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## **Hugh Davies: Instrument Maker**

Activities My title would be misleading if it were taken to mean that Hugh Davies were of importance only as a maker of instruments or that his instrument making could be effectively extricated from the entire pattern of his work to be discussed in vacuo (even if this latter impossibility must be attempted). Everything he does gives the appearance of being interlinked: he has not necessarily striven for such an end, but is pleased nevertheless to discover the integrity that underlies the diversity of his activities. So though a series of roles may be projected upon him — instrument inventor and constructor, composer, performer, exhibitor, teacher, writer on music, director of an electronic music studio, lecturer, translator, etc. — each individually is more or less incomprehensible if the others are disregarded. (All this goes to say that writing an article about Hugh Davies as instrument maker is not so very different from writing an article about Hugh Davies tout court.)

Amplification One of the distinctive features of Davies's instruments, and one that distinguishes his work from that of most other instrument makers (in this country at least), is his use of electronic amplification as an essential element in their constitution. Amplification has permitted him the use of a range of objects as vibrating agents that would be inappropriate as part of an acoustic instrument; it produces various possibilities for timbral modification through filtering, etc.; and since it obviates the need for a resonator, construction is simplified, thus saving time and money and facilitating experimentation. He has noted that Harry Partch (for whom he has a high regard), in a period of over 40 years of making acoustic instruments, produced only 45 or so examples. If Partch wanted to obtain a low note he had to build a large instrument with a suitable resonator; through the use of amplification, Davies has been able to create very low sounds from instruments that are quite compact, easily portable and of simple construction. About half (i.e. over 50) of his instruments are amplified, this figure including most of those intended for concert use.

Beginnings Davies began making instruments in 1967 as an offshoot of a deep involvement with electronic music. He had been building up a small studio of his own, having very little money and working partly with borrowed equipment. He decided he needed a wider range of sounds than could be obtained either from oscillators or from the simple manipulation of microphone recordings, and devised a series of objects to which a microphone could be attached, recording the sounds made by broken lightbulbs, small springs, combs, etc. Gradually he realised the potential of working with such objects as performance instruments rather than just employing them as studio sound sources.

Categories As one might expect, Davies's instruments do not fall into watertight categories; instead there are a number of recurrent themes that are combined and recombined throughout his output. These 'themes' may take the form of the materials used, the type of microphone, the container in which the instrument is placed, the context within which it is used, the manner in which it is played, etc. The broadest division might be into instruments for performance, exhibition (i.e. approaching the status of sound sculptures) and toys, yet even here there is a good deal of overlapping. The most important families of instruments to be dealt with under individual headings in this article are the shozygs and springboards (but the notion of 'importance' brings in a qualitative judgement that Davies might not go along with).

Composition Davies is less active as a composer than he was at one time: though composition is still important to him, and he tries to set aside some time every year for composing, his work with instruments seems, he says, to fulfil that particular creative urge. Certainly he approaches instrument making as you might expect a composer would: in an exploratory way, with an eye for the singular effect. (A performer would be more likely to adopt a more pragmatic line of attack, searching for a result that would have a wide range of application and a convenient playing technique.) The small number of instruments that Davies has devised for the purpose of playing in particular pieces (e.g. the Stringboard Mk. I (1971) and Mk. II (1972) for Stockhausen's Sternklang) have not, he feels, been the most satisfactory, especially where specific pitches were called for: he prefers to let the impulse come from the materials themselves.

He has rarely been tempted to devise detailed compositions for his instruments. He considered writing out a score (possibly graphic) for Shozyg I and Shozyg II (both 1968), the first of his instruments to be widely circulated, but eventually confined himself to a set of general, verbal instructions to the player that indicated some of the possibilities available. What he requires of anyone who plays his instruments is that he or she should become sensitive to what the instrument is capable of doing and what is natural to it: other than that he has no manifesto on their use.

**Development** Having emerged from what he describes as the 'ivory tower' of the electronic music studio, where the composer retains complete control over the realisation of his music and the performer is redundant, Davies moved to live-electronics where he still retained a strict control over the end-product by

acting as the performer himself or working with others who had a similar outlook. After a couple of years of working in this way his output of instruments underwent further development. He began to make instruments that were not amplified — sound sculptures and sound toys — and that anyone could play and enjoy. This happened with a minimum of introspection as did his progress into areas as much concerned with the visual as with the sonic. His present work embraces a fairly balanced mixture of all these constituents.

