

The Emergence of Sounding Bowls

A personal Journey

By Tobias Kaye

Where does a musical instrument come from? Craftsmanship, invention and evolution all play their part of course, but the true essence of an instrument can only be a spiritual question. Today, musical instruments are well established. On the whole we Europeans conceive of them as set in number and type with a few 'weird' tribal ones on the fringe. Instruments can generally be traced back to spiritual origins expressed in Myth. For example: the vast majority of bowed and plucked stringed instruments of Europe can be traced to the duofold Lyre invention myths of the Greeks. The Finns also have a duofold myth of the origin of a stringed instrument that appears to lie behind the zither family and therefore, possibly, also the piano.

However, new inventions do occur and while most of them are forgotten, more recently a few have joined the ranks of established instruments. Adolphe Sax's Saxophone must be the best example, while Pracht and Gärtner's Lyre may be familiar to some readers. I know little about the life of Adolphe Sax but the general story is that he was keen to invent a new musical instrument, partly to make a name for himself and partly to raise an income from his metal working skills. He invented a number of musical instruments, all of which fell into obscurity with the exception of the Saxophone. The story of the new Lyre seems to be that Edmund Pracht dreamed one night of a piano that burned up before his eyes leaving only the sounding board and strings intact which were continuing to play. Pracht asked Rudolf Steiner for some insight into this dream and he was told that a new musical instrument wanted to come into the world, one with the range of a piano but without the mechanical action. Pracht enlisted the woodworking skills of his friend, Lothar Gärtner, to create this. Their Lyre is the only hand plucked stringed instrument with a full chromatic scale. On the tribal fringe, the now popular Tibetan Singing Bowls are sometimes thought to have evolved from domestic vessels into sacred temple instruments, while others say that they were specifically created as instruments and the Tibetans fooled the Chinese into believing that they were rice bowls so as not to have them stolen away along with other ritual equipment. Either way, there is no doubting the strong spiritual links when one hears the sounding of a Tibetan Singing Bowl.

The invention of a new musical instrument was strangely incidental to my work. As a sculptural woodturner, my intent was to make domestic bowls of such beauty and grace that to have one in one's house was to be subtly blessed. This rather lofty aim was inspired by some of the things that stuck from my Waldorf school education. Prominent in this were William Morris's statement that everything in one's house should be both beautiful and useful and my woodwork teacher's reverence for Barbara Hepworth.¹ Whilst mowing with a scythe at 18, I began to notice that simple rhythmical tasks gave space for sublime thoughts to unfold. Someone later quoted to me from Rudolf Steiner that the movement of the muscles in meaningful work releases the lofty images that created them, that high beings speak to the attentive soul during such

activity. This quote richly explained this experience and encouraged me to seek such work; trusting in what my thoughts revealed. Finding my path in life was neither quick nor simple. I turned my hand to numerous types of work; in farm, factory, service and social sectors. Eventually I discovered woodturning and settled to this practice. As I did so, my hobbies of piano and poetry dropped away and my attention was held by the struggle to make forms speak by their shape as richly as a poem, or to sing like a melody. Gradually I picked up a little of the ideology of the trade: “Turn the wood the way the wood likes to be turned” is an adage that has been handed down the craftsman’s line since time immemorial. This presumes a ‘Being’ nature of the wood that is not accepted in the modern world-view. This led me to enquire into this being nature. What is it within the wood that has such preferences? To be sure there is the physical reaction; wood turned with a care for its structure shapes with less effort and requires less cleaning up with sandpaper and the like, yet it seemed to me there was a sense of something more within the wood. Not like ‘something looking out at me’ but something that did have a preference and of which the physical effects of care-in-working were merely a symptom. Could this be the essence of the tree still present in the wood? I spent a good deal of time with trees, seeking to connect with their living presence and found something there that was not in the wood. Therefore, I continued to relate to the stream of subtle activity that emerges when the wood is cut with sensitivity seeking to know its true nature. What I found was that the living tree presents a unifying presence for the host of smaller presences that lie within it, rather like we ourselves present – to those who would know us – a unifying presence that explains the sum of our daily round of doings. We are not a dish washer, car driver, child minder, cook, nor essentially are we the committed teacher, craftsman, lawyer or whatever our social identity might suggest. We are something that gives all of those things meaning and purpose. When we are gone, the books we wrote, children we raised, pots we made, speak of us but within them we cannot be found. So it is with the tree. Once it is no longer functioning as a whole presence the individual parts of it present a life that is smaller than when they were part of the whole. Thus the life that streams from the wood, as its structure is so radically changed by the speeding edge of a sharpened tool, whilst of a smaller nature than that of the tree, is no less deep in essence. Beings, everywhere, present in material forms, are released with joy when that form is broken with attention and consideration. (The most esoteric descriptions of the angelic hosts that created this world speak of a high/deep layer of beings referred to as *Thrones* because of their supportive nature. These beings have assumed the role of becoming matter, their thoughts [servants] are those beings who embody such items as a tree). Another piece of the ideology of the trade was a quote from Professor David Pye of the Royal College of Art. His 1970s book on the art and craft of workmanship,² though dense and closely argued, contained insights on the relationship between hand-made and machine-made objects and their effect on daily life, that are still only slowly entering modern awareness. One single line from this book reverberated around the crafts-artists of the 80s: “Anything you make will either sing where it stands or be forever silent”. Oh that I should have that skill; that the things I made might sing! I also discovered a little gallery in St. John’s Wood, London called Innate Harmony.³ This so clearly expressed what I was trying to conjure into my pieces that I made great efforts to sell my work

