



IN CONVERSATION WITH JOHN WOOLRICH // PROFOUND SOUND 2020

Olivia: Could you tell me a little bit more about your part in Profound Sound, how did the relationship start with the Kirkman Quartet?

John: I used to go in and teach workshops at the Royal Academy of Music. This Saturday too for example, I've got the Echéa Quartet who are also from the Royal Academy, there's just endless wonderful groups of 20-21 year old players. And one of the things about the United Kingdom is that it's a small country and the money for the arts has shrunk, if you're a young musician and in a young group it's quite hard for you to establish a career. I've been a festival director in various places down the years and one of things that interested me was how to provide the first rung in the ladder for young groups because it's hard, you leave college at 21 and so on. Both quartets that are coming this weekend are emerging groups, started from the Academy, to have gone on to get a fellowship with the RA- this is about just giving them an opportunity to do a bit of playing.

O: And they agreed! Are they excited?

J: Yes I think so, I'm rehearsing with them this week, I've been in contact with the Japanese cellist Yurie.

O: I think the venue is fitting for it as well?

J: Now I'm living in Folkestone and absolutely loving putting on things, because wherever I've lived I've started a festival or something. I'm a compulsive festival organiser. Folkestone is really interesting, Customs House has got a really good sound, very small. So, you know if you do something which is too successful you can't always pack in the crowd, which isn't always needed.

... The venues here are sort of ad hoc, unexpected, raw spaces, and I haven't done anything in Café Eletro yet and it looks perfect- little stage, little bar, and just the atmosphere feels really really good.

O: I like the term you used *raw*.

J: I've always been drawn to buildings that have been used for other things. ... I love places like home for example too, because it's just a friendly meeting place, even when it's empty I love it- I was there for a quiz night recently. It's all wonderful.

... Anyway, yes, Raw...

... New spaces, new concert halls for examples are wonderful but there's nothing in the walls if you know what I mean, they can be beautiful but no life has been led there. Churches can sometimes be the right place for a certain type of event, they're spaces that people have got married in and had funerals... and I don't believe in the supernatural but I love the idea of people's lives leaving traces in the walls.

O: Like a phalimphsest.

J: I don't believe in any of this stuff, but people talk about stone diaries, the conversation being recorded...

O: Like in whispering chamber at St Pauls.

J: Yes but what it means is when you say 'sshhh don't shout', that's what's recorded, because when they recorded the sounds on wax cylinders, that's the sound that they picked up...

O: What kinda sounds?

J: Well you know wherever you've lived, people's traces, people's lives have gone into the walls. Like Customs House for instance, I wonder who's passed through there?

O: It's a place of constant transition.

J: I like the thought of having music done in somewhere where people have done things, small point but I like that, you make music in spaces which aren't purpose built for that.

...And as a composer, as I am one, and the Eletō thing has my music in it, I like the idea, as I get pieces done abroad and so on, festivals etc, but I like the idea of my music being played where I live and maybe even played where I can have a cup of coffee downstairs. It's like the idea of being an artist in a place rather than in the world. Because we live in a parish, it's a terrible word, parochial, like it's a bad thing- but we're all parochial, because you can't live everywhere unless you've got a helicopter and loads of houses.

O: It's great to feel a sense of home & to feel grounded... to know where you're going and where you're coming back to.

J: I know musicians who spend 2/3 of the year in hotels. Just playing, eating, sleeping.

...The more I can do things here, the more *I am here*.

O: Going on that, has what you're wanting to do now, musically, changed? Has your perspective changed?

J: It's changed as an organiser of music, because I've been doing for a long time either working for festivals where people put up posters and I just come up with the ideas, but coming back to Folkestone has brought me back to sweeping up the floor and putting up the chairs, and I've just got a different sense of promoting music. The composing, curating, teaching- it's all creative, it's all one.

....writing music you select, you choose things and you organise things, you make a pattern with them, and ditto with a concert, you choose the musicians, the venue, the time of day, whether you have wine. It's contributing to making something, just like writing a String Quartet. I'm always interested in what's played and who plays it, which is what you'd expect but I'm increasingly interested in the town and the people & the audience now, I'm finding it fascinating that whole world of not exactly giving them what they want but thinking about who's here, and making a connection between what I put on, the audiences- 'audiences' as I think there are different demographics in Folkestone- I find that very inspiring.

... And as a composer, I've written a lot of music in my life, throughout my life, mostly I've been free-lance, I can spend a couple of years doing something, so at times I've done a lot of composing and not so much festival organising, and not much teaching, and here composing has not suffered, but I've been putting in an enormous amount of energy in thinking about music in Folkestone and raising money, getting arts council grants, and so on, filling in forms, having meetings, talking to people... which I've loved, and the composing has become sort of second place, but that could change in a couple of years.

