

Sounding the Condamine: Sharing a process

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in collaboration with Jan Baker-Finch

Walking into the Brisbane Museum in mid-2008 to look at the ten icons of Queensland was hardly meant to be a musically life-changing experience. The group of artefacts – including mango tree, the Ekka, the Royal Flying Doctor Service and Condamine Bell – seemed innocent enough.

But the bell was large, impressive, and totally unknown to me, Head of Percussion at Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University, and interested in all things struck, hit, scraped or shaken.

My research evolved to include tangible stories. The flood on the Condamine River when numerous drovers were stuck together with their livestock, each being able to distinguish his animals from the others by the pitch of their bells. I learnt of secret recipes for forging the bells, and the magnificent book, Cooney's *Bells of the Australian Bush*¹. Drovers bragged their bell could be heard over 10 miles on a cold still night. There was a history here, fairly well documented by people on the land, drovers, and bell collectors. But this history was a soundless one – the history of the animals that wore this bell to open up vast parts of Australia, and the drovers who relied on this sound to know the whereabouts of their livestock, providing money, safety and comfort on long, still winter nights under the stars. It was yet to transfer into any form of Australian musical or 'sounding' culture.



Making plans

As I was driving out to Miles, 400kms west of Brisbane, over the Great Dividing Range to meet my hosts Ann and Ted Gibbons for the first time, I had a vague plan. As a bush-sympathetic city girl, I wanted to connect with new people and new ways of being in the world. I wanted to create a show that paid homage to the important history of the bullock trains opening up the western part of Queensland, transforming the bell from functional to musical. I had the idea of a bell ringing competition, getting the bushies in the pub to put their bragging rites to the test – so how far does your bell really ring? Only it turns out they don't brag about these things any more.

And it turns out the dreams in my head, the sonic illusions that filled my brain on the awkward road between Dalby and Chinchilla, were met with extreme disappointment. While my hosts turned out to be the most extraordinary people possible, the bell turned out to sound like a random piece of metal, all clunk and no ring. My dream of incorporating this unique Australian sound into symphonic works (think Mahler) and to use tuned sets of these in every Australian school to replace the white-glove bell ringing units could not be realised.

4:00 pm Saturday April 18

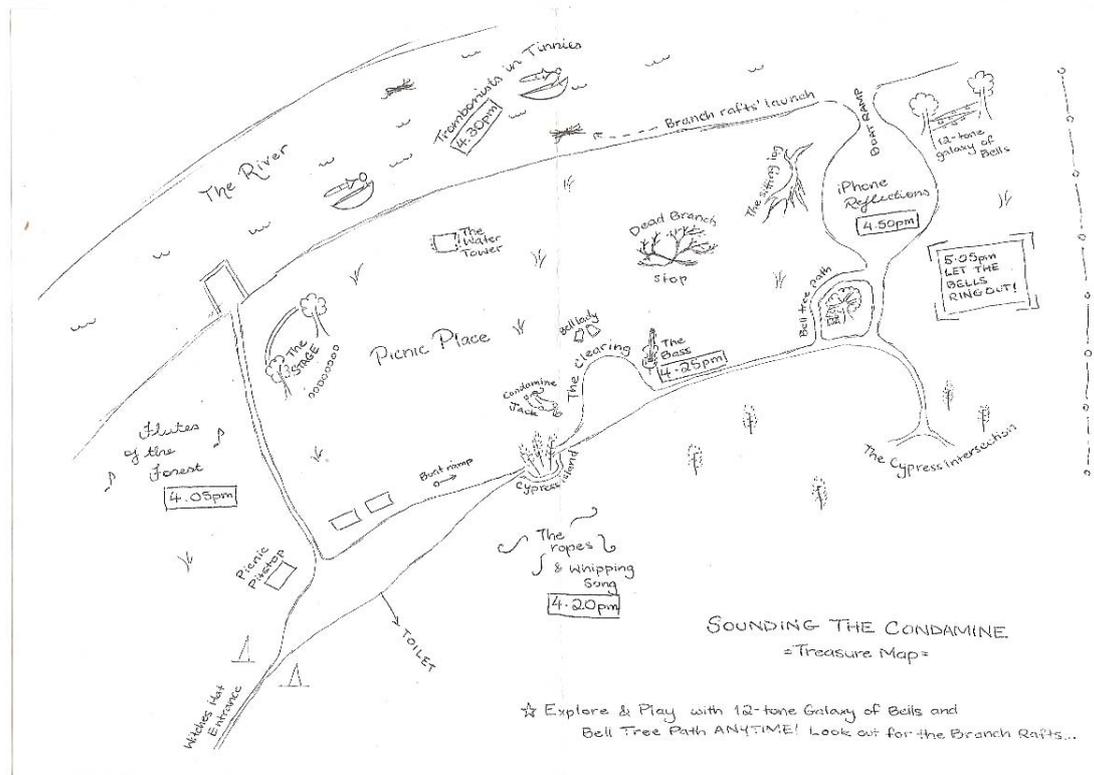
The bells were heard first, then the footsteps. People were actually coming, and they had remembered to bring their bells – often their favourite bell with a story attached. "This was the last bell I used, on my milking cow until the 1970s" says David Mundell. "We have had this one on our property for two generations, it still has the original strap attached" says an unknown guest as he rings the bell in a lateral fashion.

