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Community bird song

What would a high street be like if it was, well, nicer wondered **ROBERT JARVIS**. So he set about installing interactive warblers in Rochester. **MICHELLE BOAKES** evaluated

High streets are under threat, as numerous reports and Mary Portas keep telling us. Maybe it would help if they were just nicer places? Perhaps with bird song? As a sound artist, nothing could be simpler, writes *Robert Jarvis*.

By using Feonic audio technology, I can use shop window fronts as loudspeakers capable of playing gentle sounds. But I am wary of the imperialistic nature of public art and, wanting to find the smallest thing that could make a difference, I came up with the idea of a series of installations based on birdsong. This, I thought, would allow me the opportunity to think and communicate musically without straying into muzak territory.

Actually, I wanted to create an installation that was sort of invisible, that wasn't calling out to people saying, "hey, listen to me, I have been especially created for you." I just wanted to affect the environment in a subtle way to see what might happen. For this reason, we never officially advertised the work, nor had any sort of grand launch – much to the confu-

sion of the town councils and sponsors who thought they had got themselves an art project, and wanted to celebrate that fact.

My first experiment was a synchronised installation for Margate's high street using the call of a male nightingale. As if

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by magic, the nightingale would sing from different points along the street during the day calling out to the passers-by. The fact that the origin of the sound is not obvious entices the passers-by to relate to the area in a different way, raising curiosity, and hopefully spreading some cheer as well.

Other effects were noticed. The nightingales provided a conversation piece between shop owners and their customers, allowing the retailers a different way of connecting with their potential trade. Shop-

pers would come into shops to ask about the birds and where they had come from. More people came into shops that hosted a nightingale, sales were increased up to a reported ten per cent. And the nightingales seemed to act as a pigeon deterrent.

But these were all anecdotal examples, and so were easily dismissible. So when opportunities came to reprise the project I was keen to work with an external evaluator, the very creative Michelle Boakes. Together, we wanted to see whether the effects I'd been told about in Margate were repeatable and measurable elsewhere.

As well as questionnaires for and interviews with shopkeepers and customers, and postcard drops we used – dance notation.

Variations of the installation were tried in seven different towns. In Rochester, *Singing windows* graced the presence of four high street shops selling items ranging from handmade gifts and art materials to secondhand books and antiques. Each acquired a collection of songsters and warblers, reflecting the rhythms and atmospheres of the different shop and their window displays.

To measure the difference the installation had made during the time it was installed (October 2013 to January 2014) writes *Michelle Boakes* the four retailers completed questionnaires before and after installation using structured questions. We also visited the retailers during the installation and after the installation was taken down for qualitative conversations about the project.

The retailers were very enthusiastic. All agreed that the installation was a conversation starter, that it was a good idea and they would like to have it again. They reported that it had enhanced and developed conversations with regular customers and in many cases attracted people into the shop. In one instance customers had heard about the installation and had made a special trip to the high street to seek out the sound.

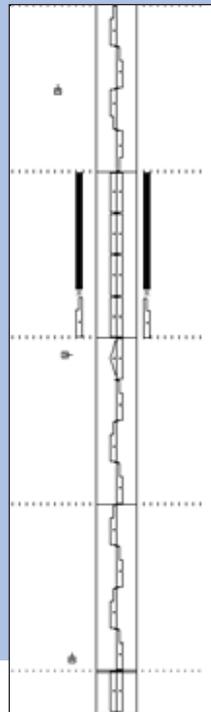
For a new retailer the installation had

Describing reactions

We observed and notated people's movement patterns at a variety of points throughout the duration of the installation. Our example notations are not necessarily complete or accurate: their purpose is to give a flavour of how we have endeavoured to capture and present movement as a way of exploring a different evaluation methodology.

On the right is an example of the notated movement of a woman who noticed the bird sound while walking past a participating shop in the high street. The notation records that the woman walked past the shop window, stopped and turned her body 90 degrees, to the right towards the window. She placed her hands on her hips and stood for a while. She then retraced her 90 degree turn and carried on walking.

Although this analysis doesn't tell us what the woman was thinking or feeling, it does show that she heard the sound and stopped to listen.





Interactive birds: A sound installation by Robert Jarvis included nightingales, songsters and warblers in windows. Literally

raised her profile with more established businesses. “It helped to create an identity for my business,” she said. Others said the installation had helped them with their marketing; it also encouraged cooperation, some shopkeepers encouraging customers to visit other shops that were hosting the sound. However, while almost all these interviews were positive – “I really miss it,” said one – they didn’t show up as quantifiable differences in the before-and-after questionnaires. In particular, these questionnaires indicated no increase in footfall, whereas in interviews shopkeepers mostly reported an increase in conversations with customers and in particular, new customers; and potential new customers had also visited the shops because of the bird sound.

To gauge customers’ reactions we designed a self-completion questionnaire using a range of questioning methods. We left a stack with each shop, and in total received 14 completed questionnaires back. All but two of the 14 had spoken to the shopkeeper about the installation, and 10 out of the 14 thought the bird sound changed how the high street felt and that the installation was a good idea: “It is a lovely sound.” “Happy and warmer feel.” “It can be quite startling when inside a shop and you think a bird has flown in.” “It is quite artistic.”

To gauge curiosity, we left a batch of numbered *Singing windows* postcards at each shop as well. The postcards gave a

little more information about the installation and also included a website address where shoppers could find out more. This was one way of helping us to measure how many people had demonstrated that they were curious, asked about the sound and picked up a card – out of the 400 we printed, shoppers picked up 97. Shopkeepers, however, reported that many people enquired about the sound and engaged in conversation with the shopkeeper but didn’t want to take a postcard.

But words are of limited use when it comes to describing people’s reactions. How, we thought, do people react physically to the bird sound? And how might we describe that? Enter Rudolf Laban and his dance notation. Laban was a movement

theorist, dancer and choreographer, born in 1879. He raised the status of dance as an artform, he established the notion of community dance, and he reformed the role of dance education. Along the way, he created Labanotation – a way of recording human movement that is universal and which has applications beyond dance. We applied it to describing the reactions of shoppers to the bird song; see box.

Finally, we also worked in other towns using the same methodologies. Helpfully, the responses from retailers and customers alike were similar to those in Rochester. It looks like singing windows are fun, creative and liked by both retailers and customers – not something you can say of other piped music.

Links and web resources

Robert Jarvis is a sound artist who has integrated his collaborative music making activities with expertise in manipulating raw sound. Previous projects have included the interactive *Magic Stones* and the bat-inspired *Echolocation*. W: www.robertjarvis.co.uk/about.htm
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Singing Windows W: www.singingwindows.com/

Prosper, Singing Windows’s main funder, is a Canterbury Festival initiative from The Map Consortium and Workers of Art W: <http://prospertogether.co.uk/>

Feonic make sound transducers which turn surfaces, including windows, into large plate loudspeakers W: www.feonic.com