Electronic music Davies's reflections on the history of electronic music are worth examining. 'If certain things had happened either ten years earlier or later, the whole course of electronic music might have been very different. The tape recorder became available just at the time when electronic music started; some of the very first composers working with electronic music started directly with the tape recorder, some of them were still manipulating gramophone records and developed from that to using the tape recorder. Possibly because of this, the tape recorder was seen as the main piece of equipment in producing electronic music. It wasn't — to take for example one studio, the Cologne studio — until the middle 1950s that filters and ring modulators began to be used. Oscillators were used straight away but no modification equipment, except for reverberation, which was a very standard thing —any radio studio would be able to do that — but more specialised equipment like modulators and filters didn't come in till really surprisingly late. In Paris, none of that; oscillators weren't used either. The early history of electronic music is almost entirely tape manipulation with oscillators. It could easily have happened that if the tape recorder had come five years later, people would have been writing oscillator parts to be played live in concerts along with conventional instruments. In other words, electronic music could have started out as a live thing rather than as something you work on in the studio.'

Exhibitions Davies has found that one of the most appropriate ways in which to present his instruments, especially those not suitable as performance instruments, is in exhibitions rather as a visual artist would. Some places where his instruments have been shown: Birmingham Arts Lab (1973), Baltimore Museum of Art (1973), Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn (1974), The Cockpit, London (1974), Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh (1975-76), Goldsmiths' College, London (1976), Sixth International Mixed Media and Avant-garde Festival, Ghent (1976), Journées des Nouvelles Musiques pour la Jeunesse, Bourges (1976). Needless to say, visitors to his exhibitions are always encouraged to play the instruments for themselves.

Feelie box A sub-category of the shozyg family, where a tactile element is included. Four have been completed: Feelie Box No. 1 [Shozyg III] (1969), The Jack and Jill Box (1969-70), The Lush Box (1969-70), and The Bargain Box (1971-73). All were built in conjunction with John Furnival. These are designed for exhibitions, though ideally they should be installed at bus stops, railway stations, dentists' waiting rooms, hospitals, etc.: anywhere that people have to wait with nothing else to do. Their general principle is to have a number of objects built into a box and amplified; these are explored with hands and fingers through holes in the sides. The Jack and Jill Box is for two people, four hands: 'fur is thoughtfully provided in case the two people wish to hold hands in the middle'.

Friends Davies's principal collaborator has been John Furnival, who teaches at Bath Academy of Art, and who has specialised in graphics and mixed media productions (see 'feelie box', 'umbrellas', 'visuals', 'zips'). John Furnival's wife Astrid is a virtuoso knitter and contributed to the Shozip (see 'zips'). Other instrument makers with whom Davies has been associated are David Toop and Paul Burwell (who both make acoustic instruments generally following non-Western models), Max Eastley (who makes sound sculpture that is operated by wind, water or electric motors), David Sawyer (whose acoustic instruments Davies acknowledges as the best crafted) and Michel Waisvisz (the work of this Dutch instrument maker is perhaps closer to Davies's in that it makes use of electronic circuitry).

Gastrology Since he became a vegetarian, Davies has brought the same principles to cookery that he has to music: improvisation within a rough framework. (Occasionally he will use a recipe or play a notated composition...) Odds and ends from the kitchen turn up in his instruments quite frequently. Egg, cheese and tomato slicers plucked, stroked and stimulated over a magnetic pickup are rich in tonal possibilities. The Culinary Shozyg for John Furnival (1969-70) is housed inside a breadbin: five of these instruments were used in Gentle Fire's renditions of Davies's HD Breadbins. Lazy Garlic [Shozyg IV] (1969) takes its name from a seasoning product which carries on the reverse side of its label the words 'use according to taste': these become the performance instructions (this is another collaboration with John Furnival).

