire with a thin cushion in the centre, the chair is structurally complex but minimalist in its look – as much air as a chair itself. Bertioia claimed the idea for it and a line of other related pieces came from an ordinary household dish rack of a variety that remains a staple in many kitchens decades later.

The Diamond Chair is as emblematic of the celebrated style of mid-century modernism as anything from the period, placing Bertioia in a pantheon including Charles and Ray Eames, Isamu Noguchi, Eero Saarinen and others of the design-minded type. He was a major figure in a discipline with a significant infrastructure and industry behind it.

Much lesser-known, but coming in now for a welcome swell of attention, is Bertioia's fascinating devotion to the more obscure realm of experimental music and sound.

Among his many other creations – sculpture, jewellery, drawings and prints among them – Bertioia made a formidable collection of sound sculptures that summon otherworldly tones. The principle of them is simple: pieces of metal (steel, brass, bronze, copper) mostly unadorned and arranged so that touching them or prompting them to move gets music going and reverberating for extended spells of time, like chimes wavering in the atmosphere. Some of them are taller than a person. Others are as short as a dog. All of them resound in ways that are calming and catalysing at once.

Sound, for Bertioia, was more than a matter of earthly resonances and tones. "He heard the voice of the wind," reads a message on the artist's tombstone, on the grounds of his home outside the city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. "Bringing sound from form to life. We now echo his love."

Bertioia died in 1978, at the age of 63, and his burial site is in a significant location: beneath a giant gong. The instrument, 10 feet in diameter and weighing 2,000 pounds, was the largest of Bertioia's many music-making contraptions, most of which he designed and built in a pastoral barn. Sounds from them are transporting, as if tuned into frequencies of otherworldly origins, from distant places as well as distant times. They seem somehow futuristic and ancient simultaneously, electronic in their effects but naturalistic and elemental too.

The new boxset arrives via the searching sonic adventurers of Important Records, a small American label behind big releases by experimental-music makers like Eleh, Pauline Oliveros, Catherine Christer Hennix, John Oswald and scores more. It's a welcome point of entry into a lineage and a legacy that was little-known before now.

The recordings sound less like recordings than incantations – a sort of channeling of aural events that are always happening in a sense but sometimes soundlessly so. In a way, that's what the sound sculptures are: manifestations of sound continuously in active or at least potential-energy form. A stiff breeze could get some of them going, or a gentle touch could register and then ring on for a long time. In any case, the sounds seem less a result of outside interaction than of some-

thing inside the instruments themselves. The titles of the long tracks on the individual albums tell a story: *Echoes of Other Times*, *Space Voyage*, *Phosphorescence*, *Elemental*, *Passage*, *Continuum* and *Here and Now*. So does the booklet that accompanies them, which opens with Important label boss John Brien paying tribute to the still-standing Bertioia barn and its special status as a tranquil place "insulated from the rest of the world".

A different setting very much part of the chaotic, clanging world is the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, where the curious Bertioia follower can encounter even more bounties of the artist's divination of sound.

Recently opened and on view into the autumn, the exhibition *Atmosphere for Enjoyment: Harry Bertioia's Environment for Sound* features documentation and ephemera related to the work as well as a store of "sound sculptures" free to be played by anyone with the temerity to do so.

Past a sign encouraging visitors to venture on and take advantage, a battery of the sculptures stands still or otherwise gently swaying, and the effect of stirring one to singing action proves transforming in surprising ways.

Metal + interaction = sound. We all probably have a general sense of what that would entail and what the result might be. The effect of it, though, is electrifying in a manner that is hard to fully account for. There's a special delicacy in the instruments' elegant, aesthetically inviting designs.

Indeed, the show is paired with an accompanying exhibition, *Bent, Cast & Forged: The Jewelry of Harry Bertioia*. But there's something even more compelling in the artist's evident faith in them, expressed over decades of discerning work and true dedication.

"Bertioia explained that his prints are not abstract," a block of wall text says about certain of the artist's visual works, "but rather his imagining of cosmic relationships, planetary systems and galaxies." Connections of the sort seem hearable in the sound sculptures as well – connections to earthly metals and satisfying shapes but also a wider cosmos that, timelessly, we are all small but significant players in too.

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**Sonambient**  
Harry Bertioia  
Important Records  
Dh360



**Harry Bertioia. Below, the Diamond Chair (1952).**  
Courtesy Important Records;  
Joshua McHugh / Knoll Studio

Modernist designer Harry Bertioia was also a pioneer in experimental sound, creating otherworldly sonic landscapes from simple metal sculptures. Now a box set of his dreamlike works takes us to a wider cosmos. [Andy Battaglia](#) heads into orbit



### the playlist three albums that pick up good vibrations

**Reverberations: Tape and Electronic Music 1961-1970**  
Pauline Oliveros (2012)

Another hefty boxset from Important Records, this surveys experimental music from a woman central to the history of it all. Spellbinding sounds and eerie electronic effects.



**Central Palace Music**  
Catherine Christer Hennix (2016)

From a Swedish art museum in 1976, this Important Records album captures a "just-intonation ensemble" moving through slithering drones with oboes, sine wave generators and a Chinese reed instrument called the sheng.



**Floating Frequencies / Intuitive Synthesis**  
Eleh (2011)

Important's mysterious contemporary artist Eleh's releases – with disorienting bass tones and sinuous synthesizer sounds – play like secret transmissions from a planet with different gravity.

