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KEY:

Cannot decipher = (unclear + time code)

Sounds like = [s.l + time code]

I: = Interviewer

R: = Respondent

[Background discussion about recorder 00:00:06.1- 00:00:18.9]

I: Okay, this is Nick Cass interviewing Matt Stokes. It's the second artist's interview from the Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience project. So the questions will follow on broadly from before, along the same themes, just as we were before we started the recording – it's more a conversation about the way the project has developed, how it's changed maybe from what you started. But the themes we'll work through is the project itself and your creative practice, the process, how that's worked as a commissioner. Then thinking about this question of heritage and your thinking around that and your understating of it.

So, I guess, partly, kind of, as a record but could you just give a quick description of the project as it has been delivered, i.e. what you have produced, so just a quick description and overview of the project.

R: Yes. So the project consists of an installation in the Holy Trinity Church, which is an 8-channel audio installation – audio installation. So when you walk into the church, there are eight speakers arranged in a circle with the speakers facing out, so you'd walk around the circle of speakers. The audio on the speakers is a composition which lasts around approximately 46 minutes, which is d... initially, it was based upon a bell peal that was rung at Holy Trinity Church in 1898, which was a composition by Benjamin Annable, which was a composition of Bob Triple's, which lasted 3 hours 5 minutes long, so we've taken a quarter-peal of 46 minutes. And there are hand-bells ringing that quarter-peal exactly as would have been rung at Holy Trinity. And then built upon that is a composition of other instruments and vocals which in some way speak about the history and development of Holy Trinity Church and the East End in various forms, from the establishment of Holy Trinity through to today.

I: **Fantastic.**

R: It took a bit long, didn't it?

I: **No, I mean, it's useful to have that overview. So I guess I just want to unpick a bit about the development from the perspective of your creative practice and your thinking. So from the proposal stage to the duration of the project you just described, has it changed at all? How has the process of your engagement of the project....? Has it changed is the simple question?**

R: Yes, it did, actually – quite radically, I thought. Because, initially, when I'd made the proposal, what I had envisaged was that the composition would quite closely follow the original Bob Triple's composition by Benjamin Annable which would be transposed... as well as being played on hand-bells, would be transposed to other instruments and voices. And those instruments and voices would be following quite strictly the peal composition, so the 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8 bells in whatever order they were bring played. That, I think, when I made the proposal, is what I saw happening. But I know at that stage it's always going to be... [Laughs]. I'm proposing something where there's going to be quite a lot of process involved because there will be no... I didn't have a composer I was working with at that stage, which ended up being composers, as opposed to a single composer. I hadn't started the research into what the content might be, so any lyrical content, I didn't know what that was going to be at that stage.

So that's how I saw it at that point in time, which probably would have ended up, if I had taken that route, as being sounding quite minimal, I suppose quite rigid in many ways. Then through the process of talking more with Amanda Gerry at the Churches Conservation Trust and probably getting to know her a little bit and her relaying her experiences of working at Holy Trinity and with the local community and local area, then starting the research, so meeting the local residents in the area as well as doing more formal archival research. Then finding the composers I might work with, which ended up being Marty Longstaff and Jordan Miller.

I: **Did you know them before?**

R: No, not at all. No. Again, what I thought would happen at the beginning was that I'd probably work with someone who had a more traditional background in composition. Well, when I say more traditional, more classical traditional background in composition. Whereas, what happened, Marty and Jordan are both from pop backgrounds, so completely different. [Laughs]. So their grounding is not in structuring a classical piece of music, what they make – and Marty mentioned this few times, and I sort of had to slow them down – is that Marty wanted everything to happen in 3 ½ minutes, radio edit style. And it was a constant reminder that, "Actually, no, this is 46 minutes that we have, so we'd have to use that time and not rush things. Anyway, that's jumping ahead but it became a very different piece and I think particularly, on making the decision of working with Marty and Jordan was really important because they're both Sunderland born and bred. That's where they're from, that's what they know, that's where they live. They're very attached to Sunderland and actually that was a very important factor, I think, because they also have their own local network as well. In particular, Marty

has a broader network through his own music as a Lake Poet but they were well connected with the local music scene. So in terms of how the composition might develop and who we might get involved to play or sing in the piece, they had a great network of people to draw upon. Again, that was really important because then I wasn't just starting cold, and actually, everyone, mostly, where possible, we tried to use people who were very local. And I think that was another important factor in terms of building up, from the Church Conservation Trust's point of view – building up the audience for the piece for a building that has no audience, essentially. So it was trying to build a community who were behind the work and supportive of the work prior to existing, and that's where the Soup Suppers kind of followed; the idea behind the Soup Suppers was to try and do that.

I think the Soup Suppers helped do that through the piece, you know, before the piece existed. They helped build this community by the work through organising these very informal, friendly occasions where I would talk to people about what the work is, what was influencing the work, i.e. the research behind the work, how it was going to be divided up. So the composition was divided up into 5 sections which had historical links to the area and the church. So I would talk about that research even before we knew how it might sound. So at the very first one, Marty and Jordan gave me some sound files, some really early sketches of things of how they thought it could sound, and actually, it sounded nothing like those initial sketches. But that was really nice to be able to open up that process. And that first Soup Supper was quite nice, being able to say, "I haven't heard this...." Coming from conversations about what the composition might sound like, so I was hearing it for the first time at the same time that everyone else was hearing it, then we chatted about it briefly afterwards, going, "Oh, you know, we quite like that but we don't like that bit." So that was very positive in terms of the Soup Suppers.