Humour Humour is an important ingredient of Davies's work. It is possible, he believes, to be serious and humorous at the same time. The thing he least enjoys in other people's work is lack of humour. His instruments frequently embody visual and aural jokes and a large number of their titles are punning. The Squeak-box Mk. I (1969) is a simple toy consisting of an alphabetically-arranged accordion file filled with doll-squeakers; the title is a multi-layered pun: accordion file/accordion/squeeze-box/squeak-box/squeaker. The Squeak-box Mk. II develops the joke: a piano-accordion has its reeds removed and doll-squeakers substituted. When played in the normal way the discrepancy between what one sees going on and the horrifying aural result is ineffably surreal. Among his numerous instruments based around springs are The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs (Homage to John Cage) (1973) and My Spring Collection (1975). Various visual/verbal games are played with the titles of instruments in the shozyg

family: Shoezyg (unfinished) (built in a shoe), Shozip (1975) (incorporating zips), Sho(zyg?) (1970) (resembling the Japanese sho but not strictly a shozyg at all). A project that is in hand at present is the realisation of Erik Satie's nonsense instrument the Alto Overcoat in C.

**Inspiration** Davies's ideas for instruments usually arise out of the materials themselves; creating instruments to order or following the suggestions that others offer him are not usually so successful. He does not believe in following a pre-conceived system: Sometimes I find at the end of a day I have built a new instrument which I'd never have dreamed of 24 hours earlier.' His flat is well stocked with the necessary resources so that when inspiration descends he can start work at once.

Junk As a corrective to the wastefulness of modern society, Davies makes a point of using among the high proportion of 'found' materials in his work a large amount of junk, thus demonstrating that much of what is ordinarily thrown away as worthless may still have a useful life.

Kids Davies has recently begun to work quite frequently with children, getting them to construct and play their own instruments. What he attempts to do is not to instruct the children, but to collaborate with them, to say, 'This and this are possibilities; anyone with open ears and open eyes can take up such ideas and develop them in his or her own way.' His approach is effective, he feels, because it is of equal value for both musically trained and untrained children: the musically literate are slightly subverted and opened up to the wider possibilities that exist, and the musically illiterate can find a way into music without having to learn an instrument in the traditional way. One project he recently organised (Bonn, April 1977) involved work with two groups of a dozen or so children aged 8-13 years. First he helped them build instruments from bamboo: there is a wide range of possibilities to choose between — bird-calls, chimes, fipple, notch and transverse flutes, gueros, panpipes, rattles, xylophones, raft and tube zithers. Then they made instruments from materials found at home or in the workshop. Finally both groups combined and devised a collective composition. Each child had up to 15 hours of workshops and rehearsals. Among Davies's aims was to encourage awareness that the resources of the planet don't need to be used and discarded so rapidly, to promote co-operation instead of competition, and to have fun but not, as one person assumed during a discussion following the Bonn performance, to try to convert the children to contemporary music.

Loudspeakers Depending upon the occasion for which they are required, Davies has a number of different sets of loudspeakers together with appropriate amplifiers. For exhibitions he has over a dozen small loudspeakers of one watt or less. Among these there are a few that employ the shozyg principle: a clock with a speaker cone replacing the face, an electric fire incorporating a speaker, a clock sprouting a telephone handset, a telephone from which a small horn emerges. For low-budget concerts he has a pair of portable ten watt speakers, while for the fully-fledged variety he has four 50 watt speakers.

Materials Among the identifiable components of Davies's instruments these are a few: accordion files, bamboo, bathroom scales, blockboard, book covers, box camera, breadbins, cardboard scenery pillar, card table, 'cello strings, chains, clocks, coffee tins, combs, crocodile clips, doll-squeakers, door catches, egg-slicers, elastic, electric fire, electrical components, expanded polystyrene tiles, fishing nylon, foam rubber, free reeds, fretsaw blades, fur, furniture castors, glass rods, guitar strings, hinges, hooks, horsehair, key rings, leather shoelace, lightbulbs, magnetic knife strip, man's jacket, marble, metal tubing, microphones, musical box, needle file, oven racks, overcoat, piano-accordion, plastic cups, cutlery and household containers, plywood, projector bulbs, radio set, rubber bands, rubber glove, screws, screwdrivers, seashells, springs (fixed and flexible), syringe, tailor's dummies, tea strainers (metal and plastic), telephones, television sets, threaded rods, 3D photographs, tomato slicers, toothbrushes, washers, wire, yoghourt cartons, zips.