Guests arrived down the long dusty road and checked in at the trestle table. They were given a treasure map, a program of events, and then after their bell was "pitched", given specific

¹ Cooney, D. *Bells of the Australian Bush*, Jinglestix, Toowoomba 2008.

instructions based on the quality of their individual bell.

Treasure Map



In the bush between the track and the creek, two flute players and two melodicas were already performing Flutes of the Forest, a new work by Erik Griswold that reflected the space, birds and sensations of this site on the Dogwood Creek. The growing crowd gathered awkwardly, unsure if the event had started, some still talking at full volume, others already inside the performance, taking photographs and listening intently.

The gentle tinkles and clunks, of the Condamine bells underscored the entire two and a half hour event. With the aid of the map, the audience were free to wander around the site at will, gazing as in an art gallery. They could discover a spider web of delicate bells created by Lawrence English; the bush poet Jack Scheikowski (or Condamine Jack to most of his friends) performing a free jam with bassist Robert Davidson; 3 trombonists in 3 separate canoes, all with their own personal rowers, playing choreography along the creek; whipping song, a work for movers and ropes alluding to the drovers with a wry humour mixed in; Hannah Macklin singing a free-jazz version of Condamine Jacks Song Time accompanied by I-phones. Some chose to investigate the Bell Tree Path – a mixture of bells from across the globe, with found object bells, mixing bowls, chopsticks attached to wine glasses, and metal plates that gave respect to the inventiveness of the bush.

This was Part 1; the discovery section. This was the adjustment between preconceived ideas and reality, familiar and unfamiliar. This was the 'alap' in South Indian music, the first cup of tea in country terms, the discussion about the weather. People in familiar surrounds, with familiar faces experiencing unfamiliar sounds and activities.

Learning the history

Back in the 1880s, a man named Samuel Jones fashioned the first Condamine Bell. Using an old cross-saw blade, a readily available metal in his forge, he bent the metal into a unique envelope fold, resulting in a sound that was deeper and less tinkly than the English bells then used by many drovers. The combination of a lighter weight bell – necessary because of the long distances these animals were driven – and the timbral quality of the metal which gave it a ring over huge distances, made this bell the definitive sound of the Australian bush from this time on.

Used mainly by drovers driving the bullock trains to open up the country, the land without fences was now the land with a wash of sound. At night many drovers would talk of sleeping with one ear open, able to discern the absence of a particular pitch within the constellation of sound. The bells were then used on all animals, and even after fences were laid, the bell continued to be used in both the domestic and droving environments. A giant Condamine Bell sits in the town of Condamine as a tribute to Sam Jones (blacksmith from 1867-1878). Other bell makers are identifiable today by their individualised stamps on the bell. Notably, Christian Anderson, Frederick Anderson, and lastly Alfred Ormand senior, and junior who is still living today in Toowong with his blacksmith in the backyard as he left it on his last day of work.

Growing the project

I now had recordings – evidence – of Ted Gibbon's eleven Condamine Bells collected over the years off the land. I attempted to place them in pitch order, hit them with mallets and play tunes. But invariably nothing sounded right. These were after all cowbells, albeit made in different sizes for turkeys, sheep and bullocks. They sounded well when walked with. They had their own internal nature which gave them quality, allowed them to resonate, and allowed them to be heard over distance. One could perceive the speed of the gait, any level of panic, when an animal was drinking or grazing, when there was an abundance of flies in the area. Anything I did with these bells would have to acknowledge the actualities of the bell, not my sonic dreams of incorporating them (jawbone of the ass to 'vibraslap') into the western artistic cultural environment.

