

# In Harmony with Trees

**Michael Fairfax** reports on his odyssey to bring harps to the woods of the world



Pic.2



Testing the sound of a metal-stringed tree harp with a tree trumpet (above), and Michael working on his first tree harp (top right)

So here I am in 450 acres of woodland and lakes in America, it is September and warm. I was here last year and picked up Lyme's disease, which is said to have been started in a town of that name in Connecticut. I dealt with it quickly and so it wasn't too bad, but it can lead to debilitating diseases, and you are never over it, like malaria. They take it much more seriously in the USA.

In 2012 on an arts residency I created a musical instrument from a limb of an oak tree, based on the Fibonacci scale, a scale of nature, a scale by which pine cones, sunflowers, bamboo and allsorts grow, following 0-1-1-2-3-5-etc..., with the last two numbers added together to produce the next.

I returned last year to create some musical instruments from the trees, but this time on the Environmental Arts Biennale 2013 at I-Park Connecticut with 12 other artists from around the world all connecting with the environment.

These woods are special, and after my visit in 2012 I feel more at home in them. Then I spent four weeks living in a log cabin in the

woods by the side of a lake or pond as they call it, very idyllic. This year I have three weeks and I am in the house, a wonderful, typical wooden New England building. We have a chef who cooks for us and a team of people who help us with everything from office work to getting tools and the like, yes we are spoilt.

So what was I going to do for all this great hospitality, these people who take artists seriously and respect the work we do? When you apply you have to propose your ideas, the thoughts of what you might do. I had suggested an Aeolian harp with a camera obscura. On a telephone conversation prior to the Biennale, Ralph Crispino, who owns and runs I-Park, had some reservations that I'd be able to complete my plan in the allotted three weeks, so he asked if I could maybe just do an Aeolian harp. I was happy to do this and all was good.

Prior to my flight I had been working in a woodland in the UK and had created some unusual ear harps, little hand-held instruments that one person plays and only one person can listen to by putting their ear to a little earpiece I

had drilled into the wood. I loved these and really wanted to pursue the idea of them and see how they could be developed. That is what I would do in America.

When I arrived we looked around the trail where Ralph wanted all the pieces, and I thought it might be a wonderful idea if I could make these ear harps in the living trees. Umm.... would this work, would the sap interfere with the transmitting of sound through the wood? Okay I thought, I would go off trail and create one in a place no one would discover. I took a cordless drill and some fishing nylon with me and went off deep into the woods, sprayed against the ticks, and found a great tree where I created my first harp, oh joy it worked and it sounded fantastic. I was thrilled and went back to tell a few of the others that things would work out. I knew I was onto a winner when one of the artists, Rainy Lehrman returned with me and put her ear to the earpiece and played it. The tone and timbre had come to the fore.

I took Ralph out to show him and tell him about the change of plans again from Aeolian harp to tree harp. He was great and loved the idea and thought hard about the best possible siting of the tree harps, and he did well, a path along the side of the pond, very beautiful and peaceful, perfect. Now I had to select the right trees that would give each tree a different challenge and different sound when strung. The first tree was easy as it started the trail, the entrance tree.

## Dancing

What I hadn't expected was the lovely way that to listen and play the tree you had to wrap yourself around it, almost as a dancer.

For the next tree I went up the trail to a lovely hollow tree I had seen, set amongst walnut trees, as I worked on this so the walnuts fell to the ground around me, I almost needed a hard hat. Like the first tree this one had separate tuning pegs for each string, so each string could be tuned. It took two and a half days to carve nearly 200 tuning pegs from oak, but whittling in the sun is never a chore and again pleasure was my friend. The hollow tree's strings were much closer together so gave a very different sound; it was also the loudest of the trees because the hollow acted as an acoustic chamber to a degree.

