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Bill Drummond's 'The 17', Part 2

At the biennial IASPM UK & Ireland Conference hosted by The University of Glasgow's Music Department between 12–14 September 2008, as Emma Webster wrote in her conference report (see Middle Eight, 28/1), a conference highlight was Saturday afternoon's plenary on 'The Meaning of Music' by the charismatic Bill Drummond of The KLF. As Webster wrote:

> Drummond has been a somewhat notorious figure in the UK popular music scene since the early 1980s, and infamously burned one million pounds £££ sterling on the Scottish Island of Jura in 1994. He took us on a journey through his relationship with music, from listening to pirate radio to the buying of his first record (The Beatles' *Penny Lane/Strawberry Fields*) to his subsequent disillusion with the recording industry. Like a music addict Drummond has desperately tried to recapture that first 'hit', but nothing seemed to work for him until the sounds his Land Rover made while driving one day reminded him of the sound of electric pylons in the rain from his bed as a child, all of which led to his latest project, The 17, a development of Drummond's increasing interest in choral music. He introduced us briefly to the project about which he has written a book, and then invited the conference delegates who found themselves sitting on or by a seat with gaffer tape stuck over its seat number to become his latest group of 17. They then took part in a musical experiment in a next-door studio (see below).

As part of the Middle Eight of 28/1 we printed six brief responses from conference delegates who were part of 'The 17'. Two other responses did not arrive in time for 28/1 and for the record they are included below.

'The 17'

Olga Velichkina

To hold a note for five minutes is a demand for sustained effort (it does not seem big, but in fact it is big enough if taken seriously) – you have just enough time to encounter yourself acting, your body, your thoughts (parasites, as usual) reflecting on what you feel and going back and forth between the reality and what you are thinking about it.

In particular, because the whole action is turned into a sort of ritual (with 'the musts' which were not explained having to be accepted as they are: Why couldn't he put more people in the show, perhaps incorporating all the conference attendants? Why these five notes [we all know about the limitations of piano tuning and the pentatonic scale, but why this scale after all?]), I only have one response – because that is how it has to be.

Good thing – you are not hypnotised or in any way conditioned to be in a certain psychological state while producing your notes. (I personally have seen at least a dozen very similar experiments in different music therapy settings and classes in France, but they all invited you to be something you normally are not.)

As regards the listening back – I had a very strong feeling of being in a church, a big empty gothic cathedral, absolutely empty inside. Of course, the gradual increase in volume made it sound like an organ, and the notes lost their significance

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completely, only colours were important, luring you inside of what could be a glass sphere. In the middle, the increase in the volume was a bit frightening, because I wondered how far would it increase, as far as the threshold of pain? But then it stopped being any concern at all.

That was more or less what I felt.

Lee Marshall

I was quite excited/intrigued going into this, and extremely curious. What struck me most was a changing sense of time: holding the first note for five minutes seemed to take ages, but once I had a sense of what was going on, the five-minute segments did not seem so long. In the end, however, it became like routine manual work – the challenge of holding a note gave me just enough to think about to not be bored, but only just. Hearing others' voices in the darkness was quite isolating, and listening to the playback I did not get a real sense that this was a communal effort. The playback was certainly interesting; there was something about the balance between the magnitude of the sound blasting at us, and the nuanced, individualised sections that you could still pick up. It did make me think about the remarkable capacity of the human ear for picking up difference, and of our ability to create meaning out of this barrage of sound. All in all, however, it was a bit of a letdown – an intellectual curiosity but without much meaning. Drummond seemed a bit edgy, perhaps because it was rushed, and the lack of group discussion, or any kind of group interaction, devalued the exercise for me. I'm still not entirely sure I understand the goal of the project and the further I move away from it the more underwhelming it becomes. Singing in the dark wasn't particularly enlightening.

References

Drummond, B. 2008. *17* (London, Beautiful Books)

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