

# music

# Sound wisdom

Elusive concepts combine to trace the recordings of ECM, a German jazz and classical label, as DJs Ricardo Villalobos and Max Loderbauer plunder the imprint's back catalogue to reconfigure its finer moments, writes Andy Battaglia

Sound and space are ephemeral, so much so that it can be hard, in certain concrete moods or states of mind, to know how much either even exists. We can agree on what notions of sound and space mean, at the general working level of language, but it's a long way from using those words to knowing how to define them, in quiet moments, for ourselves. When you're asked to really think about it, what is sound? What is space? These are mysterious and elusive concepts.

A listener is asked to think a great deal about sound and space in relation to *Re:ECM*, a remarkable two-CD collection of musical considerations and reconfigurations by Ricardo Villalobos and Max Loderbauer. Followers of electronic music are likely to be familiar with both, Villalobos as a respected DJ/producer and Loderbauer as a revered scientist of synthesized sound. It would be a great shame, however, if the results of their work together were regarded solely within their own bounds.

Desires for something more were written into the designs of *Re:ECM*, for which the two musicians revisited the catalogue of the decades-old record label ECM. Starting in 1969 in Munich, Germany, the markedly

international ECM has surveyed a vast array of artful jazz and adventurous classical music, with a focus on those intriguing junctures where points of difference begin to fade. In the world of ECM, fiery saxophone jazz can suggest a link to churchly choral chants and mournful meditations meted out on solo piano – as long as all are good and also serious about their pursuits into the realm of aural experiences that can be communally shared.

So esteemed is ECM that it is also the subject of *Sounds and Silence: Travels with Manfred Eicher*, a new documentary film (out now on DVD) that focuses on the man who started the label and still works as its producer and figurehead. The word “producer” can seem insufficient for certain ECM recordings, which, in their hyper-human clarity and intense sense of space, tend to make studio sessions for other labels sound like they were presided over by a couple of neighbourhood kids in a treehouse with tin cans cupped to their ears.

“For me, the luminosity of sound has always been a goal,” Eicher says in *Sounds and Silence*, which shows him at work in numerous different contexts. One is an Estonian church with the spiritual-minimal-

ist composer Arvo Pärt. Another is a grand outdoor theatre in an old quarry in Greece. Another is his office at home in Munich, which is sleek and exudes German efficiency – even an autobahn streams by just outside his window. Yet another is a recording studio, in which he agonises, with an accordion player from Argentina, over the fate of music that is “not floating”.

The film is full of little moments like that, when sound is subject to discussions of properties that are hard to distinguish but easy to detect. A beautiful scene shows an artisan at work on the interior of a piano, checking the minute spacing between each of the hammers attached to individual keys and sanding the felt that strikes down on the strings inside. It's notable for the ways it shows the physicality involved in making sound. But it's also notable for the attention it pays to the strange ethereality involved in the same processes, from the open flame used to treat certain kinds of wood in the instrument to the almost prayerful stare of a piano mechanic at work. All of it gets to the spirit of contemplating ECM's own monastic motto, which strives for “the most beautiful sound next to silence.”

The bit about compression can count as conventional technical studio speak, but it's unusual to think of electronic music as making use of space rather than just filling or displacing it. It's all the more unusual for it to happen out-

side the cerebral realm of “sound art” and closer to the culture of clubs and record stores – of music as a living, breathing social project. Such a setting calls for a new and agile kind of fusion, which Villalobos and Loderbauer go a long way towards realising.

For the 17 composite tracks on *Re:ECM*, the duo worked with little parts taken from ECM releases of their liking, including recordings by Arvo Pärt, Christian Wallumrød, Bennie Maupin, Paul Motian, and Alexander Knaifel, among others. None is easily recognisable or rendered in a form anything quite like jazz or classical music. Instead, what issues is a quiet, contemplative kind of music that oscillates between the natural and the synthetic, with a fineness of touch that suggests a new sort of covenant between the two.

The first two tracks make their way, slowly and with impressive patience, through atmospheric

sounds delivered with an almost psychedelic degree of detail: clinks of keys from what sounds surreally like a building-sized piano, little splashy drum parts in which you can seem to hear individual tines of the wire brushes the drummer must have used, and so on. All of that, however much or little it might have been accentuated, comes from the source material from ECM.

