

The
Economist

intelligent life

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BOWIE
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Something in the air

For the past year, a boat in the sky has been London's quirkiest rock venue. The curator was **Laura Barton**, music writer and *IL* contributor

THERE WAS A problem with the spiny horn. Was the boat big enough to accommodate a shellacked double-horn speaker, standing 28 inches tall and with a 40-inch wingspan? And who would pay for its safe passage from Chicago to London?

It was two weeks before the start of Sounds from a Room. The multi-instrumentalist Andrew Bird was due to perform the inaugural concert, and suddenly everything was in jeopardy; the elaborate speaker was looking like a deal-breaker. I googled a picture of the spiny horn, pressed my face into my hands, and wondered whether this sense of imminent catastrophe would continue all year.

It had all started with a glass of wine. One warm evening in 2011, Michael Morris, co-director of the innovative arts organisation Artangel, invited me for a drink. We sat outside and sipped rosé while he explained a grand project for the coming year: as part of London's Cultural Olympiad, Artangel would be placing a boat on top of the Queen Elizabeth Hall. Chiefly it would exist as a one-room hotel, with splendid views over the river – from the Houses of Parliament to St Paul's. But for ten days each month the boat would host cultural events: a writer in residence, a thinker in residence, and a series of concerts to be live-streamed online, as well as shown on a giant screen in the Southbank Centre. Would I, he gently wondered, consider helping them devise the musical programme?

AND SO, OVER the months, we drew up a list of artists who might want to perform on board the boat – people we loved or admired, people we hoped would give a portrait of the breadth and beauty of music, from classical cellists to popular musicians in Mali, Senegal and Sweden. We wanted to explore the potential of a single room, the echo of wood and glass, the acoustics of its library, observation deck, galley, the influence of tide and wind and sky. The charge of isolation.

Meanwhile, in a shed in Sussex, the boat was being built. Commissioned by Living Architecture,



Boating song
ABOVE Laura Barton joins the Texan singer Josh T. Pearson on board. OPPOSITE The boat, inspired by "Heart of Darkness"

and designed by David Kohn Architects in collaboration with the artist Fiona Banner, it was inspired by the *Roi des Belges* – the steamer that Joseph Conrad sailed down the Congo in 1889, on the journey that led him to write "Heart of Darkness". Our boat was not intended to float; its structure of steel, aluminium sheet and painted ply would arrive by road, and be winched high up onto the QEH roof one December morning. But until then it remained something of a mystery, a vague sketch of spire and hull and bitter red wood.

"It's a boat," I would say down the line to band managers and booking agents.

"A boat on the river?" they would reply, and I would say no, it was a boat that would sit proudly on a roof, unfettered by fish and flotsam and undulating tides. "And where do the audience stand?"

"There is no audience." And there would be a silence, as they tried to imagine a show in a tiny boat atop a large building with no audience.

It is hard to convince anyone of the merits of a project when the venue doesn't exist and you are armed only with the architects' plans, giving a misty, pastel-hued impression of what it might look like. You see how people crave solidity – photos, specifications, dimensions, technical necessities, rather than the swan-whoop of enthusiasm. So, in those early months, >

PHOTOGRAPH PETER KINDERSLEY

> discussions often stalled. Booking agents stopped answering e-mails; managers fell into long contemplation, or suggested we revisit the idea once the concerts were under way. At times I feared that we might struggle to fill the year-long, 12-concert programme.

But some got it instantly. Artists who had a long-standing relationship with Artangel, such as Laurie Anderson, Wildbirds & Peacedrums and Imogen Heap, all felt at ease with the leap of imagination required, even exhilarated. Others seemed willing to be convinced, and so we told them of the promise of the boat – a chance to enjoy some isolation, two nights far away from tour buses and thronging fans. A chance to write something new, or reinterpret old songs. We told them to think of it like the mountain fire station that inspired Kerouac’s “Desolation Angels”, or the Wisconsin cabin that brought forth Bon Iver’s “For Emma, Forever Ago” – only in the middle of a big city, and with a view of the barges and the promenaders and the buses rolling over Waterloo Bridge.

Andrew Bird arrived that January day, spinny horn in tow, but in muted spirits. The air was chill and damp and the colour of porridge, and he was disappointed his wife was unable to join him, having discovered en route to the airport that her passport had expired. He sat bundled in scarves and woollens, skin ashen save for the tip of his nose which was pink with cold.

The day of his performance, the sky hung pale and flat through the porthole window. I sat before the big screen in the belly of the Royal Festival Hall and fretted. Would the weather make for a flat performance? Would the spinny horn turn? Would all the cables and wires and switches and magic needed to let a single person see the show actually work?

Bird strolled onto the screen still swaddled in scarves. He carried his violin, and before him stood microphones, glockenspiel, pedals for looping. I remember the pure burst of joy I felt as his fingers first plucked those violin strings; the sharp, clear sound of them bright against the grey of the city. It had worked. It was working. Music spilled out across the foyer, and people stopped and sat and gawped.

Things did go wrong, of course. A technical glitch cut out Wildbirds & Peacedrums’ performance, and people had a tendency to over-dream and to run out of time: Laurie Anderson had to curtail her sound-piece cum radio broadcast; at points during his stay Heiner Goebbels’s “Up-river Book” – a sound-sketch involving the Senegalese griots Sira and Boubakar Djebaté on voice and kora, the French musician Xavier Garcia on electronics and the actor André Wilms adding narration – threatened to tangle itself in its own ambition.

