



Hear the Wood for the Trees, 2022, with Jane Norbury

Close-up Will Menter

It makes so much difference how close the sound is to your ear.

Someone whispers so that only you can hear. A mosquito passes at two centimetres. Or a pigeon - and you feel the pressure of each flap of its wings, a frequency too low to perceive as sound.

Music too. Being most often a shared social experience the sound may be intended to overwhelm you sensually but often the source may not be so close.

I keep thinking of my first experiences of hearing live jazz bands when I was in my teens and starting to play myself.

The Don Rendell Ian Carr Quintet in a pub in Cambridge, the Polish Modern Jazz Quartet in an attic room in the YMCA, even Duke Ellington and his full orchestra in Great Saint Mary's church, with the classic saxophone section including Johnny Hodges, Paul Gonsalves and Harry Carney. Great, great experiences and I was close to the musicians.

But the one that I particularly remember was the Thad Jones Mel Lewis orchestra at Ronnie Scott's club. I had already bought their first album and this was the first time they had performed in the UK. I probably got there much too early and had to nurse my expensive beer to make it last, but it meant that I could place myself within feet of the saxophone section and I still remember, 50 years later, the power of this sound projecting straight at me. But not just power, a certain timbre that you only get if you are really close, so much detail in the high frequencies, so nuanced. Actually, I'm not sure that everyone likes it. I did of course and I still do. I still try to get as close as possible when I go to a concert.

This is what I've been thinking about as I've designed and constructed my latest collection of sound sculptures "To hear a world in the grain of matter" and then "Hear the wood for the trees". The idea that the meaning of the sound is fundamentally different if you are near to it. It becomes an intimate message that is only for you. Others nearby will hear something but not the essential message. Through your ears you fuse with oak wood, or with slabs of stone, or with long steel rods. You find the music that is inherent in these different matters - not music that has been composed in the traditional sense but music that has been enabled and revealed by making a physical structure that brings it straight to your ear. It is just for you.

To Hear a World in the Grain of Iron, 2021,
with Esther Meunier Corfdyr





To Hear a World in the Grain of Stone, 2020

The gestures you must make are different too. We are so familiar with manipulating matter with our hands, but there are other ways. If the sculpture is designed to bring the matter close to your ear, then the obvious way to touch it and make it sound is with your head. Gently of course, your head can also caress and you don't want a slab of rock to wack you on the rebound. Your head touches matter, but maybe your shoulders do too a little bit, or your upper arm, but never your hands and fingers. So as well as fusing with the matter, you become aware of your body in a way that is slightly different to what you are accustomed to.

I've also worked on the closeness of sound in music workshop situations. One person sits on a chair with their eyes closed. Others in the group surround him or her and make sounds close to their ears. Sometimes with their hands, or their voices or small hand-held objects, bamboos or seed pods, my ubiquitous "bits of wood". For the listener the experience is amazingly rich with a heightened spatial awareness in 3 dimensions - not just left and right but also in front, behind, above and below. As for the people making and giving the sounds, they immediately become aware of a responsibility of care. If the listener trusts you with such proximity, well then of course you must ensure that you don't harm them with a sound that is too loud or threatening in other ways.

We know so well the format where a small number of musicians give their music to a much larger number of listeners. Here we turn the idea around and concentrate on just one listener, either with several sound makers or with large sculptural objects that envelope you with their vibrations, passing through only a few centimetres of air before entering your ears and working their magic deep inside.

And here's the thing. You can't record it or film it. Even with the best binaural microphones close to the sound source, played back through the highest quality headphones it's not the same. It's no longer just for you, it could be for anyone and everyone. More than that, it is now the sound of headphones or loudspeakers and no longer the vibrations of primal matter.

www.willmenter.com

To Hear a World in the Grain of Earth, with Esther Meunier Corfdyr, 2021



To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*, 1803