

The Expansion of the Universe

Harnessing and balancing energy

Visitors to the UK Pavilion can expect a unique sensory experience

The award-winning architect chosen through a competition for the UK Pavilion, Asif Khan, sought inspiration for his design from the very beginnings of time. As he reflects “the universe was formed 13.8 billion years ago. At that moment all energy and matter was in the same place at the same time. The idea that everything, including life on earth, is comprised of this archaic energy is fascinating to me. His aim from the outset was to “find a way to express this relationship to our visitors and explore how energy is being continually harnessed and balanced around us.

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“The whole exhibition space is deliberately quite dark. The Atrium has black signage with the message We are Energy. This refers to our shared energy, both past and future. As visitors enter the first hall they will notice that the floor is quite soft, a contrast to the marble and granite floors outside. The entire floor is made from rubber mulch from recycled tyres. I wanted to give a feeling of treading on the earth.”

Asif Khan

The first room of the UK Pavilion contains a huge image of the Sun. Asif Khan worked with Professor of Astrophysics Catherine Heymans of Edinburgh University to draw up the wall text which accompanies the image.

“Asif has approached this project as an artistic piece, seeking to help visitors learn something new about energy, to see energy differently rather than focus on the practical applications. So as you walk through the Pavilion each room is advancing forwards in time. In the first room we start with the early universe, the Big Bang, with moving footage of the Sun, showing that its surface is very active and flowing. It reminds us that the birth of all energy is located in the Sun”

Professor Heymans

Khan enlisted the help of British music legend Brian Eno to create the sound installation which accompanies the visitor through the UK Pavilion.

Beneath the Sun there is a single sound echoing, the low droning sound of unified energy. The visitor then walks through a 30-metre long dark corridor and as they do so the sound develops into something more complex.

Asif Khan and HE Erlan Idrissov at the UK Pavilion



“Our Sun is the source of all forms of energy on earth. The origin of this energy dates back 13.8 billion years to the birth of our Universe, to the point where space and time began. In just two minutes, in a blisteringly hot dense environment, the very first building blocks of life were created. Our Sun is just one of an almost infinite number of stars in our universe. It converts just a tiny fraction of these primordial particles into energy, shining light to warm and feed our planet.”

“The gradual build-up of the weight of sound represents the growth of energy turning into mass. I would describe it as epic but at the same time quite quiet.”

Asif Khan

The Soundscape

Robert Rauschenberg once said “I want Art to be the kind of adventure I like, like walking down the street”. The kind of adventure I like is sitting by a river, or watching the clouds roll by, and for many years I’ve been working towards a kind of music that had that kind of feeling - a music to be experienced as landscape more than narrative.

With the advent of recording, music bifurcated into two different art forms - in the same way that the advent of film split ‘theatre’ into two different forms. In that case we have different names for them: theatre and cinema. Perhaps unfortunately, music retained the same name for both, although recorded music is made differently and with different materials, heard differently and in different places. Most importantly, recorded music, unlike performed music, is not tied to time and place.

The division became clearer after the 1960’s, when the recording studio started to become a place where music was conceived as well as recorded. People started to make music in studios that couldn’t be made without studios, and just as the orchestra was the great musical technology of the 19th century, the studio became the great technology of the 20th century. And then another split happened..

Again, there’s an analogy with cinema, which began life in the same way that sound-recording did, as a way of capturing human performances that would otherwise have been ephemeral. But the advent of animation changed cinema into something else again: for now it became possible to make things happen on the screen that had never happened in real life, and probably couldn’t happen: to create imaginary motion, fantasy space, and impossible creatures

With the advent of synthesizers and computerisation, music too became a theatre of impossible creatures, though in this case the creatures were sonic rather than visual.

That’s where we are now: much of what you hear in this piece is not made by ‘instruments’ in the sense we normally think of them: mostly it’s software synthesizers (ie sequences of numbers) playing sounds I’ve devised - in many cases only for this purpose - often with the assistance of statistical algorithms which recombine my original choices in new ways. Anyway, that all gets a bit technical....!

The whole composing process for this kind of music is much more like painting than traditional music-making. I think of it now as sound painting, and, since its genesis is mostly electronic, the primary instruments become the loudspeakers used to broadcast it. Logically then, these become another site for compositional attention. In the 1950’s we went from mono to stereo to offer a more realistic impression of a music performance...but the ‘stereo’ idea is a sort of anachronistic leftover from performed music, from the idea that recordings existed to capture a performance and should therefore be faithful to it.

But if we redefine music as ‘sonic events in space’ we see that most of the energy of composition in the past has gone towards the ‘sonic events’ part of the definition. The ‘in space’ was (aside from some adventurous compositions by Varese and a few others) pretty much a given...after all there wasn’t much you could do to change it once the architect had gone home. But electronic reproduction makes that entirely possible. In this version of this piece there are many channels, each with its own stream of sonic events, with the result that any point in the space presents a unique mix.

Asif’s proposal for Britain’s Expo Pavilion is a re-synthesized vision of the English landscape. The music is intended to be another version of that vision.

Brian Eno 2017

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Asif’s proposal for Britain’s Expo Pavilion is a re-synthesized vision of the English landscape

Brian Eno at his exhibition ‘Lightforms / Soundforms’ at the Arts Santa Mònica, Barcelona, June 2017