

# The Short and Remarkable History of Sounding Bowls

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## What is a Sounding Bowl?

Sounding Bowls are round wooden stringed instruments. Intentionally a bridge between sculpture and music, their form is a balance between visual beauty and musical function. They may vary in string numbers from one to many, have no frets and are played on open strings, these are typically bronze wound steel guitar style strings. Tuning is by thumb-key to a variety of scales or modes selectable by the user.



*A typical Sounding Bowl in Walnut*

## Unique in World Music

I First made a Sounding Bowl in 1986 and as copyright holder am still the sole maker worldwide, Sounding Bowls are identified by expert historians as unique in world music, principally because the strings pass within the instrument rather than over the top. Still under continuous development, six separate types have emerged as meeting the needs of users. The original idea for the instrument arose as an image during a meditation whose intended subject was unconnected with the questions about sound in sacred form that I had been working on. A number of Sounding Bowls are used by performers, a few are in private and public art collections but the majority of the 350 made to date (April 2012) are in therapeutic use.

## Sounding Bowls in Therapeutic Use

These placements can be divided into state run institutions in various countries and smaller private clinics around the world.

The NHS employs only qualified Music Therapists who are registered with the Health Professions Council. Music Therapy is common now in community, child and adolescent and forensic psychiatric settings, palliative care hospices, learning disabilities services and within schools and special educational settings.

An important aspect of music therapy is the non-verbal communication in which the therapist may attune and help the patient to safely access and work through emotions when making music. In this way feelings may be safely felt even if the issues are too painful to talk about. This is a skilled art and the power of music is such that if not carefully moderated emotional overload can occur. Clients often have a perception that they are “not musical” or they may have negative memories of school music. Careful consideration is given in how to introduce people to the instruments when they may have no prior musical experience.

Feedback from such placements has from the very first in 1991 been extraordinary. Phrases like “...no other instrument has produced such results” and “I can no longer imagine working without it” became commonplace, along with “I can’t get the staff to put it down, let alone the patients”.



*Rampton Hospital's 10 string*

**In special education** the specific most valuable asset has been that children who take no interest in their environment will frequently take an interest in a Sounding Bowl. Numerous therapists have written or spoken to me to say that young clients who, over several sessions were extremely hard to engage then took a *spontaneous* interest in a Sounding Bowl.

**In hospice care** the feedback has centred around lifting a mood and making contact. Specific reports have included eliciting response from a patient in coma. While slipping into coma the patient had continued to respond to the therapist's song but once deeper the only thing that elicited change in expression, breathing or movement was the sound of a Sounding Bowl. Other feedback specifics have been about rapid exit from deep depression in a hospice patient. Typical feedback centres around an ability to make meaningful contact with patients that had previously chosen not to engage (even up to a 100% turnaround); Involving family (who are often too frightened by the whole process surrounding the dying of a loved one to engage with the loved one themselves); and opening hearts in a deeper way than other instruments have succeeded in doing.

Hospice chaplains have also sometimes chosen to keep a Sounding Bowl in the chapel where it seems to assist some people in finding some of that inner peace that can be so hard to find at this point in life.

**In psychiatric treatment** the focus has been on touch in combination with sound. The shape of a Sounding Bowl combined with the tones being felt in the wood seems to encourage patients to hold the instrument closely, even cuddle it, seeming to "*evoke feelings of comfort and care, often unspoken needs of struggling patients*" as a music therapist in Sweden put it. Particularly strong feedback has come from the work of Stella Compton Dickinson in forensic psychiatric treatment settings. Stella works with adolescent boys, with women in medium secure treatment and in high secure treatment with adults who have severe and enduring mental illness, or severe personality disorders and who have committed offences. This is an extremely difficult area of work which demands robust standards of training and personal development. Positive results have come from a balanced application of techniques in carefully controlled clinical settings.

Stella explains that no single instrument or technique is without potential contra-indications and inappropriate methods can risk re-activation of old traumas. "*Sounding Bowls have become core essentials to the work*", accelerating the building of a trusting therapeutic relationship and the patients' ability to express themselves musically. Stella maintains that the Sounding Bowl facilitates "*a connection and a depth of work that is unique and quite often not possible with other instruments.*" She is a leading therapist in this field and is

now developing research in which she is recommending the use of the Sounding Bowl as a central resource in a music therapy treatment protocol. She says "*... the Sounding Bowl continues to have beneficial effects in emotional regulation when other instruments have not made an impact.*" On first acquiring one for her department she wrote to say. "*I am deeply moved by the impact of 'Sheila the Healer' as our clients have christened the Sounding Bowl. 'She' has taken the therapy into dimensions beyond formal music therapy and into that of vibrational healing; The tactile and aesthetic qualities as well as the sheer beauty of the sound and of the instrument itself have led to deeper levels of emotional engagement than were previously possible. This really helps to facilitate the therapeutic process*"

Since this article went to press Stella Compton Dickinson has conducted a Patient Select Clinical Trial at Rampton Hospital and at time of writing, (*Spring 2012*) is publishing a report showing clear indications of results from Sounding Bowl use better than any other



*Pentatonic scales suit young people*



*Delicate forms can touch tender places*

instrument. Rampton and some other forensic psychiatric care institutes are now beginning to build on this work.

