

## The New Yorker Making Music from the Met's Forgotten Treasures

By Adam Gopnik, August 12, 2019



Oliver Beer

Oliver Beer, a thirty-three-year-old Brit who is a member of the semi-conceptual, site-specific, confessional-reminiscent school of contemporary British art, has created, at the Met Breuer, what may be the most eccentric and original keyboard instrument in the history of Western music. Called the Vessel Orchestra, it consists of thirty-two vessels from the Met's vast collection of statuary and objets. When carefully miked and connected to a keyboard, the vessels, each with its own resonance, can be induced to play a two-and-a-half-octave scale, flats and sharps included. Stretched across the fifth-floor gallery of the Breuer, the Vessel Orchestra comprises a hallucinatory intersection of objects—from Persian religious figurines to contemporary ceramics and Deco portrait busts—and offers a set of pure tones that, peeling out from thousands of years of vessel silence, have enticed many composers, including Nico Muhly, to write music for it.

Caught alongside his creation the other day, interrupted by its strange singing tones, like the moans of inanimate whales, Beer explained the instrument's origins. "Every empty space has its own resonance, one that's entirely based on its geometry," he said. "If I built a room, that might give me an A-flat and the harmonic series that goes with it. Every empty space sings, if you listen."