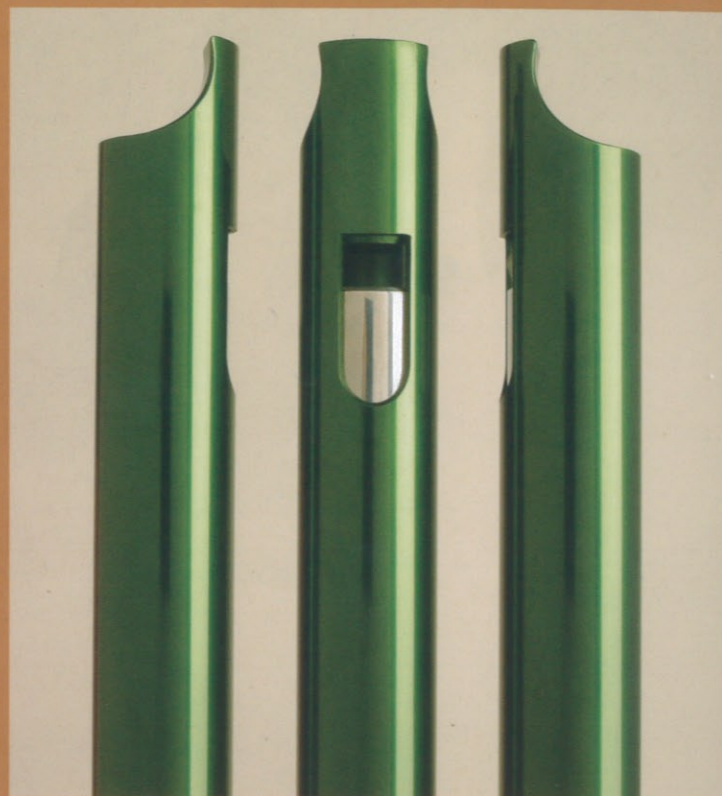


Swapping notes

Misha Somerville gives us a whistle-stop tour of his latest design venture



Whistles MK Music Misha Somerville

To make a great low whistle with a modern design

Product Client Designers Brief

Back in 2000, musician Misha Somerville founded his company MK Music with the intention of making “the world’s best whistles”. Ten years and a great deal of hard work later, Somerville’s whistles have a waiting list stretching to several years. As Somerville admits, making the whistles has become an obsession. So what’s the story behind the design?

“I used to play in a band, and while on tour, I kept losing instruments,” explains Somerville. “What struck me was that I wasn’t really that fussed about losing them – people usually grow strong attachments to great instruments. I wondered why no-one was making great low whistles before I realised it could be me”.

Meanwhile, when teaching children, Somerville started to notice children’s reactions to different instruments, and their visual appeal. “It struck me that the conventional

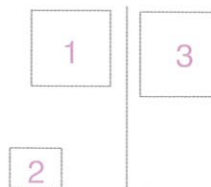


musical instruments looked a bit dated,” says Somerville. “What inspired me was what a 21st century musical might look and sound like”.

This led to the beginnings of MK Music as a one-man cottage industry making 100 low whistles a year. “Every aspect of the design has some influence on the sound and appearance,” says Somerville. “Tolerances go down to one hundredth of a millimetre. The finishing is the most time-consuming part, and every instrument is inspected and tested. Even so, every low whistle we make sounds slightly different”.

Musical instrument design usually takes a long time. Patience and persistence are fundamental skills in the profession. “It took about four years and thousands of trial instruments before I came up with something that made the mark,” Somerville says. “When you’re starting out you’re up against other makers who have been in the business for decades.” Designing and making a good musical instru-

“It struck me that the conventional musical instruments looked a bit dated”



Making music | 1. The finished product 2. Available colours 3. The workshop, the band and ideas jotted down

From a design point of view, the strengths of the whistles are that their production allows high standards and repeatability. Somerville uses cutting rather than pressing or moulding, which although not the most economical method, allows scale production and quality. The whistles are made from anodised aluminium.

The design is a simple idea that makes use of new technology, both in terms of materials and processes. Their look is unmistakably contemporary; Somerville, who works alongside several other design businesses at the Design

Hub Studio in Glasgow, is in a good place to see how instrument design differs from the wider design world. “Many of the developments in terms of materials and prototyping haven’t been adopted into instrument design. Designers stay away from musical instruments because they are so specialised and require so much background knowledge, while instrument makers tend to be craft-based and can be slow to make use of the creative advantages of computers,” he says.

The design process is still evolving, and Somerville has started publishing the process on a website, inviting others to comment and collaborate. “The idea is that if you can channel the experience and ideas of an entire community then you’ll come up with a better musical instrument,” says Somerville. “It’s a much less egotistical approach and one that’s fairly new.”

Somerville is optimistic about the future – with good reason. “I’m hoping this is the start of an exciting new century in terms of new musical instruments,” he says. “I’d love to see lots of weird and wonderful instruments out there.”

ments is a commitment which requires an interesting combination of craft and design know-how, mathematical knowledge, engineering skills, a sharp eye, steady hands, lots of dedication, and of course a good ear. Additionally, a musical instrument has a long life cycle – so early designs will still be around years later, making or breaking your reputation. “A reputation takes a lifetime to develop, but can easily outlast you. People play instruments that are hundreds of years old,” Somerville points out. In fact, musical instrument design is one of the oldest disciplines within design. For example, the oldest musical instrument discovered to date was found last year in a cave in Germany. Made from a vulture’s wing-bone, it’s been dated at 35,000 years old, and astonishingly still works. Instruments such as Stradivarius’s violins – handmade around 1700AD – are still considered among the finest working examples in existence, demonstrating an impressive product life cycle.

Any new development in the world of making musical instruments then relies on musicians to adopt the idea and develop the techniques and style – a process that takes a lifetime in itself.