Nine performers, composers, installation artists, and sound artists were asked to create works for the Sounding the Condamine project to be presented on April 18th, 2009. It was to be an outdoor event free of generators, with a music ensemble consisting of three trombones, two flutes, two melodicas, bass, drums and vocals. All creators were invited to a four day retreat in the area to get to know the locals, the stories, and the environment, but less than half took up the offer of a four hour drive each way.

Inspiration for new works came from remarkably different places. Steve Newcomb became obsessed with Condamine Jack's poetry and set 3 songs, The Bells of Condamine becoming the theme song of the event. Erik Griswold used the energy of the place to create 2 site-specific works, the now classic Trombones in Tinnies and Flutes of the Forest. Stephen Leek chose to arrange a popular folk song, On the Banks of the Condamine, for the local choir to sing. Jan Baker-Finch and I examined the pioneering history in rope work – renamed Madam Lash by the locals. Robert Davidson took the readings provided to the composers to create a strong but dreamlike musical statement that reflected the optimism and stoicism that he perceived. Installation artists visited the site and found an environment to place their work; among them, Kumi Kato, who placed her Bell Tree Walk by the creek. Sharka Bosakova recalled her Czech childhood as she floated a burning raft of sticks down the creek, a tribute also to the loggers sending timber downstream.

With only a week until the event, the site had been chosen, the locals engaged, publicity was in the papers, ABC Local Radio were on board, the local choir were beginning their rehearsals of a world premiere by Stephen Leek, canoes had been found, the mayor had been advised, the council workers were cleaning the site (which incidentally not many locals knew about), and I was wandering the streets telling everyone I could find that the event was happening (and not many

people already knew).

5:05pm Saturday April 18

At 5.05pm the first cue on Let the Bells ring out, Part 2, began. It states that bell-ringers A and B with low-pitched bells walk with their bells, swinging loosely by their sides to The Sitting Log. Minutes later a group of high bells came running past heading to the Cyprus Forest. Others wandered to The Clearing, while another group sat under their own personal tree, silently listening. The audience seemed to enact a herd of cows!

With a few hundred people on site, and at least 100 bells, contented chaos descended. Many stayed in one spot and watched the flow of activity. Some had been practising their instructions for the preceding hour, desperately trying not to make a mistake. Incidents happened: Jan, encountering a passing bell-ringer on the path, coyly invited him to dance and an audience gathered around them; someone became tired and set up a deck chair in the middle of the path while 'human cows' wandered by, en route to their next destination.

The effort was phenomenal. The sound magical. The execution far from perfect.



Then across the expanse of the 'playing field', everyone gathered for a ceremonial bell ringing. Letting the bells ring out was an emotional time for many, reconnecting sound with the very landscape it inhabited a century before. A moment filled with pride and nostalgia, humour and wonderment as the setting sun over Dogwood Creek lent a golden glow to the rusting old bells.

More on the history

Like many bush icons, interest in the bell evaporated as use for the bell disappeared. By the 1970s bells were rarely heard and instead left scattered where they had dropped on properties around the country. Interest in the bell grew again in the late 1990s when the establishment of the Condamine town icon – the Condamine Bell – was constructed. Bell collectors were popping up around the country and ebay helped propel the auctioning of bells. Soon an individual Jones bell with original stamped donger was selling for up to AUD\$6,000 and bush families were locking up their bells inside the home. They became wall hangings, a mute memory of past times. On March 28th on Queensland regional ABC radio, a call was put to anyone with a bell. They were asked to go and ring them, choose a favourite, and bring it to an event on the Miles-Condamine Road – Sounding the Condamine.

The project gathers pace ... and stalls

There was a moment on the day of the performance, under the harsh midday sun, when two indispensable co-curators and I sat on The Sitting Log trying to imagine what was about to happen. I had lost my nerve. I did not understand how hundreds of people could arrive, negotiate and experience the work we had made without confusion and boredom. I wanted the event to be

inspiring and open, with each individual able to make their own pathway through the bush, deciding how they wanted to participate. But the distances suddenly seemed too large, the light was harsh and unforgiving, and where I had expected sensuous excitement everything seemed obvious and banal. The installations seemed smaller, the ideas quirrier and the event inaccessible. I wanted the event to feel like a single breath over 150 minutes that mixed familiar and unfamiliar experiences.

These are the moments to search for the truth in a work. While nothing radical was changed, we spent time sculpting and moulding the journey, so the default setting – the audience who wanted a prescribed experience – was now strong.