I: And how did you meet them? How did you find them?

R: I found them through... Actually, Jordan was one of the very first people I met through Amanda, because Jordan has a music studio very close by, so actually, we mostly recorded it in his music studio. Again, which wasn't initially on the cards because I thought I was going to use a Newcastle studio – Blank Studios.

I: I think I remember talking about that.

R: Yes, working with Sam Grant to record, but as it turned out, yes, Jordan had a studio close by. And that's how I met him initially, it was Amanda saying, "Oh, there's this person close by, he makes music and has this recording studio." And then Marty, Amanda had also mentioned him a few times, but other people had mentioned him as well because he's a fairly well-known figure as a young musician in the pop realm, a kind of singer/songwriter kind of realm. He's a well-known kind of wordsmith. So he predominantly wrote the lyrics and then came up with the sketch of the tunes and then we'd be working over the top of the bell-peal, then Jordan would expand the initial sketch tunes. Yes, then when I contacted Marty about working on the piece, just through serendipity, he said, "Actually, I'd much rather team up with someone and that would be Jordan because he has a studio close by and probably he'd be better to work on the composition and I'd work on the lyrics." So it was all sort of a natural circle.

I: So that kind of goes back to actually what was needed to develop it from the ground up and that kind of network so that's really interesting. There's a couple of other questions about the way it developed but I want to ask this question while I remember as I was thinking about it a lot yesterday, and with the conversation with Amanda Gerry. But the Soup Suppers, the negotiations and the social aspect of the project, how much of the artwork, integral to what is the fine artwork, how do you think of what the artwork is?

R: I mean, I saw the Soup Suppers initially as more being about well, who the audience was for the final piece, because it doesn't operate in the way that maybe a lot of other heritage buildings do that are open to the public and are well-known. It's very much a closed building and has been since the late 80s. so really, that was always the idea for me, behind the Soup Suppers – a way of trying to develop the audience and trying to develop a kind of network behind the piece. So the piece really is the sound installation and the Soup Suppers are more a consequence of the idea behind the final piece. But it was also a way of trying to potentially open up and create attachments with people who might work on the project as well, or who might input into the project. So the people who came along to the Soup Suppers were people I was meeting along the way or potentially who were interested in getting involved in working and playing on the piece, or singing or whatever.

But I'd say most of the people who came, I'd already met with or probably already had a conversation with them about them getting involved in the piece and then said yes. So it was I suppose just helping to underscore their involvement.

I: Yes, it's interesting because Amanda Gerry, in terms of her perspective from the church, has said that the development of the project and the audience has been fantastic. The ability that you have to navigate the relationships between those people and the church and those different constituents has been really fundamental to the success of this project, so it is interesting to then think about that aspect for you, the relational part of the work or is it actually part of the work and getting it off the ground and developing the audience for it?

R: Yes, I was very conscious of that from the start. In some ways, it was "how's this going to work if you just create a piece of work and put it in the space?" it's not going to have any attachment to the people surrounding the Holy Trinity Church. How are we going to get people in to see it? I think I mentioned this, in the start, the way I often lead projects is starting with the people, the audience being the people involved then who they are friends with or their relations or families in the local areas – the sort of trickle effect and growing out from there as to who the audience is. Then outside of that being the people who are more the kind of random visitors who are just in the area.

I: Yes, so we did talk about that in the last interview. I think also we had a conversation earlier about focus groups. I think focus groups are really useful but what I'm interested in is that sense of the site itself, the people involved and that network. So I always think of staff as the first visitors.

R: I would also say as well, I think in the way the project changed, I was also aware or very conscious, I should say, of audience and potentially who the audience might be. And I suppose in the way that as an idea became “softer” is the best way to put it, rather than being this potentially quite harsh, minimal composition. Which probably, if I was being honest, as an artist, if I was to think about the future of it, maybe going outside of that site elsewhere into other environments, possibly it might have benefited me as an artist to take that approach. But in terms of the site and why I was there, actually, that idea of – which was a natural progression – but also being conscious of actually, I think it needs to change to really have a kind of... I don't want to put it in such simple terms as a “broader appeal” but kind of that's what it was.

I: **Yes, the complexity of that...**

R: I don't want to imply that I meant a kind of dumbing down because that would be the wrong approach. But I was very aware that I was like “actually, I think I maybe need to rethink this.” Because if I was to take it in the direction that I was originally looking at, I don't think it's going to work on-site. I don't think it's going to have possibly the resonance on-site, and with a local audience, initially, that maybe it should have.

