

UNITED KINGDOM

Playing for time

Britannia Row provides sound coverage for a concert excerpt from the longest piece of music in history. **Simon Duff** reports

➤ Longplayer is a 1,000-year long musical composition conceived by artist, composer and (Pogues) musician Jem Finer. It began playing at midnight on the 31 December 1999, in a Thameside lighthouse at Trinity Buoy Wharf in East London, and is designed to be played without repetition until the final moment of 2999. For the past nine years it has been performed by computer: actually an iMac running software written by Finer in the SuperCollider script, playing six loops from a pre-recorded 20'20" composition for Tibetan singing bowls. Factored into its working is the ability to play in other forms.



Justin Grealey, sound designer, at the PRO6

On 12 September this year the first ever Longplayer Live performance of a section of the piece took place at London's Roundhouse theatre. An orchestra comprised of 234 Tibetan singing bowls played by rotating shifts of six musicians, including sonic curator David Toop and Finer himself, performed a 1,000-minute (16.66-hour) extract. In 2002 Finer developed a graphical score that works in material form as an arrangement of six concentric circular tables effectively making up a 25m-wide instrument, on which are arrayed the precisely tuned bowls carefully spaced to correspond with the looped waveform of the original source. It was



The singing bowls in the Roundhouse, with Jem Finer positioned at the back, centre

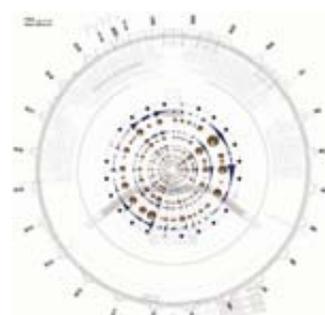
this formation that was installed at the Roundhouse and performed in the round.

Providing FOH sound reinforcement was Britannia Row, contracted in by the Roundhouse. Longplayer threw up a number of challenges for the sound team, led by Britannia Row's project manager, Dameon 'Damo' Pryor.

He explains: "The aim is to bring a full sound of all the instruments to a 360° audience in the Roundhouse for the standing and upper tier, for the full 1,000 minutes. Our challenge is to make the resonating sounds of the Tibetan bowls fill the room. They hit everything on the frequency spectrum so we have to make sure we have the right tools for the job."

The musicians and bowls were positioned on the floor space within the circle of the Roundhouse pillars with the bowls on the tables placed around waist height. Shure Beta 91 microphones were used to pick up the resonating sounds. Production manager for the event, Darryn De La Soul comments on the decision over mic choice: "Jem, Justin Grealey, the sound designer for Longplayer Live, and myself spent an evening at The Fridge in Brixton experimenting with overheads, contacts, shotgun mics, some of the Tibetan singing bowls and a piece of the wood the table surfaces will be made of, but finally set-

hang configuration to give full 360° cover, and powered by Outline PWM T9 amps. "After discussions with Damo, we decided to go with a central hang 'in the round', in order to get the best coverage of the entire room – the audience can move around at will – and to preclude the need for monitoring for the players," says De La Soul.



A diagram of the Longplayer Live setup

"Having to use wedges distributed over that whole huge central space in which the tables will be set up threw up many potential problems for interfering with the FOH sound, so all in all we are glad to have a solution without the need for individual monitoring. The sound is intended to be more of a reinforcement of the acoustic sound of the bowls rather than a rock 'n' roll level reproduction."

"The bowls are so ancient and so very, very analogue, I felt it was imperative to chase that Midas 'analogue' sound"

tled on using boundary layer mics placed between the bowls on the table surface. The sound produced in this way was so full and complete we were blown away. The decay from the bowls is incredibly long and the Shure SM91 proved the best way to capture it."

Running FOH sound mix was a Midas PRO6 console under the control of Grealey and Britannia Row regular Dave Compton. De La Soul continues: "I heard the PRO6 for the first time in a venue I am particularly familiar with, and there was just something about the warmth of the sound that particularly lends itself to this project. The bowls are so ancient and so very, very analogue, I felt it was imperative to chase that Midas 'analogue' sound, which the PRO6 has managed to capture so well."

The PA consisted of Outline CDH483 Hi Packs and Outline 218 Sub Techs, all flown in the middle of the room as a left-right left-right four-way

With no fold back or monitors required, Brit Row's other task guidance was to ensure a continuous recording was taken from a feed from the PRO6 as well as an ambient mic recording, both recorded to Alesis HD24.

The mesmerising event lived up to expectations. Finer's interest in the fluidity and expansiveness of time was fully realised by the bowls. With its lack of repetition Longplayer serves as beacon or rallying call for long-term survival strategies, in a time of quick-fix and a culture of short change. As for its future, the length of the piece prompts thoughts about its survival. In the pipeline are concerts in San Francisco and Tasmania. The long-term ambition is to find a permanent home for the live installation, where it can play on into the foreseeable and unforeseeable future. 🍄

www.britanniarow.com
www.longplayer.org

