

Birds that Both Sing and Play

Céleste Boursier-Mougenot's *from here to ear* at the Peabody Essex Museum

In February, I visited the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Salem, Massachusetts, to view *from here to ear*, a sound installation by the French artist and composer Céleste Boursier-Mougenot, which was on view from January 18 to April 13, 2014. The seventh work sponsored by PEM's FreePort contemporary art initiative, Boursier-Mougenot's installation consisted of a gallery space that had been transformed into an aviary, hosting 70 zebra finches whose nests hung from the ceiling. Positioned around the room were ten white Gibson Les Paul model electric guitars and four Gibson Thunderbird electric basses, mounted on horizontal stands and connected to amplifiers, many of which were preset with various digital effects. In addition to the guitars and basses, there were also several Zildjian cymbals lying on the floor, for added sonic possibilities. Scattered on all of the instruments were seeds to entice the birds to land. The artist's vision was to have the viewer experience the sounds created as the birds interacted with the guitars, landing with their claws touching the strings, pecking at them with their beaks, taking off into flight, and everything in between.

The experience begins with visitors entering through two sets of chain-link curtains, understandably installed to keep the finches from exiting the space, while docents warned viewers to "watch their feet" for birds on the ground. The sounds created were erratic. Given the unpredictability of these avian musicians, I did not expect a sonic explosion, so I was not surprised that, for the most part, the experience had little amplification. When birds chose to interact with the guitars, viewers would "flock" to the activity, thus scaring the birds away. On one occasion, the birds grouped together, sitting on the neck of a Gibson guitar, yet very little sound was created. I was most interested when I saw one finch perch itself on one of the bass



Zebra finches perch on a Gibson Les Paul guitar (above) and a Zildjian cymbal (below) as part of Boursier-Mougenot's *from here to ear*. (Photos courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum).

guitars, pecking a string with its beak and reacting to the sound it made. The birds all chirped throughout the experience, adding another sonic layer. At the end of my visit, I spoke with the docent about her own experience in the exhibit.

She had worked there for more than a month, and said that the birds had become so used to the employees that she often felt them flying near her head, even landing in and pulling her hair!

This is Boursier-Mougenot's 17th installation to feature birds and guitars. Much experimentation was needed to determine the ideal species of bird to use—one that would not be scared of human visitors, but would also be active enough to land on and interact with the instruments with some regularity. Admission to the gallery was limited to 20 people at a time, with the duration of visits limited to 10 to 15 minutes each. The nature of the installation proved to be



something of a conservation nightmare. According to the knowledgeable docent, the instruments were cleaned twice per day, at the same time that the birds were fed.

I thought the exhibit was well thought-out, interesting and entertaining, and it was especially compelling to see so many unpredictable birds in such a musical space. The exhibit was very popular at the museum, and due to the limited capacity and timed visits, guests were turned away almost daily. I am glad that I attended, and will be following Boursier-Mougenot to see what his next installation will be!

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