

EGSM – Playing Instruments

Content Warnings

- Brief innuendo
- Discussions of: COVID-19 pandemic & lockdown
- Mentions of: food, ghosts

HELEN

It probably says a lot about me that when you said "the bell is bigger" my first thought was: ooh, you can stick your whole head in it!

(Group laughter)

CATHY

No, that's the tuba, you can stick your whole head in the tuba!

HELEN

Oh OK!

(Group laughter)

[Show Theme - Intro]

HELEN

Hello friends and fans and welcome to Enthusiasm, the show where we talk about a few of our favourite things. I am your host, Helen Gould, one of the best Rusty Quillers and today we're talking about playing instruments and being musicians. And, I am tremulously excited to be joined by Cathy, Fay and Jeffrey. As always our guests shall introduce themselves alphabetically, which means Fay, you are starting us off. What are your pronouns and what do you do?

FAY

My name is Fay Roberts, my pronouns are either zie/zir or they/them if zie/zir is too complicated. My day job involves writing lists for other people and um-

HELEN

[laughs]

FAY

Telling them - no, you can't, we can't afford, no. I'm so sorry. And er, the fun stuff later at night involves voice acting including for Rusty Quill.

HELEN

Lovely. I do love the various ways that you describe your day job.

FAY

[chuckles]

HELEN

[laughs] It's all very exciting! Cathy, you should have gone first, C comes before F!

CATHY

That's OK! [laughs] It was nice not to go first for once!

HELEN

Oh my god, it's because I wrote down, I wrote down the names of who was gonna be on this and I put Fay first. Oh!

FAY

My middle name begins with A if that helps...?

(Group laughter)

CATHY

Yeah, today my name can start with a K. It's totally cool! It's all good!

(Group laughter)

HELEN

Yeah, but that'd mean you going third and - and, and it's OK, just the audience will just now know that that is the level that my brain is operating on during this recording! [laughs]

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FAY

Nice!

CATHY

Aww!

HELEN

It's fine! Cathy. Please give us your pronouns and tell us what you do.

CATHY

Hi, I'm Cathy Rinella, pronouns are she/her, and I'm one of the audio masters at Rusty Quill.

HELEN

Jeffrey - what are your pronouns and what do you do?

JEFFREY

Hi, my name's Jeffrey Nils Gardner, my pronouns are they/them and I am no longer one of the best Rusty Quillers.

CATHY

[gasps] Lies! Lies!

HELEN

We're so devastated.

JEFFREY

[laughs]

HELEN

You are one of the best former Rusty Quillers.

JEFFREY

I'll take that. Yeah, so I am a sound designer, audio fiction director and producer, right now I think let's call it I am the producer for Vox's "Phoebe Reads a Mystery", I am the Executive Producer of "Unwell: a Midwestern Gothic Mystery" and I am a professor at Northwestern University here in Illinois. And a bunch of other stuff but I can't actually talk about it right now!

(Group laughter)

HELEN

Right - obvious question first! What instruments do you all play and how did you start playing them?

JEFFREY

So I play a bunch of different instruments, I would say that my primary instrument through most of my life has been the violin.

HELEN

Oh!

FAY

[gasps] Oh, love it.

JEFFREY

I have been playing for a little over 30 years now to avoid having to do the math at how old I actually am.

(Group laughter)

JEFFREY

Yeah, so around 30, 30 plus years. I also play mandolin and octave mandolin.

FAY

Cool.

JEFFREY

And banjo and bodhran and-

HELEN

What was that last one?

JEFFREY

Bodhran? It's an Irish frame drum.

FAY

Yes!

CATHY

Yes.

HELEN

Ooh!

JEFFREY

And I program modular synths.

HELEN & FAY

Wow.

JEFFREY

As well as I kind of have a sideline in building and playing um, what I call electro-acoustic instruments, they're just weird circuits and you know, pick-ups and stuff like that that make chaotic, horrific noises but they're a lot of fun.

(Group laughter)

HELEN

In this house we love and appreciate chaotic, horrific noises.

JEFFREY

Mm hm.

HELEN

Can we go back, you said that you played, was it mandolin and then a something else mandolin?

JEFFREY

Yeah, so I play the regular small mandolin

HELEN

Uh huh.

JEFFREY

which is an 8 stringed instrument about the size of a ukulele, it's actually tuned and has intervals that are exactly the same as a violin, so that's a very easy switchover.

FAY

Mm.

HELEN

Mm hm.

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JEFFREY

And then I also, you'll see this on video I guess!

(Group laughter)

JEFFREY

I also play the octave mandolin, this is my electric.

