

I was a sonic experiment

MARK BLACKLOCK recalls an evening of music designed to test the psychological effects of extremely low frequencies



MARK BLACKLOCK is a journalist who verified the use of ultrasonic weapons in the recent Gulf War. Sadly, nobody was listening.

Involuntary defecation, rupture of internal organs, nausea, disorientation and perhaps even epileptic fits: once upon a time, infrasound was the silent killer, the blackest project of sinister military R&D, the low frequency wave below the threshold of human hearing which was being harnessed to incapacitate civilians and enemies alike.

At least that was the ripple which washed through the pond of conspiracy theorising for at least two decades after over-excitable French robotics researcher Vladimir Gavreau announced that he had stumbled across the dangerous effects of sound waves at the frequency of seven hertz. Now, however, the waters have calmed a touch, thanks to research such as German acoustician Jurgen Altmann's 1999 paper questioning the feasibility of infrasonic weapons - "I have found no hard evidence for vomiting or uncontrolled defecation, even at levels of 170 dB or more" (*FT153:35*) - and the US military's focusing on the opposite end of the sonic spectrum with the ultrasound devices produced by the American Technology Corporation. According to inventor Elwood Norris, these were used in the recent Gulf War (alongside that old standard of playing **LOUD ROCK MUSIC** at the bad guys - also used in Panama, Waco and the first Gulf War).

Certainly, the fact that I've now been bombarded with infrasound along with about 200 others at the Royal Festival Hall's Purcell Room would suggest that the low, low waves have been rehabilitated to a certain extent. More interesting than ruptured organs to the organisers of the event, which took place on Saturday 31 May, are altered moods and in particular the research of Vic Tandy (*FT's* *passim*), who has postulated that infrasound might be at the root of many reported hauntings.

Tandy's theory goes that around the frequency of 19Hz - which NASA



ABOVE: Inside a speaker cone at the infrasonic rehearsal.

research in the Sixties discovered to be the frequency at which the eyeball resonates - infrasound can cause people to see ghostly apparitions at the periphery of vision and to experience feelings of discomfort and drops in temperature. It can even make candle flames flicker. Tandy has since discovered infrasound at a number of 'haunted' sites (though his research at the underground vaults in Edinburgh was inconclusive). It would appear that we have nothing to fear from infrasound but fear itself.

Furthermore, infrasound has long been associated with sacred music, and some of the largest church organs in the world produce profoundly low frequencies at high volumes. Might infrasound also cause heightened religious emotion? The answers to such questions were what psychologist Richard Wiseman was setting out to discover with this mass experiment.

This event was not just about science, but rather the synthesis of art and science as promoted by the sciart Consortium. Representing the arts were pianist GéNIA, electro-acoustic composer Sarah Angliss and video artist Ravi Deepres; making up the science team alongside Dr Wiseman were psychologist Ciaran O'Keefe, and Dr

Richard Long and Dan Simmonds of the National Physics Laboratory, "the keepers of the decibel", who had constructed from a length of sewage piping and a subwoofer the real star of the show, the infrasonic generator.

Up stepped Prof Wiseman to explain the experiment. The audience/guinea pigs would be asked to fill out a questionnaire at four separate points during the concert, rating feelings such as excitement, drowsiness and happiness and noting any unusual sensations or experiences. Infrasound would be present during two of the four pieces and not during the other two. At a later performance the infrasonic pieces would be reversed, thereby establishing a control. Following a question from the audience, Wiseman informed us that the infrasound would be generated at a frequency of 17Hz, thereby disappointing all those who'd come for the constipation cure.

The music was essentially abstract, modern composition, aiming to fuse electronic with classically-derived pieces. Works by Arvo Part, Karen Tanaka and Hayden Parsey were performed, while Ravi Deepres' naturalistic films were projected as a backdrop; lozenges of light shooting across city nightscapes; fluid cylinders with vertical lines; red smoke or coloured liquid rising through a liquid medium.

The standout piece of the recital, at least for this humble observer, was Philip Glass's 'Metamorphosis Two', which called to mind collaborator Aphex Twin's successful adventures with strings and treated piano.

And what of the results of the experiment? Well, I noted a tightness in my chest and an increased heart rate during the pieces 'Lo but Hi' by Hayden Parsey and 'Toccare' by Ton Bruynel. I was slightly disturbed to discover after the event that these were the two compositions from which infrasound was completely absent. My colleague, despite encouragement to note a desire to kill his father, was troubled only by "slight erotic fantasies about the pianist" during the solo piano piece 'Techno Etude No 3' by Karen Tanaka, during which infrasound was played. One can only conclude that further research into the aphrodisiac qualities of low frequency sound is urgently required. **[7]**

Infrasound has been associated with sacred music

REFERENCE

www.infrasonicmusic.co.uk/

A further experiment will take place at the Science Museum IMAX theatre at a date to be confirmed.