

## **Simon interviews: Michael Colley – Instrument Maker**

Simon: On this lovely rainy afternoon I'm sat in Corlay with Michael Colley.

Michael: Hello there, yes.

Simon: Who er is um, we're installed actually in Carpe Diem which is er appropriately named bar. Er. Yeah, Michael, you're an instrument maker.

Michael: I am indeed.

Simon: But you are an instrument maker of a particularly unusual instrument.

Michael: Um, yes. A very unusual instrument. It's probably one of the only real true acoustic instruments invented this century.

Simon: Wow, that's quite a.....

Michael: Most instruments nowadays are digital.

Simon: Yeah.

Michael: Or they have some kind of plug-in component.

Simon: Yeah.

Michael: This is completely acoustic. Two sheets of metal.

Simon: Right.

Michael: Fixed together and tuned by hand to make quite harmonious, unusual sound that is becoming very, very, very popular. You will hear it in er documentaries, and in intros and outros, films and advertisements.

Björk's percussionist also is a player of these instruments. The original name of the instrument that I make was called the Hang.

Simon: The Hung.

Michael: Hang. It's pronounced hung because it is in the dialect of Bernese Bern, er in Switzerland, and their word hung, spelled H, A, N, G - h, a, n, g - means hand.

Simon: Right.

Michael: And it means you play these instruments with your hands.

Simon: Right. So just to cut to the chase, for people who aren't familiar with these kind of percussion instruments, describe one for me.

Michael: I shall hold one and describe it. It is two hemispheres of er a particular steel, which has been through a treatment called nitriding, which adjusts the tonality of the metal. It doesn't sound so tinny, it sounds more ceramic. And it's a a thermic treatment of over 600 degrees Celsius with the gas, a ammonia, ammonia gas with the oxygen just removed. The metal is put into the ovens, the shells as I call them, they're called the shell or cock, which is half of an instrument. One half has a lump sticking in the middle, and the other half has a hole.

Simon: Right. Now I'm going to describe it physically to people. it looks like a giant er sherbert spaceship.

Michael: Yes.

Simon: In black. Or it looks like a very small spaceship from a 1950s sci-fi movie. It's beautiful. And it really does look like the classic shape of a spaceship. Doesn't it?

Michael: It does, indeed.



Simon: Even the the little indentations that look like windows. So tell me about how these, how did these come about?

Michael: Um. The original maker was a tuner of steel pans. If people are familiar with steel pans.

Simon: Like a Jamaican?

Michael: Not Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago.

Simon: Right. Trinidad and Tobago.

Michael: They come from, yeah, that area. Er, leftover barrels after the war, were used by the locals in Trinidad and Tobago, and they hammered them and made them sound musical. And that was invented, getting on for 100 years now. Well, almost 100 years. In fact it's probably about the 100th anniversary since since the first real steel bands where groups would play and you play those with sticks.

Simon: Yeah.

Michael: They're like inverted barrels, basically. Um, but the percussionist, named Reto Weber, German guy, he went along to the steel pan makers and said, it'd be great if I could play one of these on my lap. And I could play, you know, both sides or or it could be more portable um. So the the inventor, Mr Felix Rohner, he did some experimentation. And he's he commenced with with a huge version of what we're now looking at and it had all of the notes like a piano all 12 notes that we use in the western um music scales. Unlike in India, where they got 22 shrutis. So, you know, here we use 12 notes and that is it. All music is made of 12 notes, or in fact 11 because the 12th is a repeat of the first. So each one of these instruments cannot compose all notes. So each one has a particular gam or scale. Er musical scale. They can be different pitches, they can be very high,

very low. Er they can be melancholic, major, minor, er Indian um scales, er pentatonic scales, hexatonic scales. Anything you want, basically, but within a fixed scale. And so that's what gives it its overall resonance, is because it's set in a fixed scale, all the harmonics that are tuned to each one of these zones, as I call them, have three separate frequencies tuned. As I'll give you an example. Here is the note A ... a three. If I touch one side of the note ... and I tap just there, you hear the octave - fundamental ... octave

... But on the same note, tuned to the sides is what's called the compound fifth, which is the fifth above the octave .... Three notes. ... That's just from one note.

Simon: Right.

Michael: So for each sound, there's no one place to tap it, it can be anywhere. And the more to the sides, the more you hear the fifth. ... The more to the long axis, the vertical axis, the more you hear the octave.

Simon: Hm.

Michael: That's a little example of one that's not quite tuned yet. Er, on the other side, add notes to the bottom. And you can tune the hole ... you can use it as a gudu. There are little tricks that you can play with it. You can use it like a real spaceship.

Simon: To anyone familiar with the Hammond organ will recognise that Leslie effect.

Michael: Yes.

Simon: Also um an invention of the, when? 50s? 40s I think.

Michael: Yes. But that's not an instrument.

Simon: Well actually the Hammond was invented in the 20th century.

Michael: 20th yes. This is 21st century.

Simon: O. Ah, right.

Michael: This is 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Simon: I'm forgetting that we're in, yeah. So OK. This is in fact, because also, yeah.

Michael: 2001 was the original.

Simon: Wow, OK.

Michael: I was a player of the original instruments, um well for the last 20 years. And then in 2007/8, there came the first copy, shall we say?

Simon: Right.

Michael: Or homage to, or or version of. Lots of people tried to make a similar sounding instrument. And they failed.

Simon: Right.

Michael: But because people had heard this this sound, if you've ever heard it, if you've ever seen it, you've ever seen one of these instruments or heard one of these instruments, you want one.

Simon: Yeah.

Michal: Like straightaway, you just want one. But they're not cheap.

Simon: No. A lot of people may have come across these on the street.



Michael: Yes.

Simon: They seem to be, they seem to be very popular with buskers.

Michael: Indeed.

Simon: Um, where else might people see them? Has anyone put them into an orchestra or anything like that?

Michael: There is a chap named Manu Delago. He's classed as probably the most famous, well the the generic name now, hang is trademarked by the original fabricators. So now there is a name generic name. It's called handpan.

Simon: Okay.

Michael: I have a brand and mine is called Aciel, which is a a mixture of two words - Acier, which means steel in French, and Ciel, which means sky in French.

Simon: Yeah.

Michael: So I've mixed the two words Aciel. This one ... sounds to me awful because it's not in tune.

Simon: Yeah.

Michael: It mee needs a little work.

Simon: Yeah.

Michael: But if I play one that's probably slightly better in tune, virtually the same scale but just a little bit tighter, a little bit cleaner

Simon: Beautiful. Now that





Michael: That sounds clear.

Simon: Absolutely. Well, why don't you play us out with something. It's an absolute joy to listen to this and thank you very much for joining us at Spotlight on Brittany.

Michael: No problem.

Simon: Yes, let's play us out with something