

Manfred Bleffert

(By Michael Deason-Barrow)

Manfred Bleffert was born in 1950 in Altenahr am Eifelrand, Germany. After leaving school and working for 2 years as a care person for cancer patients he moved to a small quiet village, Winterscheid, and entered his path as a tone artist who paradoxically works with silence. From this time onwards he took the decision to renounce all old instruments to enter into what he calls the 'Garden of the Inaudible', where he works with the 'Sounding Fields of the Inner World'.

1971-1979 was a time for him of transition between musical and sculptural realms. [Manfred initially trained as a sculptor at Alanus Hochschule.] For Bleffert it was as though the musical element streamed into the sculptural realm. All this time Manfred explored music in the landscape and began to experiment and develop his studies of tone in matter, working first with copper and tin, and then widening his work through researching, and using, other metals such as bronze and iron.

In 1980 he moved to Heiligenberg above Lake Constance and founded the 'Musical-Sculptural Smithy' there as his research/teaching studio and production workshop. 1980-'83 was a very productive time of experimenting with the rhythmic sound processes inherent in different materials and this led to the development of new sound groups (instruments), new compositions, and his new 'Theory of Tone', as well as innovative ways to notate new music.

During the '60s and '70s he had had many meetings and experiences with well known avant-garde composers such as Karlheinz Stockhausen and John Cage, as well as with sculptors such as Joseph Beuys. In the late '80s he met Herrmann Pfrogner whose deep sharing and understanding of his work confirmed for him the path he had entered into and the basis of his musical work.

At this time also, Jürgen Schriefer and some friends from the 'School of Uncovering the Voice' (including the present author) also began to support his work. In the early '90s his meeting with the celebrated composer Sofia Gubaidulina led to a wonderful connection which has led to numerous artistic collaborations often involving improvisation. Since the '80s his instruments have been used across Europe in both educational and therapeutic contexts.

What is truly original about Bleffert's work is his totally open disposition to observing the inner life of metals, woods and stones. What he does is to allow the phenomena in all its 'nakedness' to speak as he listens to the Song / Sounds of the Earth. His research work into the musical being of different woods and metals includes a simultaneous entering into the physical body of the instrument and into the material basis of tone and sound. After these foundation experiences towards the end of the '80s Bleffert began to research strung and bowed instruments.

Bleffert has also worked in the same way on researching how to widen the realm of tonality, where intervals, scales and keys are not randomly chosen, but arise out of the qualities of the materials themselves. In his concerts he is concerned to connect tone with particular themes from stones, birds and clouds to the cycle of Christian festivals and the qualities of the seven days of the week. His path has led him to a unity that has grown between his research, the creation of musical instruments and his compositions where one calls for the other. As he said to a member of the audience after one of his concert, 'this is not only music, it is a whole attitude to life'.

What is extraordinary about Manfred Bleffert's work is the way the voice of each of his instruments is created out of

the individuality and being of the material from which it is made. With his metal instruments you can live into the way the tone enters into a silence which is felt as something which is vibrantly alive. The duration of a tone from a metal instrument, such as a gong, calls for a tremendously long attention span in our listening where it gradually takes us into a non-physical world and into a sense of deep peace which typically spreads all around the listener. Thus his metal instruments are wonderful for deepening our meditative life.

In particular, Bleffert has researched the unique qualities of different materials and how they influence the being of music: from the light streaming quality of silver (where there is very little resistance); to the singing quality of tin; to the heavier collected, centred and awakening quality of iron; to the inner singing and warmth qualities of copper; to the way bronze instruments also work in the realm of warmth, but in such a way that the warmth spreads out very freely into the widths of the periphery.

Bleffert has also researched how the sounds of each instrument move in space. Thus they are ideal for working with Eurythmy (although it has to be said that up until this time Eurythmists have basically not taken up this wonderful way of working with tone). His instruments call upon the player to explore the different types and qualities of movements needed to play the instrument and how the quality of movement in the player becomes audible in the sounding of the instrument.

His instruments have an extraordinarily open sound quality that is full of movement which helps the listener to awaken to the space all around them. In addition, his instruments enable new forms of group music making to occur that are not possible with conventional instruments. Thus, as I have found, they are ideal for Community Musicing.

