

**Soundforms**  
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The sound of silence



Credit: Sian Disson and WAN



## **BFLS stifles notion that outdoor performance spaces are inferior with elegant mobile shell**

Several years ago, experienced architects BFLS were sought out by respected conductor and producer Mark Stephenson for a number of acoustic panels to enhance sound quality during outdoor performances. What they delivered was a standalone mobile acoustic performance shell: the first of its kind.

Bolstered by the passion and creativity of BFLS's Jason Flanagan and Paul Bavister, Stephenson launched a new company - Soundforms - with the two designers and raised £500,000 of Enterprise Investment Scheme funding for an 18-month design-build programme.

The end result is exquisite. Last week, the mobile performance shell captivated an eager cluster of journalists and designers in an industrial park under the shadow of Boris's partially constructed cable cars on the edge of the Thames, with an inaugural performance by some of the world's most talented classical and jazz musicians.

On first glance the shell is a little unusual; almost extraterrestrial in form. Under the sun's glare its inflatable outer skin seems doesn't exactly strike a fire in the heart of the observer, its curious design comparable to the gaping mouth of a whale shark. However when the sun goes down and a projector is activated, the shell transforms into an animated and engaging space, hypnotising the audience with its alien appearance.

Whether you love or hate the curvaceous form there is no denying the acoustic quality afforded to both musician and listener. An overhanging peak projects the sound beyond the conductor towards the audience and acoustic reflectors installed on the fixed overhead and vertical side stage wing trusses optimise the clarity of each individual instrument. This mobile shell has an impressive assembly time of only two to three days.

An aluminium frame arches over to a raised peak which helps project the sound from within and an inflatable waterproof skin provides a blank canvas for detailed animations. Optional lighting systems are available and whilst there is the capacity for microphones and speaker systems, these were not in use during the first performance last week and the quality of sound was a triumph.

A regular pitfall of outdoor performance spaces is the inability of musicians to hear one another: the dilemma that first brought Stephenson into contact with the BFLS team. The flawlessly-crafted acoustic elements of this mobile venue - designed in collaboration with Arup Acoustics and TSG - present an effective solution to this problem.

Last Tuesday, some of the UK's shining stars put the shell to the test. The inconceivably brilliant pianist Grace Francis was the first to the stage, her digits moving at lightning speed despite the biting cold and the beauty of her music warming the shuffling crowd. Performances by talented saxophonist Iain Ballamy and the London Philharmonic Orchestra followed, with sterling renditions of Bach by Charlie Siem and Nicola Benedetti transporting the audience away from an otherwise dismal location.

The passion and ingenuity of the Soundforms team is truly inspiring and while visually the mobile performance shell may not be everyone's cup of tea, there is no denying the clarity and projection of sound it affords. Soon to be available in a range of sizes and customisable to the needs of any budding troupe, BFLS has silenced all who believe that exterior performance spaces are acoustically inferior and set a new tone for open-air concerts.

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