

Sounding Bowls

Opening Hearts Across the World

by Tobias Kaye: Designer and sole maker worldwide

Answers to three questions asked by the Rampton Hospital magazine upon their purchase of a Sounding Bowl

Who is Tobias Kaye?

Presently a woodturner of international repute Tobias lives and works in Devon. He began life in 1956 on a farm in Ireland where he was born to idealistic parents who moved to England three years later to pursue their hopes and dreams. Tobias was educated at a Steiner-Waldorf school in Sussex and then spent some years travelling the world and exploring different forms of work. Coffin making, forestry, bar-tending, geological section mapping, care of children with learning difficulties, and teaching, were just some of his trial occupations.

Throughout this time music was important to Tobias. Whether it was playing piano, penny whistle or just singing and whistling Tobias retained a love of music on a very amateur level. Tobias first began turning wood in 1979, and 25 years on still finds it absorbing, especially now that music and woodturning have combined. During those years Tobias has exhibited his work at major Art-of-Woodturning shows across the world and had pieces bought by museums and private collectors in many countries.

Tobias finds real satisfaction in seeing his work go to people and places that are working on human issues. Personal and human development is an area that is important to him and his studies in this field, centring around the work of the Austrian philosopher and spiritual teacher Rudolf Steiner keep him as much interested as does his woodturning.

Tobias's hope for the Sounding Bowls is that they may become an established musical instrument. "if after my death" he says "others are still making recognisable Sounding Bowls, that people are getting real satisfaction from holding and playing then I shall feel I have achieved something." He is aware that a new idea can be too much diluted by an

early spread of makers, continual innovation and development, but also aware that if it is not improved by experience it will not amount to anything. Therefore his hope is to keep on improving the instrument-sculptures he has pioneered within a clearly recognisable framework so that the Sounding Bowls eventually become something valued and recognised, that others can pick up and take further.

Where have Sounding Bowls come from?

Tobias had for years been struggling to lift his work of making wooden bowls more towards sculpture. Each piece he made became for him a journey of discovery as he sought to find forms for the bowls that were visually innately harmonious. Filled with harmony, as quietly harmonious as a water-lily, yet filled with subtle humming life like a beehive. The result of this search was that his forms began to show a strong acoustic response.

One night during a meditation the image of a bowl strung with musical wire appeared before him. From this image all Sounding Bowl development has sprung.

When he accepted the offer, given that night to make his forms into actually sounding instruments he felt as though he had, in one way failed. He felt as though accepting this idea was a confession that his forms would never be alive enough in themselves that people could hear them hum just from their innate harmony. Yet at the same time the transformation of the silent, acoustically echoing form into sounding instrument was tremendously exciting. It was as though life was breathing out of the very air into the form of wood he had just crafted.

After some time making and developing bowls that sung once strung Tobias found that his customers began to include people who were using music in healing. Both professional music therapists and spiritual healers started to use Sounding Bowls to help their clients find a way from difficulty into development.

Soon Tobias was invited to speak at music therapy gatherings and as more people saw and heard them, Sounding Bowls began to build a reputation worldwide.

In 1991 *Experimental Musical Instruments* magazine ran a feature. The editor of this multi-national journal, a researcher of musical instrument history, commented that there was no known precedent for such an instrument. "Sounding Bowls are unique in the history of world music," he said, "on at least three counts: No known stringed instrument has before had the strings held within the resounding space, in every other case the strings are fitted over the top; Turned components have been used on instruments before, but never as the sole component; Instruments that have turned bodies have always had necks."

How does one play a Sounding Bowl?

Plucking the strings is the most common way of using Sounding Bowls. Some people occasionally use lightweight string-hammers. This technique is borrowed from the Indian Santoor or American Dulcimer players, but the favourite mode remains plucking.

There are many ways to pluck a string. Some people use plectra, but while this technique is common amongst guitarists most stringed instruments are finger-plucked and most people prefer to do this with Sounding Bowls. Harpists and Lyre players use distinct plucking techniques. The more robust technique that creates the volume required of a harp is to put the finger tip under the string and raise it up, releasing the string on the pass. The subtler technique employed by Lyrists is to place the finger over the string and roll it downwards so the string is part plucked and part stroked. This gives a softer tone more open to expressive intonation. Both techniques are popular with Sounding Bowl players.

Ultimately there is no right and wrong of Sounding Bowl playing. The deciding factor as to how you should play a Sounding Bowl is not how it has been

done in the past but what gives *you* the greatest satisfaction and raises the sort of sound you want to make. It is one of the great advantages of Sounding Bowls that however you may be playing it no-one will come by and tell you that you are using a wrong technique. Though many instruments have a huge history of technique that has become a weapon of standardisation, Sounding Bowls have less than twenty years of history and the notion that the technique you prefer is the best technique has been fostered during this history. Therefore it is your ear that tells you how best to play this instrument, your heart that responds to this tone or that and says yes or no. Thus it becomes play in the sense of child's play; that one plays *With* the Sounding Bowl and learns from that how joy filled music arises.

Since 1986 when the first Sounding Bowl was created by Tobias Kaye in his small stone built Devon-Long-House workshop these instruments have grown in reputation all over the world. People as far apart as Japan, Sweden, Australia and America have found that the Sounding Bowl brings something special to their music making. Many have even found that that music making becomes possible for the first time when they are holding a Sounding Bowl. Too many people have felt that making music is something beyond their skills. Too many people have felt that 'some people make music and some just don't.' Finding a Sounding Bowl has released many people from this bind.

One of the aims of the Sounding Bowls is to enable the experience of making music for many, many people who have previously felt cut off from this life enhancing experience. When the idea of fitting strings to an acoustically formed wooden bowl-shape was first offered to Tobias during his meditations one night, he was immediately aware that this was something that could occupy a space between sculptural art and musical art. Here was something that could appeal to the eye as well as enable anyone to make beautiful, harmonious sounds.

Rampton's Head of Artistic Therapies, Stella Compton Dickenson gives her feedback from work with their Sounding Bowl.

" I am deeply moved by the impact of 'Sheila the Healer' as our clients have christened the Sounding Bowl. She has taken our work into dimensions beyond formal music therapy and into that of vibrational healing; The tactile and aesthetic qualities as well as the sheer beauty of the sound have led to deeper levels of emotional engagement than were previously possible. This really helps to facilitate the therapeutic process"