... So I don't know what effect living here has had on the music in effect, what I've been doing as a composer is writing short string quartets and I've got really interested in that. I've got this big project which is called the book of inventions, google it, got a website for it. I've always wanted to write short pieces, a lot of them are written as 12 / 10 minute pieces, and I've been going out engaging with String Quartets, ones in America, ones in Germany and so on, encouraging them to play these pieces. I think one of the pieces that the Kirkman's are doing was premiered last year at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, by a young American quartet and then another... and so, that's my interest, in writing small pieces with always the same instrumentations. And then pieces have been going out into the world, one new quartet has just been done in Moscow. And the Sacconi quartet who have a residency in Folkestone did one in the autumn and they're taking it to Italy in the summer. I've been concentrating on this artistic project, trying to sell the idea and see if I can make it spread.

O: What inspires you now? I guess that changes towards what format you're concentrating on?

J: The real answer is everything, I remember reading an article asking how many productions German theatre director, Peter Stein, put on in a year. And he said one. And the interviewer asked, what do you do in the rest of the time? He said, well I read books, meet friends, have drinks, watch movies- and the implication is that, as

an artist you're affected by everything, you're affected by the people you meet, the books you read, the whole thing, and if you're lucky, you sort of open a door to your imagination.

O: You're affected by everything, whether you want something or not, you don't even have to go seeking for it?

J: Yes and if you're an artist, a writer, an actor, a poet, is that you are working all the time, you don't have to be at the desk, you can be creating ideas even subconsciously, ideally you're like a sponge, taking things in and squeezing it out.

O: I think as an artist you're quite receptive to those around you, which can sometimes be quite hard going especially as you are forced to be socially inclined, and sometimes you don't necessarily want to be perhaps.

J: Well yes I had my 10 years in France in isolation, I got myself a perfect place with a view of the Pyrenees and I used to go to Toulouse to get the smell of car fumes, so I'd get inspiration.

... I'd always lived in London kinda squeezing stuff out between teaching, writing pieces, I thought I'd go to France and have the time and space, lovely wine and that, and I just sat down and that's when the blank page was in front of me.

... I prefer people but you know 10 years of looking at nature, orchids and snakes, I loved every second, I don't regret living there and I don't regret living here. I don't want to say I've retired, if I was just an old man living in Folkestone I could be very lonely, because what I do is so involved with people, I find I've got this sudden circle of very interesting people around me- novelists, artists, young arts administrators, poets. And I love it, I can go back into myself, find a private place to make my own music but then I can go out, because I think the creativity about making performances and putting things on is absolutely for me. It's a question of relationships with other people, because I do a lot of programming for orchestras, as a sort of consultant, and always, I prefer to talk to someone from the orchestra. I like the idea of talking to people, and even if it's still my ideas, it's a way of having a sounding board, I love the conversation I'm having about putting things on in Folkestone.

O: It's very close knit, but at the same time, you're thinking big, feeling grounded, yet also inspired?

J: I just want to have a sort of open ended conversation just where we go- what shall we do? I want the ideas to come out of these relationships.

O: Which they are!

J: Yes, when I was offered to do something on the harbour arm, it took my breath away, to be trusted and go straight into it.

O: I think it's about the people and the place, a lot of relationships are based on friendship first here.

J: I was the artistic director of Aldeburgh festival- I was on the phone all the time and then maybe they've gone to other jobs, and what you realise is that your relationship with the festival is actually the relationship with the people, it's like when you leave university and you come back after 10 years and you realise there's no connections with the halls and the windows as they're just buildings, it's about the people.

... what I was trying to say before, as what makes Folkestone attractive to me is that you can work with people, it's the same point about stone diaries and the walls, if the people disappear and it was just the buildings, it'd be incredibly hard to do what I've done in the buildings, without the people.

O: And the relationships are so accessible.

J: In Folkestone, things move incredibly quickly, if I'm in home and I meet someone, and they run a gallery on tontine street, I can say why don't you bring an artwork to the customs house? Put an exhibition on, and it goes from there. When I was at the Almeida, I remember sitting next to the director, and he was on the phone to somebody for a long time, but we found out, and I must've said who was that? He said Woody Allen, they were talking about doing Allen's line of plays- and that's what a small organisation can do, be fleet of foot. And in Folkestone because people are nice, and there are raw, rough edged spaces, you can virtually put something on within a couple of weeks.

