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Jem Finan: New musical underground

How did The Pogues' banjo player become a leading conceptual artist? Will Johnston meets Jem Finan and his magnificent machines

How did a member of "the Irish Sex Pistols" come to be spending his time deep in King's Wood, in Challock, Kent, constructing an installation inspired by suikinkutsu, the water chimes used in Japanese gardens to create a Zen-like ambience? For this is where Jem Finan, a one-time member of the insurrectionary, Anglo-Irish punk-folk outfit The Pogues, finds himself today.

The musician-turned-conceptual artist has been overseeing the construction of his "hybrid water instrument". A large dew pond feeds drops of water into a 7m-deep acoustic chamber, filled with a plethora of percussive instruments. These are ambitious in design, and include suspended bells, resonant hemispherical bowls and even a "water organ", the label given to an intricate assembly of chimes, tuned marimba bars and organ pipes.

The resulting sounds are channelled through a series of pipes and ducts before being amplified by a huge metal horn that was forged in a Nottingham foundry, but could have been wrenched from a giant gramophone. Finan describes his project as "both music and an integrated part of the landscape and the forces that operate on it and in it".

Together with Finan's previous forays into conceptual art *Score for a Hole in the Ground*, to be unveiled next month, has earned him the inaugural PRS Foundation New Music Award. The prize was created to honour pioneers in the field, but the recipient suggests that his winning entry is just as much a piece of art as it is a sound-generating device. "Maybe one description," he ventures, "would be sonic sculpture."

These days, Finan works in a diverse range of media, from music to photography and performance art. And he is still seen on stage with the Pogues during their intermittent reunions, as ever the musical foil to the man characterised in these pages by Andrew Mueller as "the Amazing Indestructible Shane MacGowan". In recent times, Finan's teenage daughter, Ella, has joined the band on stage, too, stepping into the vocal shoes of the late Kirsty MacColl.

The multi-instrumentalist - he plays banjo, hurdy-gurdy, mandola, saxophone, guitar, piano and drums - was born in 1955 in Stoke-on-Trent. He studied computer science and sociology at Keele University and, after a post-college stint travelling in Europe, he ended up in London, founding The Pogues with MacGowan and Spider Stacy in 1982.

The Pogues' commercial break-through album, *Rum, Sodomy and the Lash* (1985), came adorned in a sleeve that parodied high art: the cover featured Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*, with the faces of the shipwrecked crew replaced with those of the band members. It proved perspicacious as the band careered haphazardly through the decade, delivering the album by which they will be remembered, the flawless *If I Should Fall From Grace with God*, in

1988.

Finer co-penned the album's highlight, the MacGowan and MacColl duet, "Fairytale of New York", coming to a Christmas festivity near you till Doomsday. Joe Strummer once described Finer as the "Bill Wyman of the Pogues", suggesting that without his steadying influence the outfit would disintegrate, and if it wasn't true of the remorseless machine that is Rolling Stones Inc., it was of the Pogues. When Finer left the now MacGowan-less band in 1996 (the singer had opted out in 1991) with their glory days long behind them, they called it a day.

Finer's next outfit was the Hieronymus Monk Octet, in which "the Middle Ages collide with the 21st century", apparently. He also performs both solo with guitars, various sound sources and computer, and in the trash-country DM Bob and Jem Finer Two Man Band.

But it is his career in the art world that has taken off. From October 2003 to June 2005, Finer was artist in residence at the astrophysics sub-department at Oxford, resulting in a number of works, including *The Centre of the Universe*, which used a satellite dish to generate music, and *On Earth as in Heaven*, a book of 22 alternate constellations based on the incidence of star names on websites. It also resulted in *The Big Eyed Beans from Venus*, a band formed with members of the astrophysics department.

Another ongoing project is *Longplayer*, a sonorous, slow-moving, computer-generated piece of music based primarily on Tibetan singing bowls and gongs. Now in its seventh year, the piece is intended to play continuously, without repeating itself, until 31 December 2999: the prototype of a sustainable instrument can be heard in the lighthouse at Trinity Buoy Wharf, London, among other locations, and on the internet via a live stream. "Longplayer started life on a computer, but I realised that for it to last anything like a thousand years it couldn't be tied exclusively to a piece of late 20th-century technology," he explains. "It had to be moveable away from a computer and into new areas that we might not even imagine yet."

Both *Score...* and *Longplayer* were influenced by the *Clock of the Long Now*, "a clock designed to last for 10,000 years by making it on very sound mechanical principles, but developed using the latest digital ideas". Founded in 1996 by, among others, Brian Eno and Stewart Brand, editor of *The Whole Earth Catalog*, this "long-term cultural institution" (it has a modest framework of 10,000 years) aims to promote "slower/better" thinking as a counterpoint to today's "faster/cheaper" mindset.

Blending cutting-edge technology with age-old knowledge was the basis for Finer's latest project. While "it requires nothing other than the forces of gravity and weather to run it", he has used the digital technology to elaborate all areas of *Score...*'s design, from the frequency of the acoustic chamber to the development of the horn. "I have started to use the term 'post-digital'," he says, "to describe something returning to a tactile relationship with the materials, but informed by digital practice. It is not nostalgic for past technology, but instead uses everything at your disposal."

Initially, he conceived of building a monumental hourglass, through which sand would spiral down onto a variety of musical instruments. Like *Longplayer* and the *Clock of the Long Now*, it was intended to have a considerable timespan. When the cost proved prohibitive, however, Finer settled on the idea for his giant horn. "Ostensibly, it is a musical composition," he says, "[but] the idea was to make something permanent, with an indeterminate duration and an indeterminate score." Finer acknowledges that the award of £50,000 was "a big help, because it gave a very substantial bit of initial funding. And obliged me to finish the project!"

The installation has thrown up some difficulties: suitable locations were hard to come by, and the dew pond that feeds the acoustic chamber has been plagued by low rainfall and thirsty deer (although it probably makes a change from the problems caused by thirsty lead singers). "It means that, with climate change and as it rains a lot less than it used to, my work has tapped into a much more serious issue than was originally intended."

Finer hopes that the finished work will continue to surprise him. "The music that it will play will be very different, according to different seasons and weather conditions, and will be something that I can't imagine at the outset. What I find exciting about making anything is that you make your plans as best you can and then something new emerges, and that you actually learn things from it yourself."

'Score for a Hole in the Ground' is the winner of the inaugural PRS Foundation New Music Award. The public launch is

on 24 September, King's Wood, Challock, Kent (www.scoreforaholeintheground.org)



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