



## The sound of wellbeing comes naturally

**Siân Ellis** meets sound artist Justin Wiggan who harnesses the healing power of Nature to improve people's mental wellbeing; words © Siân Ellis

**I**t was like sitting in a rainbow" ... "I feel more relaxed and aware of my surroundings" ... "I have a completely new respect for Nature now".

For a mental health wellbeing group of people who suffer from high anxiety, being immersed in Cornwall-based sound artist Justin Wiggan's latest project for just fifteen minutes inspired a range of positive thoughts and feelings.

The Internal Garden experience has grown from "quite left-field ideas," Justin says. Like his birdsong installation at Tŷ Hafan hospice in Wales (featured in my article *The Natural Sound of Memory*, in the May issue), it also channels the healing and creative powers of Nature.

"Using MIDI Sprout technology, I take electrical impulse readings from

**Stephanie Tyrrell, national arts manager for Sense, with a participant in Justin Wiggan's project Internal Garden, at Birmingham Botanical Gardens. All photos © Sense Arts/Owen De Visser.**

plants and trees, and turn them into sound with a computer. Then I turn the sound into physical vibrations by using SUBPAC technology — people wearing special backpacks can hear

and feel the impulses at the same time. It's like a sonic plant massage."

Justin has explored sound and vibration with plants from trees to bluebells, cacti to prayer plants.

"Electrical impulses can change according to the time of day and where a plant is, whether it is in sunshine or thirsty," Justin explains. "Seaweed is amazing because it is

really tactile. When you move it, the whole sound changes and because you are touching it, you are adding your own electrical impulses — an inter-species collaboration.



Justin uses a range of hi-tech equipment to take electrical impulse readings from plants and turn them into sound.



Justin (in the white shirt) demonstrating his Internal Garden project.





*Above and facing page, participating in the Internal Garden project is a tactile experience — “It’s like a sonic plant massage,” Justin explains.*

“You can set the instrumentation [that translates the electrical impulses] to anything. You can get a plant playing double bass or you can get it playing a drum kit.”

Justin recently took Internal Garden to Birmingham Botanical Gardens to work with Sense, the charity that supports people with complex disabilities including deafblindness.

“Someone who is blind and deaf can still feel plants with their hand, and also feel the vibrations through their backpack that sounds are producing,” Justin says. “Some of the children were non-verbal, but you can see how their

body language changes, how their eye movement changes. Their carers are able to say that they become a lot less anxious or are spending a lot more time with a plant, more dwelling time, than is usual. These things are unlocking through Nature, feel, sound and vibration.”

Justin has also been working with WILD Young Parents, a charity based in Cornwall that helps vulnerable young mums, dads and their children to be healthy, happy and safe.

“We spend time outdoors with them exploring how to use Internal Garden, listening and talking with

them. One of the young dads writes rap music, and sounds he got from bluebells and seaweed will now be on a rap record that is being put out; it has been a really rewarding experience for him.

“There is a big Nature deficit with the younger generation,” Justin adds. “One of the ideas behind Internal Garden is that it offers a positive way to use technology, which young people are interested in, to connect them to green space and learning about Nature.”

Justin’s creative practice is underpinned by a belief that “we have a responsibility as artists to help people with their wellbeing. I think this is a massively untouched resource. Nature and sound and memory are areas

that seem to work for people. We have a longing for Nature, a desire to understand it. Whether people are from a scientific or a religious background, Nature draws them to it. I think Nature offers more hope to us than anything else does.”

Justin grew up in Burnley, Lancashire, and says his route to becoming a sound artist began when, aged five, he was told that by the time he was an adult he would be blind. Luckily that did not happen. “But it made me super conscious of my hearing and my sound world.” Cycling in local countryside also seeded an affinity with the outdoors. “The more I’ve aged the more I’ve felt part of Nature; it has a detoxing effect.”



Via art school and music bands, Justin developed as a sound artist and began exploring how his work could benefit wellbeing, an interest that sharpened when in 2011 his wife, Oona, was diagnosed with breast cancer. Fortunately, she received the all-clear last year but the experience made Justin consider more closely memories and how they can be recalled through sound.

This led to a project called Life Echo, which has had particular resonance with dementia patients: creating a personal 'atlas' of different sounds as an aid to trigger positive memories that can help them piece together scattered fragments of their lives.

Life Echo has also been used by fire services as a therapeutic gateway to positive thoughts that can combat stress and trauma.

Another of Justin's projects harnessing the power of music and Nature is I Wish I Could Sing Like a Bird, a title that came from a remark made by a dementia patient during a workshop at a Staffordshire support centre. Justin developed a playlist of patients' favourite songs being sung by their favourite birds.

"We had a robin singing Yellow Submarine and doves singing Love Me Do. It made special connections and the patients loved it."

Justin is also working with the RNLI and Cornwall Council on the

project Echo Point, to create solar-powered audio posts to place in particular coastal spots; the idea is that sounds that trigger positive feelings can be used to potentially redirect a vulnerable or suicidal person's negative thoughts away from self-harm.

"What are the most meaningful sounds that make *Countryman* readers happy in their lives?" he asks. "I want to find the ten happiest sounds in the UK and include them on the audio posts."

Justin has lots of plans to develop his projects further, including do-it-yourself apps and kits for Life Echo and Internal Garden, and a possible permanent Internal Garden at TouchBase Pears social enterprise in Birmingham, bringing Nature experiences into the city.

"Being able to work with people and make creative interventions that help someone feel better, emotionally, mentally, physically is an honour and a blessing," Justin concludes. ■

*Share your thoughts on sounds that can trigger positive feelings by contacting Justin on [Twitter.com/justin\\_wiggan](https://twitter.com/justin_wiggan)*

*You can also follow Justin on [www.instagram.com/twinofglass/](https://www.instagram.com/twinofglass/)*

*Find out more about Justin's work at [www.justinwiggan.co.uk/](https://www.justinwiggan.co.uk/)*

*For other project information, visit:*

*[www.iwishicouldsinglikeabird.uk;](https://www.iwishicouldsinglikeabird.uk/)*

*[www.life-echo.co.uk](https://www.life-echo.co.uk)*

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"The three great elemental sounds in Nature are the sound of rain, the sound of wind in a primeval wood and the sound of the ocean on a beach." *Henry Beston*