there. Most days were spent at the lathe, working simple repetitive cuts while struggling to leave such a refined curve and assess the balance of proportion and weight that each piece might 'fly', be released from its salad bowl status and sing to the world of the images and concepts that filled my soul as I worked. Day after day, I stood in amazement and wonder at the inter-related images that slowly built up pictures of the nature of existence: I felt a little like Tolstoy's hero in *War and Peace* who lies on his deathbed watching minute crystals shimmer in front of his eyes as they assemble themselves into intricate patterns that build up into three dimensional forms which, castle-like, grow larger and more beautiful; promising, as they grow, to create an image of perfection. And, just before that point of total symmetry and harmony is reached then collapse, falling, tinkling one over the other into chaos and then disappear, only to reappear moments later, one by shining one and begin the slow and gentle dance of creation all over again and this time more beautiful, more perfect, than the last. I began to know the feeling described by C. S. Lewis⁴ of allowing a world-view to develop to the point when one is sure of it, when one feels that one now has a grasp on the world and can understand how it works. Then, to invite doubt in to test it, and watch as, pillar by pillar, beam by beam, doubt destroys the sureness of the structure, the substance of the dream leaving dried husks, to find amongst them a seed. To plant the seed and watch as a new plant grows, different to its progenitor and more complex, beautiful and profound.

One book in particular used to inspire great journeys of soul; Rudolf Steiner's *Occult Science*. In this, descriptions of the stages of planetary growth lead to a point during the inception of our planet Earth when little more than the warm intention to create was present; Layers of differentiated warmth contained all the potential that has lead us to being and becoming what we are now. During that stage, the greater-than-human beings (those that regulate those huge forces of existence we remain unconscious of) formed these layers. The germinal human being floated in and out, up and down amongst these layers absorbing the forms that would eventually solidify into our physical body. This absorption took place through extended, diaphanous, wing-like forms (if one can speak of 'forms' where only warm intention exists). Later in this chapter, Steiner makes some effort to explain his concept of time and how a 'series' of events can take place 'before' time 'begins'. As far as I can comprehend it, things that are outside of time are, on one level, happening now. Such concepts need more than a moment to take in, more than one reading to relate to. Exercising the daily repetitive gestures of my craft, seeking the impossibly refined curve allowed this particular framework of picture to revolve slowly, majestically around my mind. Deeper and higher, more and more firmly rooted this image of the winged intention-to-become became. And, like the forms that entered the germinal human being through these wing-like structures, so into me entered a deep new urge to bring life to earth in a new way. In the galleries that sold my work, I would look at forms created by potters, glass blowers, and other wood turners. Sometimes one or another shape would speak to me: this shape might be richly rounded, pregnant almost; that shape might be remarkable refined, crisply clean of line. One man's shapes rose up from the table with such speed they were almost shocking in their dynamism. Another's were so gently curving, so utterly rounded that they warmly invited one into an embrace. Yet, in my work I sought to

