

Making Music Via Marbles

Sound and Mechanical Engineering Combine on the Wintergatan Marble Machine

Matthew Jaster, Senior Editor

According to his official biography, Martin Molin specializes in vibraphone and music box as the ringleader of the band Wintergatan (Swedish for The Milky Way). The band's unique low-tech, homemade instrumental moxie could easily work as a steampunk film score or set off an entirely new musical genre altogether (electronic folklore comes to mind). There's magic here, ambitious and creative, the kind of musical experimentation lacking in most playlists today.

Wintergatan (www.wintergatan.net) is a Swedish instrumental group that provides an array of low-fi noises and sound effects through bells, glockenspiels, projectors, music boxes and various drum beats. While Molin and his bandmates seem eager to bend, break and alter the rules of music production, it's evident there's an engineer or two within the band just dying to get out.

After touring with the band for 18 straight months, Molin found his 'inner-engineer' in November 2014 when he started building a programmable marble machine. "Shortly after visiting a fantastic museum with mechanical instruments (The Spielklock Museum in Utrecht, Holland), I stumbled across a computer program online to produce templates for wooden gears," Molin said in a recent interview with *Gear Technology*. "I always loved the marble machine subculture and once I learned how to cut wooden gears, I wanted to build one."

14 grueling months later, the dream of building a programmable marble machine became a reality. The finished product is a giant musical instrument that utilizes wooden pulleys and funnels to move 2,000 marbles around via a hand crank. There's also a kick drum, a bass and other instruments thrown in for good measure.

Unfortunately for this journalist, words don't exactly do the Wintergatan Marble Machine justice. But a quick click on the following link will give you an idea of what this young man put together without a traditional background in engineering, (www.youtube.com/watch?v=IvUU8joBb1Q).

The Wintergatan Marble Machine video has generated more than 19+ million views since he uploaded in March 2016. Molin believes, especially in the music business, people are more concerned with searching for the perfect advertising or promotional strategy. "They pay less attention to the quality of the work itself. While it's easy to fall into this trap particularly in our digital social media landscape, I think searching for the best art is the greatest promotional strategy."

For his part, Molin is thrilled so many people on the planet share the same kind of imagination and vision he does. "I knew the video and the machine were going to be good, but I couldn't believe that my love for this project would be shared by so many," Molin added.

Molin plans to build a smaller, motorized music box that he will take on tour that will act as a 5th member of the band. After that, he plans to redesign some of the elements of the Wintergatan Marble Machine so the band can utilize the large version during live performances. "There is so much interest in the machine now, I have found some new energy to perfect it," Molin said. "I know there are more people than myself that want to see it on a live stage."

And where did all this ingenuity come from exactly? "Problem solving is very addictive," Molin said. "It puts me in a place where earthly, existential and emotional problems don't exist. When the idea first came to me to build the machine, it was so strong and it would not leave me alone." 