I: **And is that kind of resonance about the content, about the lyrical, historical content?**

R: Not necessarily about the lyrical content. I'm talking more broadly about the feel of the piece overall. And there was the collaborative process of working with Marty and Jordan as well and how that worked, because Marty and Jordan hadn't worked with an artist before so there was quite a lot of grappling, I think, from their end of actually what my role was and their role. You know, you get into another level of complexity in that collaborative process of how I'm influencing what they're doing but then also me giving them enough space to do what they need to do without me imposing all the time. That's something else. But so I think in terms of the final composition, there were bits of it that I think really work, for me, and there's bits of it which I don't think works that well. And I sort of feel a touch uneasy... initially, I felt a touch uneasy about it but I suppose I had to step back and look at the fact that I had handed parts of it over by saying, “okay, this is a collaborative process so I need to give you two the time and space to develop parts and then see how that's working.” Then if they're really not working, then I'd try and steer them back.

I: **Don't worry if you don't want to answer this question, but thinking about those bits that really do work for you and which bits don't, can you say a little bit more about that?**

R: Yes, completely yes. Like the Vestrymen, the first section, if I was to break it simply down into the sections, I thought it worked really well because it was a great way into the piece. I think it was quite moving. And the male choir we got involved in that piece were really nice to work with. There were a few hiccups with them because we had to get them back in to re-record, which was an interesting one because we did the original recording session on early Sunday morning as

that's what they said would work for them. But then we realised it was completely the wrong –

[Phone Interruption 00:22:53.2- 00:22:58.6]

- completely the wrong time to do it because Sunday morning, voices aren't warmed up in the morning as it hasn't had time to warm up. One of them was still half-cut and they sounded ropey. And also we thought Marty was going to turn up but he was stuck somewhere, and it ended up being not a brilliant scenario so we got them back in and they were much better the second time round. Also, we had Marty there to help steer them better. So anyway, that section, the Cholera section I thought kind of worked okay, I thought that was alright. The Slum section I thought worked pretty well, and the Garths section, again, I thought that worked pretty well. The end section was the bit I felt most uneasy about – the final section. That was partly because I thought Marty and Jordan, I thought they'd rushed the final section a bit too much and actually didn't listen to a number of things that I'd said in terms of the direction it should take, and slightly went against... They kind of went down the route where I was saying, "Maybe don't go down that route." But I think overall, if I took off the final section, overall, I thought it worked. It was doing a lot of the things I hoped it would. Yes.

I: That's interesting because I'd actually found the Vestrymen part really moving. And I did find that whole sense of journey through the history in that space quite compelling, and in the walking, in the thinking and listening, and looking at the very empty church which was literally crumbling, that whole atmosphere was quite stunning, really, I thought.

R: Yes, I guess until you get in there and install it, you don't know quite how that's going to work. But I think that it did what I hoped it would do in the space, which was about reinvigorating that space and having this... Again, not to put it too simply, but having this echo of the past. But it was more about trying to invigorate that space and enliven it, and using the acoustic of that space, and really... I think that's why the sound works so well in that space because it does have a beautiful acoustic, and making the most of that in a way that possibly, working with something that was just a silent piece of work – maybe a sculptural piece of work – might not have done in the same way.

I: Yes. I'm sure I could listen to that bell-peal just for hours in there, because it was just really beautiful.

R: Even just... I mean, Marty and Jordan said this as well, I had this conversation with Marty and Jordan where, when we did record the peal, so the Durham & Newcastle Bellringers came in and recorded the peal on hand-bells, then Marty and Jordan had a bit of grappling, of, "Right, now we've got the peal, that's the basis, that's the spine of the piece," because that's always throughout the composition. They said they were trying to get their heads around it and they both fell asleep listening to it in the studio because it's really mesmerizing, and actually, I was quite happy just listening to the hand-bells on their own. I felt you could almost have just had the hand-bells on their own. But then obviously, you wouldn't have had the other layering over the top of trying to talk about what has happened

to that space and the area, and that was an essential part of it. But I know from Amanda's point of view, the Church Conservation Trust point of view, they actually just wanted as a historical record, the hand-bells on their own for their interpretation, as well as the final work. Because I think they were quite taken with the.... Amanda even said to me, "We could have maybe just done the hand-bells." I'm not too sure what it quite would have been doing if it was just the peal on its own.

I: Yes. I think it might have necessitated a lot more, bizarrely, a lot more interpretation, a lot more reading to understand the historical context of it, whereas that's embedded within the work itself and the whole sense of the bells almost marking the passing of time through each of the...

R: Yes, but also the draw, that you feel like you... You've got the hand-bell in front of you there and that's why I thought the hand-bells were really an essential part of it, is to quickly go "there are 5 sections" and that you maybe feel compelled to listen to what the next bit is or I suppose the essence of the story of what happens next. Again, simply put, but...

I: Just a really quick, stupid question – the title 'Gogmagog'?

R: Yes.

I: I mean, I've looked it up but I'm just kind of...

R: Yes, you wouldn't know... I came across it because when I was researching Benjamin Annable, it was referenced in a piece about Benjamin and Annable and he, if I remember this correctly, he either wrote a composition or a method, a peal method, that was... I think was actually never completed, that was called 'Gogmagog'. That's where I first came across it. Then immediately when I read it, I was just intrigued by the name, then I looked it up and I was like, "Oh, okay." So it's legend... Irish/English folklore, a story of this slain giant. I just thought this fitted this idea of Holy Trinity as this, you know, essentially parallel to that, that it was this incredibly influential, powerful building, which had then become this sort of decaying, crumbling building with no influence and power at all. So the folklore story sort of seemed to go parallel and fit quite well with that. Then the subtitle – Voices of the Bells – again, came from when I was doing research into Benjamin Annable and I was looking at an old copy of... it wasn't Ringing World, it was another, like an old bellringing publication. It was an advert for bells or a foundry – I think it was for a foundry, actually – which used the line 'Voices of the Bells' on that. Again, it was like this is what the piece is doing, so putting the two together... I really wanted to keep the Gogmagog title because that was the initial title to the piece, then having something... But it is a bit mysterious, then having the subtitle 'Voices of the Bells' just said a bit more of 'this is what it is'. Yes.

