

# Seeking the source of Creativity

## the sound of wood singing

My drive to *make* things began only once I discovered woodturning. Previous to that I was more interested in talking about things

Perhaps it was once I was into my twenties, but making things became very important, it overtook music, it overtook poetry as my primary form of expression.

Woodturning is one of those hobbies by which one can complete a project in an afternoon. Bowls, spinning tops, and trinkets began to flow. Hollow acorns as necklaces were, for me an expression that I had found my life's work and that great oaks might grow from this play.

I decided to make woodturning my career. My pieces found their way into markets, shops and galleries around the country, I began a serious pursuit of physical beauty, asking:

"What makes a bowl *REALLY* beautiful"

I picked up quotes from famous makers, such as the RCA furniture professor, David Pye who wrote "Anything you make will either sing where it stands or be forever silent" The father of modern potters, Bernhard Leach said "Anything you make is necessarily an image of yourself: It is not without reason that a jug is described as having a neck; a foot; a belly; a mouth and a lip."

Or Rudolf Steiner, architect and sculptor. "The forms a craftsman or artist gives to their work flow from the experiences they have between a previous incarnation and this one"

My own attempts to create more and more beautiful things became a passionate search. Eventually I realised that the search for creativity is the search for "God".

"God", or the creator of all that is has (traditionally) created us in His image, of Her substance. Therefore creators we creatures must be. After all nearly every situation in life requires a creative response if it is to be resolved. All of us need to look within for how we will respond to what is asked of us. This is the nature of the freedom that the human being suffers and rejoices in.

Faced with a piece of wood in my workshop the same questions assail me: how can I best do justice to the years of growth, giving and being that this tree has put into it, what can I bring to it from my developing sense of beauty, that it may carry harmony and love into the world. As each piece was finished I felt a sense of

defeat, the curve *may* be better than some I had done, yet it did not hum like a dynamo. One could pass a piece like this by and not be assailed by it's song.

Trying to bridge these poles of enthusiasm and despair became a guide for me.

I began to identify other polar pairs in craftwork I saw elsewhere. Some bowls I saw expressed a great warmth, whereas others expressed a lightness. Some pieces had strong definite forms, yet others showed the inherent beauty of the wood, Yet such pairs seemed never to blend. As a tree bridges the dark earth and the windy sky I sought to find forms that were at once warm and light. I sought to bring harmony to the relationship between wood's own forms and those that human art that gave to it. Slowly I found that as finer curves reach upwards and fuller curves embrace, spiral curves reach up from the base and curve into an embrace.

Spiral curves became my path. I sought along it for the balance and harmony that only choice can make between the poles of extremity to which we fall if we do not choose creatively. Wrestling with unblendable opposites I sought, feeling as though I were trying to splice a rope that tug-o-war teams were pulling at.

The Tao speaks of this creative struggle between heaven and earth. The poet Goethe, in his *Fairy Tale of the Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily* speaks of human life as seeking to find or build a bridge across the river dividing dream and possibility. He in turn wrote this in response to Valentin Andrea's *Chymical Wedding*, an alchemical text on spiritual growth.

Sages down the ages have sought the bridge that personal creativity can hope to build, connecting what we and the universe *truly* are with what we seem to be. The Apocalypse of St. John describes this journey (and the help that the angelic realm offers) from the perspective of the whole human race. Padraic Colum's fairy tale *The King of Irelands Son* does this especially clearly for individual growth.

I was entranced by some of Rudolf Steiner's descriptions of the striving of the artist. How the pursuit of beauty typically leads to embracing a truth that serves the individual more than the group, what he calls the Luciferic temptation, he describes how the future role of art is to serve the group even at the cost of personal loss-of-ego. What he calls Christ inspired art. I wondered deeply if this were yet possible, or if my art

like that of most of my fellow artist/craftsmen was only going to go into the houses and collections of the wealthy, sold in galleries who made much of my name so that the buyers might feel safe in their choices.