Work with all age groups has regularly underlined the unique value and importance of this remarkable instrument for deep psychological healing, even in cases where movement of the condition may have reached a plateau years ago.

A collected report from a therapist in Gloucestershire working with both teenagers with multiple challenges including behavioural difficulties and with adults with severe learning difficulties is available on the [website](#). Zambodhi Schlossmacher is a Eurythmy therapist but finds that the Sounding Bowl is now occupying the great majority of her working time because of the valuable effects it has with the clients.

**All of these above comments** come from work undertaken by trained music therapists within a controlled clinical setting and it should not be presumed that the mere possession of a Sounding Bowl will replicate the results.



*Remarkable healing effects.*

### Sounding Bowls in Healing Use

Healers of various persuasions also use Sounding Bowls. Feedback here has been varied but all positive. Some have spoken of a 'Being' that accompanies Sounding Bowls at all stages, both in their making and in their use assisting healing and development at all stages. Others have described White Light pouring out of a Sounding Bowl over assembled meditators bringing individual healing, and telling how this sight was confirmed by independent witness. Descriptions of the effects include frequent references to opening all the chakras at once and visible sound flowing down through them.

Meditants and self-healers are typically more shy about specific feedback yet some have described new ground in meditation being opened up or steps taken in self healing as part of a wider set of initiatives.

Feedback from such work shows good results not dependant on clinical settings but coming from "ordinary" people achieving extra-ordinary results for themselves and for others.

### Reliable results?

The scientist in us wants to see real results based analyses and tends to believe that if a machine confirms these results we are on to something. But it is also important that we use our own personal senses, and do not rely on external authority to tell us what is healthy and what is not. One does not need a machine to confirm the real and visible changes Sounding Bowls can trigger. It is extremely common to notice that a person takes a deep breath on first sight of one, or each time one is put into their hands. It is also common for their face to flush and their eyes sparkle. These are commonly understood as simple physiological evidence of good health and their appearance can signal the beginning of a change towards health of body or mind/soul.



*Moving the Heart*

The movement of the blood from the heart to the periphery and back, then from the heart to the lungs and back is the basis of life and health in the body. These two circulations cross in the heart. That this movement is intimately related to, deeply influenced by how we think and feel is now well documented. It may be seen without controlled laboratory conditions how enthusiasm influences warmth and how we may blush when our emotions are touched. It is not rocket science to equate our fears with a damping down of our breathing and

circulation and to see that anything that allows these two more freedom and depth results in increased health of body and mind.

That sound and music can be used in helping people to get well and have an influence on this level as well as on deeper levels is now clear. The best way to apply these tools remains a question. Quite apart from any clinical trials Sounding Bowls have been part of, for many people it becomes even more interesting when a high proportion of highly trained and experienced professionals say they can no longer imagine working without a Sounding Bowl. This is clearly considered by some as of real supplementary value to any measurements of specific changes in bodily matters. In the three specific areas of music therapy described above the professionals are used to gauging usefulness of a technique through responses in and from the person as a whole, (moods, behaviour, clinical measurements and opinions) and not reducing their measurements of success to one numeric indicator.

For me the crisis we face in our present time is connected with our relationship with matter and spirit and the soul element that flows between them. This has been variously characterised as concern for the whole rather than the parts; attention to the quality rather than the quantity; or awakening to the causal elements of reality. The problem lies in this conundrum: That *the very nature of spirit is that it cannot be defined*, set against this; Our definition based, scientific approach to understanding the world has proven very fruitful in very many fields. The way forward must be to appreciate the value of both, to seek repeatable, assessable results that do not rely purely on numerical definition. A new approach, yet one already inherent in some practices whose acceptance that some things lie outside definition tends to alienate those seeking quantifiable facts. Statistical analysis has tended to throw a rope bridge over this divide, yet more is needed.



*Form, Colour, touch and Sound  
in harmony*

Sound healing, like so much else is accessible to the 'measure and quantify' approach. Specific tones, specific wave forms affecting specific parts of the body. Adopting this as the primary modality seems too similar to the practice of the last hundred years or so, refining active ingredients out of wholeness for a more specific and intense effect. This approach has proven records of efficacy but sidesteps that most difficult question:

**What is health, other than a mere absence of symptoms?**

If we really wish to 'heal into wholeness' we need to start with an image of the whole human being and allow that image to guide our progress. Reductionist thinking will only create partial answers. Sounding Bowls come from a world view in which the whole Human Being, Body, Life, Soul and Spirit is an integral part of the spiritual/physical fabric of all existence. Their role is to open up possibilities for the human spirit to heal it's situation on all or any level.

