The recordings for the piece were gathered over the course of a year from Huddersfield, Stirling, Aberdeen (United Kingdom), and s’Hertogenbosch (The Netherlands). These were used to create an installation consisting of over 100 tracks that were remixed in real time during each performance. The set up varied from show to show, sometimes playing through 6 speakers and 3 subs, and at other times, through 12 speakers etc. The performers were positioned at the centre of the audience, who in turn, were surrounded by the speakers from the installation. The performers’ only instruction was to improvise sensitively to the sounds of the installation and each other.
MAGNETIC YIELDS: SHIFTING CURRENTS

Commissioned in partnership with Le Weekend festival in Stirling and Aberdeen’s sound festival. Shifting Currents features electromagnetic recordings of distinctive and atmospheric places from each of the three locations, alongside improvised responses from Thompson, Keith Rowe and Rick Reed.

Shifting Currents explores the unstable, unpredictable realm of electricity as a metaphor for the way in which music flows and changes around us. In keeping with the found sound aesthetic of his previous work, Aberdeen-based Thompson has used a stick-on telephone microphone to capture electromagnetic signals and interference, transforming the inaudible waveforms into delicate and harsh sonic textures. He recorded in Stirling’s historic Church of the Holy Rude, where the infant James VI was crowned, and in Fraserburgh Lighthouse on the windswept Aberdeenshire coast. In Huddersfield he found inspiration in the university’s engineering department.

Shifting Currents receives its premiere on 30 May at Le Weekend before visiting HCMF and sound in November. The former wool blending shed at Bates Mill will play host to a constantly evolving multi-channel installation of Thompson’s recordings, with Thompson, Rowe and Reed weaving the sounds into their own musical performances on guitar and electronics.

Keith Rowe has been a key figure in British improvisation since the mid-1960s, when a new year’s resolution to stop tuning his guitar set him on a journey away from the jazz he was playing with Mike Westbrook and towards free music. As well as several decades as part of the group AMM, Rowe’s career includes the founding of M.I.M.E.O. (who performed at HCMF 2007), and numerous solo and collaborative recordings. The one-time art student’s break with traditional playing techniques parallels the innovation of Jackson Pollock’s floor canvases: laying his guitar flat upon a table, he incorporates found objects, electronics, contact mics and radio transmissions into his music-making.

Rick Reed shares an artistic background with Rowe, and a home state, Texas, with Thompson. After college he moved to Austin and became involved in the city’s experimental music scene, making music with synthesizers and tape machines, alongside video art and sound installations. Shifting Currents will also pay a visit to the November Music festival in the Netherlands, transmitting the intangible qualities and hidden music of Huddersfield, Stirling and Aberdeen to a new location.
“A few years ago I heard a story online of somebody’s friend who had just got a cochlear implant, and who was having some trouble because of interference from all these different electromagnetic fields,” Bill Thompson recalls. “I remember thinking it was amazing that here was someone struggling with hearing loss who was hearing a world that people with ‘normal’ hearing can’t. It had opened up another dimension of sound.”

As with the genesis of many of the Texan-born sound artist and musician’s other projects, what Thompson read stuck in his mind and buzzed around for some time. Eventually it found a route to the outside world in the form of a commission to create the work which would become Shifting Currents.

Armed not with a cochlear implant but with a humble stick-on microphone of the kind that can be used to record telephone conversations, he set about exploring the world of electromagnetism-turned-sound. Like fellow sound artist Christina Kubisch, whose Electrical Walks featured at hcmf 2007, Thompson found that the previously inaudible fields emitted by everyday computers, wiring, shop signs and street furniture were anything but silent, instead emitting a range of sinister hums, intriguing clicks and startling squeals.

It’s not the first time that Thompson has unveiled new aspects of sonic perception. Originally trained as a jazz guitarist – a pathway blocked when he developed tendonitis – he went on to teach electronic music and composition at Texas State University, performed and promoted new electroacoustic music and, for the past five years, has combined PhD study in Aberdeen with teaching, improvisatory performances and creating sound works. These include Of Aberdeen (2005), a field recording of an eight-hour walk around the city (“My feet were bleeding by the end”, he says) and resonare/in absentia (2005), the microscopic sounds captured inside display cases of precious artefacts in Aberdeen’s Marischal Museum.

He sees Shifting Currents as a step forward from his previous multi-channel sound experiments. "I’ve developed a certain way of using sound with multiple players so that the sounds are able to blend with each other. I treat the sounds in really specific but super-minimal ways that you wouldn’t be
able to hear, but so that when a sound plays with another track, a certain effect will come out. But I’ve never played against that; this is the first time I’ve tried to bridge the gap between me as a solo performer and me as an installation artist,” he explains.