CATHY & FAY

[impressed noises]

JEFFREY

And it is, I made this out of a three quarter scale guitar which has the same scale length as a regular octave mandolin, so it's 8 stringed and just every string is a full octave down from the regular mandolin.

HELEN

I see!

CATHY

Oh that's so cool!

HELEN

That's super cool. I always forget that you can get different instruments that are just like, you know, big brothers, like, to the other instruments or like, little baby siblings!

(Group laughter)

HELEN

Like saxophones, and you have like a soprano saxophone and stuff like that.

FAY & CATHY

Mm hm.

HELEN

Cathy, what about you?

CATHY

I have one instrument that I play with several others that I kinda adopted on and off over the years. So I primarily play tuba for the last, oh god now I have to do the math.

(Group laughter)

CATHY

Sure, let's say at least 20 years, probably?

HELEN

Ooh!

CATHY

That was my primary instrument through school and into college and then probably the second longest is bass trombone, and then there's been a smattering of other instruments picked up here and there through classes in college so at one point I was playing a little bit of piano, one year I was learning some snare drum, another was - was it oboe or bassoon? It was oboe. Oboe, that was pretty fun. And um, at one point I tried to pick up bass guitar-

FAY

Mm.

JEFFREY

[laughs]

CATHY

With vague success and then put it back down!

(Group laughter)

JEFFREY

You've got all those low instruments!

FAY

Yeah!

CATHY

Oh I love the low instruments! And that's where my eardrums live, I just, I just love 'em so much. Yeah.

HELEN

What's, er, OK, so is a bass trombone just a very big trombone?

CATHY

Actually it's, it's similar in size to a regular trombone but the bell is larger and there's extra tubing so that allows you to get the lower octaves that you would normally assign to a bass trombone as opposed to a regular one. And because of the extra tubing in it, will often come with a valve.

HELEN

Oh!

CATHY

That allows you to switch to the additional tubing that you need to hit those low notes, whereas on a normal trombone there's not usually, sometimes there's valves but it's not, you know-

HELEN

It's usually just the slide?

CATHY

Yeah.

HELEN

It probably says a lot about me that when you said "the bell is bigger" my first thought was: ooh, you can stick your whole head in it! [laughs]

CATHY

No that's the tuba, you can stick your whole head in the tuba!

HELEN

Oh OK!

(Group laughter)

CATHY

The, the bass trombone you can wear like a very large hat.

HELEN

Oh lovely!

CATHY

You can just stick it with the very long, you know, brass trail behind you!

(Group laughter)

HELEN

Gorgeous! And Fay, what instruments do you play and how did you get started?

FAY

Oh crikey. Er, I guess instruments I have played, I started with probably like most people in the UK I started with the recorder.

HELEN

Oh yeah!

CATHY

Oh!

FAY

And then piano, because there was a piano in my house from when I was like 3, something like that. Went for lessons when I was about 6, maybe 7. I think it was 6 though because there was, that was apparently controversial, I dunno.

HELEN

[laughs]

FAY

I don't know why! And then, and this is terribly middle-class, I was asked, you know, would I like to learn a second instrument and my submission that French horn is cool was rejected by my parents who I think had horrible visions of how that, you know, someone learning a French horn would go.

(Group laughter)

FAY

So er, clarinet was um, was choice B but I did, I did fall in love with it. Also a great deal more, what's the word I want? Portable. You break it down and it goes into a tiny little case.

HELEN

Yeah.

FAY

I think I focused more on singing, I'm like a classically trained singer, so I've been singing-

HELEN

Ooh!

FAY

-yeah, um, I've been singing in choirs and such and even competitions since I was, oh, in choirs since I was 3 or 4 and in competitions since I was 5 which I suspect is a very South Wales thing. I tended to assume that was normal and then when I set up a choir that I ran in university and we, part of the warm-up to get people in the audition was to ask them, you know, how long you been singing, what other singing have you done kind of thing. And to find out that in fact there's a huge difference between for example Welsh culture, German culture, Italian culture and then like English culture and various other cultures especially, yeah especially English is that you don't, just don't sing as much as, as, yeah, as I was used to. And I used to think: gosh, these people haven't sung very much! And then I realised after a while of going - oh no! No. My, my perception is skewed. And then I picked up hand percussion, I'd always been interested in it in school, just liked to play with it, just mess around with it and then um, got into it in a much bigger way, weirdly enough through poetry which is an odd flex I know, but ended up something that I would do to accompany poetry and [laughs] - and then here's an even weirder flex, ended up somehow joining a bluegrass band-

HELEN

Oh!

