

Thomas Bloch's glass harmonica has featured in orchestral music and in pieces by Tom Waits, Marianne Faithfull and Radiohead



Once condemned as an instrument of the devil because of the belief that its sound could damage mental health, the glass harmonica, invented by US founding father Benjamin Franklin, almost died out in the 19th century.

But thanks to musicians such as Thomas Bloch, who has been reintroducing it both in and outside of the classical world in the past decade, the instrument has been revived and local concert-goers will get a taste of its ethereal sound next Tuesday, when the City Chamber Orchestra of Hong Kong performs a glass-theme programme, conducted by Jean Thorel.

Bloch and the orchestra will perform music by Mozart, Hasse and Franklin, who wrote *Quintet for Glass Harmonica and Strings*. The concert, part of *Le French May*, will also feature work by Philip Glass, Samson Young Kar-fai and Haydn.

Multi-instrumentalist Bloch is almost certainly the world's most famous glass harmonica player. He has given more than 2,500 concert performances in 40 countries. He is in demand for film and television soundtracks and has been featured on recordings by artists such as Marianne Faithfull, Tom Waits, Radiohead, and Damon Albarn.

But the glass harmonica wasn't his first choice. "Originally I studied the piano, and then I heard the *ondes Martenot* and said, 'This is the instrument I want to play'," he says.

Invented by Maurice Martenot in 1928 the *ondes Martenot* ("Martenot waves") was one of the earliest electronic musical instruments. Bloch is one of its leading exponents. He teaches it at the Strasbourg Conservatoire, and the experience of learning it appears to have given him a taste for esoteric and endangered instruments.

The glass harmonica, for which Mozart and several of his contemporaries wrote music, had been out of production for more than a century when, in the early 1980s, Bloch heard that they were being made again near Boston by a German-born master glass-blower named Gerhard Finkenbeiner.

"I ordered one without even having seen it, and then started teaching myself to play it," he says.

The technique of playing the glass harmonica predates Franklin's invention of the instrument. People had been making music by rubbing wet fingers round the rims of wine glasses "tuned" by filling them with different quantities of water for centuries, and Franklin was intrigued by the sound.

He had the idea of mounting 37 bowls, tuned by the glass blower, on

Once feared, the glass harmonica nearly disappeared. Now it's back and finding favour, writes **Robin Lynam**

Dangerous when wet

a spindle made to revolve by a treadle, "like a sewing machine", says Bloch. The player touched the revolving bowls with dampened fingers to produce the notes.

Bloch's glass harmonica is operated by an electric motor, but the delicacy and purity of the sound remain unchanged.

"It has a celestial quality," he says. "Paganini said the glass harmonica was an 'angelic organ'." Mozart loved the instrument, and Bloch can be heard on the soundtrack of the director's cut of the film *Amadeus*. With the City Chamber Orchestra, he will perform arguably the best known of Mozart's glass harmonica works – the *Adagio and Rondo in C Major K617*.

Not everybody agreed with Mozart and Paganini. Some people thought the glass harmonica was cursed. By unfortunate coincidence, for reasons unlikely to be related to their playing, some of its prominent exponents fell victim to mental illness. Its reputation may also have

been damaged because the controversial physician, Franz Mesmer, whose name is the root of the verb "to mesmerise", played it to patients to relax them – "a kind of new age music" says Bloch.

In Germany the instrument was hounded out of existence in the early 19th century. In some cities it was banned by police decree, and was blamed for causing premature births and frightening animals. It was even asserted that the glass harmonica could kill.

Whether that kind of hysteria affected the instrument in other countries is less certain, although the fact that Marie-Antoinette played one wasn't the best advertisement it could have had in post-revolutionary France.

In any case, its decline was probably inevitable with the emergence of louder modern instruments. Its delicate voice went the way of the harpsichord, which was marginalised by the piano.

Bloch says the glass harmonica

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Thomas Bloch, musician (above)

can sound like a flute, and that was one alternative for composers who wanted a similar effect. Others included the celesta or glockenspiel.

Interest in the glass harmonica has revived considerably since Finkenbeiner, who died in 1999, began building them again, using quartz bowls rather than the lead crystal of the original instruments. Bloch has a busy schedule. He believes he is one of only about five people who play it professionally.

Although he is best known for the *ondes Martenot* and the glass harmonica, he continues to learn

new instruments – always rare and unusual ones. He plays the cristal Baschet, which sounds similar to the glass harmonica but requires the player to apply moistened fingers to tuned glass rods rather than bowls. More recently, he has learned to play the waterphone and the Theremin cello.

"The *ondes Martenot* remains important," he says. "I am fortunate to be able to make a living from playing these unusual instruments."

Although the waterphone is relatively portable, most of Bloch's instruments raise eyebrows at airports. "If I travel on a plane I have to book two seats – one for the glass harmonica. Recently in the US an immigration officer saw the glass harmonica through the X-ray machine and said, 'I know what that is – it's champagne fountain.' So I said, 'Yes. That's exactly what it is.'"

Glass Music, May 26, 8pm, City Hall, HK\$120, HK\$160 and \$220 Urbix. Inquiries: 2864 2154