express the harmonic resolution of diametrically opposed forces. Looking at the uprising forms I felt they lacked in warmth. Looking at the pregnant curves I felt a lack of refinement. Looking at the warmly embracing forms I felt they were too heavy. What could I do to my awkward shapes that I might contain both lightness and warmth, both rich potential and refinement? Interleaving with this process I began to wonder at another of Steiner's suggestions. During his first mystery play, *The Soul's Probation*, one of the characters describes to another how the fallen angel Lucifer (Bringer of Light as his name translates⁵) has assumed the role of inspirer of the Arts; how Lucifer's halls are hung with all the greatest works of art of the past millennium that would not have existed without his inspiration. At first this seems blasphemous, but, after many, many months of puzzling over this, I came to see that both the churches that commissioned many art works and the bankers who created the art boom of the Renaissance, were elitist rather than egalitarian. Exactly the distinction between the Christianity of the Gospels and influence of Lucifer as described by Steiner. The Bringer of Light would have each of us so impressed with our own brilliance that we do not relate to our fellows as true equals. If this is so, how could it be that an Art could arise that was inspired by Christ – as the play goes on to assert – “will become possible in the future”.

This imaginative questioning went on for years. Slowly my wonderings gave rise to some distilled questions: if all these deeply Christian images in Renaissance art were really Lucifer inspired then what would a Christian art look like? Given that artists (archetypically) tended to be more given to flowing feelings than rigorous thinking, what sort of inner life might give rise to a truly Christ-inspired art? If the great art of the world hung in the houses of the rich, in Galleries and museums, what role would an art that served Christ play in society? Added to the insights, arising spontaneously as I worked, there began a research into the archives of human endeavour. Where amongst Chinese vases, Greek amphorae, Korean rice bowls, Victorian country woodturning, might I find shapes that could lead me further? At night I would hear songlines flow through my dreams, lines that in their melodic progression described a curve in the air before my eyes. During the day, these wonderings over the insights arising as I worked were deepened by the wise mysteries in Steiner's writings. The striving in my heart to create forms that brought love into the world rose like new buildings from the ashes of destroyed temples always to burn again in their failure to reach the Gods. My hands would form curve after curve, each one condemned to be a salad bowl as I saw, more clearly than my customers, its imperfections. Eventually, before my heart's eyes appeared shapes that rose lightly from the floor, flowing upward and yet embraced with warmth. Looking at these shapes in the wood as I formed them, I realised that spiral curves lay within them. Spirals can, like snail shells, go slowly round and round, swelling gently, almost imperceptibly, as they turn. Spirals can, like Hazel tree leaves, accelerate from their centre point and spread swiftly out, reaching further and further beyond themselves before they even complete their circle. Starting from a centre the progression of a spiral gives a distinct feeling to the heart-linked eye; starting from its outer reach, the enfolding inward rush of a spiral gives totally another feeling. Turned wood is, of course always round, yet the line of its profile is the curve of its sculpture. Spiral curves now filled me with hope and warmth as I strove to represent their mathematical perfection with

human warmth. Now my forms began to speak to me in a new way. As I polished their completed interiors I heard new sounds. Bit by bit, as the forms improved, I heard their internal acoustic become rich. Environmental sound resounded newly harmonised from within. My own grunt of effort came back like a cello's note. Even my own breathing, if I were attentive, emerged like a whisper into my ears from these spiral forms. Now I remembered a school trip to a university sound research department where silent rooms, oscilloscope images and cardboard Fibonacci trumpets created different emphases on the world of sound. Fibonacci it seemed had isolated a curve, a type of exponential spiral that was so in tune with creative processes that even sound itself was re-created within it. Had my spirals stumbled into Fibonacci's field? By drawing out on paper different types of Fibonacci spirals I could see that there was a definite relationship. So, as diaphanous wings, new sources of Art, spiral curves all flowed through each other, I began to wonder how my customers might become aware that within this piece of richly figured wood, formed to rise lightly into a warm embrace, there coiled an acoustic of richly rewarding property. What needed to happen that those who enjoyed the look and feel of my work would be led to discover its aural riches? No answer came to me. Even after a composer friend discovered the acoustic and, using it in some recordings, then encouraged me to explore it, I could find no answer. Abandoning the search, I returned to the pursuit of forms that would "sing where they stood" in the purely visual sense. Then, while meditating one evening I saw, just across the room from me, a bowl I had not yet made. Within it there stretched a string, so tensed that the bowl gave forth a musical note. Developing an idea is a little like bringing up a child; coming from somewhere beyond oneself, one is faced with giving it what it needs to become what it wants to become; faced with making the compromises that life in the world requires without reducing the potential too far. New to this I tried many different ideas. Coached in musical technicalities by the composer friend, I quickly realised that this was not a pure sculpture I had been given, it was a musical instrument. Yet not a pure instrument, it was to bridge the space between, so that those who sought sculpture might be led to music and those who sought an instrument might imbibe beauty of form as well as tone. The beginning meets the end.