I was also inspired by Steiner's description of germinal human development, how in the early stages wing like forms emerge from the human spirit while it is circling in the spiritual envelope of the earth. Through these wings archetypal forms of being are played into the developing human being that later manifest in our ability to connect creatively with the rest of the cosmos. Such things lived very strongly within me as I sought to draw in, from what open ended reservoirs of creativity I might find, true forms that could sing in the world.

After some time of making bowl-forms in this way I began to notice an acoustic response from within each bowl. At certain angles my voice would resound within it, or at others environmental sounds would become softly harmonised by it's curves.

I began to remember a school visit when I was 16 to a university sound department where we had been shown a cardboard trumpet, made according to the Fibonacci-spiral that provided remarkable amplification, either of voice, if spoken into or distant sounds if put to the ear.

As my feeling for curves developed the resonance in my bowls continued to grow. I began to reflect that my customers were buying fine forms and beautiful pieces of wood and were not noticing that they gained a remarkable sound with it. I wondered if there were not something I could do to make this aspect of my sculpture available to them.

One piece, a deep bowl made of Ash sat in my living room, drying. (much of my work is made while the wood is fresh). The stresses in this piece were unusually strong and the swirling grain could not hold them. The distortion of the drying caused the bowl to split. I was in the next room. Both rooms rang for a second with the sound of the wood splitting.

I am used to hearing wood split. On a summers day offcuts of wood lying in my workshop set up a regular chirping of clock-like ticks as they open their grain to the sun. None make the musical twang that this bowl gave out.

I went through to see whether this sound could really have come from the bowl. I found it sitting on the piano and wondered if that were the sole cause of the musicality. Picking it up I tapped it with my ring finger. The sound of gold against this wood was remarkable. Listening into it I spoke, sang and tapped again. A proud acoustic sang within and rang forth from this piece of wood, from it's inner shape.

Two days later a composer friend happened by. I showed him the piece. He borrowed it to make recordings for use in his compositions. On returning it some while later he said "you should do something with this, it makes a truly remarkable sound." But like me he could not think what could be done to bring out the acoustic secrets of my bowls. I turned my mind to it again over the next few weeks, storming my brain to produce something useful. No new ideas came.

About 6 weeks later while doing my evening meditation; in front of me, as though across the room I saw an image of a bowl with a string stretched across inside it.

It was clear to me that here was something new. Here was a chance to allow the wood and the form to speak for themselves. Later I would remember that Barbara Hepworth had used the straight line of strings to add visual contrast to the subtlety of her curved forms but had never used sound. After some years the editor of EMI magazine would confirm that these forms were unique in the world history of musical instruments.

As I write I realise that was 19 years ago this week. My first ten ventures into this image were shown at an exhibition at my local craft guild. They sold very quickly but not before the composer friend and I had recorded a short tape of spontaneous compositions on them. The next few ventured into new interpretations of the image, taking a more fanciful slant on the idea of tuned string on bowl forms. After this they settled down into the space between instrument and sculpture, a strange space that few recognise to exist, a space in which sculptors and arts funding bodies do not recognise them and nor do most musicians.

Making each one became a journey for me. Unlike the majority of turned work that is finished in a few hours, each Sounding Bowl took days to make. I would experience the gamut of hope and despair as I tried to find the best form and thickness for each one. Too thick and they lacked expression, too thin and they would collapse under the tension of the strings.

The moment of hearing the first string sound was always a powerful experience. The form that had for years been silent would suddenly come alive. Like breath entering into a living body, sound would enter the waiting form.

I became aware that more was flowing into this new work than I was aware of. I had for years cultivated an interest in friends who had crossed the river from this life to the next, seeking to understand more about life on the other side and to learn how their perspective could enhance my understanding of and effectiveness in this life incarnate. I pursued these relationships

meditatively, not being one for séances or relying on others to interpret a language I seek to learn directly. The great advantage of working alone is that I can use my workshop time meditatively, that I can seek while I work to hear the currents of Creation that underlie every moment, to see the effect in the invisible of cutting wood that has for years been invisible itself by virtue of being deep inside a tree.

During this time of development, of excited exploration of the potential of strung bowls I became aware that amongst those voices that whispered below the sounds of making were some that I recognised. Friends that had died, relations and tutors.