FAY

-in which, in which I would play djembe and various other hand percussion, which is, I dunno what this looked like to the audience, they just went with it. But um, yeah.

HELEN

So when you say hand percussion you mean like drums that you actually hit with your-

FAY

You hit with your hands, yeah. I, I think the co-ordination required to actually use sticks and especially if you're using sticks and feet which is why I'm always really impressed with the people who can use drum kits, it's just like - mmm, no! [laughs]

HELEN

Did you ever use those little cymbals that you could put on your fingers?

JEFFREY

Castanets?

HELEN

Castanets, that's what I mean, yeah.

FAY

Yes, yeah, oh yeah we had, got given those when I was very little and so -

HELEN

Yeah?

FAY

-and again annoyed the parents greatly on maracas and, don't give inquisitive children loud percussion instruments is definitely their vibe! So of course when my little sister was born one of the things I made sure to do was to give her lots of instruments [laughs] from about 2 or three onwards!

HELEN

Yeah!

FAY

Which I think yeah, I think was very responsible for me to do. And to be fair she's studying music at Leeds now so I, I feel like I helped, I helped nurture that, so.

HELEN

You are vindicated!

CATHY

[laughs]

FAY

Yeah!

HELEN

I encourage giving children loud instruments because they'll like it.

JEFFREY

[laughs]

HELEN

Just do it somewhere far away from where you are-

FAY

Yes.

HELEN

-if you don't want to be disturbed.

FAY

That's the way!

JEFFREY

Now Helen, in asking for a definition of hand percussion were you trying to ferret out if Fay was just having a really, like, exciting name for clapping?

(Group laughter)

HELEN

No! I had, I had - I, I've seen instruments before!

(Group laughter)

CATHY

OK!

HELEN

Audience, I just wanted to mention that when Fay was talking about how Wales and most other countries have a very different singing culture to England, Lowri turned her camera back on just to pop into the Skype call to nod enthusiastically and then disappeared again! [laughs] So a little behind the scenes things for you there!

FAY

Nice!

HELEN

So Fay you've gone into this a little bit about bands and orchestras, can you tell us anything more about, you said a Bluegrass band did you say?

FAY

Yeah, a bluegrass band. I played like I say djembe and various other instruments with them and cajon when their main drummer wasn't available.

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A cajon is brilliant by the way, everyone should try and play one of those, they're gorgeous instruments.

HELEN

What is it?

FAY

Cajon is, if you've ever seen someone sitting on a box and hitting it and think-

HELEN

[gasps] Yes!

FAY

It's that - that's the cajon.

CATHY

Mm hm.

FAY

So yeah, the weird coincidence is I was bought this for my 40th birthday, which is an excellent present I think to give someone for their 40th, but it turned out to be made by someone who, whose playing when they were busking inspired a poem that is, well it became one of my standards that I do like kind of vocal percussion, so it's, it kind of switches between vocal percussion, singing and poetry. And then got this cajon and it's, you know, signed by that cajon player and singer who inspired the poem and I was just like: this is so cool! But yes,

so I played that with the bluegrass band and accompanied various poets when I was in school. You didn't really have much choice, if you played an orchestral instrument you were expected to join the orchestra.

HELEN

Of course, yes.

FAY

And latterly I, they, they did, they had a wind band as well. For the orchestra, and it was accepted that I was either second or third clarinet, because there were a fair number of clarinet players of better standards than I, let's say! [laughs] So when you get to, I don't know if any of you have played in, well I suspect Jeffrey has but um, you get desks within an orchestra. So you have like first violin, second violin etc. but you also have it for some of the other instruments so you're, depending on how keen your school is to, to get any - well just, just play something! But the further back on the desks you go the less you have to play or the more basic you have to play. So sometimes all you're doing is watching other people to find out when you turn the page during all the rest bars before you go "toot toot TOOT!" Twenty more rest bars kind of thing...

(Group laughter)

FAY

So there was a lot of, there was a lot of eating on the third desk for clarinet!

(Group laughter)

FAY

A lot of snacking!

HELEN

I want an orchestra made entirely of people just making the noises with their mouths and someone just yelling "toot"!

(Group laughter)

FAY

It's bound to be out there. Bound to be!

HELEN

Yeah!

FAY

There are orchestras with instruments made out of vegetables which just makes me so - so excited! [laughs]

HELEN

Oh, lovely!

FAY

I could have done that!

HELEN

Oh - have any of you, um, oh my gosh what's it called? The Portsmouth Sinfonia - I'm gonna read from the Wikipedia -

FAY

Oh right.