Microphones These are of various kinds. Contact microphones are used extensively in shozygs and elsewhere. The models employed are mostly cheap Japanese ones; though giving a poor result on conventional instruments, these are for Davies's purposes preferable to hi-fi models because of their much greater sensitivity. Normal considerations of fidelity to the original sound become irrelevant where the microphone is effectively a part of the instrument: there is no 'original sound' except what emerges from the loudspeaker. Similar to contact microphones in the way they operate are stethoscope microphones which give a particularly good response on low frequencies; the two Stringboards each incorporate one of these. He has also made his own quasi-contact microphones from hearing aids in foam rubber. Magnetic pickups are widely used in instruments featuring springs, notably springboards. These are taken from old telephone handsets, headphones and ex-RAF Spitfire microphones. Gramophone cartridges have been found particularly effective with strings. He complains that it is now hard to come by the old variety which had a large hole (big enough to take, say, a pipe cleaner and a screw that held the stylus in place.

Modification Though he has no fundamental objection to electronic modification of the signals produced by his instruments, Davies has used it very rarely. What he has found taking place, however — often not realising what he had done until an instrument was completed — is that he has built quasi-electronic modification into an instrument, so that there is variable reverberation, an effect akin to modulation, or, most often, filtering. The four outer pickups on My Spring Collection have slightly different responses, so that the same vibrating spring will have its overtone structure modified at the output depending upon which pickups are selected. In instruments with two or more contact microphones the distance of a

vibrating object from a microphone will determine by how much the final sound will be masked again, microphone selection will determine timbral quality. Some of the springboards, particularly Springboard Mk.X, also produce quite elaborate filtering effects using a similar principle.

Non-Western instruments Davies's instrument-making activities have been paralleled by his interest in non-Western instruments; he now has a collection of about 30. These are mostly winds and strings, chosen because they were cheap and because he found some element of their sound, design or conception intriguing. He has, for example, a snake-charmer's double pipe (drone pipe, melody pipe) that also has a drone string; this combination of instrumental types is reflected in some of his own work that brings together two hitherto separate ideas, e.g. a set of tubular bells that may also be used as notch flutes (1974).

**Organic** When he talks about his work it is noticeable that Davies constantly uses phrases like 'the instrument tells me what to do', 'the materials show me how it should be'. He feels strongly that all that he does should be allowed to happen in what he describes as a natural, organic way.

Personalia Hugh Davies, b Exmouth, Devon, April 23, 1943. 1961-64, studied music at Oxford University. 1964-66, personal assistant to Stockhausen and a member of his live-electronic group. 1967-69, concert organiser for Arts Laboratory of London. 1967-present, Director of Electronic Music Studio, Goldsmiths' College, University of London. 1968, published his compilation Répertoire International des Musiques Electroacoustiques; International Electronic Music Catalog (MIT Press) (originally published in Electronic Music Review of which he was European editor). 1968-69, member of Arts Laboratory Ensemble and played as duo with Richard Orton. 1968-75, member of Gentle Fire. 1969-72, member of Music Improvisation Company. 1971-73, member of Naked Software.

Compositions include: Contact, piano (1963); Vom ertrunkenen Mädchen, soprano, flute, clarinet, piano (1964); Quintet, live-electronics (1967-68); Interfaces, tape, live-electronics (1967-68); Kangaroo, organ (1968); Beautiful Seaweeds, musicians, dancers, slides (1972-73); Raisonnements, piano (1973); Wind Trio (1973-75); The Musical Educator, speaker, musicians, dancers, slides (1974); Natural Images,

tape (1976).

Compositions for own instruments include Shozyg I/II/I+II (1968); Spring Song (1970); HD Breadbins (1972); Gentle Springs (1973); Music for Bowed Diaphragms (1973); My Spring Collection (1975); Salad

(1977).

Hugh Davies plays his own instruments on Gentle Fire (Electrola 1C 065-02469); Music Improvisation Company (ECM 1005); The Music Improvisation Company 1968-71 (Incus 17); New and Rediscovered Musical Instruments (Obscure 4); Shozyg I+II (OU magazine 36-37).

Quantifications Instruments: about 125 made or in progress; roughly half of these amplified. Approximately 250 duplicates of instruments, including 100 of the Eargong (1973), c.45 of Lady Bracknell (1971) and 25 of Shozyg I. Microphones: about 210 incorporated into instruments; 40 or so loose for use in concerts; more than 250 spare (since most are no longer available he needs to keep large numbers): grand total in excess of 550. Springs: about 400 in use in one capacity or another, with large quantities in stock.