In June, Imogen Heap brought a “listening chair”



Radio silence
Jarvis Cocker, singer with Pulp and BBC DJ, played hard to get, but eventually put in one of the best shifts on the boat

into the Festival Hall in an attempt to crowd-source material that she would turn into an entirely new song during her stay. It was a big undertaking, drawing on their testimonies while writing from the perspective of the Thames itself. She named the song “You Know Where to Find Me”, and composed it in the middle of a storm, on two hours’ sleep. Her performance recreated its composition – from crowd-sourcing to melody-making, via its mood and themes, and presented the half-finished song. “This is as much about the process as the actual finished article,” she explained, and although the song was incomplete, it offered a sharp insight into the process of songwriting. Heap finished it later and posted it on the project’s website.

WHEN WE STARTED, I remember thinking how easily it might stray into a festival of introspection, a glorified singer-songwriter bedroom, beset by melancholy and gloom. So, in July, we invited the American band tUnE-yArDs to play. The project of Merrill Garbus, tUnE-yArDs is a joyous cacophony of loops,

electric bass, snare drum, ukulele, and her distinctive vocal style, the product of studying Swahili at university and a trip to the coast of Kenya where she learned music and dance. I had seen them live on several occasions and was thrilled by their infectiousness, the way their music seemed to work on the guts, skin and muscles as much as the ears. I had no doubt that they would make something special of their time in the boat.

In the event, it was extraordinary. Garbus insisted that instead of exploring the boat’s remoteness, she wanted the space thronged with people. She wanted noise and life and voices. Dressed in elaborate costume and facepaint, she launched in with a kind of exquisite caterwaul, soon joined by her bandmate Nate Brenner and two female gospel singers, who had spent the previous hour squashed into the boat’s shower room, using it as an impromptu rehearsal space. The boat seemed suddenly delighted, jostlingly vibrant, transformed from the serene space of Bird’s performance.

We began to make plans for the second half of the year. The artists who had performed up to now had given us something ambitious, unusual, exciting: Imogen Heap’s listening chair, Laurie Anderson’s spoken-word performance, Heiner Goebbels’s musical rendering of Conrad’s river diaries, Wildbirds & Peacedrums playing the boat itself like a percussive instrument. Now we had to get our heads around some of the more outlandish plans of the artists to come: the cellist Natalie Clein’s desire to establish “a dialogue between solitude and its opposite and music that feels as though it ebbs and flows with the river”, and Charlie Fink of Noah and the Whale, who began with the intention of melding a brass band with Oliver Stone’s talk-radio show.

IN SEPTEMBER, WE had invited Jarvis Cocker to host his BBC 6 Music show from the boat. It was a long-running plan, tentatively agreed the previous autumn, but as the date drew near none of us seemed any clearer about what Cocker might actually do in the boat, or how we might overcome the obstacles of broadcasting, recording, performing so far from the studio. The summer trickled by; Cocker remained worryingly uncontactable, his producer noncommittal, and Artangel became fretful. I assured everyone that all would be well. I tried to sound calm, but in my belly I feared that in September we would be left with an empty room, and a fevered scramble to fill it.

In the end, Jarvis’s shift in the boat was one of the best. He appeared as if by magic the week before his scheduled stay, armed with an array of ideas for a river-themed radio show – interviewing archaeologists who harvest the riverbanks, and a gentleman from the

Port of London Authority who stood on the prow of the boat to talk about the tides and the moon. Jarvis brought a gentleness and a warmth to the room.

My own relationship with music shifted over the year. Seeing the space that a performance must fill, and watching – at such an intimate distance – the way each artist proceeded to fill it, was either thrilling, terrifying, or both. Each month, as we stood on the brink of a new performance, I would feel a sudden lurch, as if stepping off into that wide, blank space with them.

Many of the artists saw the boat as an opportunity to try something new. We began and ended the year with Andrew Bird and Stornoway performing unreleased material, but in between we had some curiosities that displayed the lick of genius. Among them was October’s performance by the Texan musician Josh T. Pearson. We had expected something similar to his usual shows, performed alone with a guitar and the clutch of songs he recorded for his latest solo album, “Last of the Country Gentlemen”. Instead he gave us a kind of gospel hour – excerpts of his favourite country gospel performances on YouTube and a variety of readings, smattered between gospel classics recorded on the boat in the small hours of the morning.

As I stepped aboard to this news, another pit of worry opened up inside me. What if it didn’t work? What if this rambling show never caught fire? I sat on the bed and watched as Pearson, a long, bearded straggle of a man in a Stetson, cowboy boots and a fancy belt buckle, drifted between two laptops, a guitar and a microphone, introducing each song with an anecdote or an apology, nubbled short by correction, or wild observation. And slowly the pit began to disappear.

There was something incredible about this performance – the hilarious peculiarity of this drawling, world-weary, long-limbed Texan scrunched into this tiny room, preaching the gospel. Behind him the sky was darkening. Buses ran silently across the bridge, and the lights freckled across the river. He played a piece called “I Surrender All”, a lilting sprawl of late-night sadness. And it struck me then what we had achieved with this little boat: all the rich and extraordinary music it had carried across these months, through rain and wind and grey skies, the leafing trees and the fading light, a river of deep and lustrous song. ■

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