

## Tobias Kaye

You've heard of singing bowls but maybe not stringing bowls. **Katie Rose** investigates.

**“I**’ve come out of nowhere in a certain sense. I was not a musical instrument maker, I was not a musician, I was not a therapist and I’ve had to learn about everything as we go but I’ve had over twenty years to do that now and I’m catching up.”

So says Tobias Kaye, maker of Sounding Bowls, beautifully hand-crafted strung wooden bowls, which generate powerfully therapeutic effects.

Tobias describes having a deep relationship with trees and enjoying playing piano as a child. When he began playing with a wood lathe that he found in his uncle’s cellar, he found that sculpting wood gave expression to his philosophical, musical and poetic pursuits. Realising that wooden bowls were more saleable than abstract wooden sculptures, he began supplying international art galleries.

Tobias discovered the acoustic of the bowls whilst polishing one in his workshop – a lorry went past the window and he realised

the bowl was “harmonising the sound, it’s not just amplifying it”. He defines this quality of the bowl as the “positive opposite of a filter – it can pick out beauty and ignore what is not beautiful.” After eighteen months of questioning, during a meditation “an image of a bowl with a single string stretched through the centre of it appeared in front of me”. He made his first piece with four strings and began to experiment with different tunings and string layouts.

He took the first dozen bowls to a composer friend and they recorded a cassette together. “I didn’t realise what was happening, but immediately the therapeutic potential of these instruments became apparent.” He gave a copy of the cassette to his hairdresser who discovered it had a profoundly relaxing effect on his clients and started making copies for them. The recordings found their way onto local radio without any attribution, after which Tobias realised he had to be “a little bit more pro-active in my marketing!”

The profound effects of the bowls became apparent in hospices. Patients in coma, Tobias explains, are more connected to their fingers than to their hearing and sight and their breathing is usually shallow and uneven. Music therapists place the patients’ fingers on the bowl enabling them to feel the texture and vibration as well as hearing the sound. “What happens is this big intake of breath and the holding of it and then after that the breathing stays more regular and deeper for a while.”

Therapists describe being able to form meaningful interactions with those who are usually unreachable – from children with autism and multiple learning disabilities to advanced dementia patients. One volunteer Music Therapist works with babies whose vital signs are fading in a neo-natal unit in France. She holds the bowl against the incubator walls and as she plays there is

often an immediate improvement in heart and lung function – the baby relaxes and moves into recovery.

Outside of healthcare settings people report changes too – those who used to call themselves non-musical start making beautiful music, relationships are harmonised and health improves. Tobias has noticed recurrent themes. “If you do a meta-analysis of the feedback what you get is this word ‘heart’ comes up again and again.” People repeatedly report a moistening of the eyes and a faint blush which suggests a “heart-opening event – the blood is flowing more freely so there’s this warming up and softening and moistening of a person that happens.”

Tobias describes the power of the bowls in terms of the relationship between forms, sounds and textures. Geometrically the bowls bring a straight line and a circle into harmony which combines the dreamlike effect (produced by other circular meditative instruments such as gongs) with the focus of the strings on which tunes are picked out. The acoustic of the curve powerfully amplifies only harmonics, producing a “golden shine of overtones” (the Fibonacci spiral).

**T**he tunings of the bowls are deeply significant. Tobias quickly moved beyond the major scale and started exploring other scales and modes. He describes the pentatonic scale found in Celtic music as “capable of a huge amount of emotional expression” – which can then alleviate the experience of those suffering pain, loss or depression. Each bowl comes with a tuning chart and players can access tutorial videos on YouTube or attend events at the workshop in Devon.

He thinks that Sounding Bowls are the first instrument to have the string inside rather than across the surface, which Tobias describes as akin to the movement from collective to individual identity. “We don’t take our ideas from outside any more, they now come much more from inside of us.” There is also a sense of isolation in this individualism – before mechanisation, he explains, all our belongings would have been hand-made with care and creative risk-taking by a member of the community. So when a uniquely handcrafted instrument enters a clinical setting such as a hospital it stands out.

The legacy of this work is now being passed on to other makers whom Tobias encourages to come and train with him. He concludes that “It is a mystery and I’m in service to it and it’s a joy, it has brought so much into my life to be in service to this.”

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