After making 21 different attempts some musicians began to show more interest, suggesting that perhaps therapists might find these useful. My 28<sup>th</sup> Sounding Bowl sold to a new project in Oxford whereby music therapy was being offered to hospice patients. This was a small 7 string one. Within a week they phoned asking if I could do a larger one. The therapist pestered me in the weeks it took me to find and dry the wood, make and string the form as he particularly wanted to play it to one of his clients who was slipping slowly into a coma as she approached death.



Bit by bit her response to his playing became less, and by the time the instrument was ready she was not responding even to his voice. As soon as the new, 15 string sounding bowl arrived he took it to her bedside and played and sang to her as he had done for many weeks. His hopes were born out, the sound of the Sounding Bowl, together with his voice, singing in time to her breathing reached to her, wherever she was. Her response was gentle, slight even, but distinct. In that middle land between life and death she was able to hear the music of the Sounding Bowl.

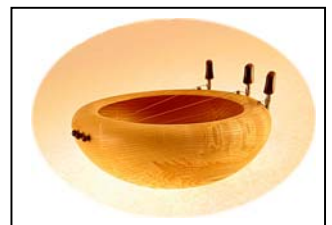
It has seemed appropriate to me that the Sounding Bowls, emerging from the space between my searches and struggles should go, in therapy to those who slip slowly through the space between life and death. That, inspired by friends who have died the Sounding Bowls should go first into hospice work.

But it has not stopped there. By recommendation and through my speaking at music therapy conferences the word about Sounding Bowls has spread. Homes for children with special needs, psychiatric hospitals,

trauma centres, nerve damage units all began to find Sounding Bowls exceptionally useful.

Remarkable stories started to come back to me: Autistic children who would respond to nothing else would take an active interest in a Sounding Bowl. Chance encounters in hospital corridors with nervous or bereaved relatives that were made fruitful by a Sounding Bowl. Psychiatric units for offenders reporting that a patient unable to cry or show regret softens into tears holding a Sounding Bowl. A victim of stroke during childbirth who has cried for months almost without sleep or break is able to quieten her breathing and sleep peacefully when a Sounding Bowl is played on her chest. A depressed patient in a hospice who wont speak to anyone, after a session with a Sounding Bowl asks for the chaplain, makes his peace with his wife and himself and lives fully for his last few months.

After some years of making Sounding Bowls for such institutions some people begin to request small Sounding Bowls for use in meditation. One, two or three strings, small enough to hold in the palm of a hand. These have now become a popular meditation tool.



Recently spiritual healers, most of them not working in or funded by large institutions have been requesting Sounding Bowls. Now stories come back to me of angels accompanying Sounding Bowls from the workshop into every situation, of beings standing gently behind those who play. Stories of light pouring out of the Sounding Bowl into crowds of people, bearing individual healing according to need. Stories of people feeling a current run through their chakras when they first hear the sound.

One particular commission was for a Sounding Bowl to work with the pyramids in Egypt. Large, with fan shaped stringing, the owner is hoping heal the effects of centuries of misuse in one of the earths power centres. As I made this one it felt as though the desert winds blow through my workshop. Dune like flowing curves emerged in the grain, distant sounds rang from miles away into my workshop and out again. I know that the sounds of this instrument will go beyond the audible like star light comes from beyond time.

Each instrument, as I make it challenges me to reach beyond what I know, what I am capable of and be present to what might yet be, to what wants to become.

Each instrument, once finished sounds with a subtlety and richness that engenders wonder in so many. The

notes ring out like no other instrument, coming from a unique spiral section resonator, not from a sound box as in most stringed instruments. The overtones and sustain on the notes can be felt in the wood, even after the note has faded from hearing.

Each Sounding Bowl goes to someone, somewhere in the world who will use it in some form of personal or transpersonal healing. They do not go into the art collections of the rich.

Development goes on. Still I seek in the space between birth and death to find completion, to become whole, to open the gates of creativity that a little celestial music might shine through.

More about Sounding Bowls may be seen, read and heard at [www.soundingbowls.com](http://www.soundingbowls.com)

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