HELEN

-was an English orchestra founded by a group of students at the Portsmouth School of Art in 1970. The Sinfonia was generally open to anyone and ended up drawing players who were either people without musical training, or if they were musicians, ones that chose to play an instrument that was entirely new to them." So all of the stuff that they have released is people trying their very best to play music but not actually being very good at it.

FAY

Glorious...

HELEN

But it's got a really like wholesome history because the, the, they set it up because they, they just wanted people to play music, they didn't mind if it was good or not, they just wanted people to like, have fun with it and try to - it says here on the Wikipedia: "The only rules were that everyone had to come for

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rehearsals and that people should try their best to get it right and not intentionally play badly."

(Group laughter)

CATHY

Aw, that's awesome though!

FAY

That is very cool.

CATHY

That's great.

HELEN

And then: "As the years passed the musicians eventually became accustomed to and more skilled at playing their instruments which diminished the novelty of the group."

(Group laughter)

FAY

Oh no, they're no longer terrible! What?

(Group laughter)

HELEN

Anyway, yeah, so um, that's my favourite orchestra in the world!

FAY

OK!

(Group laughter)

HELEN

And we shall, we shall move on! Cathy, tell me about you being in bands/orchestras.

CATHY

Oh gosh. Well as a, as a primary tuba player I got whisked into bands and orchestras fairly quickly from the time I started playing. I learned in grade school around third grade, which I think is a little uncommon for US schools, but because there is a rash of people not wanting to play the low instruments because they're not as glamorous – flute's very glamorous, a trumpet, a saxophone, you know, everything that you kind of see in-

HELEN

Yeah, they get the lively bits to do.

CATHY

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I got whisked into band I think you know, maybe five months after I started playing.

FAY

[laughs]

CATHY

And it's, I mean I, I've always enjoyed it, I've played a lot of band and orchestra over the years, at times playing in both again because of the scarcity of the instrument. It, being a tuba, Fay was - what you were saying earlier about the watching other people change the page of the music. [laughs]

FAY

[laughs] Yeah! Oh, I'm on the 17th rest!

(Group laughter)

CATHY

Playing tube in the back, oh gosh there's so many rests, so many measures of nothing to do that you just kind of trained yourself to hear when you had to come back in or you watched for the conductor to do something that was like - ah! I know when he moves his hand like this, that we're probably close to this measure where I should start paying attention.

(Group laughter)

FAY

Yep!

CATHY

Ohh, it was wonderful. So yeah, there is a lot of like impromptu, improv learning within band sometimes.

(Group laughter)

CATHY

Because we couldn't count 1, 2, 3, 4 all the way up through 60 measures!

(Group laughter)

HELEN

I'd forgotten that a lot of music involves counting.

FAY

Mm hm.

CATHY

Yes.

JEFFREY

Mm hm.

HELEN

Like - that's a major part of it, that's at least half of music!

FAY

At least.

(Group laughter)

CATHY

You know, if you can't go along for the ride with the, the main melody then you're, you're forced to like really count out the full time signatures and make sure you're keeping track of the rhythm and everything like that.

FAY

Oh no, we've changed to 3/4! Argh! Yeah.

CATHY

[laughs] And now we're gonna go to 7/8. And now we're going to 7/6, and then we'll go back to 3/4.

FAY

[laughing] That's the one!

CATHY

It won't make sense but believe it, it'll be fine!

FAY

It is interesting isn't it, you kind of suspend the idea of you being the only, like hm, you're, you're part of the bigger thing and you have to kind of trust that whoever wrote it and whoever's conducting it can bring that together in a whole that the audience will perceive?

CATHY

Mm hm

JEFFREY

Mm.

FAY

Yeah. Yeah. It can be um, it can be a weird experience because you know you're only like a, a really small component of the entire sound.

HELEN

Mm hm.

CATHY

Mm. And every group that you're in has a different personality to it.

FAY

Mm.

HELEN

Mm.

CATHY

Like just by sheer nature of the instrument make up so like, I always felt that orchestra was a lot more serious than band was at times, even if we're talking like a professional wind symphony versus a professional orchestra, there's still a characteristic, there's still a dynamic that's different between the two groups, just like how everybody works in a wind band is different from how everybody works in a jazz band is how everybody works different in a pit orchestra for like, you know, a theatre production, things like that.

HELEN

Do you think that's because of the kind, like the kind of genres of music that tend to be most suitable?

CATHY

I think so. I think like for example, jazz-

HELEN

Mm.

CATHY

It's encouraged that you improv on things, it's encouraged that you're, you kind of go off the rails a little bit in terms of just trying to be creative with the

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performance and letting loose and swinging the eighths and kind of tweaking the triplets and all that fun stuff. Whereas in orchestra you have decades, sometimes centuries of established music-

FAY

Mm hm.