I: You've already touched on this a little bit. Partly the early Sunday morning recording – or not recording – but I guess, it's the obstacles, challenges that have meant the idea has changed. You've mentioned a little bit but I guess it's just any particular obstacles?

R: I think how the idea changed was a very conscious.... I was very conscious around how the idea was changing and why it needed to change, really, if it was going to work for both the building, the audiences and the Churches Conservation Trust – those three, really. I suppose I was thinking less about how that operated for me as an artist I suppose. I was more thinking that it needed to work for the site, and actually, if it had a life after that, and that's very much the same with many other projects I've worked on, because I didn't know how it was going to turn out in the early stages. Even making those decisions of how the composition might change and this idea of what I was saying before – in inverted commas – this “softening” of the piece. So that was very conscious.

The obstacles, I'd probably say the biggest obstacle was the collaborative relationship, how it was working with Marty and Jordan, what they felt their role was and their position within the piece, and what my role was. And I think quite often they were kind of forgetting it as a collaborative process so I had to keep reminding myself. It was like, “Right, I need to come in and listen to this and see if it's going the right way.” And I think sometimes... partly, they were quite excited to work on the piece and were slightly jumping ahead of themselves at times, then forgetting things, and I'd have to go, “Oh, but did we not have the conversation about this?” Or, “Do you not remember an email I sent where I mentioned this?” So initially, in relation to the Garths, they'd done an initial composition for the Garths and sent it to me. I was like, “Hmm, this is not really what I was thinking.”

Then once we'd got into the conversation about why I didn't think it was working and we talked about the jazz bands, East End jazz bands which were a really big thing and were almost mentioned during the Garths, which I put in a document “the marching bands”, they were like, “Oh, we thought you meant more like trad jazz.” “No, no, no, it was the marching...” It was in a document. Quite often, I think they were either just not quite taking everything in, so quite often it felt we were having to backtrack. Also I think because they hadn't... they'd work with musicians in a collaborative way before, but I think working with me was quite different for them. I think they definitely felt they couldn't send me something until they'd got to a point where they were happy to send it out. But what I tried to keep reminding them of was that, “Okay, I've worked with quite a lot of musicians before,” and actually, I completely understand things will be sketchy and they won't sound right, but it's good for me to have a listen to know if it's going in the direction I feel like it should be going. So I think there was a constant sort of little bit of a battle there to get that to work, and sometimes they were leaving things far too much to the last minute, because I think of their feeling of ‘oh, we can't send Matt something until we're happy with it’. Then it would feel like, “Guys, you really need to slow that down.” Again, that pop sensibility, which Marty kept saying was like, because he has to write everything in the radio edit format where within the first 30 seconds, the hooks are in there, hook-lines in there, and it was like, “No...” [Laughs]. So I think from their point of view, they found it an interesting process, they found it a different process. I think they would admit it was a bit of a battle. I think they were constantly thinking about what's Matt's role in this because he's not a musician? I don't read or write music but I was still trying to keep an overall vision of how the piece was going.

I: I guess it's interesting in talking about what they are doing as musicians and what you're doing as the artist, and this is slightly off-script but it's very relevant to the idea of creative practice. One conversation I often have with a colleague at Leeds is, what is the nature of the labour of the artist and why is it that artists are often used by – whether it's heritage organisations or museums – and one of the things I said in a slightly flippant way once was, is it because they are simply a form of itinerant labour that can be drawn on at various times. Clearly, there's a lot more to it than that, but I'm just really curious about what you feel your role...? I'm not sure what the question is but I kind of find that really fascinating, what you do in these projects is demonstrably what you are doing as the artist as opposed to what somebody else might do as a facilitator, administrator and somebody who has a creative vision but who might not call themselves an artist. Does that make sense?

R: Yes. Er... [Pause]. I think it's going in with that – from my point of view – it's initially I guess with that quite sort of broad-stroke and then trying to make sense of quite a lot of stuff going on with the heritage organisations and buildings or sites. Because it's not just the organisation, it's the site and everything that goes with it. Then I guess trying to find a path through all of that which leads to whatever the final idea is and trying to boil that down to something. Because I suppose yes, they could have maybe gone to someone... they could have gone to Marty and Jordan and said, "Can you write some songs about this?" But I think it would have ended up being very different to what we ended up with. I don't know, did that even start to go...?

I: Yes. It does definitely, because even that description about the finding a pathway through that, kind of making sense of the... of course, actually ending up with something which is a very profound path or resonant piece of artwork in that sense. It's really interesting to try and think through that.