It turns out that making decisions in the light of the 11am bush does not relate to the 4pm bush. Eucalypts offer little shade at midday and let too much light through. The trunks of trees and their leaves all reduce to muted greys, birds are sporadic, insects muted, and even then undergrowth seems dead and barefaced. My concerns about the project were more to do with the time of day than the content. This is something we think about very little in western art music, but there are certainly times of day when certain music sounds better. The Indians have this worked out with morning and evening ragas.

Sunset Saturday April 18



A contemplative burning raft set out into the creek while the band launched into the Davidson tune “Condamine”. Small LED lights were just starting to illuminate the musicians, and the audience, set up neatly in a natural amphitheatre on the banks of the creek, were getting out tea, food, and blankets. Part 3 - the concert - had begun. After introducing all the performers personally in Part 1, and the audience interacting with each other, making new friends, in Part 2, there was a comfortable familiarity in Part 3.

This relaxation was a huge collective exhale as we wound through a number of country tunes.

MAID to Sing (the local choir of Miles), reinforced with members of the band, sang The Banks of the Condamine beautifully. Many do not know the song, but it speaks of the hardships of love in the often-transient shearing community. It lilted perfectly and left wistfulness in the air. But the highlight was to be the inspired set of country songs arranged by Newcomb and sung by Hannah Macklin. The beauty of Snow on the Mountain, performed here in a drought-ridden bushland, was palpable, and the finale, Bells of Condamine, was unforgettable. Here instead of a sing-a-long, was a bell-a-long; a culminating gesture that led the concert into complete darkness.

Looking back

Once the event began at 4pm, no one was in control. Timing for each piece was left to the individual performer, and for almost 90 minutes a free-flowing logic emerged with hundreds of witnesses and participants – all learning to re-listen to their bush, to their birds, to their environment. Holding a mirror to another community can easily be a reductive process, but the time spent over preceding months meeting locals, hearing stories, allowing them to shine in the spotlight, being tenacious, and listening, meant that the mirror had an expansive quality. It was reflecting life. Not the bush life, but our shared lives, teaching us all to see, hear and feel differently. That is the beauty of art. The ability to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary.

The ability to create collective dreaming, nostalgia and wonderment.

In the bush, there are few preconceptions about what art should be. The benchmarks for ordering ideas are less rigid. Rather than this resulting in presentation of familiar ideas it provided permission to stretch boundaries. The bush is an amazing world of synergies where all members of the community – regardless of eccentricities or usefulness – form an unavoidable part of the whole. So the palate of acceptance, trust, and discovery was appreciable in the audience and gave artistic freedom to the creators. This event was an amalgam of the community's values, an amalgam of community art, environmental art, installation art, community story telling and community singing.

Making history

The Condamine Bell has not yet reached the symphonies of Australia, school kids certainly don't approach them at recess with white gloves, and many have said – it sounds like just another cowbell. It is a bell with living makers, including Barry Doonan aged 70, who make bells to specification, with and without dongers, helping to test the musical limits of the instrument. They are assisting in the transformation from historical icon, from souvenir size necklaces, to another living tradition – music. The local community has been reawakened to the sound of the bell. It is no longer an artefact of a past life, but an instrument with a sound and newly formed memories. And the participants themselves – the musicians, composers, installation artists – are also transformed. This one sounding device, a humble cowbell, has articulated a pathway from the city into a bush story. It is now a new living history that can be re-imagined in myriad directions. And so often that is what art does. The birthing of a new way of seeing, a new way of hearing. This humble cowbell forged by Jones in the thriving town of Condamine, was the excuse to make art.

Making community an art

Throughout this paper there is constant reference to environment, locals, transformation, familiar/unfamiliar, and transitions. While these elements might seem specific to this particular project, I believe they are deeply embedded in the creation of any musical event, whether in the concert hall, pub or outdoor space. The constructed environment in which art happens so honestly affects the reception of the art. Community art accepts this ... perhaps because many bush concert halls do not have the same acoustic qualities as those in the city.



This project has awakened in me questions about the place, purpose and possibilities of art in communities. My questioning goes like this: what if more established institutions, like symphony orchestras, for example, take some cues from this kind of project? What if the mix of familiar and unfamiliar is always examined, continually renewing art forms and leading audiences through new possibilities? What if care is taken about what music to play at which time of day? What if creators always research place – interviewing people, connecting with iconic locals, unearthing hidden stories? What if art is made so that we all have the potential to be part of it and to get something out of it? What if community art is actually just art ...