

A “Sound” Idea!

by Bob Heltman, CMW, AAW

God Bless the Irish, and especially the March 2008 Journal of the Irish Woodturners’ Guild, and even more to the point the work and article “Sounding Bowls” by Tobias Kaye. Tobias has been putting phosphor bronze guitar strings across wood bowls, making them into a sort of musical instrument, for over 20 years. Actually, his bowls have been bought on 4 continents and used in hospitals, clinics, care homes, special education settings, and for private meditation. Plucking sounds warm the heart! See his website: www.sounding-bowls.com

I got so excited I just had to try making one. Since my musical talent approaches zero, I visited my local Tempo music store, described my general plan, and bought 3 different strings. They gave me two violin tuning pegs, but I planned to make my own. It also struck me that using pegs is a bit ancient and maybe there was another way. Next I visited my Hobby House store, figuring that some of the small rigging devices used in model airplanes might work. As you can see from the picture below, Photo 1, this amounted to quite an assortment of wiring, small (2-56) nuts and bolts, threaded couplers, blind nuts, swivels, rods, tubes, etc. The kit on the left was mine.



Photo 1. Assortment of things needed to convert the bowl into a sounding bowl.

Back in my shop/studio I found a damaged walnut bowl about 7” dia. x 3” deep, and finished it with a thin spray of lacquer. Next I turned 2 pegs out of purpleheart. At the one end, with grain running in the direction of the strings, I drilled small holes just below the rim through which the strings would be threaded. Tobias uses copper tubing to line these holes, saying it gives a brighter tone and stops the strings from cutting into the wood. The first string went in the center; one end of each string comes with a stop-ball to hold it in place.

Tobias holds the ends in place with small turned wooden pegs like on an old fashioned Spanish guitar, after first removing the stop ball, purely for an improved appearance. I used a blind nut in a hole opposite and turned in a long screw. Clipping the string to length I crimped its cut end into a small electrical connector, turned up the end and placed it behind a nut at the screws end. With heart

pounding I slowly tightened the screw, using pliers to keep the nut and connector in place, and plucked the string until it was tight and produced a pleasant sound. IT WORKED and the bowl resonated wonderfully. (A pretty knob could be turned and glued over the screw.) This method worked like a charm, kept its tune, and was easy to adjust. It could be quite well hidden under a recessed rim.



Photo 2. The author's Sounding Bowl with three strings.

Tobias tells me it would sound even better if I perfected the spiral section curve that he uses to give the richest resonance. His kit contains instructions on shaping this curve. You might invent other methods for holding and tuning strings. Tobias uses specially made stainless steel threaded pins like you might find on a dulcimer, but with knurled tops for wooden thumb grips rather than key turned square heads. Again, he says that this is a visual issue, feeling that his pieces should look as beautiful as they sound. (These special pins are available from Tobias as part of a kit that includes step-by-step instructions and the fine copper tubing mentioned above.)

On thin walled bowls, threaded couplers or rigging couplers soldered to the string wire, etc. might work too. BUT, be careful as "too thin" could mean breaking the bowl as strings are tightened. You can Google "violin making" and the like for more ideas.

While a violin peg has a 2 degree taper, I simply drilled the peg holes and twisted the rotating drill to make a tapered hole fitting my pegs. In these cases the strings ran over the bowl's rim into small holes in the pegs. Again, tightening and plucking gave me 3 different and pleasing notes. They do calm the soul and relax a person!

Visit Tobias' websites for more information on copyrights, to contact him for a kit, etc. You can make a better sounding bowl than this first fast try of mine! Have fun and improve your meditating. (It is OK to

make a bowl for yourself, but not to sell. Give credit to Tobias Kaye and send commercial business his way like a good sport.)

With permission of Tobias Kaye, the World Master of Sounding Bowls, here are photos of some of his remarkable pieces of work with captions supplied by Tobias:



Photo 3. This Holly Sounding Bowl, about 10" diameter by maybe 4.1/2" has red and green pegs to reflect the leaf and berry color of the tree. A wider fan would have given a better tuning but the shape arising as the wet wood dried is very pleasing to me, Tobias Kaye.



Photo 4. Wild grain gives a better resonance as well as better looks. This one in Ash shows the carved underside that is randomly rippled by hand leaving five little feet. 9"x2"



Photo 5. The strings pass over the wall at one end only in the simpler models. The steel tuning pins have maple thumb heads fitted shaped and stained so that the tuning system is part of the overall sculpture of the piece.



Photo 6. Hard maples gives a good tone this rippled one (*Acer PseudoPlatanus*) is about 13" across x 2.3/8ths dee . The seven strings are tuned to a pentatonic scale and go through the wall in copper tubes at both ends.

It is fitting to close with the following feedback from just one of Tobias' many purchaser/users:

"The (multiply handicapped) children I work with can respond to the Sounding Bowl and even initiate musical sounds in a way that is impossible with nearly any other instrument. When I first got the Sounding Bowl one of the boys who had not responded to anything else before spent the entire session touching, feeling then playing the Sounding Bowl." - Julie H. music therapist, Warwickshire. Using a 12 string cross strung style. - Julie H. music therapist, Warwickshire. Using a 12 string cross strung style.