

Solders

Of

Synthesizer builders
and performance
collective

Kikimore

construct intricate
tactile instruments to
make their spirited
noise. By **Abi Bliss**

Fo

rtune



Kikimore: (from left) Barbara Poček, Staša Guček, Nina Orlič, Sara Pegam, Katarina Legat Blomstedt

“There’s a complete freedom in building your instrument,” says Barbara Poček, reflecting upon on the DIY synthesizers that she and the other members of Ljubljana collective Kikimore assemble and play. “The way you connect the wires, how you play with the breadboard, the circuits, it’s your own domain. There’s no way you can fuck this up; no rules on how to play it.”

Such self-built instruments are not only integral to Kikimore’s sound but to their genesis. Back in the mid-2010s, Poček, Staša Guček, Katarina Legat Blomstedt, Nina Orlič and Sara Pegam first crossed paths at a series of workshops hosted in the Slovenian capital by the Ljudmila and Sonica festivals. The connection might have ended as they downed soldering irons but for the encouragement of Ida Hiršenfelder and Saša Spačal from ČIPke, a local initiative providing workshops and knowledge-sharing for women at the intersections of science, technology and media art.

The pair invited them to gather regularly for noise tea parties in Kersnikova Institute’s Rampa hackspace. “It was fun to go somewhere after work where you could make noise and try out these weird instruments,” recalls Poček. Eventually the group were persuaded to share their nascent sound under the guise of a public rehearsal at an event in a forest, and Kikimore were born.

Slovenia’s wildlife and folklore-rich forests were a fitting spot for the debut of a group whose name comes from kikumora, a house spirit to which Slavic myth attributes a variety of nocturnal upsets, including sleep paralysis, seductive dreams and things that go bump in the night. Although tapping into the long association between analogue synth sounds and the occult, Kikimore’s soundscapes roam more freely between noise, ambient and techno, countering the sinister evocations of gravelly thuds, prowling filter sweeps and icy witch-finger stabs with inquisitive

warbles and adrenalin-surging pulsed rhythms.

Sigil captures the spirit and evolution of Kikimore’s first five years as they learned how to find space amid the noise, sculpt structure from improvisation, and combine contrasting atmospheres: a development that was accelerated by 2020’s circumstances into concentrated creativity while pandemic restrictions eased last summer. “We came up with the name *Sigil* because it’s a symbolic representation of a magician’s outcome and the outcome can be chaos,” says Legat Blomstedt. “We’re making chaos in chaotic times.”

Poček suggests a more controlled approach to summoning Kikimore’s music. “We start jamming and then we have this moment where a composition is born,” she says. “That part just magically happens but then we need to step back and solidify what we’ve done into something we can remember.”

While Kikimore also use factory-made synths as well as contact mics, field recordings, violin and voice, their painstakingly assembled DIY synths seem especially haunted by their capricious and mischievous namesakes. Members’ favourites include the bubbling modulations of a Benjolin unit and the Touch Tone, created by local maker collective Theremidi Orchestra. “We call it Screamo because it makes a screaming sound,” Pegam explains. “When I play it’s like a transfer of energy from my fingers to the machine.”

As a percussionist versed in high energy Brazilian and industrial styles, Orlič relishes creating rhythms on Constanza Piña’s Copernica machine. “In the industrial band I was hitting a plastic barrel, but here, movements are very subtle. With just the turn of a button you can achieve so much more.” Poček cites the versatile circuits of Casper Electronics’ OMSynth and a rough and ready kalimba electrified with guitar pickups. “It has these nasty steel wires that keep cutting your fingers and destroying your fingernails,” she laughs. “With the blood, you know, it’s ritualistic,”

Orlič observes, “So the more blood you spill on your kalimba, the better the gig.”

Besides illustrating the cover of *Sigil* with a fragile yet foreboding insect form, Guček combines interests in electronics, art and ecology to create her own synth kits. These include the MOTHerein and Sentinels series, beautifully etched copper renderings of insects that are played by gently caressing a wing or moving fingertips near the electrode antenna. “It’s really DIY as you have to etch it yourself at home,” she says.

As central as self-built instruments are, Kikimore’s members lament their perverse tendency to function well in rehearsal then fail during concerts. “It became quite crucial that we know how to support each other during a performance,” notes Poček, “because a lot of the instruments are really unreliable, so we have to rely upon each other.” Yet such obstacles also strengthen a collective, non-hierarchical ethos that broadens DIY to DIWO, or Do It With Others. “We realised that we have to listen and give space to each other,” says Pegam. “That was one of the most difficult but also one of the most significant things to learn. It’s an ongoing process every time we play.”

Having launched *Sigil* in November 2020 with a live-streamed performance, Kikimore are only too aware of how they benefitted from the real world support of ČIPke and Ljubljana’s DIY community, through space, encouragement and access to skills and gear that many women never have the chance to experiment with. “I was always a big fan of electronic music but I was scared of questioning: what do those buttons do?” Legat Blomstedt remembers. “Ida had to tell me ten times to go to a workshop, but when I did, I was completely hooked.” Orlič agrees: “For women to explain to women very simply: why does this work in this way? To me, that was a really nice thing to learn. And also the smell of solder... I know it’s not good for health,” she laughs, “but I like it.” □ Kikimore’s *Sigil* is released by Kamizdat

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