HELEN

Mm.

CATHY

-of historical repute.

HELEN

[laughs]

CATHY

And it's like a core part of the classical music repertoire that you must do this a certain way, you must be precise and if you don't get it right, anybody who knows their music will point it out to you and make sure you know.

HELEN

Oof!

CATHY

And um, in that sense it kind of leads to a difference in personalities between the instruments too, in different groups I think. Like Jeffrey, you were saying that you learned violin. Oh, SO much respect for learning violin. I - that takes so much training at the start.

HELEN

Mm.

CATHY

That, I mean it's hard to pick up a string instrument in the er, in the early years as opposed to like a wind instrument. You can get results out of a wind instrument pretty quickly as a beginner, like to a point where you feel comfortable with the notes on the page but with a string instrument there's just so much to take in and so much you need to train before you can feel comfortable with playing.

JEFFREY

I mean I guess in some ways I'm lucky in that I was really, I was playing violin before I was learning to do anything else other than like, I guess, share?

(Group laughter)

JEFFREY

Or you know, maybe my, my colours or numbers I learned beforehand, but-

FAY

Oh wow!

HELEN

Wow!

CATHY

Oh my gosh!

JEFFREY

You know yeah, I was, I, you know the, actually the story of how I got into violin is funny. I um, as a child in my grandmother's house, my mother's mother, I found her grandmother, so my great-grandmother's violin. Like-

HELEN

Oh!

JEFFREY

Hidden down in a basement somewhere and I was like - "I would like to play this!" And you know I'm like, again I'm like 3 or 4.

FAY

Mm hm.

JEFFREY

And they're like - OK, well we did want to get you on an instrument so you wanna play violin - and apparently I was very into it and er, so I got a very, very small violin and started playing and actually the, the one over here on my wall, my main acoustic violin is that same violin that we restored.

CATHY

[gasps]

FAY

Oh that's gorgeous!

HELEN

Aww!

CATHY

That's so cool!

JEFFREY

And er, I still play.

HELEN

That's lovely!

JEFFREY

There are a couple of family instruments that have been passed down, I also play my Great Aunt Peachy's tenor banjo. Peachy was a, um, she was a performer for the rodeos.

FAY

Oh cool!

HELEN

[gasps]

JEFFREY

And so she never had a day of musical training in her life but could play any instrument that she picked up and played for the rodeos out in Montana and er yeah, I ended up with her banjo. I dunno I, I like to say that I am kind of broadly not deeply musical. I can kinda play most instruments, I don't pretend to, you know I sing but I like, I can sing in a punk band, I can't sing in a Broadway musical.

(Group laughter)

HELEN

So but were you in bands and stuff?

JEFFREY

Yeah, yeah! So I, you know in my younger years, you know elementary, middle, high school I played in a couple of orchestras and a couple of chamber music quartets, and then some time in high school I got an electric violin-

ALL

Ooooh!

JEFFREY

And kinda never looked back! And so I played in a couple of punk bands and an Irish punk band-

HELEN

Oh ho ho!

JEFFREY

That was like right in the era where like Dropkick Murphys-

FAY

Yeah.

JEFFREY

and Flogging Molly were really popular here in the States.

CATHY

Yeah! Yeah!

HELEN

Oh hell yeah! [laughs]

JEFFREY

And then I've play- I had a couple of different like acoustic trios that I played out with here in Chicago for a while. I'm not currently playing with a band, mostly just because time but I miss it a little bit.

FAY

Mm, yeah.

HELEN

Aww!

JEFFREY

You know especially with like a really loud, good rock 'n' roll band, er, there is, I love playing with orchestras, it was a lot of fun, but there is no sensation like you know, three people with amps cranked way too loud and your drummer-

HELEN

[laughs]

JEFFREY

And it's just, it's like surfing a wave of sound and you're just barely staying on top of it. It's a really delightful experience.

HELEN

Lovely!

FAY

Oh I love it.

JEFFREY

Also I can't hear any noises above like 1400 - 1200 Hz now.

FAY

Oh boy!

(Group laughter)

FAY

It's destroyed, OK!

HELEN

Oh dear!

JEFFREY

Yeah!

HELEN

Well on that slightly upsetting note!

(Group laughter)

HELEN

We're going to take a break and we will see you again after these ads.

- [BREAK] -

HELEN

And welcome back. So we've talked about our various musical histories, I have another question, and this time it's about other people. I wanna find out which musicians you each admire, if there are any in particular, like if there are any particular performers that you really enjoy.

