

A Day in the Life of...

Lawrence Reed, MA composition student at Bath Spa University

Saturday, May 1 2010 was the culmination of '5 ways', Lawrence Reed's Community Music composition project for the village of Larkhall, Bath

4.30am I'm downstairs rummaging around with some percussion while being careful not to wake the family. I'm getting some weird and interesting sounds out of scratching the edges and hitting the sides. I can't sleep so I fix up the portable CD players and megaphone with batteries and test them out. Will anyone turn up? Will the weather let us perform outside?

5.30am I return to bed much more relaxed.

9.00am I stroll to Oriel Hall in Larkhall, Bath, where my Community Music piece '5 ways' is being performed at 12 o'clock to launch the 2010 Larkhall Festival. The doors are locked so I huddle up in the cold and think about why I'm doing this. My MA in Composition at Bath Spa University has led me down a path of developing improvisation

frameworks for community events. I want '5 ways' to realise and reflect the five key objectives of the Festival – engaging local schools and the community; celebrating Larkhall; unlocking creativity and developing skills; creating something interesting, entertaining and important; and having fun – using five distinct layers of sound:

1 Sounds of the village recorded by pupils from St Saviour's Junior School reflected back from portable CD players and speakers mounted on Bath's famous pink milk float (I call this piece 'the noise manufactory')

- 2 Pupils from St Saviour's Infants' School performing a series of rhythmic chants inspired by Larkhall and accompanied by percussion, including the use of objects found in the village
- 3 Local musicians and members of Bristol's Cube Orchestra interpreting an improvisational framework designed for the event
- 4 St Saviour's Junior School playing atmospheric percussion - often in a sequence or cross-rhythm
- 5 The bells of St Saviour's Church ringing something different – including an awesome 'firing' of the bells





10.00am It's clear the weather is going to be unpredictable so I opt to hold the majority of activity inside the hall with some of the children processing in and out. I arrange chairs in a semi-circle for the performers and meet with festival organisers. Photographers and video-makers arrive and start setting up. Apart from making a record of the event, we are creating a video installation as part of next year's festival.

11.00am My two daughters turn up with friends and instruments. Members of the Cube Orchestra arrive along with local musicians. I have to say that getting musicians to commit to an unpaid community event has been the hardest part of the project but at last I can relax – our scratch orchestra is taking shape!

11.20am We chat through the form of '5 ways' – essentially designed to move with the church bells and link together the children's percussive sounds and chanting. The frameworks involve simple guidelines around which players may improvise. I've been working with these as part of my MA, perhaps most notably the Acrophobia project in Trafalgar Square where over fifty musicians turned up to interpret a grid of notes while I conducted from the Fourth Plinth. In that case, there was no contact with the musicians beforehand – just the exchange of the framework – so even having ten minutes to run through some interpretations is a luxury.

11.30am Juniors from St Saviour's arrive. We've been working on the use of original percussive sounds together and in sequences. An interesting part of this work has been linking it in with the sounds we recorded around the village two weeks ago. That was a riot – fifteen children with three microphones recording all sorts of sounds and making a few of their own along the way! We explored the very nature of sound and the concept of what is 'noise' or 'note' and what falls in between: 'node'. We all became acutely aware of the lack of silence anywhere and the richness of sound around us.

11.45am I find a couple of mates who are prepared

to wander round with portable CDs playing (or 'reflecting') the sounds back into the environment they came from. One last check outside and I see the milk float has arrived and is blasting out the noises the kids have recorded: the rustling of a crisp wrapper, the hum of the local bus, an amazing spontaneous velcro ensemble!

11.50am St Saviour's infants gather with their teacher, Sophie. The infants have been a real joy to work with and one of the keys to this is that Sophie has enthusiastically embraced the project and carried the children along with us. The infants are divided into five groups, all with a different chant of their own devising. The words are designed to evoke Larkhall while the rhythms are linked to the other themes. In workshops, we've explored complex counting games and cross rhythms and the children's aptitude has been a source of amazement to myself and their teachers. They've brought 'made' and 'found' percussion – brightly painted cardboard shakers and drums, dustbin lids and sticks to beat them with. Suddenly everything looks very festive and there's a buzz of excitement as parents and festival-goers take their places on chairs or crane their necks at the back.

12 noon My nerves and reservations slip away as I pick up my megaphone, startle everyone into silence and we're off...

12.20pm Everyone makes their way outside, chanting, playing, plucking, banging. The bells are reaching the crescendo of their firing, the CD players and milk float are blasting out the recorded sounds, the kids launch brightly coloured helium balloons into the sky and with a final roar it's all over.

In terms of my own learning and the MA in Composition, the results have been diverse. In teaching the infants various mathematical rhythmic models and creating chants, I've been amazed at their natural ability.

I really think there is room to develop this further

with crossovers into vowel sounds and more. During the collection of sounds from the village with the juniors, I've been struck by what children notice and how they categorise the sound around them. Also, how they embrace the 'noise, node, note' model and are quickly able to apply it. Involving the church bells with their octave of notes in G was a terrific experiment as well.

The project demonstrates how layers of sound from a variety of sources can be assimilated and overlapped while reflecting the same local themes. I do believe it validates the idea of simple improvisational frameworks and I shall continue to work on this.

So... what about the performance?

The really important thing here is that there is no right or wrong execution of an experimental framework like '5 ways'. You can listen to a recording and make judgements about the 'music' but the performance is all about the 'here and now' and the project is all about the process rather than the product.

On reflection, I believe we went a long way to achieving our key objectives: engaging local schools and the community, celebrating Larkhall, unlocking creativity and developing skills, creating something interesting, entertaining and important and, above all, having fun.

Further information

You can check out details of this project, including recordings and the '5 ways' improvisational frameworks, at <http://www.lawrencereed.com/events02.php>

Details of the Acrophobia project can be found at <http://www.lawrencereed.com/events01.php>

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