



Marc Richter aka Black To Comm

Marc Richter's miniaturised sound mechanisms impart the spark of life into inanimate objects.
By Mark Fisher

Black To Comm
Alphabet 1968

Type CD/DL/LP

An album of *songs* by Marc Richter, the man behind the Hamburg based Dekorder label? Surely a man associated with the outer limits of drone and sound collage must be joking when he promised songs – especially in reference to a record on which the only human voices are on field recordings at the edge of audibility. By talking of songs, Richter is suggesting a certain concision: this is a record of ten tracks, which only lasts about 45 minutes. But what if we were to take Richter's provocation seriously – what would a song without a singer be like? What would it be like, that is to say, if objects themselves could sing?

It's a question that connects fairy tales with cybernetics, and listening to *Alphabet 1968*, I'm reminded of a filmic space in which magic and mechanism meet: JF Sebastian's apartment in *Blade Runner*. The tracks on the LP are crafted with the same minute attention to detail that the genetic designer and toymaker brought to his miniature automata, with their bizarre mixture of the clockwork and the computerised, the antique and the ultramodern, the playful and the sinister. Richter's musical pieces have been built from similarly heterogeneous materials – record crackle, shortwave radio,

glockenspiels, all manner of samples, mostly of acoustic instruments.

Except on "Void" – a steampunk John Carpenter track with sussurating voices conspiring in the background – the music does not sound electronic. As with Sebastian's talking machines, you get the impression that Richter has used the latest technology in order to create the illusion of archaism. Sounds are treated, reversed and slowed down in a way that makes their original sources mysterious, and you can almost smell the dust coming off the retrieved objects. The drones which dominated 2007's *Wir Können Leider Nicht Etwas Mehr Zu Tun...* are no longer in evidence, except on "Forst", where it coats the track in a softly rushing mist. *Alphabet 1968* more closely resembles 2005's *Rückwärts Backwards*, with its montage of field recordings, vinyl/shellac crepitation and vintage instrumentation, though *Alphabet 1968* has a greater consistency – all of the tracks belong to the same anachronistic soundworld, and each of them has a highly condensed quality. There is a sense of subtle but constant movement, of sound shadows flitting in and out of earshot.

JF Sebastian's apartment was itself an update of older spaces in which science and sorcery co-existed: the workshops of ETA Hoffman's inventor-magicians, or

of Pinocchio's creator, Geppetto. I think, too, of Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's astonishing 1886 tale *The Future Eve* in which Edison, using the expertise he has recently acquired from inventing the phonograph, sets himself the task of constructing an artificial woman. But if there are songs here, they are sung by the gramophone and other recording and playback machines. Richter so successfully effaces himself as author that it is as if he has snuck into a room and recorded the objects as they played (to) themselves. Rather than simply automating his music, as in the case of Pierre Bastien and his mechanical machines, Richter makes us feel that he has merely recorded the unlife of objects.

On the opening track, "Jonathan", crackle, a field recording of drizzle and cutaways to white noise set the scene for a pensive piano, with children's voices in the distance. It is as if Richter has attuned himself to the subterranean raptures and sadnesses of objects in unoccupied rooms. It's not for nothing that the theme of objects coming to life is taken up so often in cinema animation – for what is animation if not a version of this process? Most of the tracks on *Alphabet 1968* could be tunes for cartoon sequences – the 'song' an object sings as it stirs itself into motion, or declines back into inertia.

Indeed, the impression of things winding down is persistent on *Alphabet 1968*. Entropy has not been excluded from Richter's enchanted soundworld. It feels as if the magic is always about to wear off, that the enchanted objects will slip back into the inanimate again at any moment. The labouring, looped double bass on "Rauschen" has all the mechano-melancholy of a phonograph or music box winding down – or perhaps of one of Sebastian's automata running out of power. A parallel might be Colleen's 2006 LP *Colleen Et Les Boîtes A Musique*, except that, where Colleen restricted herself to actually using music boxes, Richter loops and sequences his sonic material so that it uncannily simulates clockwork. On "Amateur", with its hints of artificial respiration, as if the walls themselves are breathing, the piano loop seems bent out of shape. The general feeling of a world winding down is interrupted on "Musik Für Alles". The frenzied strings – could they be a multitracked harp? – have a merry-go-round mania about them, like rave if it had been invented in the fairgrounds of the 19th century.

"Hotel Freund" is a staggeringly beautiful conclusion to the album, as epically sad as many of the tracks on Leyland Kirby's *Sadly, The Future Is No Longer What It Was*, its tragically opulent strings summoning a grandeur that is faded, but still impressive. Then there are children's voices again, indicating, perhaps, that the spell is breaking, and we must re-enter the ordinary world. □