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A choir of bats versus classical beatboxing in New Music Award

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Composer, trombonist and sound artist Robert Jarvis is rubbing his eyes wearily. I've just dropped yet more homemade coffee cake crumbs on his spotless desk and asked, again, how the Batphone, a walky talk like device, works. "Bat Box", he says with the weary intensity of someone who often ends up having to repeat themselves, "Bats communicate through ultrasonic sound. A higher pitch than we can hear. The Bat Boxes are detectors which translate the ultrasonic calls of the bats into our frequency range." Ah, so each bat is like a radio station and you are tuning in? Deep sigh, "Yes, but they're not playing anything you want to hear, at least not for very long." He's right. So far we've listened to a Leisler (bubbly), a Serotine (funky) and a Daubenton (like a machine gun), all interesting but not exactly "musical", " So my plan is to turn them into something worth hearing."

Jarvis is one of six artists shortlisted for this Monday's £50,000 New Music Award, a sort of Turner Prize for music. Funded by the UK's largest independent funder for new music, the PRS foundation, the inaugural prize was won by former Pogue Jem Finer, for Score For A Hole in the Ground, a 20ft brass horn that is currently broadcasting sounds from a hole deep in a Kentish wood.

We are in Jarvis's studio discussing his bid for the year's prize, Echolocation, a "bat choir". His studio is a small, neat room, with swirly lilac Anglypta wall paper, in his Faversham house. There is a pair of spotty socks on a side table, an Aaron Copland CD, two lap tops and not much else. A postcard on display bears the slogan 'Nature Is A Workshop'. A combination of eccentricity and fastidiousness, it reflects Jarvis rather well.

In the past Jarvis has used flowers (their DNA), postmen (their whistling) and toffee sellers in China (the sound of their hammers breaking up the sweet) in his sound compositions. Echolocation would see bat boxes being placed at various locations around the London Wetland Centre. The ultrasonic calls of the 10,000 or so bats would be detected by the boxes, converted into audible frequencies which in turn will be digitally sequenced into music. If he wins, this summer for the whole of the bat season visitors will be able to go to the Wetland centre and hear the previous night activity represented in musical form.

So, the obvious question, why and why bats? "Well obviously bats communicate outside our hearing range, and I like making the hidden audible. All my work is about place and helping people discover their surroundings in unexpected ways. Sound is good way of doing that."