

The Record Player Orchestra

I began this project wanting to bring together as many record players and their owners together for a day to admire the variety of these devices and the part they played in enabling millions of people to listen to and enjoy recorded sound. I wanted those that came to share the story of their record player, for each record player to be listened to on its own and for all record players to be played at the same time.



I also wanted participants to be able to engage in a shared activity in which no one had more skill or knowledge than anyone else, in which anyone could come up with an idea of what to do with the record players and be able to explore it, and for which there was no prescribed outcome for the activity. It would be an opportunity for anyone and everyone to experiment, to learn from this experimentation and to create something that would not have existed but for their involvement. I therefore created an event that invited anyone to bring their record players and turntables and play tracks on a vinyl record simultaneously with the other record players and turntables.



In considering how people could take part in the Record Player Orchestra, I realised that a common source of sounds would be needed so that combinations of sounds could be played together to produce harmonies or disharmonies. In early experiments, I realised that putting together tones to form chords worked particularly well but that trying to synchronise rhythms exposed the limitations of analogue technology, something I was keen to explore. I also recognised that a vinyl record would need to be provided for each of the record players and that this record needed to have sufficient material on it so that there was a great enough variety of sounds that could be combined.

The initial Record Player Orchestra developmental meeting on 20th April, 2013, was a very enjoyable and creative day in which participants played the record players and experimented with the sounds to find out what could be done with them. Pre composed scores were tried as well as improvisations on the day.

In the Record Player Orchestra the record player becomes an instrument that can be played by placing a stylus on a vinyl record which will then play a sound. This physical engagement with the vinyl is key to the activity as sound is produced only when the stylus is physically placed on the vinyl record. No prior skill or expertise is needed to do this and, as with most aspects of the Record Player Orchestra, all participants are beginners at playing this instrument and all become more adept during their playing. By discovering how to play the record player, participants can start to understand the qualities and particularities of this instrument, what kind of playing might be possible and what might be more problematic.

Future meetings will be arranged at locations proposed by anyone who wants to host the Record Player Orchestra and everything that comes out of these meetings will be placed on the Record Player Orchestra blog.

How the tracks for the vinyl record were created

In order for the Record Player Orchestra to have a vinyl record that all the record players could play at the same time, it became clear that one would have to be produced. This is because a number of tracks that would give a great enough variety of tones that could be combined to produce sounds would be needed and it was not possible to find an existing record that had this and which could be found in large enough quantities.

It was also clear that this record would need a silent track so that we could hear whether the record players themselves made sound whilst playing a record. I had speculated that a silent record would have been needed to test record players once they had been manufactured to ensure that their integrity, but so far have not been able to find any evidence of the existence of such a record.

However, whilst researching how record players were tested before they left the factory I was pointed to an EMI Technical Test Record by the Sound and Vision department at the British Library.

This vinyl record has a series of tracks that are monophonic frequencies starting at 20 thousand hertz and descending to 30 hertz, announced in turn by an announcer.

I recognised from this EMI Technical Test Record that each note produced by a musical instrument equates to a frequency and that using a number of frequencies would provide enough notes to create scales and chords. As I did not want to use a traditional musical instrument to produce notes for this record, I used this information to produce synthesised notes based on specific frequencies. With middle 'C' on a piano being 440 hertz, I decided that I wanted a lower tonal range and produced 18 notes starting at C3 (130 hertz) up to F4 (349 hertz).

This provided the 18 tracks that would be side A of a vinyl record.

I wanted side B to start with the silent track and then be made up of more rhythmic tracks that would form the base for sounds from side A to be played with and which could provide some structure for any composition if wanted. These tracks came about as a result of collaborating with two artist friends, Martin Thomas and Matt Robertson, and we created a variety of sounds either from directly recording the sounds that the record player made and sequencing them to create a rhythm or by experimenting with other monophonic frequencies. The resulting 7 tracks formed side B of the record.

The vinyl record was mastered by Sean Magee at Abbey Road Studios on 2nd April 2013 and was pressed at the Vinyl Factory in Hayes on 20th April.

All tracks have been made available so that participants in the Record Player Orchestra can download them and start to think about how they could be combined or used for any compositions that they might create. These compositions can then be brought to the Record Player Orchestra meetings to be played.