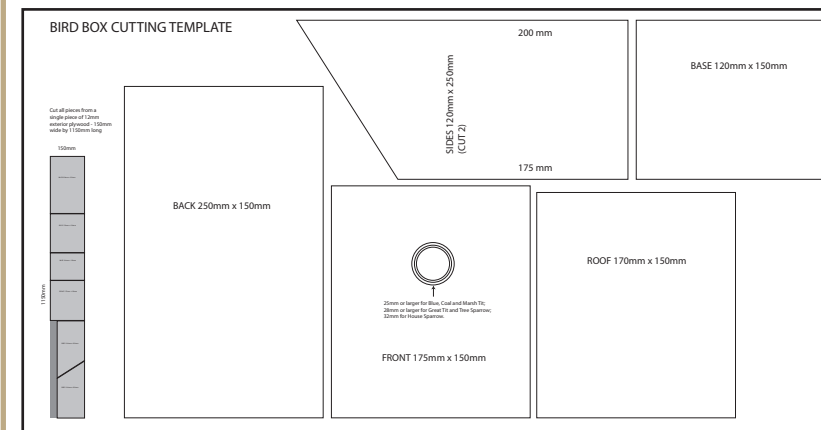
There was a tree with a lovely large span that



Testing Michael's final tree harp at I-Park (above) and the two-handed harp (left). There is no screwing into the trees. Over time Michael believes the trees will grow over the pegs and will not suffer

## Making for birds & bees

Simple projects to make or learn on a course



## Stick a box

Araldite were promoting National Nest Box Week in February by encouraging people to use up plywood offcuts, stuck together with their Outdoor Fix adhesive. If you are making the box from new ply you'll need a piece 150x1150mm. Once you've cut out the pieces following the template (top), you simply stick them together, reinforcing the joints with a bead of glue on the inside, which you wipe away. Allow 48hr for the glue to set. For details of National Nest Box Week visit [bto.org/about-birds/nbnw](http://bto.org/about-birds/nbnw).



Sticking parts together and reinforcing (above)

## Build a beehive with Axminster

The Axminster Skill Centre has added Build a Beehive to its list of courses, with the first one running from 10-11th June (and another from 13-14th November). The two-day course will help you make a 12x14in National hive from scratch, and is tutored by experienced beekeeper, Ed Cruwys, who will go through the equipment and materials, plus jig making, jointing and construction to make the hive from western red cedar. Cost is £255; [axminster.co.uk](http://axminster.co.uk).





## Hand-Held Harp



Michael produced some hand-held harps from branches (above) and worked with a hollow tree at one point (right). Another Biennale will be held at the same location in 2015



Michael had to whittle dozens of oak tuning pegs to hold the strings on the tree harps

I thought might be interesting next. Using a large gauge of fishing nylon as well as the thinner one I was using before, I was curious as to how this would effect the sound produced. More drilling of holes and insertion of pegs and the harp was complete, and my what a sound this produced, with the size of this one both hands could be used like a normal harp and the range in sound over all these strings was marvelous. The physical nature of playing this tree was such a pleasure; the fish jumped and the snapping turtles snapped (okay jumped off their perches).

This was going well, and the other artists were working well, there was a terrific spirit growing amongst us all we all worked hard to make sure we would all be finished for the opening to the public and the friends of I-Park. Tremendous work was produced over the three weeks by sound artists, a performance artist, sculptors, a photographer and an architect. Brilliant just brilliant, but onwards to the next tree and the one that would be at the end of the trail. This one shouted at me, the branches were almost already a harp ready for stringing, and I decided to string a bit like a 12-string guitar with thicker and thinner strings next to each other, to see if I could get that harmonic from them. I drilled through the branches, using only two tuning pegs, one for each string, and boy did this sound good, whether it was because the strings went through the actual branches or whether the type of tree was different I don't know, but I do know that this one made everyone's mouth drop in surprise when they played it.

## Stainless steel

And so to the third one along the trail and the one that is different to the others, this one is on the trunk of the tree and strung with stainless steel strings, which are the leader strings for sea fishing, something big with teeth! Tom took me to a fishing shop in the local town, Old Saybrook, which was great shop and they had everything, so I bought some line and when I told the owners in the shop what I was using it for they got very excited, asked for links to my websites and we invited them to the private view. So for this trunk I used metal piano tuning pegs I had brought with me and set them into the tree which I spiralled around the trunk. I then made little wooden bridges so you could tune the strings but also to get around the

curve in the trunk, so the string would stand proud. The sound on this one was very different to the others, and the metal strings gave a different sound, and much more resonance.