Remuneration Davies manages his finances specifically so that he earns what is necessary to make a living and no more. Unlike most visual artists, his exhibitions are not held in order to sell work. When he does sell an instrument it's usually at little more than the cost of materials which is rarely more than £5.

Serendipity Serendipity, 'the faculty of making happy chance finds', is very much in evidence in all Davies's work, which includes entirely 'found' instruments and scores.

Shozyg A shozyg is any instrument (usually amplified) built inside an unusual container. The name derives from the container of Shozyg I and Shozyg II: various oddments amplified through two contact microphones are housed in the final volume of *Knowledge*, a 13-part encyclopaedia published by The New World Library. Topics from 'shoal' to 'zygote' are covered in the volume and hence the letters 'SHO-ZYG' appear on the spine. Shozyg I is probably Davies's best-known instrument and has been used in a large number of compositions with indeterminate instrumentation. It also achieves the distinction of being the only one of his instruments to be specified in a score other than Davies's own: there was a part for it in the original version of Harrison Birtwistle's *Medusa* (it was replaced by a synthesizer when the work was revised). The text that accompanies Shozyg I was published in *OU* 34-35; an original instrument was included with 15 de-luxe copies of the magazine.

Other containers for shozygs have included: radio set — The Lush Box; television set — Tellybrella (1969-71) and Moral Music with Water (1969-71); man's jacket — Sound Jacket (1973-74); specially-constructed leather-bound 'book cover' — Lazy Garlic; purpose-built boxes — Feelie Box No. 1, The Jack and Jill Box and The Bargain Box. The Alto Overcoat in C, Culinary Shozyg, Squeak-box Mk.I and

Mk.II and Shozip are described elsewhere.

**Springboard** Springboards consist of long, flexible springs stretched upon a wooden board above magnetic pickups. In operation they are somewhat like an electric guitar: springs are generally plucked and may be stopped, though Davies has not fretted the instruments and rarely uses tempered tuning of intervals himself. There are a dozen variations upon the theme in existence with at least two more planned. Springboard Mk.V (1970) is the simplest, with just two springs and one pickup. Mk.I, Mk.II and Mk.IV

(all 1970) all have four springs and two pickups, each in a slightly different arrangement with consequent differences in sound and playing technique. Mk.III (1970) is more elaborate:14 springs radiate out in a semicircle from a key ring to which they are all joined. The interconnection gives rise to an interesting playing technique: if a spring is plucked, the vibration will travel through the key ring and set up a reverberation in the other springs. The amount of reverberation may be controlled by damping with the other hand (another example of a built-in modification device). The springs in Mks.I-V were all originally the same length, but are now stretched to different extents. A wide range of tuning is available through the selective stretching of portions of a spring. This may have the result — as in Mk.III — of making the shorter of a pair of springs the lower in pitch.

Mk.VI (1973) is the lowest in the range; of its five springs the longest vibrates at about 7 Hz. Mk.VII (1973), with four springs, is the highest and the first of the range to have two-channel amplification. Mk.IX (1974) has been constructed in two versions, one with one-channel amplification, consisting of a long, continuous spring stretched into a very irregular hexagon over four pickups, the other using two such

springs with two channels.

Developing the reverberation principle of Mk.III are Mk.VIII, Mk.X and Mk.XI (all 1974). The nine springs of Mk.VIII are distributed like the spokes of a wheel around a central key ring. This arrangement introduces a new playing feature: by pulling the key ring to one side, an alteration may be effected in the tension of all the springs and in their relative positions over the pickup. Two concentric key rings are used in Mk.X: five springs radiate out from the larger of the two, and eight more connect this to the smaller, which lies inside it and is positioned over the pickup. Complex changes in filtering and reverberation may be produced in this model by altering through damping the route that the vibration from a plucked spring must travel to reach the pickup. Mk.XI is a similar instrument, but has different radial springs and replaces the outer key ring with a series of short springs, so permitting slightly more subtle filtering.

The two Stringboards operate in a similar way to the simpler springboards, but have conventional instrument strings instead of springs. The Springstring (1972-73) stands midway between the two types: it employs two springs that are coiled for only part of their length and straight for the remainder (another of this type is incorporated into Springboard Mk.VI); this offers the advantage that the straight portion may

be bowed.