R: I mean, you know, it was that thing of coming across, in this case, of the bell-peal and knowing from a very early stage that, "that is going to be the core of it. Everything is going to stem from this bell-peal." Because, again, from an early stage, I just knew that would be the constant – "Whatever it's describing, whatever the piece is trying to do, this will be the constant through it. And however the piece ends, whatever it ends up being, I know that the bell line, composition, will be the thing that everything hangs on." So I did keep that, obviously, it changed quite a bit from what I initially thought. I think it was sticking with that sort of vision but also seeing that actually, I couldn't do what I'd initially thought about because it wouldn't work in various forms for various reasons – both practical, conceptual, and I don't think it would have the same audience impact, at least not on the site. Again, that's a very sketchy way of trying to answer your question there.

I: No, it's such a kind of ongoing... it's more of an ongoing thinking process about...

R: I should probably say as well that the other practical thing of the piece changing, I think from the original idea, was that I think I quite quickly realised, because from the proposal stage, I talked about working with local people, not just to draw

research from but also local musicians to play, sing – you know, local choirs or whatever to perform essentially the final piece. But what I quite quickly realised that unless they were really, really, good musicians.... It was a big call to try and get them to follow the peal pattern because the peal pattern and the mathematical structuring around how a peal works is so rigid that you have to stick to that, because if you stray from it, it's not what the original is. You'd have to be so... to get it as a live take, the musicians and singers would have to be really on it to do it, probably quite experienced. Or, it would take a lot of heavy sampling to do it. Then it was a bit like, well, we're kind of heavy sampling and essentially rebuilding it or in Pro Tools or Logic or whatever it might be and it was like, I don't know if that's what I really intended. Because people we were starting to chat with were generally amateur or semi-professional – or possibly professional but with their day jobs – musicians. And it's still a big call to get them to do that. So I think the idea of well, actually, the sort of restructuring of it and getting the bell-peal as it should be, then working over the top of that in another way and building upon that, actually felt practically like it was going to work as well. So that was another reason why I...

And I had a conversation on the opening night with the bell ringers who rang that hand-bell peal, and Chris, the President of Durham & Newcastle Bellringers Association was my key contact all the time, so he conducted the hand-bell ringers, and he was one of the hand-bell ringers. And my initial conversation with him, because we had a day of sitting down, going through the exact 'this is how the composition should work', and me beginning to understand that and I wrote down – because stuff gets lost along the way – I wrote down every row, line of how the bells should be ordered for the 46 minutes, gave that to Jordan at the early stage. So, "This is the note of each bell – 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8. This is exactly the notes of those bells that hang on Holy Trinity, so this is how it would have sounded." That was our starting point and essentially that went out of the window because once the hand-bell ringers had rung the peal, we never had to refer back to that again. And the hand-bell ringers didn't need that to refer to because they knew the composition pattern.

So yes, all the work that went into that sort of disappear hand-bells, essentially, and that's how I initially talked to Chris about the piece. It was, "Okay, now I understand this. What I'm thinking is that voices will follow this and other instruments will follow this. So sometimes the hand-bells will disappear, sometimes they will come back again." Then as the piece progressed and it was obviously changing, I hadn't informed Chris that "this is what's happening to it", so I was quite nervous about what the hand-bell ringers would make of the piece at the end, and Chris, because it was obviously going to sound quite different to maybe how I'd described it. But what was nice was he kind of said, "Oh no, I completely think it was right. I think if you'd tried to follow what we were doing with other voices and instruments..." From his point of view, he said, "I don't think it would have worked."

I: Musically?

R: Musically. He said, "I think you would have been battling with that." So that was quite comforting to hear from the bell-ringers. Because I felt that he had invested

quite a bit of energy and time into sitting down for a day and organising the hand-bell ringers and everything. And the other hand-bell ringers as well were really nice. [Name], another of the bell-ringers, was extremely complimentary. He actually said something that was really, really lovely on the opening night. He said, "Oh yes, I've travelled all around the UK and Europe ringing hand-bells and church bells and working with bells." And he said, "I've never heard anything like this and I really love it." He's phoned me up a number of times since to ask me questions. And I know from the bell-ringers' point of view, they would like copies of it. They keep asking, "Can we get hold of this? We'd like to make this available to other bell-ringers in terms of how we've been involved with the project and how other people might be hearing the bells who might not normally listen to bells." So for me, that was a really nice moment. And the fact that, you know, Chris, the President of the Association as well, after they rang the hand-bells, he wrote an article for Ringing World, which was all off his own back, about the experience of ringing the hand-bells in a recording studio, in the recording session. So in Ringing World, it was a two-page article, which said...

I: Fantastic. We should have a copy.

R: Yes, I sent a copy – at least a PDF copy – to the research team. And they also logged it with the Bell Board, which is this tracking of the bell-peals that are being rung everywhere.

I: Oh really?

R: Yes. So it's logged as two recording sessions or two peals, two quarter-peals of Annable's Bob Triples in Blank Studios on whatever the date was – on 8th April at this time, in 46 minutes or whatever it was, 47 minutes.

I: That's amazing.