CATHY

I would actually say I don't have any, it's more just I don't have any that I've been focused into but maybe as a, as a counteroffer to answer that question I have always really admired some people's ability to compose for other instruments.

FAY

Mm.

HELEN

Go on?

CATHY

Er, one that sticks out in my mind especially is um, Eric Whitacre.

FAY

Oh, yeah.

CATHY

Who's an amazing choir composer. He's done a lot of wonderful singing pieces, he's spearheaded a, um, virtual choir that performs with singers from all over the world through the internet well before the pandemic happened, and has always been really innovative in how he composes his music. But I fell in love with how he wrote things for band before he got into his groove for choir, because the way he composed meant that he found ways to have the instruments do things they don't normally get to do.

ALL

Mm.

CATHY

A lot of creative illustrative music. So like er, there's one piece in particular that he wrote ages ago called "Ghost Train" and it's for wind symphony and it's basically, there's a whole story that goes behind this piece of music that illustrates this paranormal setting where this train is moving through this ghostly, dark land and you, you hear the band as, as you hear this train just like starts revving up and you hear like the percussion bringing in like the "chugga-chugga-chugga" of the train.

HELEN

[laughs]

CATHY

And you hear the horns and the flutes and the clarinets all helping to create this wonderfully massive, elaborate like train sound that's slightly eerie and as like the, as the "who-who" starts going off and, and the low brass brings in this massive like, sound of like the presence of the engine and everything. I just, I love when people think about instruments in a different way that allows them not to be pigeonholed. And so I really, I admire that kind of work and I admire a lot of music that is illustrative and fun and not just - it's kind of like what Jeffrey was saying before of you know, feeling that kind of drive when you're in a band.

HELEN

Yeah.

CATHY

Or when like you're in a, in a punk band or you're in a rock band of like performing for a crowd, like composers that can do that for an orchestra or a band is amazing. Because we don't always get that feeling when we're playing.

FAY

Yeah.

JEFFREY

I'd love to build off of that. I have two, I guess two kind of answers for your question on like musicians I have been - I mean the first is, I have just gone down the deepest John Darnielle Mountain Goats hole-

HELEN

Oh!

JEFFREY

And so I think if there's any, if there's any musician that I'm spending a lot of time with right now and have over the last couple of years it's - it's his music. Just a fantastic lyricist and thinks about the world and music in really interesting ways. But branching off Cathy what you were saying, I think there's also, I, I have discovered lately a real love for, you know, sampling is, is maybe the easiest way to talk about it but things like Plunderphonics from John Oswald. [laughs] Famously coined in his essay which has just the best title: "Plunderphonics, or: Audio Piracy as a Compositional Prerogative".

(Group laughter)

FAY

OK! Damn!

CATHY

I love it!

JEFFREY

He's got an amazing er, the, the place to start is DAB, D-A-B, in which he somehow makes Michael Jackson undanceable.

(Group laughter)

FAY

Damn!

JEFFREY

So it's a really, it's a really cool piece. But also you know, I think about the, the first time I heard Steve Reich's "It's Gonna Rain" which is just, it's a piece that is played using a pair of tape decks with the same sample of this preacher preaching and he uses them and like lets them go out of sync, so that they're, you know they get some phase cancellation and it's a, just incredible piece of music using this, this one piece of audio that you know, I will just sit down and listen to every once in a while, it's a, a really devastating and beautiful piece of music.

CATHY

Oh that sounds awesome.

JEFFREY

Or maybe, maybe someone like Chris Wilson who was an audio engineer for the BBC, did a bunch of their documentaries and then apparently the, what I hear is that in his contract he had written in that anything he recorded he could also use for himself so he would go out and you know, record trains all over Europe and then, and use that to, you know, create the, the documentary and then come back and create these beautiful pieces of music using the, the train recordings that he captured, so. Yeah. Yeah, I have been really, lately have been really interested in musicians who are using, you know tape and other things, things that are not typically thought of as musical instruments and creating what is either recognisably or maybe you would say arguably music out of it!

(Group laughter)

FAY

Debatably music. OK!

HELEN

And Fay, what do you think? Like who do you, do you have anyone you admire?

FAY

I'm glad I got to the end of this because I've spent this time trying to work out-

(Group laughter)

FAY

But I've realised that a lot of people that I admire as in: "Wow, that's amazing, I could listen to that for ages" or you know, I wish I could do that or I'd love to work with them kind of thing, a lot of them are people who aren't that well-renowned, or they're just people I've jammed with or stuff like that. And I'm trying to-

HELEN

Aw!