What gets incorporated anew is a haunting and paradoxically humanising strain of machine music that sounds uncertain and curious about its surroundings, like the music itself is thinking out loud.

In a track called *Recurrence*, a bass line wanders in with a sound suited for jazz, but then it subtly starts to change, to mutate around the edges, in a way that transforms the source sound slowly into an electronic simulation of itself. It's all very tenderly and meticulously done, to the

point where you won't even notice unless you listen expressly for it, and moments like this suggest a newly refined kind of organic-to-electronic musical phase-change, like when water turns to ice or steam while remaining water all the same.

The expectant sense of space it happens in also strikes a resonant chord in an era when music of all kinds is being squished to bits and carted around as little more than disposable data.

A picture in the booklet for *Re:ECM* shows Villalobos and Loderbauer in their Berlin studio surrounded by an almost cartoonish amount of whirring gear, from keyboards and monitors to modular synthesizers patched up with dozens upon dozens of scraggly wires. On top of that, a suggestive setting to be sure, are a variety of different ambient room-tones they recorded on their own and integrated into the final



The DJ/producer Ricardo Villalobos and Max Loderbauer, a revered scientist of synthesized sound. Courtesy Stefan Stern/ECM Records

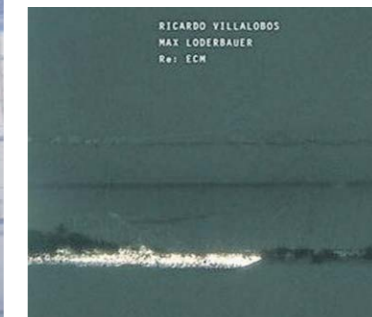
## this week's essential reading

{ 'Ry Cooder's vintage Los Angeles fiction' by Tim McDonnell

The renowned guitarist talks about his new collection of short stories, which follow hardscrabble musicians and other vagabonds in the post-war City of Angels



Sounds and Silence: Travels with Manfred Eicher ECM



Re:ECM Max Loderbauer and Ricardo Villalobos ECM

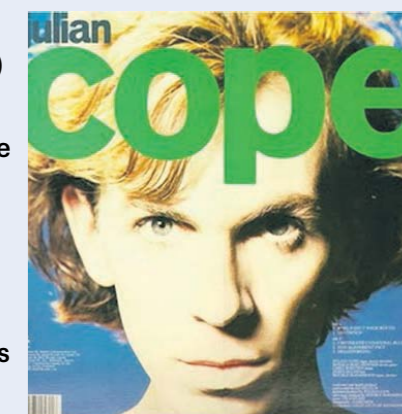
## playlist

Mute records: a playful guide to making a noise by singing about sounds and silence

### Julian Cope

World Shut Your Mouth (1987)

Cope would bag one of his biggest chart successes three years after trailing the name of his most enduring solo hit in the title of his first album following the disintegration of the Teardrop Explodes. A great British eccentric, Cope rarely plays by the rules and is still active today. This year he released his 27th solo album.



### Pussycat Dolls

Hush Hush (2008)



Written as a break-up anthem, the song that propelled the band to superstardom in the Czech Republic and Hungary proved true to its billing, as Nicole “X-Factor” Scherzinger left the group to pursue other interests soon after the fab five hit payday in eastern Europe. Don't Cha just hate it when that happens?

### George Michael

Careless Whisper (1984)

Fondly remembered as a staple of Saturday night slow-dances by many a middle-aged fan, George Michael's first solo hit helped the Wham! frontman imagine a life outside the stifling confines of teen stardom. Even all these years later though, his guilty feet still lack rhythm.



### Simon & Garfunkel

Sounds of Silence (1964)



The opening track on the duo's second album remains one of the great songs of the pair's hit-laden back catalogue. Paul Simon, who turned 70 last week, most recently performed the song – written in the months after the assassination of JFK – at the 9/11 memorial as a 10th anniversary tribute.

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Artforum*, *Spin* and *Pitchfork*.