Perhaps of all instruments, metal instruments enable us to approach the deepest laws of sound in matter. Thus the early history of these instruments was one of use in connection with sacred realms. (N.B. Bleffert's metal instruments are ideal instruments for use in the Christian Community, but as with the question of their use in Eurythmy alluded to above, alas, this has also basically not entered into the realms of Christian Community practice.)

However, in the 18th Century metal instruments were largely used by Mozart and Beethoven, etc. to create a sense of colour, drive and rhythm. (Thus their sacred potential was forgotten until in the 19th Century metal instruments began to be used again to help the listener approach a sense of the unfathomable mysteries.)

To give one particular example of his work, I would like to share some thoughts about a seven-fold continuum of metal instruments he has created where you can hear how sound can move from warmth to light.

The sequence goes from the tam-tam the cymbal tubular bells gongs glockenspiels finger cymbals triangle. To give a flavour of this work let me share a few observations about just three of these instruments.

With the tam-tam the whole sheet of metal flows in a sea of vibrations without any differentiation. This is a world that is full of warmth and the width of the cosmos. It is almost as if the whole world is being turned, where you hear all vibrations, intervals and tunings contained in an undifferentiated way. Thus the tam-tam lives in the realm of our metabolic processes and in the realm of the night-man in us. It also challenges us to stand centred in ourselves, but yet to follow the tone out into the widths. It is a world of total peace, whilst at the same time it invites us to open up to the realms of our unconscious world.

The opposite of this world can be found in Bleffert's bronze triangles where the centre (and thus the majority of the material) of the instrument has disappeared altogether. The triangle is therefore the least material and physical of all the metal instruments. Consequently it is the most light-filled.

With these bronze triangles it is as if sparks of streaming light shoot outwards from them not least because the vibrations are indeed moving very fast. Thus the inherent movement of the bronze triangles has most to do with the sense of out-breathing as the listener is pulled outside themselves. In order to feel these tones it is as if you have to step out side yourself. (N.B. This mirrors the true meaning of the word 'ec-stasis', namely 'to stand outside oneself').

When you hear these two instruments sounded one after the other, you can begin to hear other qualities that lie between these tones. This work has given rise to an extraordinary new realm of musical work which is being pioneered by colleagues of mine such as Reinhild Brass, who is exploring how the between-ness that lies between different instruments has parallels with our traditional understanding of the different qualities of experience that lie between two different notes/scale degrees (i.e. intervals). The key difference here, however, is that this scale of Bleffert's instruments moves from warmth to light in a much more archetypal and universal way than those embodied in the tempered tuning system which differentiates Western intervals from the use of other tuning systems found all over the world (see below).

In between these two extremes of the tam-tam and the triangle you find an instrument that balances the qualities of both these extremes: this is the realm of the gong. With the gong you hear the pleroma of the tam-tam meeting the pointed quality of the triangle, namely you experience the meeting of both warmth and light. Significantly, to make this instrument, Bleffert beats the edge of the bronze and then beats diagonal lines across the instruments so that the tone or pitch gradually incarnates in the centre of the instrument. Consequently, when you hear the gong played on its edge or periphery it rays out like the tam-tam and works with the limb forces of the human being. On the other hand, when the instrument is played right in the centre, as it is held in stillness, you hear the focussed quality of the thinking human being. Then again, when you swing the instrument and allow the beater to find the centre of the gong within the stream of movement then you hear the harmony of the middle realm appearing archetypally within the tone of the gong.

Thus it is wonderful to explore with both children and adults the polar opposites of the tam-tam and triangle with their in-breathing and out-breathing qualities.

With the triangle it is like living in the mood of the interval of the 7th.

With the tam-tam, on the other hand, you experience standing in the prime or tonic with both legs standing solidly on the earth.

With the gong you experience both the inner and the outer breath the centre and the periphery all of which can be experienced in the mood of the interval of the 5th. Thus the gong is the perfect instrument for working with one of the great paradigms of our age, namely, how can we be centred in ourselves, yet simultaneously be present in the space around us. In short, the gong encourages us to practice being individual within the stream of community life.

It is beyond the reach of this article to go into the realm of Bleffert's other instruments mentioned above, but from what I have shared I hope the reader will be able to feel the extraordinary and absolutely unique qualities that his instruments open up in the realms of pedagogical work, music therapy, social community building realms, and contemporary music making.