FAY

No, which is, which is lovely. But I mean it's like not necessarily, to do you the favour of being able to connect to their music in the same way. But I realised that one of the things that I'm particularly drawn to is especially multi-instrumentalists, people who can just pick up a lot of different things. And people who are generous, I think that's probably the best way of putting it, who don't necessarily put themselves first and foremost when it comes to performance. I don't know if this is just a background as being a choral singer. I mean, and again when I used to audition people for the choir I wouldn't necessarily always take the best singers, like technically the best singers, it would be about the people who would be able to work in a choir if you know

what I mean. The people who you'd go - right. This is someone who can harmonise, this is someone who can listen to other people and isn't necessarily putting themselves first even if they're an amazing - and you can have these amazing solo singers who are able to make that switch to being a good choral singer as well, and I'm just thinking, someone I know from, from work of all things, we just kind of got falling into talking about this and then ended up doing some collaborative stuff as poet and musician. His name is Gavinash Sirisena and he is again a multi-instrumentalist, and very modest about it as well. I'll say: "Wow, you play the sitar!" And he's like: "Oh I've a GOT a sitar..." And I'm like - sure, but you actually know how to-

(Group laughter)

FAY

It's just not sitting there covered in dust, you know what to do with that kind of thing. You know, he plays keyboard, he plays lots of hand percussion, he plays guitar like it's not a guitar. Like one of the pieces we used to do together it sounded more like a harp or something like that, he was able to do this amazing high pizzicato stuff that made you just go - I don't know what you just did, I didn't even know that guitars could do that! And yeah, that could spin all sorts of wonderful kind of images in my head. But he also, he plays with other bands who again aren't the kind where it's like a, a coincidence of egos but is in fact a proper band together and any time I've seen him in session with other people and you just go - he's making everyone else, like, larger. He's, you know, he's bringing it all up as well as being spectacular by himself.

HELEN

Mm.

FAY

Similarly I suppose a more famous example would be Nitin Sawhney. And again a lot of his stuff is not about him, it's about who he can bring together and the stories he can tell. All of his albums are, they always have an overarching theme and they always tell stories within the individual pieces as well as across the album, and it'll be about lots of other musicians, lots of other ways of talking about the world. Yeah, I, I guess I, and I admire people who you can harmonise with and you can work with, like there's a bassist/vocalist called Ian Newman who plays with, what are they calling themselves? Anachopunk, spoken word something or other, they're the Anti Poet.

HELEN

Oh excellent!

FAY

Yeah, they're the Anti Poet and there's one guy who's like a former punk musician doing ranty, proper old-school ranty poetry and occasional singing, and there's Ian who's doing double bass and various other instruments and singing with that as well, then just various interjections to kind of make it work.

HELEN

Mm.

FAY

And again he's an exceptional musician himself but he also brings everything else up, he's also an absolute dream to harmonise with which is, which is really good, and he plays with that bluegrass band when they do the festival lineup. So yeah. Yeah, that's something I'm again missing with, with pandemic is that bit where you improvise harmonies with other people.

HELEN

Yeah.

FAY

Where you go: I don't know if we'll ever be able to do that again but that five part harmony that we just did then that was frankly close to orgasmic? That, that that happened then?

(Group laughter)

FAY

That will possibly never happen again in any of our lifetimes? That. That moment. You know?

HELEN

Yeah.

FAY

Yeah. That's - yeah, we'll, we'll get that back. We'll be, there'll be space and time to do those things.

HELEN

Yeah, eventually.

FAY

Yeah. Yeah.

HELEN

We are coming to the end of our time.

FAY

Ooh.

HELEN

So I wanna end on like a quick-fire question. And that question is: if you could learn any instrument that you don't already know, which one would it be? Because for me it would be the piano. The piano's one of my favourite instruments to listen to it and it would be really cool to be able to play it. What about the rest of you?

FAY

Just one?

HELEN

Just one!

(Group laughter)

JEFFREY

You know I, I would say that my brain says piano, I would be so much more employable in various fields if-

(Group laughter)

JEFFREY

-er I could do more than you know, plunk and, hunt and peck in much in the way that, you know, people type!

(Group laughter)

JEFFREY

I can hunt and peck on a keyboard but if I could really play it would be great. But my heart says cello. I love the cello.

FAY

Ooh yeah.

HELEN

Oh, what a beautiful sound.

JEFFREY

And maybe, maybe some of it is just like envy as a violinist because they've got those big deep notes and, but it's just such a beautiful instrument.

HELEN

Yeah.

FAY

It is. My clarinet teacher, halfway through our time together, started learning the cello, and I swear at one point half our lessons were just her rhapsodising about how amazing the cello was.

