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Rocks and Bones
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producer: David McGuinness

John Purser: Music from the Stone Age ought to have stones in it. Well it does – musical ones.

The thing is, stone is not inert and dull. Quite a lot of stones make a sound. There's even one that the kids at Burghead on the Moray coast still go and strike – but they'll be telling you all about that themselves.

The Stone Age also has its share of bones, so we've got bone flutes in the programme too.

And, finally, we just reach the Bronze Age with some sexually symbolic sounds from the great chambered cairn of Maes Howe in Orkney, and in the Hamilton Mausoleum – and that one, I can tell you, is a bit weird. But since these structures were to do with the sun, and since this is the first programme and at the turn of the year, we'll start with Da Day Dawn – celebrating the midwinter sunrise in Shetland at the northern extremity of Scotland, where the winter solstice markes the difference between death and life.

Trad. Shetland - Da Day Dawn
Chris Stout, fiddle
BBC recording

Chris Stout: Da Day Dawn is a beautiful tune – a really old tune from Shetland. Traditionally only played once in the year, and it would have been the very first morning of the New Year.

I always think that it's a very poignant tune that seems to have a – very much a sense of looking forward and looking backward at the same time, neither happy or sad, it's just got that very special quality about it, that's why I love it so much. Beautiful tune.

JP: Chris Stout playing and talking about Da Day Dawn. But although there was wood in the Stone Age it rarely if ever survives. Stone, however, is durable and it was the main material our earliest inhabitants had to work with. They used it to cut and shape wood and leather, antler and bone, and they used it for music as well. Scotland has no shortage of stones and amongst those stones there are those that have their own voices.

Rick Bamford and friends - Tiree ringing rock
Rick Bamford and friends
CD The Kilmartin Sessions
Kilmartin House Trust (no cat. no.) Track 4

JP: This is the sound of the rock gong at Balaphetrish on the Hebridean island of Tiree. The rock's about ten feet across and is being struck by small hand-held stones,

and the sound you hear is the sound of the rock itself. It's said that if it is ever moved, the island will sink back into the ocean. Not such a foolish thought. It's a glacial erratic – a granite boulder shipped there by the ice. If the ice-cap melts or an ice age comes again – some say one, some the other – either way, Tiree might very well sink beneath the waves.

The Tiree rock gong is covered with prehistoric cup-marks; but when I first visited it, there were coins green with verdigris in a little hollow on the top, so it's still being venerated after thousands of years. Most of us have put a coin in a fountain, even in a supermarket, and made a wish. Deep down we haven't changed that much.

There are several of these rock gongs in Scotland, and this next one's on the shore of Iona, not far from the Abbey.

Druids & John Purser – Druid Rock
Druids & John Purser
CD The Kilmartin Sessions
Kilmartin House Trust (no cat. no.) Track 19

The island itself is sacred and the rock is being struck by a group of latter-day druids – members of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, searching for something vital and ancient that is perhaps, not irretrievably lost.

And here is another rock gong – it's the huge recumbent stone that's part of a stone circle near Huntly. Listen carefully and you'll hear that it attracted an audience from a species that was certainly around when the stone was moved into place by farmers over four thousand years ago – the cattle beasts that still form the basis of much of our economy.

Arn Hill rock gong
tape from John Purser's collection

Not all rock-gong hunters are music archaeologists like myself, as I discovered at Burghead Primary School when I asked why one of the stones in the local graveyard was called "The Cradle Stone or The Baby Rock".:-

interview with children from Burghead Primary School

Children used to be told that beneath the stone was where babies came from and they'd also go in to strike it when a burial was taking place – but the old graveyard's full now. Wendy Costen used to go there as a child.

interview with Wendy Costen

field recording of Burghead stone (John Purser)

The Cradle Stone itself is said to be the tombstone of a child but the traditions that go with it are ancient and also international.
Of course, if you're a child, the world is there to be explored without all the answers being given in advance. But adults can also explore it with the same innocence.
These four stones you're about to hear, were found at random on a beach at Loch

Fyne. Hit them with a simple stick and each one has its own pitch – nature's xylophone.

Rick Bamford – Kilmartin Lithophone
Rick Bamford
CD The Kilmartin sessions
Kilmartin House Trust (no cat. no.) Track 5

This is what they sound like, accompanied by a stone whistle riddled with natural holes. The hand of a man has done nothing to alter these stones. They are nature's musical instruments waiting for recognition.

Simon O'Dwyer – Stone Whistles
Simon O'Dwyer
CD The Kilmartin sessions
Kilmartin House Trust (no cat. no.) Track 6

Rick Bamford was playing the lithophone and Simon O'Dwyer the stone whistle. These stones were picked up in modern times but ones like them have been found in Stone Age sites, and in our own stone circles are rock gongs – like the one near Huntly. They may be four to five thousand years old, but they never went away. People visited and revered them; and told stories and made music about them. We still do.

Trad Shetland - Hylta Dance
Chris Stout, fiddle
BBC recording

That's the Hylta Dance and what it tells you is that some of the standing stones are people.