I also made a number of the hand-held ear harps for a fundraising event. Two were auctioned and sold and I gave away a couple to some of the lovely artists I had met.

The Biennale was a great success with the public and with I-Park, and there is a DVD being made of the whole project, which we should see soon, and there is talk of a catalogue being produced, which I hope comes to fruition.

For all of you reading this article with a woodland, however large or small, woods work in many ways. Let us not forget that artists are the dreamers in the wood, who can tap into something romantic, or dark, the poets, the makers, the evokers. Let us in, employ an artist in your wood and see it in a completely different light.

**Details** If you want to hear the sounds of the tree harps please visit Michael's vimeo website: <https://vimeo.com/77587596>. And visit his website at [michaelfairfax.co.uk](http://michaelfairfax.co.uk) for an introduction to the range of work he does. For information about I-Park visit [i-park.org](http://i-park.org). For further information you can email Michael at [michaelfairfax@eclipse.co.uk](mailto:michaelfairfax@eclipse.co.uk).



## Make a Medieval Stool

With access to an Alaskan mill and an ash stem, **Ian Bye** makes a simple two-piece stool

**C**f you are in full armour and chainmail these chairs are remarkably comfortable providing a solid base for your rear and accommodating a well-splayed pose, yet still providing room for your mead. Otherwise they provide a novel conversation point. I saw them originally at the medieval re-enactment at Berkeley Castle last July and thought I might try to make one. The joust is a wonderful summer gathering with beautifully authentic re-enactors, trade stands, jousts, trade stalls and luthiers. A friend Will from my local pub, the unique Red Lion in Ampney St Peter, expanded on their use. They are known variably as bog chairs or African birthing chairs. Plans are available online but Will particularly referenced Dougie the Wood and helpfully gave me some printed plans. The chairs are very simple to construct and will pack-flat with ease.

First I had to source some wood. Inevitably I went to the copse owned by long-suffering and indulgent friends Steve and Sonya. Some ash had recently been felled in suitable lengths so this was hastily loaded and once home the piece was reduced by chainsaw to two simple planks, and then planed up. The seat back then had a letterbox created with a 1in drill, and chiselled out to receive the seat base. This had the shoulders removed with a newly-acquired Pax rip saw which I had set and sharpened. I was pleased with the relative ease of this in preference to power tools.

Some easing of the base and back was required before the base slid home to the shoulders and formed a solid seat. It is important to spend some time on the tightness of fit to ensure a stable seat. I dissembled the seat to true up the base which would be in contact with the ground and ensure stability.

I then came to the decorative detail of the seat back and opted for a simple arch with three holes on my prototype. This was simply achieved with a compass and a coping saw followed by a 1in drill.

I sighted all this by eye and what the planks offered rather than slavishly following a plan. The first seat was solid and pleasing but I felt it looked sad on its own so decided to make a second. On a hot July day last year, full of confidence, I made the next one slightly larger for more portly friends, and unusually I had my shirt off and was wearing khaki cotton trousers. With my closely-shaved head and middle aged physique, a mate rounding the corner spotted me and spontaneously greeted me as Comrade Putin! This was all taken in good humour but it sowed the seed of an idea. The detail of the second chair now includes a hammer and sickle motif capped off with some beaten lead to prevent water ingress.

Finally with the offcuts from the seat plank and shoulders I made a simple table to rest lunch and drinks on. The whole project took little time and I thoroughly enjoyed the results.



Ian with his pair of ash stools, decorated with cutouts



Cutting the shoulders on the seat piece with a Pax rip saw, made in Sheffield by Thomas Flinn



'Vlad the Impaler' drills out the corners of the 'letterbox' on the back of the stool. It helps to get the fit as tight as possible for rigidity