HELEN

[laughs]

FAY

Because you, you hug it. And she was talking in terms that frankly I'm not sure that, like a 15 year old should have been listening to an adult talking about, but yeah-

(Group laughter)

FAY

It was, for her it was a very sensual experience for her and I was like- yeah man! Yeah! It certainly looks it!

(Group laughter)

HELEN

Well good for her!

FAY

Yeah, good for her!

(Group laughter)

FAY

So for me probably any, any stringed instrument. It's not something I've ever been - I've tried but they don't kind of "take" for me. So I'd love to be able to um, to do that. Any of them, frankly. Just anything that's stringed. So when Jeffrey was kind of like reeling out the list I was like - god, any of those, that would be amazing!

(Group laughter)

FAY

Like I can get a tune out of any fipple flute or whatever and I think they're like a lot of different woodwind but like, you get chords with, with strings! That would be amazing.

HELEN

Yeah!

FAY

So yeah. Yeah, so that basically. A whole family of 'em, any of those. Pick one!

HELEN

[laughs] And Cathy, what about you?

CATHY

Ohhh yeah. Where to start?

(Group laughter)

CATHY

I mean I - I love a stringed instrument. I'm not very good about picking them up and taking to them but oh gosh, a cello. A string bass, a viola, a mandolin. I mean all of those.

HELEN

[laughs]

FAY

There, you see?

CATHY

It just, it would be so, it would be wonderful to just pick it up without like, pick it up and know that your fingers knew what they-

HELEN

Mmmmmm!

FAY

Yeahhh...

CATHY

-were doing instinctively, like they just kind of start playing on their own and it's like - ohh, that would be wonderful. [laughs] Oh, a guitar. Again, I've tried my best at bass but oh it's not - again, not taken to, to strings well. So, I've got some there but it's nothing like pulling out a good guitar riff, you know?

FAY

Yeah.

JEFFREY

[laughs]

CATHY

You know when you're watching a rock band. I think finally I would, I would love to be able to pick up an accordion and go to town.

ALL

Yeah!

HELEN

Oh hell yes!

JEFFREY

Oh I, I do own an accordion and I can play half of it, I can play the chord part.

(Group laughter)

CATHY

There's one easy part and one hard part! [laughs]

JEFFREY

But the, the piano keys, actually it's that most of them are broken so I haven't really been able to -

FAY

Oh no!

HELEN

Ah, OK.

CATHY

Yeah.

JEFFREY

-learn and I haven't had a time where it's made sense to get it fixed.

HELEN

Ohh gosh.

FAY

Ooh I have a, I have a didgeridoo I've just remembered.

ALL

[gasps]

FAY

I don't know why I have a didgeridoo but I've never been able to get much out of it!

CATHY

Ooh, love a didgeridoo! Oh that's awesome!

HELEN

We love a didgeridoo.

FAY

That would definitely annoy the neighbours, that would be awesome.

(Group laughter)

CATHY

I've developed a very bad habit of enjoying all the really obnoxious instruments-

(Group laughter)

CATHY

So I love an accordion, a tuba, er, I love listening to bagpipes, I'm sorry, bagpipes are wonderful!

HELEN

Yes, no, they're great!

JEFFREY

No, they rock!

FAY

They are!

CATHY

I would love to be able to learn to play a bagpipe too, that would be so much fun.

HELEN

[laughs]

FAY

Oh yeah.

HELEN

Wonderful. Right. We are now out of time.

FAY

Damn!

HELEN

Pun not intended! Ha ha ha!

FAY

Woo hoo!

HELEN

Thank you so much for talking about music and instruments with me, I really like the episodes we do about music. It's just something that like, people have such passion about, and it's so lovely to see. Thank you listeners for coming along with us, and I hope that maybe you learned something and maybe you are inspired to pick up a new instrument or an old friend of an instrument. I will see you on the next episode, but for now it's goodbye from me: goodbye. And it's goodbye from all of them. Would you like to say goodbye?

EVERYONE

Bye! Farewell! Goodbye!

[Show Theme - Outro]

Enthusigasm is a podcast distributed by Rusty Quill and licensed under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial share alike 4.0 international license. It is directed by Helen Gould, produced by Lowri Ann Davies, with executive producers Alexander J Newall and April Sumner. This episode of Enthusigasm was edited by Tessa Vroom, Lowri Ann Davies and Catherine Rinella. Thanks for listening.

[Show Theme – Outro Ends]

Rusty Quill Enthusiasm – Playing Instruments (Patreon)

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Executive Producers: Alexander J. Newall & April Sumner

Editing by Tessa Vroom, Lowri Ann Davies and Cathy Rinella

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