

Notes for Nathaniel Mann: "Pigeon Whistles"

1 - Are these ordinary pigeons?

No, these are a special breed of domesticated pigeon called Birmingham Rollers. These prized and cherished birds are bred by fanciers all over the country, with many established clubs and associations holding regular flight displays and competitions. For this project the birds have been bred and trained by Peter Petravicius who has worked with the composer, Nathaniel Mann, as this piece was developed.

2 - Where did the idea for the whistles come from?

The project takes its inspiration from centuries old traditions from both Indonesia and China. Pigeon Whistles, also known as Pigeon Flutes, are small, lightweight whistles carried harmlessly upon the tail feathers of pigeons, and borne through the air to create a beautiful haunting sound. The history of this technology is fascinating in itself, originally developed as a method of deterring predators, the traditional uses of the whistles range from ceremonial use to creating tactical diversion within warfare. The whistles in this project are directly inspired by the collection of Chinese pigeon whistles housed at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford.

3 - What are the whistles made from?

Traditionally the whistles are made from small dried gourds and bamboo. For this project we have developed whistles made of recycled plastic 35mm-film pots. Each of the whistles has a slightly different sized aperture which creates the different tones.

4 - Why do the birds roll in mid air?

The pigeons used in this project are of the Birmingham Roller breed. Whether wearing whistles or not this breed of birds is famous for its mid-air acrobatics. No one fully understands the origins of this behaviour, but these birds are prized amongst breeders for this unique trait.

5 - How long do the pigeons fly for?

The pigeons will fly from anything from 10-40min, this is dependent on the birds and the weather conditions.

6 - How do the birds return to the loft?

Pigeons are renowned as extraordinarily intelligent birds, capable of finding their way home from many miles away. Our birds are trained to visually recognise their mobile pigeon loft from the air - they never stray far from home and always return to their loft.

7 - How are the birds cared for?

Peter accompanies his birds during each event and every journey. The pigeons are transported in release baskets - much the same as used for racing pigeons. The baskets are regularly cleaned and the birds have regular access to fresh water. For the releases the birds are temporarily placed in a specially decorated release basket - this is the same basket they have learned to visually recognise as their home loft as since they were squeakers (young). Overnight the birds are moved into dedicated pigeon loft on site. Throughout this project we adhere to the guidelines and regulation laid out by the DEFRA & the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency (AHVLA).

8 - How do the pigeons carry the whistles?

There are many historical and cultural precedents for training pigeons to carry loads: messages, packages and even surveillance cameras. Traditionally the whistles have always been designed to be very light weight, and accordingly, whilst designing our whistles we have minimised both size and weight. Our pigeons have become accustomed to carry the whistles through gradual training.

The whistles are attached in a very simple manner to the tails feathers of the pigeons.

The procedure for attaching the whistles is as follows and can be seen in the accompanying photos: Locate the pigeon's 2 central tail feathers and, at a distance of approx. 2cm from the birds rump, tie them together using fine thread. The slim 'base' of the whistle is slipped between the two feathers. A small metal ringclip is attached to the whistle's foot to ensure that the whistle does not fall off during flight.



Close up of the two secured feathers.



A ring-clip is threaded through a hole in the plastic base of the whistle.

9 - Why are the birds not affected by the sound?

There are many cultural precedents for animals carrying sound-makers; cats, cattle and horse all regularly carry bells for a variety of purposes. As we started to develop the piece, and first attached whistles to the birds, we carefully observed the pigeons for any signs of discomfort or distress. Our bird handler Peter Petravicius is a respected member of pigeon fancier community and has bred pigeons for over forty years. He knows his birds like nobody else and shares a special bond with them. The birds are in fact comfortable carrying the whistles. Pigeons are adaptable and resilient and whilst the noise of the whistles will have been new the first time they flew with them (at the start of the project) they are not adversely affected by them. Perhaps this is to be expected given that feral pigeons are comfortably adapted to noisy urban environments.