**The Making of Sounding Bowls**

Four levels of making are important to their maker:

☹ **The body** of the Sounding Bowl is made from wood carefully selected from local trees. Only certain parts of certain species have the potential to resound as required. Local trees have a relationship to local people that rainforest woods do not.

☹ **The form** of the Sounding Bowl arose through careful searching for shapes that combined opposing aspects such as visual lightness and visual warmth. An acoustic response was noticed in these shapes that turned out to



*Meditative attention to detail*

relate to sacred geometry, specifically the Fibonacci or Golden spiral. Fibonacci number sequences are the basis of all life patterns. A geometrical process of enfolding and unfolding the 'Golden Spirals' that result from these numbers shows a match with the curves that gave resonant response. There is also a known relationship of these curves with amplification of sound, reflected in their use in wind instruments, pre-electrical hearing aids etc. Fibonacci number sequences and their related curves are also an integral part of the human body. Every limb, the chambers of the heart, the curve of muscle movement are all related to these fundamental patterns and the eye perceives as beautiful shapes such as the sunflower, sea shell and Greek temple that are also formed from these sequences. The strings pass through the inside.

☺ **The process** of making a Sounding Bowl is not industrialised. Every major part is carefully hand made in a workshop where work is a process that honours the moment as much as the result and does not damage one in pursuit of the other. One might equate this with the soul of the instrument.

Accomplished musicians are mostly aware of a 'Being' nature to their instruments and regard music making as a co-operative exercise, most makers of high end wooden musical instruments practice a balance between process and result, ultimately this makes work a form of worship which in turn opens the door to...

☺ **Spirit**, that indefinable element that may or may not choose to accept an opened door and abide in the space. In this case the space around a Sounding Bowl. I know no other way of understanding the extraordinary effects that Sounding Bowls are reported to have than to consider that healers may be describing a reality of some sort when they report the presence of a Being seen as supportive of both the maker/making process and the player/healing process.



*The experience of playing a Sounding Bowl is different to any other instrument.*

There may of course be specific frequencies involved, there may be some relationships between being exposed to sound that has been amplified through growth-pattern Fibonacci spirals and growth processes in the brain, heart or neurological system, possibly assisting in re-growth of trauma wounded subtle pathways, I do not know. There may be any number of such quantifiable relationships but to my mind they are part of a process and we will not understand the horse by analysing it's hairs. If there is a future for the Human as Being, if there is to be a future for the social organism of Humanity I believe we need to start feeding the horse and learning to ride it in place of merely defining it's parts.

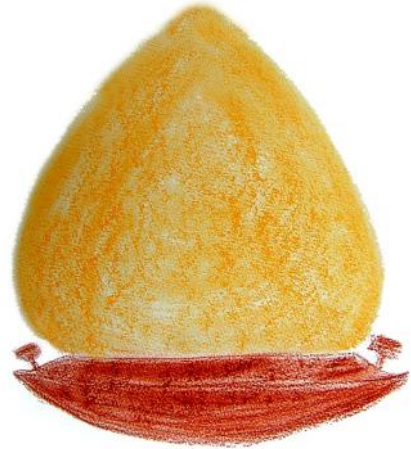
### Some Possible Reasons for Healing Effects

**There are specific factors** that could be connected with the remarkable, instant reaction that so many (not all) people experience with Sounding Bowls.

One lies in how sound from an open reflecting amplifier is experienced. Most stringed instruments have a 'box' amplifier. Guitars, violins, even the harp have closed resonant chambers to increase sound levels. Sounding Bowls achieve amplification purely on the resonant properties of the curve. This means that the sound is greater in front of the instrument than behind. There is a specific area in which the sound is most strongly heard. One can move ones head this way and that in front of the instrument and, even with no string sounding one can hear ones voice, or environmental sound reflected into ones ears. Moving attentively one can find edges to this area and map out a sort of bud-shape in front of the instrument within which the sound is most noticeable. The key thing is that any sound

reflected in this space is beautified. Passing cars are less harsh, the human voice becomes musical, hearing one's own breathing becomes a tender experience. My feeling is that this experience, mostly happening unconsciously is one factor in opening the heart and assisting healing. Part of a traumatised state is experiencing oneself as negative. The Sounding Bowl feeds back a positive experience of self through subtle sounds and confirms that experience by surprising people with how easily they can make music. The sound of Sounding Bowls has been described by top string performers as "As close to the ideal of a plucked string sound as I have ever heard" and strikes all hearers with its pure and gentle tone. Combine this with their beautiful shape, (the circle and the pure straight line of tensed string are also sacred forms) to find factors that may contribute to the remarkable healing effects reported from Sounding Bowls.

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*A kind of Bud-shape of  
Resonant response*