BUY, BUILD, BREAK: COMPOSERS AND OBJECTS

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To demonstrate the practices of appropriation and redefinition, I will now turn to several works by Austrian composer Karlheinz Essl (b. 1960). Essl has written nine pieces involving the toy piano, each of which shows his increasing preoccupation with the secondary, extraneous sounds and resonances of the instrument. Through his works, Essl models the processes of appropriation, experimentation, and redefinition performed with all instruments; he condenses these processes from a span of several hundred years to less than a decade.

Figure 3-2: Opening of Karlheinz Essl's *Kalimba* (Essl 2005).

The first work, *Kalimba* (2005), features toy piano and fixed media. The fixed media consists of toy piano recordings and is played through a small speaker hidden inside the instrument. The performer begins by miming along with the fixed media, creating the illusion that the instrument is making all the sounds. The material throughout *Kalimba* is primarily octatonic scalar patterns, sometimes synchronous with the fixed media, but often not. The overall effect is a constant state of activity that emphasizes the mechanical nature of the instrument but contradicts it diminutive stature. In its most dense textures, *Kalimba* reveals the high amount of noise inherent in each tone the instrument creates, differentiating it from its less noisy parent instrument. When the fixed media plays pitch-shifted tones, they reveal aural similarities with other metal instruments, like clock chimes and kalimbas (also known as “thumb pianos”).

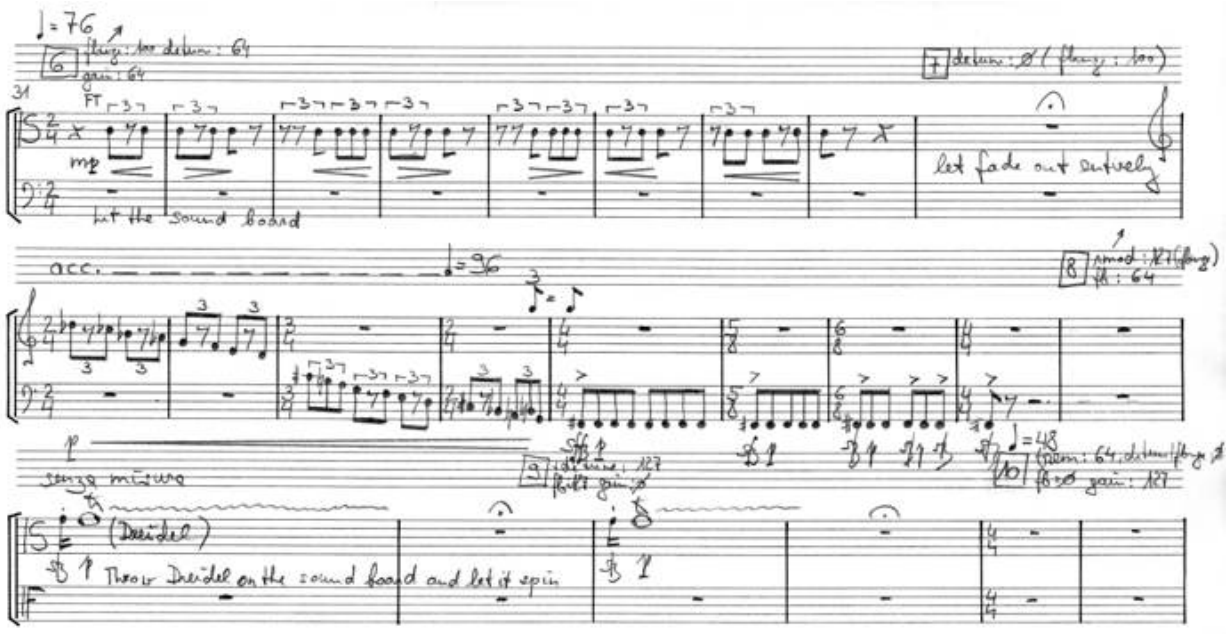

Figure 3-3: Excerpt from Karlheinz Essl's *whatever shall be* (Essl 2010)

In his 2010 composition *whatever shall be*, Essl uses live processing to highlight the toy piano's role as a resonating chamber. He articulates resonance by tapping, scratching, and rolling a dreidel inside the instrument. The processing primarily consists of delays and reverberation; these processes keep sounds in the listener's memory while the performer moves to a new section or technique. The acts of scraping the wooden shell of the instrument and scraping the metal tines create a continuum of noise and pitch. They also highlight the inherent noise of the normal performance method.

