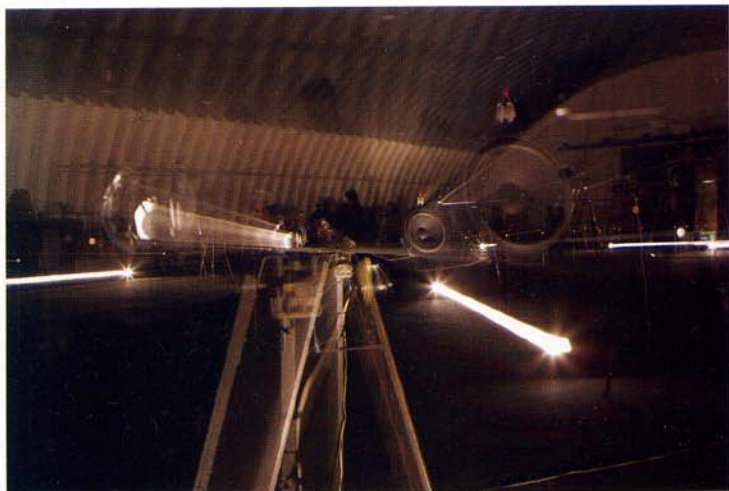


Cross Platform Sound in other media



Day of the tripods: Ray Lee's *Siren*

The whirling blades of Ray Lee's forest-like sound installations evoke the mysteries of music from the aether. By Julian Cowley

"It's not just about making sound," says Oxford based sound artist Ray Lee. "It's about making something that creates that sound." In dimly lit vaults beneath London Bridge railway station, Lee is discussing his kinetic sound sculptures. This secretive and atmospheric space, segmented by a series of arches, is a venue for his current performance piece *Siren*, which involves 29 tripods topped with revolving blades. Each blade is equipped with an electronic tone generator, small loudspeakers and light emitting diodes. "It's very important to me that I build them all," Lee continues. "I know how the oscillator is made, because I built it. With digital technology we are so far removed from the means of production."

Performing *Siren*, Lee and his associate Harry Dawes dress in heavy felt suits that make them look like industrial operatives, use screwdrivers to tune each oscillator to an Aeolian mode and set the blades whirling. The tones accumulate into a pulsing choral drone, coloured brilliantly with overtones and disclosing different facets as listeners wander through the arched space. The play of lights is visually mesmerising too. Although Lee values an empirical, hands-on approach to the practice of sound art, the real impetus for his work remains intangible. "You turn on the radio and something appears," he says. "For me there's still a kind of magic involved in that. Play the theremin, moving your hand through an invisible field and you're shaping sound. Something physically there that you can't see. There's a sort of fascination in that, for me, and a magic which science doesn't manage to explain out of existence. You can do things with magnetism and radio waves that still have this sense of mystery." During the tuning process glissandi are heard that may evoke, in the underground shelter of the vaults, wartime air raid sirens. *Siren's* title and the piece's alluring

sonic texture allude also to the sirens of ancient myth. Lee steers skilfully amongst associations of danger and seduction, practicality and enchantment.

In the mid-1990s Lee and Dawes toured as improvising musicians. Seeking a wider audience for their piano and trombone duet, they framed it as theatrical performance. "Playing improvised music is intrinsically interesting to watch," Lee says. "We thought if we made theatre out of the production of music, it might have a life of its own that we could sustain through small-scale arts centre and theatre touring. Some of our installation and sculptural ideas started to come into it, and films. At that time we came across the theremin – the ultimate visual instrument. We had some made and started playing them."

After a London gig they were approached by Lydia Kavina, protégée of Leon Thérémín, the instrument's inventor, and its most virtuosic exponent. Although they were total novices, she invited them to a conference in Moscow, part of the theremin centenary celebrations, where they met leading authorities on early electronic music. "We saw this instrument in the Moscow Conservatory where Thérémín used to teach," Lee recalls. "He'd built it to demonstrate different temperaments to students; a simple two octave electronic keyboard, but each key had a separate dial and loudspeaker, so you could individually tune each note. I wanted to make something like that. What I've done in *Siren* is to separate out the tones and they all spin. Seeing that instrument in Moscow was an inspiration for making individual oscillators that you can tune and build into a complex chord."

But *Siren* has not sprung straightforwardly from an idea: in Lee's characteristic fashion it has evolved through trial and error, intuition and an improvisor's

willingness to turn accident to advantage. In 2000 he was making sound machines in a disused textile mill in Derbyshire. The nature of the site suggested spinning machines so he built a tripod with a small motor at the top and put a metal arm on it that would spin round. A battery powered circuit attached to the arm generated a tone transmitted through loudspeakers. Lee was surprised by the outcome and built four more tripods for a piece he called *The Theremin Lesson*. His intention was to activate them using his MIDI theremin. But a driver he had made to activate switches blew up just before the initial presentation and he had to do the job manually. So that has become part of the performance.

The following year he presented *Choir* at Oxford's Museum of Modern Art. It used 16 tripods and its sound had assumed oddly vocal qualities, like some strange transmutation of Ligeti's *Lux Aeterna*.

"I arrived at the sound by chance," Lee remarks, "by a circuitous and labour intensive route. I didn't know I was going to do this: it grew through discovery." In 2004 Lee was working in a disused hangar at a former airbase in Oxfordshire. It was through that site's associations that the title *Siren* first emerged. It was staged in Utrecht as part of a multimedia festival before arriving at London Bridge, where the particular acoustic qualities of each of those heavy brick arches lend it new richness. "In these arches you get pulsing," Lee observes. "In the hangar you got more of a wash of sound; a forest of tripods stretching ahead of you. Here they are separated out: as a member of the audience you have to move around, navigating your own route visually and acoustically." □ *A reconfigured version of Siren will be installed at Kinetica Museum in London's Old Spitalfields Market, 15–29 March*

Ray Lee

