

Q&A

Bill Fontana

As part of his honorary fellowship with the Birmingham Electroacoustic Sound Theatre (BEAST), American sound artist Bill Fontana devised Sonic Mapping: a performance for the campanologists of St Martin's Church in the Bullring. He'll also be talking to Tate Modern curator

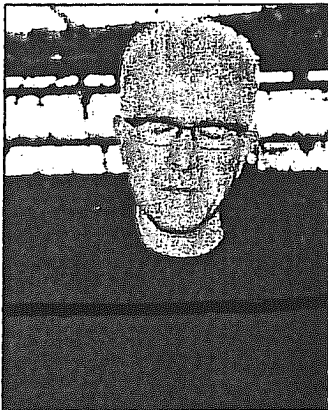
Ben Borthwick tonight to launch an installation of his work-in-progress.

What's the idea behind Sonic Mapping?

I worked with the bell-ringers to produce a quite complex harmonic piece. I almost used the bells as a signal to test the acoustic qualities of central Birmingham and Eastside. In the original parish, you could hear the sound travelling far into Eastside, but now you can't hear them because of traffic noise.

Do you regard traffic noise as essentially sound pollution then?

It's a quality of life issue. You wouldn't want to breathe polluted air and traffic is like a layer of dirt obscuring all the other interesting sounds in the environment. If you go to Venice, where there's no traffic, then you can hear footsteps, voices and even the wings of the pigeons.



You've sourced sounds from a rainforest in previous work. Do you need a different approach working with 'man-made' sounds? The distinction I make isn't between man-made and natural sounds. I listen with what you might call a natural ear, so I can recognise what's interesting in the environment. I don't like the noise of cars but I love the sound of wind turbines,

airplanes and certain factory noises. You just need an ability to appreciate it in a way that is meaningful.

What quality makes a sound meaningful though? You can't put it into words because the English language is so limited when it comes to describing sound. The best way is to record the sound rather than talk about it.

Do you see yourself

more as a composer or a sound sculptor? One's just an offshoot of the other really, so the only difference is semantic. The artist I had the closest relationship with – both personally and philosophically – was John Cage.

Paul Clarke

Tomorrow until Jul 7, Vivid, 140 Heath Mill Lane, Birmingham, Mon to Sat 1pm to 5pm, talk tonight 6pm, free.

Tel: 0121 766 7876.

www.resoundings.org