

work as a musician. “The actual sound of the instrument is important. The sound itself might have a message, like the ram’s horn that was given to me by a farmer many years ago. He said it might be from the last living wild goat of Norway. The sound of that horn is totally unique.” He continues, “when performing on an ice horn knowing that the ice melting on my lips might be 100,000 years old, it adds something.”

In 2006, he established the world’s first ice music festival in Geilo, a ski resort between Bergen and Oslo. “All the instruments are built out of local ice, so the sound is decided by nature. The venue is built out of snow and ice. The date of the festival is the first full moon of the year so the date is decided by nature. The weather on the concert day will decide how the concert is going to be, as ice melts you know. After the festival we give it all back to nature. All of this project has to do with taking care of nature – and also being willing to take the big risk of letting nature decide how the music is going to be.” When pressed to talk about a message, Isungset can appear ambivalent. “I try to give a message when performing my music. The message will not be told. I’m trying to let the music speak without using words, to go deeper and to be a part of the music, to be 100% intuitive in my performing. I try to let the music itself show me where to go, and to go with this flow. I don’t see myself as something bigger or more important than the music. I am simply a tool. There’s no brainwork – only performance.” Yet Isungset acknowledges an interest in ecological issues since his childhood, has worked collaboratively with scientists at concerts and with Greenpeace on videos (which he recently screened on a tour of China), and insists, “my work with ice in specific has made my environmental message more clear, I think.”

This is food for thought. After all, the direct, slogan-based campaigning of NGOs and even governments has not, even on their own terms, been very effective. It took decades for plastic bag usage to be reduced, and they’re still very much around. Species are dying out almost daily. Flight shame is a niche affliction. Individual Western lifestyles still gobble up more carbon than entire hamlets of Bengal.

As with other eco-minded musicians, Isungset finds inspiration – and a means of accessing wonder – by looking backwards through time, in his case to the traditions of the Sámi of Lapland. “With respect,” he explains, “I have collaborated with the people from the north – people who have been living together with nature for generations, maybe for thousands of years. From them I have learned that nature might be more than ‘only nature’.”

SPREADING THE MESSAGE

In November 2020, Terje Isungset will be playing his ice instruments alongside Inuit, Sámi and Siberian singers and some of Scandinavia’s best jazz musicians at London’s Kings Place as part of a year-long cycle titled *Nature Unwrapped*.

It’s an ambitious project, with sound recordist Chris Watson featuring as artist in residence – his ‘sounds of life calendar’ will be a collection of sonic environments reflecting the shifting seasons of the northern hemisphere – and a diverse roster of folk and classical artists, from the Askew Sisters to Eliza Carthy to Rowan Piggott’s *Songhive*, comprising songs of ‘beelore’ and British folk song, to professor Brian Cox sharing the stage with violinist Jack Liebeck and friends for a performance of Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*.

“I’ve been curious – and heartened – to see how composers in our own time are beginning to reflect a sense of jeopardy in their art, of time running out on the planet, some obliquely, others head on,” says Helen Wallace, programme director at Kings Place. “It is in our folk programme that the deep connection between rural landscape and music emerges most directly. Songs passed down from a rural way of life persist through the centuries, revived and renewed by musicians who by turn are inspired to write of the landscapes they love.”

Kings Place’s programme is impressive – but across the industry, producers and bookers, promoters and publicists are rising to the challenge of climate change. At the time of writing this, Julie’s Bicycle, a charity that mentors on sustainability and climate change across the arts – and recipient of the 2019 WOMEX Professional Excellence Award – is launching a new leadership training scheme. The acclaimed Making Tracks concert series is being rebooted for 2019-20 after a nine-year hiatus, with an environmental message to the fore. Music Declares Emergency co-founder Fay Milton is telling fans – as consumers – it is time they cleaned up their eco-act.

What sometimes seems to be missing from it all is a subversive, furious, anti-establishment message, of the kind punk and ska once communicated – of a call for urgent action and life-altering, even anarchic, change. This may partly be because artists have learned not to make the mistakes of preachy, self-styled spokespersons such as Bono and Chris Martin. But it may also be too soon.

We like to think that art anticipates scientific understanding. That Shelley and the Romantics warned us about industrialisation. That sci-fi knew the great melt was coming. But in the case of climate change, I think art got caught on the hop. Writers and musicians, like the rest of us, are struggling to keep up with the information, not to mention processing it and honing a response. This crisis is insidious, ubiquitous, overwhelming. Festivals consume gargantuan amounts of energy. Flying an artist anywhere is not great. Energy is the lifeblood of music, but even plugging a guitar into a Marshall amp is an ethical decision now.

In the end, songs about CO2 levels, geological time-frames, forests on fire, or even pandas and polar bears aren’t likely to win hearts, minds or anything else. Not on their own, anyhow. It will be the sheer diversity of responses that could amount

Above right: Terje Isungset and his ice instruments
Below: Chris Watson recording orcas in the Ross Sea, Antarctica:

Jason Roberts