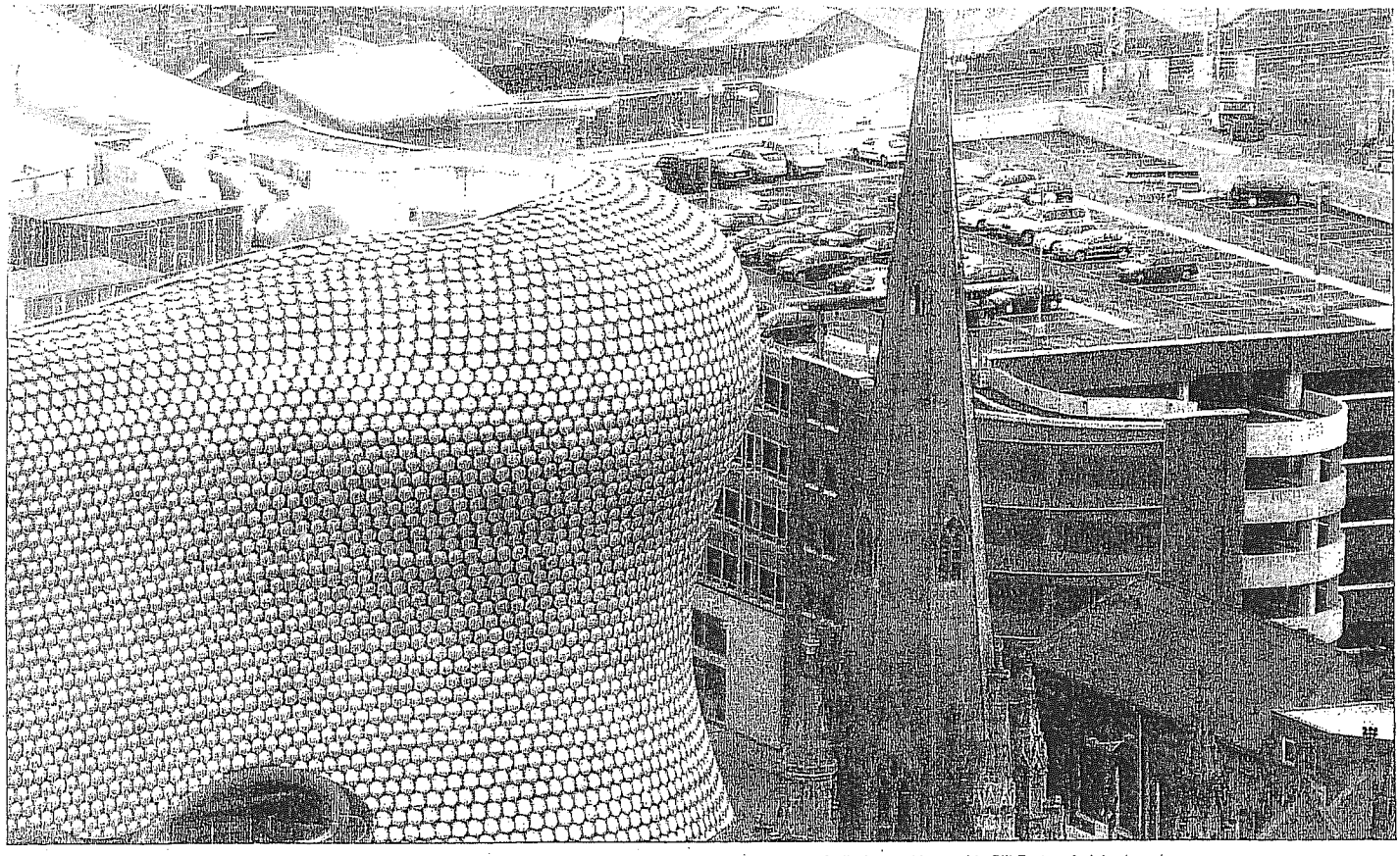


The peal of bells from Birmingham's St Martin's church are soon to ring out over the Bull Ring and beyond in Bill Fontana's latest work

For whom the Bill toils

American sound sculptor Bill Fontana has relayed the sound of the Normandy coast to the Arc de Triomphe and amplified the workings of Big Ben. Now he wants to restore the sound of Birmingham's historic bells. **Terry Grimley** reports

The new Bull Ring development has helped Birmingham rediscover its ancient parish church of St Martin's, but in one respect it has diminished it.

It has created a sound barrier which prevents its bells from being heard across the city centre as they once were. Bill Fontana would like to do something about it.

Fontana is a composer and "sound sculptor" from San Francisco. He specialises in "real time" sound spectaculars, like relaying the sound of the Normandy coast to the Arc de Triomphe to mark D-Day or amplifying the workings of Big Ben.

He is just completing a nine-month residency with Birmingham University's Birmingham Electro-Acoustic Sound Theatre (BEAST) and would like to leave a permanent legacy in the city.

He explains: "I was invited by the Arts Council to do a research fellowship here in conjunction with BEAST, to explore issues of sound and space and architecture in relationship to the future development of Eastside. So I've been making regular visits to Birmingham since the end of last year.