My teacher's love of Hepworth resounds anew in an instrument that arises from form alone. As the first string is tensed and a note resounds from the form's own substance, a profound experience arises. For a moment the stars bend down, for a moment the dome of the sky flows into the space within the bowl, what exists in the universe as potential lights up anew as the form that arose from a search for harmony yields harmony in an unexpected way.

The world is wary of things that do not fit in the box. Galleries do not easily sell instruments. Musicians have little practical use for a sculpture. Handmade instruments take a great deal of time and I was trying to live by my hands. Thus these expensive anomalies found a slow market. Whilst the first few sold quickly and easily as if I was being encouraged to pursue this idea, after that it was slower. Individually made and numbered art commands some respect and sales did occur as I continued to develop the genre. Adding to questions, like should the strings cross the grain for vivid contrast or follow it for reliable tuning, came questions like should the strings be metal for a bright tone or gut for a natural origin. Magazines began to

report on these new sound forms and one, edited by a renowned musicologist, declared that there was no historical precedent for instruments in which strings are fitted within the resonant space rather than above it. This detail, implicit in the meditation's image is rich for me: it seems that the progress of human consciousness in the 20th Century, whereby the creative self, or personal image of being has moved from being commonly associated with the group (I am my husband's wife, my father's son, a miller, or soldier and Englishman) to be more commonly separated into personal difference (I completely disagree with my father's ideology, I may be employed by the bank but do not think of myself as a banker, though born and bred in England I will examine any government's reasons for going to war very carefully before I join in). Thus the individual moves from that which they hold now within their own soul, rather than from that which is their environment/inheritance: even as the resonant space gives forth sound generated within it rather than responding and amplifying sounds given to it from without as do the box-resonators of all other stringed instruments.

Some people began to suggest that music therapists might find these instruments valuable, and after a few years' development the music therapy department of an Oxford Hospice bought one. They found it so useful they immediately commissioned a larger one. Their music therapist was extremely encouraging. More and more of his colleagues, acquired Sounding Bowls and began to report remarkable results; word spread abroad so that Sounding Bowls are now used by mainstream therapists, spiritual healers, sound and vibrational healers and meditants across the globe.

During the past 23 years I have made over 200 Sounding Bowls, in a range of sizes, styles and patterns. Many therapists have used them, finding that they have enhanced their work, aiding the progress of those with whom they worked. These Sounding Bowls have found their way to NHS hospitals, hospices and to psychiatric prisons where music therapists work and many have remarked on the transformative qualities that these sculptured instruments enable and encourage. Some found that their 'clients' would cuddle the bowl as much as play it. There have been *many* instances when a response to a Sounding Bowl has occurred where other instruments failed to create any connection. This is as true in work with children as it is with the dying as it is in secure psychiatric institutes. It is true of situations where the therapist has the use of modern lyres as well as in situations where that is not a known instrument. Many with severe learning difficulties or disabilities have found a relationship to these Sounding Bowls; for example, those working with autistic children typically say that their main problem has been eliciting a response, with a Sounding Bowl they have commonly experienced spontaneous interest coming from the child. For myself, these results suggest the possibility of that Christ impulse I sought to connect with and understand being somehow involved in the originating essence of this art/instrument.

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Endnotes

1. William Morris (1834 – 1896) was an English artist, writer, socialist activist and pioneer of Eco-socialism.
Dame Barbara Hepworth (1903 – 1975) was a major British sculptor of the 20th Century.
2. David Pye, *The Nature and Aesthetics of Design*, Herbert Press Ltd., 1978.
3. Now called Cecilia Coleman Gallery as she found that her customers did not relate to her insights.
4. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, Harcourt Brace, 1955.
5. Rudolf Steiner paints a picture of the human soul as striving towards his true self (as Christ showed us in Jesus) guarded or flanked by two fallen states as held and exemplified for him as Lucifer (the Bringer of Light and self aggrandisement) and Ahriman (the bringer of the loss of self in a mechanistic or ant-like co-operation with social norms). For a fuller explanation of this picture, see such 'basic' books of Steiner as *Theosophy* or *Occult Science*.