R: So that's officially logged now in Bellringing World. But that was great because it suddenly opened it up to the bell-ringers and that world. And I think Bellringing World also did a follow up as well, because they asked exactly the question that you asked, as the Editor, Will, got back in touch with me and said, "Oh, I feel I should probably just ask, the title 'Gogmagog', could you just expand on why you called the piece that?" So again, I just gave him what I told you. And he asked me another question, I think, in relation to what the installation might be and how it might be experienced so I just wrote something about that. And I think he was also asking the question to the readership of Ringing World, if they knew any more about Benjamin Annable's possible calling the peal after Gogmagog or this method, if any readers knew anything more. Because it's real bell-ringing history buffs who read it who would probably know.

I: That's brilliant. So watch this space for a response from them.

R: Yes. I haven't heard anything more back but...

I: Okay, there's quite a bit there. We've touched on audience, but there's two things in terms of time. It's a rich conversation but I don't want to take up hours of your time.

R: Sorry, I'll shorten my...

I: No, no, that's really important because it's definitely the nature of creative practice. So a couple of questions about your experience with a partner organisation. So we've talked a little bit about the requirements of the commissioner, so I guess, could you just sort of describe, partly, because I think you will end up answering some of the broader questions, but could you just talk about your experience of the commissioning process with Holy Trinity Church? And the bits we're interested in is their requirements, the particular individuals that might have helped, then just challenges, but that's more about the commissioning process. So the relationship with the commissioning people.

R: So my main contact was Amanda Gerry. So, really, the face of the commissioners, or the organisation, was Amanda. I had very little contact with anyone else from the Churches Conservation Trust until the very end. Amanda was really fantastic. She's very friendly, she's very open and just naturally... she's very easy to get along with. So she was really key, I think, to making things happen and when I needed extra help on things. But largely, apart from her putting me in touch with some local organisations or key local figures at the start, and assisting with the Soup Suppers, so she was key to the Soup Suppers working and functioning. She seemed very happy to just let me get on with things. She would ask how things were going but there was never any pressure from her to know what was happening. And certainly no pressure to make it go in one direction or another. In some ways, I'd say the commissioning process with the Churches Conservation Trust as an organisation was very casual. [Laughs]. Because it wasn't until towards the end... I've got to admit, towards the end I was kind of thinking 'I don't know what's happening. I'm not too sure what's happening with the launch.' Because Amanda, her contract ended at the beginning of June, if I remember rightly, then there was this sort of 'I don't know who I'm talking with now', which was Anthony and Rachel, really, from Churches Conservation Trust.

But there were long periods of silence or I felt I needed to get in touch and go, "Oh, can you just tell me what's happening around the launch because I'm not too sure who is disseminating information about the launch happening." And with Amanda going away, I was very conscious all of a sudden. It was like, "How do I access the building to install?" No one had actually talked to me about these things. So there was a last-minute thing of me saying, "I'm going to need access into the building but if Amanda is going to be away, I don't want to keep..." There was a local key-holder that was given keys – Julie – who runs the CHANCE organisation, but I didn't want to particularly be to-ing and fro-ing to collect and drop off keys every time. But Amanda was great because she just went out and cut me keys, gave me the keys. So that's why I say it felt very casual because, you know, there was a little bit of a sense of concern from me towards the end of, actually, I just didn't know what was happening around the launch and me installing and accessing things. I knew they were taking up pews and I was like, I

didn't know when that was happening as I couldn't install until that was done. Then there was, which I mentioned earlier on, the issue of – which no one could have foreseen really – but the pews coming out then asbestos was found attached to some of the pews so we couldn't access the building for a while, which knocked back me installing little bit. But essentially, I just let myself in and out of the building to install, which actually was really helpful. And particularly because things got knocked back a little with the asbestos being found and the pews being taken out.

And actually, things were a bit more last-minute than I wanted them to be with Marty and Jordan completing the final bits of composition and recording, and actually we wouldn't have been able to mix in the space until the last week – the week of the launch anyway, although we had the majority of it recorded. We couldn't have mixed it until then anyway. So actually, it didn't really affect things too much. Then during the... whilst the piece was being installed, things seem to go quite smoothly. Again, there was a little thing of how I didn't know how it was going to operate with the building being opened up and just wanting to know how that was going to work so the kit was safe, that things would get turned on and off okay on the days it was going to be open. So apart from getting something that couldn't have been foreseen – the leaky roof. [Laughs]. It's – touch wood – been operating fine, and even when there's been large audience numbers, not that that should affect things anyway, but it seems to have been running smoothly so far.

I: Yes, yes. In terms of the installation, is there anything that you were really enthusiastic about, is there anything in particular about the installation itself?

R: I was really excited about recording the hand-bells. And after sitting down with Chris, the President of Newcastle & Durham Bellringers Association and talking about all the numbers and mathematical sequences and pages of numbers, all of 1 to 8 in different orders...[laughs]. And actually hearing how that sounds, or sounded, when rung on hand-bells, I think that recording session in Blank was... that was really exciting. The bell-ringers, they said themselves they were really nervous about doing it and being in a recording studio because it's so different to what they're used to. Suddenly, they felt the pressure was kind of ramped up. Chris said it was unusually... it was not a complicated composition to ring on church bells but he said it was oddly complicated to ring on hand-bells because each bellringer rings two bells, so there's four ringers and two bells each. And he said it was slightly odd to ring on hand-bells, which made it a little bit more complex than they were expecting. But it was great to see that they were excited about ringing it and they were quite happy despite the fact that there was the odd little mistake in their ringing. But they said, and they said this before we recorded, "If we ring church bells, we always try to be perfect, but if we ring this on church bells, we never going to get it perfect. Something might just slightly slip timing-wise. But that's the human element of bellringing. You could simulate it or sample it and get it perfect, but we won't."

