

## TRASH

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Alchemical experiences, making beautiful music with a stainless steel industrial size double basin sink and a 747 jumbo jet aluminum engine cowling.

During my time as a member of Finland's Sound And Fury, the ensemble lead by the great Finnish composer Edward Vesala, the double basin sink was my main instrument. Being a percussionist, I often find myself contributing to musical concepts while playing objects that are not normally considered to be "musical instruments," and a perfect example is my time with the sink. It was not a new sink, but a discarded piece of junk. Once it was retrieved from its inevitable fate at the Helsinki junkyard, the alchemy began. After the sink was cleaned, Sound And Fury guitarist Jimi Sumen attached guitar machine heads, stretching strings across the once filthy basins that had now become rich resonators. A brace was attached so that it could tilt and balance at different angles, making it possible for me to explore all areas of its body. There were many sound production possibilities within the body, as it was constructed with varying degrees of metal density, such as the thinner basins and the thicker skeletal framework. All parts responded well to being struck, rubbed, bowed, scraped, shaken, plucked, beaten, kicked and whipped with all sorts of objects including, mallets, barbecue skewers, metal rods, superballs, bass bows, springs, wires, sticks, clubs and various chains. I occasionally threw myself against it, and of course, chain whipping a metal sink works wonders!

The alchemical transmutation was not a matter of making the junk into a quasi version of an already existing instrument, as was the case while playing in Lou Harrison's *Old Granddad* American Gamelan. While performing Harrison's piece *La Koro Sutro*, one of my parts required that I strike sawed-off oxygen tanks with baseball bats. The oxygen tanks were substituting for the *kempuls*, which are pitched gongs in a traditional Javanese gamelan. The other part of the composition that I played was for

metal pipes that were cut to different lengths and set into a wooden resonator. This instrument's role in the music was modeled after the *saron*, also an instrument in a traditional Javanese gamelan, and the technique of striking and muffling each note was directly borrowed from traditional gamelan. As unusual as these instruments in Lou Harrison's and Bill Colvig's (designer/builder) American Gamelan may be, they were built and played with preconceived ideas as to what function they would serve in the music. Also, the design and role of the new instruments was based on instruments and an orchestral concept that already existed. This is still a form of alchemy or transmutation, and those oxygen tanks—that were once considered useless—became incredible musical instruments. Yet the transmutation of the sink was not based on a preconceived idea of substitution. The sink encounter was about taking what was never designed or thought of as a musical instrument, and in fact was discarded as useless in terms of its original purpose, and making it into a conduit for music and *accepting it for what it was*, a sink. A musical sink that was once ready for destruction was now leading me toward discovery. The constructed, became the conductor.

Also, I as a percussionist was being transformed, as I needed to find and develop the appropriate technique—which at times had nothing to do with techniques that I would have used with traditional instruments—in order to facilitate the arrival of music. This process required that I be wide open to receive information from the source and explore and experiment with all areas of the object. Experiences like this, when discovering new sources of sound and developing extended techniques, naturally bring me to a state of acute but relaxed concentration.

Wagner was quoted as saying, "I feel that I am one with this vibrating Force, that it is omniscient, and that I can draw upon it to an extent that is limited only by my own capacity to do so."

Pulling music out of a sink. That's magic!

I had a similar experience with a 747 jumbo jet aluminum engine cowling while rehearsing and performing John Bergamo's composition *On The Edge*, at California Institute of the Arts. My setup for this wonderful piece was the cowling, which is a metal ring about eight and a half feet in diameter, placed on three tripod stands. The cowling was placed so that the hollow gutter/trench side was facing up. My playing position was in the middle of the ring. The composition is very specific as to what takes place in the gutter. The piece is conducted and at various times I was instructed to

roll items such as pool balls, marbles, bbs (birdshot pellets), golf balls, etc. with force and speed determined by the length and dynamic of the sound I was to make. As the aluminum was quite light, I was able to lift and balance the cowling which gave me the ability to change the speed and sound of the rolling objects. Other instructions included superballing (rubbing a superball that has been attached to a flexible wooden barbecue stick against the metal while applying various amounts of pressure), scraping and bowing, as well as striking with mallets and sticks made of wood, metal, rubber, plastic and yarn.

Once again, as with the sink, there was no method—accepting the cowling as it was, without preconceived ideas as to what it could be.

Over the years, I have had many experiences with the transmutation of rubbish into musical instruments. Through some mystical form of alchemy, discarded toys, metal lamp shades, metal screens, grills and gratings, pipes, sections of air ducts, oxygen tanks, bottles, rice bowls, coffee cans, kitchen utensils, pots and pans, flour mixers, egg slicers, containers made of metal, plastic, wood and glass, metal knives, forks and spoons, galvanized garbage cans, hubcaps, nutshells and more have produced beautiful music.

Regarding the role of the composer and performer, in his book *The Harmonies of Heaven and Earth*, Professor Joscelyn Godwin writes “... they are alchemists who help to transmute the Earth by making its substance and souls resonate with echoes of the heavenly music.”

Many of the metal objects mentioned above, which in their “natural” condition as an object of purpose (food preparation, lighting fixtures, toys, etc.), already showed great promise for the creation/discovery of music, but may be transmuted further.