Toys Sound toys are instruments with limited musical potential, but which are fun to play with. The Squeak-boxes belong to this category. The Eargong (1973) (published in an edition of 100 with a poster by Collection OUt) is possibly the most interesting of Davies's dozen or so toys: to an oven rack are tied two cords, which are wrapped around the index finger of either hand and the fingers placed in the ears. If the rack is now nudged gingerly with the knees, vibrations are transmitted from the rack, through the strings, through the fingers, through the skull, and are heard as booming and ringing sounds, quite inaudible to bystanders. (This is essentially a 'found' instrument: the principle is not Davies's own discovery but general knowledge.)

Lady Bracknell is an easily-made instrument: a length of nylon fishing line is extended from a small hole in the bottom of an old coffee tin (re-cycle that rubbish!) one foot is placed on the coffee tin to anchor it to the floor and one hand holds the line taut. If the line is rubbed with wetted fingers, the contraption should make rather upper-class squawking noises, which in the hands of an expert (Mr Davies is one such) can be made to talk convincingly by controlling the tension and speed of rubbing and deftly tilting the tin with the

foot.

Tuning Davies is not very interested in tuning his instruments to a pre-determined system. Where an instrument does produce clearly-defined pitches, he prefers these to be 'found' rather than imposed. He has no strong antipathy for the tempered scale as such, but when improvising he would prefer to be freed from its limitations.

Umbrellas A motif that occurs a number of times in Davies's instruments is that of umbrellas. For the exhibition 'Dorothy's Umbrellas', organised by John Furnival in 1971, Davies collaborated with him on Moral Music with Water (which includes the figurines of a nymph and an old man, both holding umbrellas) and contributed Tellybrella (television-cum-umbrella). The Umbrella Picture and Whirlerbrolly, both begun in 1971, have remained unfinished.

Visuals When he started making instruments Davies wasn't sure of his ability to produce visually interesting work, but his collaboration with John Furnival gave him the confidence he needed. He says that if things are allowed to happen organically, then appearances will take care of themselves. The example of the springboards demonstrates that it is not necessary to superimpose decoration upon instruments for them to be good to look at. More recently he has gone so far as to produce some entirely visual pieces such as the Camera Obscurer (1975), a kind of kaleidoscope.

Winds The fact that no new type of mouthpiece has been discovered for about three thousand years has discouraged Davies from doing very much work with wind instruments. He has made a number of bamboo flutes of which the most interesting is the Multiflute (begun 1973). This may be played as a notch flute, an end-blown transverse flute, a centre-blown transverse flute, a cornett and probably several other things too before it's finished: not surprisingly, it still has a number of snags to be ironed out. Gentle blowing on the amplified fretsaw blades of the Aeolian Harp (1972) produces some extraordinarily beautiful sounds,

though this would not, perhaps, be classified normally as a wind instrument. His chief interest in this area is the development of the possibilities of the free reed.

Xylophilia Davies speaks very warmly of the merits of blockboard: 'It's nice wood to work with; I know how to deal with it.' Plywood he finds less satisfactory.

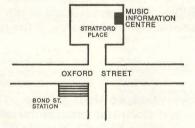
You You too can become a Hugh Davies instrument! 'On a day when there is a stiffish breeze, stand so that the wind is blowing from one side (approximately 90 to 120 degrees; the exact position must be determined by trial and error). Open your mouth and let the wind produce quiet notes as it blows past your protruded lips, sounds that are varied by opening your mouth by differing amounts and thus changing its resonant cavity, as in playing a Jew's harp.' You'll be playing Mouth in Wind (1974).

Zips In the fake mixer console of the Shozip (1975), twelve zips are mounted in a row to resemble a bank of faders. Each of the zips when drawn to and fro produces a different quiet, unamplified sound (the absence of amplification is part of the joke). Above the console appears the name of the instrument in multicoloured knitting wool, and above that a first-rate forgery of Erik Satie's handwriting. The Shozip was constructed as a tribute for the 50th anniversary of Satie's death; the concept, title and knitting were contributed by Astrid Furnival, the text by John Furnival and the 'mixer' by Hugh Davies.

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