I: But then it almost wouldn't sound right somehow.

R: Yes, it would sound mechanical. So that was really great. I mean, despite the slightly fraught moments with Marty and Jordan of things feeling like...the timeline of where I wanted to be, of things slipping slowly... I mean, that was a really exciting process, working with them, despite those kind of fraught moments. Some of the recording sessions with the musicians, they were great moments of hearing what Marty and Jordan, how they were composing and dealing with things, how that sounded when it was played on a real instrument. Because we used quite a lot of virtual instruments when they were working things out. Again, it was just they don't notate things; they work with Logic; the main thing we were using was Logic Pro, with virtual instruments to build this composition, which sounded a bit horrible and mechanical and clunky and that stage. But then to do the recording session and hearing a real person playing a real instrument, and how that might then really come alive because those musicians were then adding things into what Marty and Jordan...

So each musician actually brought something new to it because they would do things ever so slightly differently. There's always this bit of openness to "Okay, these are the simple melody lines or hook-lines, how about you just sort of..." They would always use the term "noodle" around it and see what comes out.

I: As a sometimes guitar player, I...

R: Exactly. And sometimes, you're like, "That was really great," and you'd see how that would fit. Then slotting all those things in, slowly, into the composition and moving them round... Sometimes, things really didn't work and you could tell they didn't. And hearing things like the Keel Line singers, the male choir, singing the Vestry Men, and hearing how that worked when we multi-tracked them to make them sound bigger than they really were, as there were only about 10 of them, so we'd do a number of takes and get them to sing slightly differently each time, then multi tracking them. Then you go, "Oh yes. That was kind of what we'd hoped." But you don't hear that until the final mixing stages. And that moment, actually, of mixing – and Marty and Jordan said the same – because everything was recorded right from the start, so we said we need to record everything really dry, so in the studio we can't have any reverb on things; we just need to keep that dry recording because we need to make the most of the acoustic in the space. And that moment, Marty and Jordan were like, "Oh, this is going to sound a bit horrible in the studio." But then the moment of actually playing it in the space and mixing it on the speakers and hearing the acoustic, that really brought it to life as well, and that was the moment we were going, "Oh yes, it does work." It was a bit of a worry because you don't know until that moment.

I: Which then goes back to that whole conversation about the artwork being in that space and doing a very particular thing then whatever happens to it as a piece of music afterwards, or as an artwork afterwards, is somehow very different, which I guess we've talked about, than as the project in the exhibition space, for example. Okay, heritage, and I've looked back at my notes and with all the artists, we've talked a lot about this idea of heritage. What does it mean? I suppose it's a slightly open question and doesn't

necessarily need a huge response but it's just, have your thoughts about heritage changed, have you thought about heritage at all in the project?

R: [Pause]. I'm hesitating there... Yes. But not just as a consequence of this project. Just partly by design and coincidence over the last two years, I suddenly seem to be working on a lot of heritage projects. And in a way, I always have but in a less obvious way. I mean, heritage has always been ingrained into many projects I've done – more looking at the idea of contemporary heritage and this idea of something that might go back, a sort of contemporary archaeology, so looking at something that might have happened, whatever, 30 years ago and whether that's rave culture... I'm taking that as a for instance because that's a project I've worked on. I mean, there's still a form of heritage within that but it wasn't necessarily associated with a heritage organisation. That came out of working with Grizedale Arts but that was a project I took on myself and it came out of a research and development residency with Grizedale Arts, and then it took on its own life, which I then pursued.

But I suppose working with more clear-cut organisations, certainly over the last couple of years working on projects with Arts & Heritage, which was working with Hexham Old Gaol and 'This Liberty' as a consequence of that. And working on Gogmagog as well, but particularly through 'This Liberty', the broader Hexham Old Gaol is part of the Woodhorn Trust, now Northumberland Museums Trust, they then approached me about working for all four of their sites, so to work on a commission for each of their four sites that are all kind of joined up. So I'm actually, going back to Hexham Old Gaol to work on another project as part of that and their three other museums, which will all open in sequence next year. So that's a project which is just really starting with them. Then this project as well, Gogmagog. Actually, that's taking up most of my time at the moment as an artist, working on heritage, what you might find (over-speaking 01:10:27.0) as heritage commissions. So in some ways, I think because of the way I've worked as an artist over the last however many years, 10, 15 years, I don't feel a big leap between the way I have been working and working with those heritage organisations. There's probably a bit more grappling with what the demands of the heritage organisation might be and what their aims and objectives are, of why they're commissioning something. You know, what do they want to get out of it? Should I be focussing on a particular part of a collection or a particular part of heritage related to that organisation? But largely, beyond that, I don't feel my working processes are particularly different. I don't feel like I've had to bend anything too much really, to work with those organisations. I suppose in some ways, it's exciting working on those commissions and the commissions I'm working on now. Although it's slightly in the back of my mind, I suddenly become very local, which is slightly bugging me, you know, because I've worked on projects prior to that which have been geographically more spread out. So I think possibly after this, kind of, run of exhibitions to Summer 2019, I think probably, consciously, I will try to broaden that out a bit.