Commissioned by a partnership of hcmf, Stirling’s Le Weekend and Aberdeen’s sound festival, Shifting Currents offered Thompson the opportunity to explore the varying electromagnetic landscapes of each festival’s location. In Huddersfield, he found the university to be a rich source of material.

“The elevators in Huddersfield University are absolutely stunning to record,” he says. “In the engineering department they were quite accommodating. They let me crawl behind a lot of machines.” As might be expected from the nerve centre of a leading contemporary music festival, hcmf’s own office didn’t disappoint: “There’s a printer there which is incredible. I think the staff were pretty impressed that there was so much weird sound going on next to them. Or maybe they were just smiling to humour me.”

In Aberdeen, Thompson recorded electromagnetism in both the university and around the city centre. “Sometimes I would just carry the mic and go for a walk and not even listen, just capture all the fields as I was walking up and down the street.”

Stirling’s historic Church of the Holy Rude received the Thompson investigation, as did the Tolbooth arts centre. “I explored the Tolbooth from top to bottom, everything from flashlights to the sprinkler system, computer screens...”

“They have a room which has all the breakers and circuits for the whole building, which was absolutely stunning. The thing about the mics is that where you position your hand and how it shifts as you’re breathing in totally...
affects the sound. As you turn it you get higher frequencies; if you get close you tend to get the darker, lower frequencies.”

He adds, “There was one sound I found that I just want to release as a field recording track. It’s just six minutes of this red box fire alarm which is just lovely by itself. It evolves naturally and has its own structure and is just really beautiful to listen to.” He later paid an additional recording visit to the Dutch city of ‘s-Hertogenbosch, home to the November Music festival, where Shifting Currents is also being performed.

The recordings are only half the story, however. As a performance, Shifting Currents is a collaboration between the captured sound material on one hand and Thompson and celebrated improvising musicians Keith Rowe and Rick Reed on the other. “I really like those guys and it’s a pleasure to work with them,” says Thompson. “We could have just done an improv gig, and that would have been fine, but with this installation moving around us it’s almost like a fourth player that has its own will.”

Randomly selected extracts from the recordings will play through six loudspeakers that are shared by the musicians. “Rick won’t know if it’s the installation playing, or Keith, or me. It’s not so much about responding to another player, as working with these delicate sounds, reacting to the space and the sound and not a gesture-based jazz approach.”

Reed and Rowe are longstanding friends of Thompson and he believes they have the required approach. “They’re so tasteful, that’s the thing. When you have a lot of electronics, you don’t often find people who will play less, rather than more. They’re so restrained and delicate: they know when to put on the gas and they know when to pull back.”

With around 100 tracks available, the recorded component can have an entirely different character for each performance: “The one at Le Weekend was a really minimal set because the players threw up lots of quiet tracks. Huddersfield might pull out a much more dominant soundworld. You would never browbeat another musician by telling them they’re playing too loudly, and you definitely can’t do that with the installation.”

The audience will be sat in the round between the speakers, leading to a subtly different experience for every listener. “A lot of the sounds make use of standing waves. These set up narrow beams, so that if you turn your head one way you’ll hear it, and if you shift position you won’t hear that frequency. There can be some quite unique spaces in it. I’m going to be nerdy here, but it’s bringing people’s attention to their own subjectivity.”

To Rowe’s kit of pared-down guitar and tabletop electronics and Reed’s synthesiser and effects pedals, Thompson brings his laptop “with a year’s worth of sound files” and what he describes as “some weird, eccentric synthesisers. One is called a Dave Smith Evolver, it has a genetic algorithm in there that can produce completely random patches that sound like broken electronics. I’ll often generate 120 of those before a gig and pick a few to use.” A dab hand at circuit bending – creating customised instruments out of scrap electronics and old toys – he also has a further method for finding new sounds: “I built a device that’s an old keyboard with just one big red button, and every time you press it, you get a new sound. You can never predict it and you can never recreate it.”

Thompson’s view of such an untameable instrument as more opportunity than annoyance echoes his infectious enthusiasm for the intangible, every-changing realms of the electromagnetic. “What I love about it is that you wouldn’t hear all those sounds without this little device, the telephone mic, but then a whole universe of sounds opens up,” he reflects. “We’re surrounded by this stuff, all the time. The world has changed. You can’t find these sounds in a forest or the desert. It’s just a sign of what we’re become. I like that.”

http://www.hcmf.co.uk/BillThompsononShiftingCurrents