Miles to go (2012), for four prepared toy pianos, continues Essl's exploration of the noise-pitch continuum in toy pianos. Here, the quartet recreates the quick transitions and complex textures that had previously been created by the computer. Thus, this piece sounds much like Essl's earlier pieces. It also shows the culmination of Essl's work in defining and redefining the essence of the toy piano—an instrument with more capabilities than initially appear.

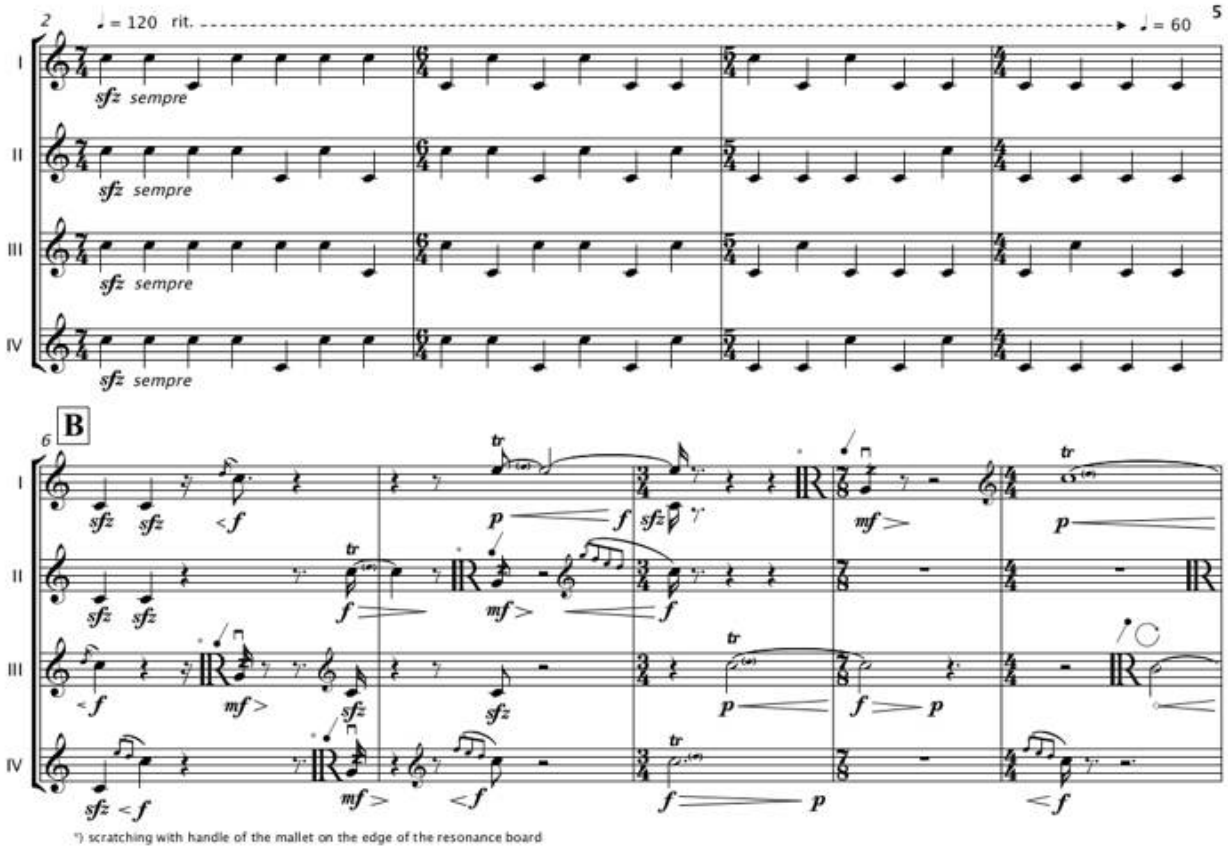

Figure 3-4: Excerpt from *Miles to go* (Essl 2012)

Inside each toy piano, the metal bar to which the tines are mounted is unsecured. It is positioned so that most of the plastic hammers hit the bar instead of the tines. The low C hammer hits the wood at the back of the toy piano. Only the low D through low F# hammers hit the tines. Thus, much of the work consists of unpitched metallic noises, sounding more like a collection of old typewriters than toy pianos. Figure 3-4 shows the transition from the opening section into the middle section. In the opening, the players hit unpitched keys and change tempo independently, which creates a full, noisy texture. Just before B, they finally coincide on a unison tempo. At B, the performers create a thinner texture, taking turns playing metallic rolls, wooden scraping sounds, and pitched tremolos.