



aroundNorth

Robert Jarvis

As the Earth spins on its axis, and day becomes night becomes day, our view on the near universe changes as seen by the changing positions of the stars in the sky. One star appears to stay stationary (the North Star); and the rest take about 23 hours 56 minutes and 4 seconds to complete one complete revolution.

aroundNorth offers its listeners the opportunity to hear this phenomenon in real time. As stars cross equally spaced virtual lines emanating from Celestial North Pole, their sound is heard corresponding to their position in the sky, size, distance from Earth, brightness and temperature, creating a mesmerising sound map of the universe as viewed by our turning planet. If the stars were a musical instrument, how would they sound?

On a clear night, in an average dark place, it might be possible to see about twelve hundred stars, depending on the weather, eyesight and light pollution. **aroundNorth** refers to twelve thousand nearby stars, the majority of which are just too faint to be seen, even with a good pair of binoculars, or telescope.

By referring to the host of stars out there and mapping their parameters through the medium of sound, **aroundNorth** opens up how we think about our stellar neighbours in a novel way. As stars move across the score's virtual lines, brighter stars sound for longer, fading in and fading out as they move across the score's virtual lines, whilst fainter stars sound shorter; stars that are closer sound louder; hotter stars crackle corresponding to their heat; and, bigger stars sound deeper whilst smaller stars are higher sounding.

aroundNorth humanises the astronomical, giving us an emotional key to help us relate the unfathomable heavens to our own experiences of time and space. With echoes of a Neolithic monument of ancient myth, the installation introduces us to a universe full of interest, encouraging us to think differently about the cosmos and our place within it.

The installation was created over a five-year period in collaboration with astronomers at Armagh Observatory, and is now available for touring.

PRACTICALITIES

Currently there are two different versions of **aroundNorth**: a gallery version and also an outside version. Both are specific to the hosting location. That is to say, the installation sounds are tuned to the stars potentially visible from the site where the installation is to be placed, and (of course) to the exact time of the listening experience. In this way, the audience are able to listen to what is actually happening above them, in real time, as the stars slowly move across the sky.

Surprisingly perhaps, **aroundNorth** works very well in daylight and therefore also in gallery conditions; however, under a clear dark sky the experience is very special indeed. In this case, the installation benefits from an area of land with a good view of the sky, and preferably without nearby light pollution.

The gallery version plays back on four or eight speakers (depending on what best suits the gallery) and runs from the specially created **aroundNorth** audioPlayer. With the push of just one button this audioPlayer takes note of the time and the location's longitude, works out the local sidereal (astronomical) time and then begins playing the composition from the correct place in the score and in synchronisation with the rotation of planet Earth.

The outside version of the installation uses eight battery powered speakers, each with their own built in synchronised sound system, and so the installation can be set up without wires, and without access to an electricity supply. The installation will run on battery power for at least ten hours. The eight speakers are placed around the circumference of a virtual circle of a diameter of about twenty metres, and are positioned on the cartesian coordinates of North, NorthEast, East, SouthEast, South, SouthWest, West and NorthWest. Thus when a listener hears a sound coming out of the East speaker, for example, when they look up above the direction of that speaker, that is where the sounding star will be in the night sky (and if the star is bright enough then they will be able to see it). The audience are free to move within the circle, exploring their window to the universe through sound.

The creator of **aroundNorth**, Robert Jarvis, is happy to talk about the work, give guided listenings and of course workshops. In the case of the outside performance, Robert will be available to converse with interested listeners.

A preliminary visit to the hosting location by Robert will help him with the tuning of the installation to the specific area as well as providing an opportunity to discuss practicalities with the organisers.

There is an **aroundnorth** website at: www.aroundnorth.wordpress.com and more information on the work of Robert Jarvis can be found at: www.robertjarvis.co.uk .

Three short films about the installation can be seen at:

<http://vimeo.com/92469984>

<http://bit.ly/1hCuN2f>

<http://bit.ly/1nTRGAs>

COSTS

Whichever version of the installation is booked, there are two elements to the costs involved. The first is the travel and transport of the necessary equipment (and Robert) to the hosting location, and the second is the fee for the installation itself.

The travel and transport costs amount to a maximum of £600.00 (depending on time of year and ferry prices); however, this expense could be shared between a number of venues, providing they have booked the work within a similar time period.

The exact fee for the installation itself (excluding travel costs) will depend on whether the gallery version of the work is booked, or the outside version, and then for how long.

For the outside performance, excluding the travel costs, there is a single performance fee of £900, with each additional performance costing another £500. (So, two for £1400, three for £1900, and so on). Each outside performance can last for a maximum of eight hours (related to the battery life of the speakers). This fee includes Robert's preparation to fine-tune the work to the exact hosting location and time of listening so that the installation encompasses all those stars within the expanse of sky visible during the performance. Also included is a site visit prior to the performance so that we can plan exactly how the performance will be on the night (or nights) in question.

For the gallery version of the work, excluding the travel costs, the charge is £1200. Again, the installation will be fine-tuned for the gallery's longitude and altitude so that the sounds heard will exactly relate to what is actually happening in real time. A site visit to the gallery is also included so that the installation can, as much as possible, be customised for the space available. A typical length of stay in a gallery might be one month, although longer periods can be negotiated.

Finally, if appropriate, it will be possible to arrange workshops, public talks, etc., (either astronomical or musical) and for whatever age-groups seem appropriate. There will be a cost per workshop of £150 (half day) or £250 (full day).

FURTHER DETAILS

If you would like more information about **aroundNorth** or would like to discuss a possible event, please contact Robert at the address below. Thank you.

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aroundNorth

Review of première

(Thu 20 February, 2014)

by Iain Orr

My 20 February event was being with some fifty other people at the world première of Robert Jarvis's aroundNorth, a sound installation in the grounds of Stowe - the site shared by Stowe House and the National Trust. The conception is breathtakingly simple. Draw a line from the Pole Star to a specific place open to the skies and listen to the movement of the stars across that line in time with the earth's rotation. Each star has been given its own note, harmonics and volume, reflecting the distinctive spectrum, size and brightness of each star and its distance from Earth. The effect is to make three-dimensional and visceral a relationship with the stars which is usually the two-dimensional one of gazing at the apparently unchanging canvas of scattered twinkling points of light round "that inverted Bowl we call The Sky".

The programme notes for aroundNorth are a stellar playlist. As each crosses the invisible line to Polaris - at a precise time that is different for each of the three evenings of this installation - it is named, with some characteristics noted and the length (usually between thirty seconds and just over a minute and a half) of its sound. This makes for an entirely novel sensory and emotional engagement with objects - or can we call them beings? - that are, on the normal human scale, unimaginably huge and remote. Listening to their sounds is a relationship that is both intimate - like the groans of a calving glacier or the call across the ocean of a humpbacked whale - and fleeting. One can imagine that after listening long enough to the stars from roughly the same latitude one could start to recognize them and even be able to place them in relation to each other, like the instruments in an orchestra or a magnificent multi-choral composition with separate choirs scattered around a huge cathedral.

There are two more performances, tonight and tomorrow. I hope both are as clear and cold as last night. My route to the event was, for me, part of it. After a bus journey through rural Buckinghamshire, with lambs already at least a week old, I walked up the straight miles of Stowe Avenue, the twilight sky deepening behind bare tree branches, and past bushes full of thrush, blackbird, chaffinch and blue-tit songs. On the way I crossed a small gurgling stream. Sound magic was already in the air. Then it fell from the skies as Robert Jarvis's aroundNorth rolled across the Stowe landscape.

Iain Orr

21st February, 2014