Another aspect of playing found objects, junk and other newly discovered instruments concerns electronic modification. Although sometimes referred to as “amplified percussion,” this should not be confused with the common technique of miking something to simply make it louder, as with overhead or close miking. Of course, in the right hands, these techniques help us to hear many sounds with harmonics/overtones we would have a difficult time or possibly no chance of hearing without the amplification, but there is another kind of electronic modification. By directly attaching some sort of pickup to either the sound source itself or directly to the rack/stand which holds the sound source, sounds can be amplified and

modified. When mounting the pickup directly onto the rack or frame, consideration should be given as to what kind of metal is used for the racking, as the jewels of sound live within the vibrations traveling through the rack and into the pickups. A metal book shelf-support works very well as it is a good conductor for sending rich and powerful vibrations to the pickup and it also has screw holes that can be very helpful when attaching metal, cymbals, springs, wire and other bits of trash. The difference with this amplification technique, compared with the previously mentioned techniques, is mainly the extreme/radical signal/sound generated as a result of the direct contact with the sound source. So while this is also amplification, which helps extension of our range of hearing, this is also extension/modification which transmutes the sound. Once played, the sound source/instrument sends a mutated sound (because of the direct miking) into an amplifier that will produce a new and unusual sound due to all the transient weirdness and over the top vibrations that the pickup is trying to handle. The incorporation of guitar pedals and electronics (the cheaper, the better!) can modify the sound even further. Ring modulators, compressors, volume pedals, pitch shifting devices ... not the expensive designer gear, but the cheap stuff.

Besides the obvious financial benefit, cheap devices can be the favored choice as the "inferior" electronics used within them often tend to respond to the instrument/signal by producing a mutated sound that is richer in color and contains far more grease, grime and grit than the expensive "good" stuff.

Some of the early pioneers of these techniques of close miking and/or modification of acoustic sounds via processing include Max Neuhaus, John Cage, Hugh Davies and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Regarding percussionists, the meister motherfucker who defined this direction is Tony Oxley. Tony was first working with "amplified percussion" in the late sixties: amplified racks of metal, springs, knives, wires, egg slicers, all amplified by pick-ups attached to metal racks. The signal is then sent through sound modification devices (ring modulators, compressors, pitch shifter, volume pedals, etc.) before being sent through the amplifier. There is nothing like it. Sounds are stretched, bent, squeezed, shifted... (for great examples of Tony's work with amplified percussion, check his recordings on Incus Records, *February Papers*, *Tony Oxley* and *Soho Suites*, and *The Advocate* on Tzadik). Concerning pickups, Miroslav Tadic gave me the idea for amplifying my rack of junk with Walkman headphones. Talk about cheap!

We're talking about the ones that they give away with the Walkman, nothing expensive, strictly JUNK. Miroslav used rubber bands to tightly attach the headphone earpieces to the rack, using them as microphones/pickups as opposed to headphones. The intensity/impact of whichever playing technique is used, along with the choice of what material the instruments are being activated with, makes quite a difference to how the electronics process the initial sound. Although the amplified sound going directly from the rack of junk to the amp can be a beautiful sound, it can also be completely out of control. Even without modifiers such as a ring modulator, distortion boxes, pitch changers and other devices, a volume pedal is a good idea for shaping and controlling the sound. A compressor is helpful in controlling the extreme dynamics produced by the wide range of sound sources being used that are directly and cheaply miked and played with a large assortment of materials and techniques. The compressor is also helpful in protecting the speakers from murder when you forget to release the volume pedal from the completely open position and you strike a mighty blow with a Louisville Slugger baseball bat to a thick piece of metal, which is tightly attached to the rack! Now those pathetic headphones have great value: one day it's junk, the next day it's still junk, but now it's talking to you, and with an attitude!!!

Over the years, it has come to my attention that certain forms of trash *speak* to me the same way that drums did when I was a child. I'm often surprised when other people don't react like I do to a great piece of rubbish. While I'm thinking about the possibilities of this junk to create beautiful music, others often think that it is simply useless rubbish.

To quote Joscelyn Godwin again, "In order to undertake this work, the true composer, like the alchemist, does not choose his profession: he is summoned to it by a call that cannot be ignored."

Although I have studied traditional instruments, and while playing them have experienced levels of concentration and "freedom from distraction" that have been inexplicable, experiences with rubbish have been a bit different. With the transmutation of junk as a way of finding music, without previous research of the "instrument" or an established method or technique, I believe that the musician/chemist accesses other levels of attention when dealing with the undiscovered. *Even more* inexplicable? Mystical? Having only a vague idea as to were the sounds in the object may be and how various parts of the selected junk may respond to activation,

one must be “wide awake.” This state of acutely concentrated lost in unknowing is a form of the *philosopher’s stone*.

I think it’s a good idea to have respect for your instrument, even if it is trash, as it’s not just a pile of wood, metal, strings, skin, etc., but a vehicle that can bring you to an exceptional state of awareness and peace. It’s yoga/meditation, with music as the object/point of awareness—by making music practice not just something that you do to improve your ability with your instrument, but approaching music practice as a destination, a focused, relaxed and concentrated state inside the music. This cultivation of attention makes music a place to create within as well as the product of creation itself.

One person’s rubbish heap can be another person’s altar.