Chris Stout: The Hylta Dance is a great tune – a Trowie tune from Shetland, the trows being the little people that live among the hills in Shetland. The story that goes with this is there's a crofter that's been fishing off the rocks one night, and he comes back home over his croft – he comes upon the trows having a dance – dancing in a ring – they're doing a ring dance, and with the trowie fiddler in the middle. Now the sun came up on the trows and they all turned to stone – while the crofter was still watching this stone circle emerged so we have that still in Shetland – and it's called – in Fetlar actually, the island of Fetlar and it's called "Hylta Dance".

The tune is only half the tune, because according to the legend the second half was never heard; it got lost, so I always have a notion that if you'd go and stand in the middle of the stones long enough, you might hear what the second half of the tune was; but all you got there was the first half.

JP: The Hylta Dance from a stone circle.

But now let's go right inside a stone – the Dwarfie Stane on the Island of Hoy in Orkney. It's been hollowed out to make a tomb with the result that the whole stone – 24 feet by 12 feet by 6 feet – has been turned into a vast drum and resonating

chamber. Whoever cut this out maybe four thousand years ago, must have heard how it sounds – even if you simply thump it with your fist.

Legend has it that a trowie lived in this stone and with two big frame drums inside it, it gets downright scary.

field recording of Dwarfie Stane (JP)

But what did our earliest ancestors do for melody? They sang, only we don't have the faintest clue what their songs were like. We do, however, have some of their bone flutes and because these have finger holes, they give us an idea of their melodic potential.

Scotland's oldest musical artefact is a bone flute made from the leg-bone of a sheep. It has three finger holes and was found in a midden at the stone age village of Skara Brae in Orkney. It dates from around 2,500 BC, but whoever was making it botched the job and split the bone, so it was thrown out. A better maker would have produced a flute sounding like this one made from a swan's bone. First you hear it being used to imitate bird calls as though to lure them within the hunter's bow-shot, and then how such bird-calls might be used to improvise simple melody.

Rod Cameron – Calling birds/Swan Bone
Rod Cameron
CD The Kilmartin Sessions
Kilmartin House Trust (no cat. no.) Tracks 1 & 2

If the bone's long enough, you can add more finger holes and make more extended melodies. This is an eagle's ulna made into a simple flute, but the sounds that come from the hollow bone that once steered a great bird through the skies are hauntingly lovely.

Rod Cameron – Eagle Bone
Rod Cameron
CD The Kilmartin Sessions
Kilmartin House Trust (no cat. no.) Track 3

Rod Cameron. Not far from Skara Brae, where our oldest musical instrument was found, is the great burial mound of Maes Howe. The sun penetrates it only at midwinter, as though to inseminate the womb shape of the mound, awaken the bones of the ancestors, and ensure that with the lengthening days the land will become fertile again.

It's also a sound-proof place, but if you bring sound into it, it becomes fertile in a different way. These are bronze age horns and a bronze age rattle. The horn's shaped like the horn of a bull, the rattle is like its scrotum and they are advancing up the passage into the heart of the chamber.

Maes Howe
Simon O'Dwyer, bronze age horn (dord iseal)
AN Other, crotal
(John Purser's collection/Sabhal Mòr Ostaig)

That was the sound of a replica bronze age horn and rattle. The originals date from between 1500 and 700 BC and they are made of cast bronze.

Nearly all of them were found in Ireland, but a fragment of one was discovered in Wigtownshire, and bronze smiths working in the Irish style of that period were known as far north as the Northern Isles. The horns were extremely complex to make and must have been valued very highly. This is the sound of the originals themselves.

Simon O'Dwyer – Woodlands Reel
Simon O'Dwyer, bronze age horns
CD Horns of Ancient Ireland
Coìrn na hÉireann CNE 002 Track 42

Of course, we don't know how these instruments were used, but their design strongly suggests that the musicians would have employed circular breathing – a way of keeping the sound going by breathing in through your nose while still blowing into the instrument from your mouth. We also know from the way they were ritually deposited that not only were they highly valued but they were almost certainly played together as a group.

This is the sound of an end-blown and a side-blown horn being played together in a 19th century equivalent of Maes Howe – the ritual tomb known as the Hamilton Mausoleum, just south of Glasgow.

Simon O'Dwyer & John Purser – Wolf Dream
Simon O'Dwyer & John Purser
CD The Kilmartin Sessions
Kilmartin House Trust (no cat. no.) Track 16

Well, Maes Howe was more than four thousand years ago, and the Hamilton Mausoleum is not yet 200 years old. It's in the shape of a circumcised penis sticking out of the ground and the Duke of Hamilton's ancestors were placed in their coffins at its base: the Clyde was designed to flood it annually – fertilising it as the Nile fertilises Egypt – and, oh yes – the 10th Duke had his body squeezed into an Egyptian porphyry coffin, evicting a supposed princess. Accordingly to Scotland's ancient origin myth, the Dukes of Hamilton were descended from the Pharaohs and therefore from the gods. So this building, just like Maes Howe, is in search of eternal life and was built with the longest reverberation of any building in the world – eternal sound? Well, not quite. Not on this earth. But we tried it out with just one bronze age horn and one voice and nothing added. Just the straight sound and the natural acoustic.

Simon O'Dwyer & John Purser – The Shadow of Light
Simon O'Dwyer & John Purser
CD The Kilmartin Sessions
Kilmartin House Trust (no cat. no.) Track 35

Burghead Child: That's a little bit weird, that.