

A man stands alone on stage holding a washing up brush. The venue is silent. He brings the brush to his ear and gently strokes the bristles. Next he plays around with a corkscrew, followed by a pencil and sharpener, and a variety of other quotidian household objects. Each time, we watch without hearing any sounds. But because these objects are so commonplace, their sounds so familiar, we already *know* what they sound like so we can still share in this simple act of listening – even in the absence of any audible noise.

Later, a second and then a third performer will join the first on stage. Between themselves they will play these small domestic instruments for each other, holding them up to one another's ears and stroking the bristles of the brush, or twisting the handles of the corkscrew, and so on. It becomes a ritual of communal sound actions that the audience is both outside and yet still able to vicariously participate in, a procession of organised noises that would nonetheless communicate equally well to the deaf.

The piece is by Timothy Cape, one of the two principal curators – along with Edward Henderson – in a composers' collective called Bastard Assignments, based in South London. They met around 2012 when both were studying at Trinity Laban Conservatoire. For one particular coursework assignment, the pair were

put together in a group with a couple of other student composers and set to devise a concert that was supposed to somehow challenge the expected norms of the classical concert experience. Halfway through their recital, they had the audience ushered out of their seats into a waiting room and then called one by one into a 'shower' room full of meat and bones from the butchers, with flashing lights and abrasive music blasting out of small speakers.

The shower piece was neither Cape's nor Henderson's (though the former did write 'waiting room music' for before and after) but the whole experience of the task taught them "that it's very important how you set up the audience experience", as Cape puts it. "And the context of that is almost as important as the material that you're writing in your bedroom, on Sibelius, or whatever." Running a succession of concert series, in venues ranging from a derelict Victorian home to a police cell to the Thames tunnel shaft in Rotherhithe, offering music whose instrumentation is as likely to include a comb or a cheap plastic harmonica as a piano or trombone, between them they have been challenging the expected norms of the concert experience ever since.

"I think we're both impressed by composers and performers whose music is intense and immediate," responds Henderson when I ask what common threads

link the works presented at a Bastard Assignments show. "It can be quite abstract," he continues, "but the actual connection and the communication is very, very clear and pure."

"It's a focus on people rather than on stuff," agrees Cape. Much the same could be said of their own music. It's stripped back but far from austere, animated more by a sense of play and an eagerness to explore ideas than any too formal conceptualism.

One of the earliest Bastard Assignments shows took place in Henderson's own living room. It was a Christmas party, really, but they decided to perform some pieces for their friends. "We realised," says Cape, "that this atmosphere was what we wanted to be able to transfer to a more public gig." Using unusual venues has been a way of maintaining that combination of respectful focus and easy conviviality they found doing house gigs. It started simply because such places were free to hire. "But it became more central," Henderson says, "because the process of going into an unusual space seemed to represent the experience of the work: seeing six brand new pieces by people you've never heard of, in a place you've never been. It signals that this is going to be a bit of a journey into the unknown." □

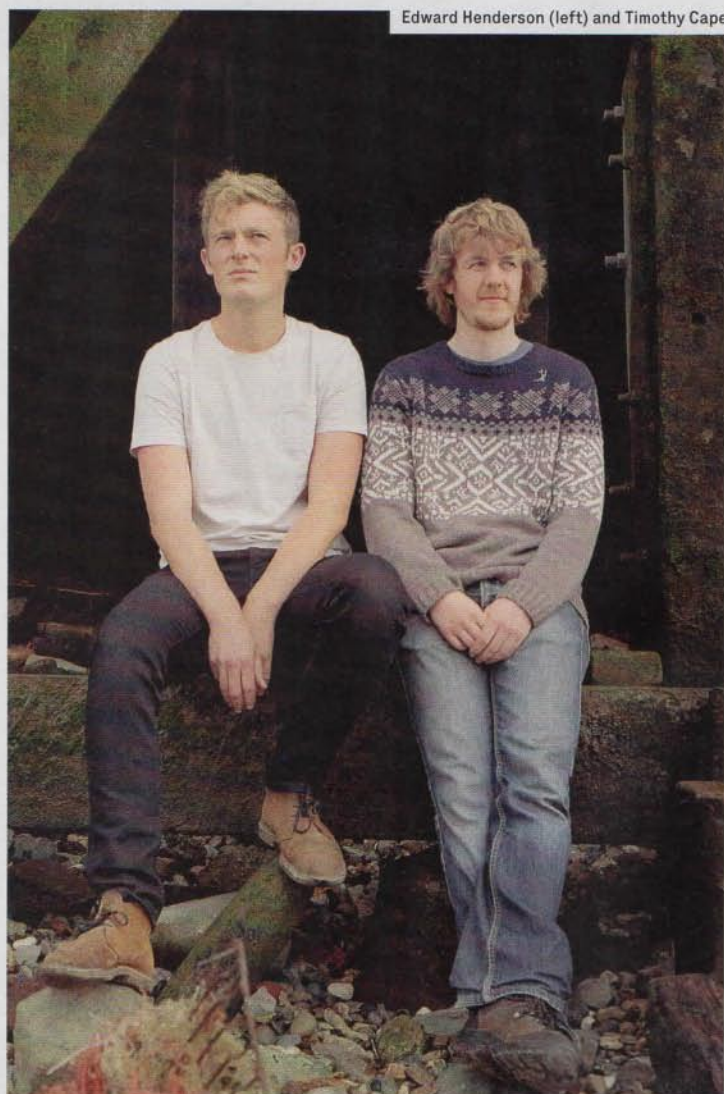
bastardassignments.com

Robert Barry

Family

Weirdness starts at home for London composers' collective **Bastard Assignments**

Unknown



Edward Henderson (left) and Timothy Cape