I: **Yes, which is interesting because one of the questions this project has is the impact of these projects on the career ideas and sense of the artist, so that's interesting.**

R: I think one thing that does come up on a personal level through working on the commissions I have been working on, which are more defined by heritage over the last couple of years and that I'm currently working on, is that I'm also realising as an artist – and this is probably common to many artists – is that you're always looking beyond where you are for opportunities or things to feed off as an artist. But I'm also building up a catalogue of stuff that I'm finding really interesting, which I won't pursue – or I can't pursue – through the commissions that I'm working on because there's a set idea of whatever the commission is going to be. But there's other stuff that I've found out about through research that I'm like, "Wow, this is really interesting," and I can imagine this becoming another project but not through this opportunity. Then I'm left with this slight conundrum of exactly what I've just said, going, "Oh, well I'm suddenly feeling a bit local but I'm finding this stuff really interesting that I've found out about." Do I then pursue that myself, i.e. find my own funding or another organisation who might want to pick up on an idea and commission it? But is that still keeping me in this very localised, geographical area? Yeah.

I: **that's really interesting. Because The Unthanks have been doing something for the Parsonage in terms of Emily Bronte's bicentenary and in some ways, their very raison d'être is about the heritage and the history of folk in the North East.**

R: I think that works for a musician because of, I suppose, the dissemination of what they do, how they disseminate what they do, the final outcome. It's kind of more 'mass' – it hits a much bigger audience, so what they do... And obviously The Unthanks – Rachel and Becky – have really kind of played off this is where they're from and this is what they draw from. But also, they have a massive following so they'll get radio play through what they do so it reaches a big audience. But I suppose how a visual audience works probably isn't going to reach that mass audience in the same way at all. It's probably a more limited audience. I'm just thinking of art going public... How people engage with what the final outcome is.

I: **Yes. That brings us very beautifully to the last question, really, because the last thing we wanted to touch on, which is the audience. I know we've talked a lot about the audience and growing it from the ground up, so this really is just in a way an opportunity to think. It might be around that issue, actually, of how do you take this work and think about the audience and think about the audience for your work, generally. I guess it is just a question about audience – is there anything else we've not touched on yet, that this process has made you think through, audiences and you work?**

R: [Pause]. I think probably the biggest issue with Holy Trinity was the fact it had no audience. It's not a building that has visitors.

[Phone interruption 01:17:39.0- 01:18:11.6]

R: Yes, I think the thing I was always grappling with was this... Sorry, can you just repeat what...?

I: So it is just about audience and about how you were thinking of that audience, for the site, for your work, it's really just to touch on...

R: Yes, so with the case of Holy Trinity, just to reiterate that, it was always... partly at the forefront of the thinking behind the project was that thinking of, "well, who is the audience for this work?" Because there are no visitors to Holy Trinity so we were very, very limited through Amanda's network and the Churches Conservation Trust. So that, in terms of working from the bottom up, in terms of who's coming to look or listen to the piece... so I think again, going back to that initial thing, which is the way I've generally thought about projects, which is going from the collaborators, participants, people who get involved in a project, starting from the inside out, I felt I should keep following that idea for Holy Trinity. Then I was fortunate enough that it was falling at a time when things like the Tall Ships were happening, because that was going to bring a much bigger outside audience into the area. And without that, probably the audience numbers would seem quite small for Holy Trinity, though there's still the heritage weekends to come. So there's a few things which the timing is just coincidental to when the installation is there, which will, I think, really help broaden the audience; otherwise I think it probably would be a very localised audience, quite a small audience.

Is it making me think about audience any differently than otherwise? [Pause]. I don't think so. I think it's fulfilled how I hoped it might operate in terms of audience in that I do know that through the hand-bell ringers posting it onto their newsletters, websites and things, saying, "Oh, this space is here..." And trying to get other bell-ringers interested in going along because of their association with it, you know, I think that's worked, and other people who have been involved. [Pause]. I'm trying to think if there's anything to add to that, really.

I: There doesn't have to be. I think a lot of the beginning was that, so it's just to kind of...

R: I mean, how successful it's been in terms of getting people along, I don't know, but I know BBC Radio Newcastle did a piece on it, very short, on air on Saturday/Sunday morning. I can't remember when it went out now, which was a local reporter who has done a few things on Holy Trinity before over the years, so I think it was through the Churches Conservation Trust. So he came and I could tell he was sceptical about it, but what was brilliant about it, despite the fact that he was obviously sceptical about what he was going to hear, he was amazingly complimentary afterwards, although it ended up being this really short piece that went out, and highly edited. He was still very complimentary about the piece, and hopefully, things like that helped maybe draw in a wider, still local audience.

I: There was a piece on CORRIDOR8 which is a Leeds-based online contemporary art writing space, so if you've not seen that, I will try and send you a copy.

R: I think NARC— again that's local – were going to do something. Whether that went out, I don't know. I think possibly the local Sunderland Echo were going to do something. Again, I don't know if that went out. But, yes...

I: Okay, thank you. I think we'll call that a day, if that's okay.

R: Yes. Fine. Yes.

[End of Recording].