

Cross Platform

Sarah Angliss's motorised crow Edgar Allan



The sonic imagination of

Sarah Angliss

was first sparked by Cold War science fiction and medieval music. Now her uncanny inventions dig deep into military, industrial and social histories of electronic sound and look to the future of robotics. By **Abi Bliss**

In Ray Bradbury's short story *There Will Come Soft Rains*, a high tech house sets about its daily routine for 4 August 2026. Disembodied voices gently awaken the inhabitants; breakfast is cooked and an army of electronic mice emerge from the walls to clean the floors. All the while, the house is blissfully unaware that the residents it serves now exist only as shadows, a nuclear family burned in silhouette onto one of its exterior walls by an atomic blast.

Bradbury's words came from the dawn of the Cold War; in the BBC's 1977 adaptation of the story, masterminded by the Radiophonic Workshop's Malcolm Clarke, icy synthesizers and metallicly intoning vocoders conjured up the robotic house. Recorded from the radio for her by her father, it gave the young Sarah Angliss her first taste of the uncanny potential of electronic music. "It really, really got to me," she remembers, speaking on the phone from her Brighton home. "I literally played the tape out; I was obsessed with it."

Years later, similar incorporeal forces abound in Angliss's own work. Performing both solo and as part of the trio Spacedog with sister Jenny Angliss and Stephen Hiscock, her music inhabits an eerie, atemporal realm where Max/MSP-processed musique concrète weaves around folk song and where the theremin encounters its sonic ancestor, the handsaw. Angliss's own instrumental creations include the Ealing Feeder, a robotic carillon of handbells that chimes out dissonant algorithmic

compositions (it also does a mean version of "Popcorn"). In the song "Electric Lullaby", the folk ballad bogeyman Long Lankin who steals into houses and pricks babies with pins crosses paths with a 1930s poem from the journals of the Electrical Association for Women, in which a nameless engineer joyfully imagines soothing her infant with direct current: "*Hushaby baby, Mother is near/Don't you cry, precious, take an ampere*".

"When electricity was first brought into the home, it was, in an odd sort of way, an intruder," Angliss says. "There was a lot of excitement and fear about it. It was something other in the home, the electric servant, the literal disembodied replacement for the domestic servant."

Shunning laptop-only performance, her stage shows feature her own cast of self-built electric servants. Her theremin-playing baby doll Clara 2.0 and Edgar Allan, a motorised stuffed crow, date back to when she honed her live set alongside burlesque acts at cabaret nights. Ventricle, a late 1960s red leather handbag, opens and closes in time with her own heartbeat, while Hugo, part of a 1930s ventriloquist's dummy, lip-syncs and moves his eyes to vocal samples, his decapitated head perched on top of the moving mechanical parts. "You can see his guts, and that's a very uncanny thing," she says, noting how uncanny, or *unheimlich*, can also be translated to mean unhidden. "You would think that it would be more exciting to make things happen by



Angliss with theremin