"I've done a number of public presentations and met a lot of people. I wanted to finish this time in Birmingham with some sort of result and what I became interested in is St Martin's."

It's likely that few people realise it, even in Birmingham, but St Martin's has a unique place in the tradition of change-ringing because it has 16 bells, the largest peal in England.

"If you go into the tower there are plaques on the wall commemorating various peals that went on for hours and hours, and the names of the ringers," says Fontana.

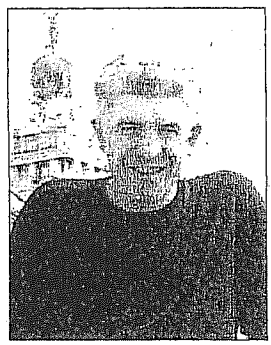
"The sad thing about the bells of St Martin's is that the scale of the church was originally designed for a time when Birmingham was a medieval town and the height of the tower would have been greater than anything else.

"From the point of view of sound I think the design of the Bull Ring is very unfortunate. Visually it embraces St Martin's but it destroys it acoustically. Selfridges is an enormous sound barrier. From my point of view this is a terrible thing – as soon as you step away from the tower the sound is lost.

"So my concern is that you have a sound in Birmingham that to my mind has a great deal of cultural and historical significance that is really lost in the contemporary environment. I am interested in the idea of trying to redefine it, to re-establish it. I think it's a beautiful sound and an interesting sound."

Fontana has proposed two responses to the problem. The first, an experiment which will be tried out on June 26, is a composition he has written for the bells which is designed to create a denser sound.

"We are attempting to create an acoustical experience with the bells that will enable them to produce a much greater volume of sound than they would generally have. It will create a much greater density of sound, a larger sound that I hope will travel further into the Birmingham landscape."



Bill Fontana

This three-hour performance will be recorded from various locations and re-created as an art installation opening at Vivid's new gallery in Digbeth on June 29.

Fontana's other proposal, to be put forward as part of Architecture Week (June 17-26), is to make discreet use of sophisticated technology to recreate the historic reach of St Martin's bells.

"It's an experimental idea. What I would like to see happen is to go back and think about what the original parish of St Martin's was and compare that with contemporary Birmingham. You could then try to recreate it by putting some sophisticated microphone equipment in the belfry and relaying that to high-quality loudspeakers to 'return' the sound to the city."

Given some of Fontana's past projects, there seems no obvious reason why this unorthodox concept could not be achieved.

Though he has a background in orthodox composition, working with ready-made sound has always been his main interest. As a student at the Cleveland Institute of Music this already marked him out as an oddball, and when he moved to New York he shifted to studying philosophy.

However, he then came into the orbit of America's most renowned musical experimentalist, John Cage, whose course in composing experimental music he attended.

At this time Fontana was experimenting with sound collages and to his evident surprise Cage took his efforts seriously.

By an odd coincidence Cage's own best-known piece in this vein is called *Fontana Mix*. Though it was made many years earlier and has no connection to Bill Fontana, it has helped to give his name a familiar ring: he finds newcomers to his work often think they have already heard of him.

Following Cage's encouragement, Fontana's career reached a major turning point in the early 70s, when he went to live in Australia.

"I got the most amazing job with the Australian Broadcasting Company, which was to record what some parts of Australia sounded like. I was putting together a tape library and I had no real restraints to what I recorded

"I used the material myself to experiment with in that period with ABC. It gave me the chance to work with what was the state-of-the-art in sound recording at that time. And to not really feel I had any limits about what I could imagine doing."

In 1976 he realised a project he had been thinking about for some time, to create a "real-time soundmap". This took place in Sydney Harbour in the middle of the night, using eight microphones.

The resulting eight-track recording was subsequently staged as a sound installation at the National Gallery of Art in Victoria and the Whitney Museum in New York.

"I consider this was my Opus 1," says Fontana. "If I was doing a retrospective show it's the first thing I would include."

Five years later he created another sound map of foghorns in San Francisco Bay, and in recent years he has made sound installations in various places in Europe – notably in Venice, Vienna and on Lyon's new tram system as well as London and Paris. Apart from Birmingham his current projects include an installation in the undercroft beneath Leeds railway station and one at a new museum in Cologne drawing on the "acoustic memory" of the ruined medieval church over which it is built.

Oddly enough, the new peal for St Martin's probabably takes him nearer than usual to the realm of conventional composition. As he points out, the practice of change-ringing, with its shifting overlaid patterns of repeated parts, bears a distinct kinship to the music of American minimalist composers like Steve Reich and Philip Glass.

"Change-ringing as a compositional style has this abstract, ritual quality to it. For June 26 the bell-ringers are in discussions about some new concepts that will generate clusters of bells, with more simultaneous movement so you get a bigger sound coming out of the tower. It's a musical experiment to see how far into contemporary Birmingham the bells can travel."

Though in some respects the circumstances of the St Martin's bells are unique, the problem of ancient bells competing with high levels of ambient noise in modern cities is widespread.

"In London it's hard to hear Big Ben above the traffic, and in Trafalgar Square even when you're just across the street you can barely hear the bells of St Martin-in-the-Fields. But I felt in the case of Birmingham it was something I would be able to do."

■ For more information about Bill Fontana's work, see resoundings.org