

The sound of music



As featured in
The CEO Magazine
For more info visit
theceomagazine.com

Michael Brown has spent five decades fanatically perfecting his Sophera 'spheres'—handmade, polished concrete loudspeakers that deliver sound like nothing else you've ever heard.

WORDS MICHELLE HESPE

In the small country town of Gunning, on the Old Hume Highway between Goulburn and Yass in New South Wales, there's an 1880s shop frontage with three old windows in dire need of repair. It's adjoined to what was once London House, a popular inn with a horse-and-coach entrance. The shop, which is actually the home, workshop, and studio of Michael Brown, looks empty. However, those with a curious nature who pass this classic old building in this traditional country town often stop and peer into the windows, because although the shop doesn't look open, nor is it particularly welcoming, there are a few beautifully smooth concrete spheres displayed there. It's almost as though the maker hasn't decided whether or not he yet wants the world to see his work.

Some look closer and discover that they are speakers, and beautiful sculptures. Those with a trained eye will pick up that they are no ordinary pieces of handiwork. For starters, they are made of a notoriously hard material to work with (concrete), and they are perfectly round.

You need to meet the creator of these spherical concrete speakers to understand how special they really are. And then you need to listen.

My partner and I were passing through Gunning and were out for a walk when we stopped by the 1880s window. Both having a love of art and design, we wanted to know what such interesting pieces were doing half on display in a shop that seemed closed. They wouldn't have been out of place in the Guggenheim Museum, or in any concert hall in the world.

We went to the door and gave it a nudge. It swung open but there was no-one there. The spheres sat there, shiny and new—off-the-form

concrete balls freshly out of a mould. They were proud.

The walls of the old room were covered in thousands of milk cartons for soundproofing, and all around the room, and covering the back wall in stacks on shelves, were concrete spheres in various stages of undress—half spheres, some coloured and some not. Insides out on display. Cords dangling. Technical bits and bobs waiting. Sketches and photos, moulds and materials. It was an artist's studio. There were spheres in pale grey, others in terracotta, some bright-blue ones, and some in a classic marble design.

I stroked one. It was smooth, dense, and I could already tell that my partner was mentally assessing its no doubt intricate innards. These were no ordinary speakers.

Then Michael Brown appeared in the doorway. He looked like a mad professor, a frustrated composer, and Einstein, all rolled into one, with his arms open in welcome. "Come in, come in," he said. We stepped forward, introduced ourselves, and he began to answer some questions. But then he stopped, his brow furrowed.

"You need to listen first."

Michael led us through hallways and rooms heavily laden with experiments—more wires and moulds, milk cartons, and sculptural speaker stands in a dizzying array of forms not quite meeting function.

We arrived in a high-ceilinged room where another old window faced Gunning's main street, thick curtains allowing some rays of light to filter in. "Take a seat, take a seat," he said. We had barely seated ourselves upon sheet-covered crates when he put on Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*. As music filled the space, I closed my eyes. I could have been at a concert, the music was so intense. Over 50 spheres of different sizes surrounded us.

"Which one is the music coming from?" Michael asked, head and arms raised dramatically. And that was the most remarkable thing. It was

impossible to tell. If you looked at one sphere, you'd swear the music was streaming from its every pore. If you looked at another and stood before it, you'd swear that it was it, emitting the most precise sound. Michael pointed to one that neither of us had chosen, and sitting right before it was the only way to really tell. The sound was so all encompassing, so pure and precise in its technical outpouring it was enough to bring tears to any music-lover's eyes.

From the beginning, music was in Michael's veins. He says that he was born under a piano, as he grew up with his grandmother, who was an accomplished pianist. He was in awe of her as she played, and he would sit under her piano, the music coursing, vibrating through him.

Michael went to music appreciation classes after school whenever he could, and later when he could afford music lessons he was taught by Dorothy Fountain, whose words he will always remember: "You make some of the best sound I have ever heard, but it's a pity you can't play anything."

"But she taught me to hear," Michael says. "And I was a great sponge."

He worked in a music store in his 20s and ended up with a subscription to orchestral concerts—sometimes seeing as many as 40 a year—after having the good fortune of meeting the concert master at the time for the Sydney Orchestra, Donald Hazelwood. He attended as many concerts as he possibly could, and was always surrounded by people at the store who were obsessed with music and its creation, often involved in or overhearing conversations about other people's efforts at making loudspeakers.

Michael studied the work of many greats who have studied sound and its production, including the work of Richard H Small on electromechanical parameters and the technicalities of a loudspeaker driver's performance. He also read about the discovery by Harry F Olson, that different enclosure shapes produce measurably different >>

I stroked one. It was smooth, dense, and I could already tell that my partner was mentally assessing its no doubt intricate innards. These were no ordinary speakers.



Photograph by Bob Dunn

diffraction patterns. Today, it would likely be a tough test for these men to prove empirically what Michael has done physically with his spheres, in terms of the inner chambers and his clever application of technology.

In the 60s and 70s, people were innovating methods of reproducing music, and Michael discovered the work of Percy Wilson, who challenged what he'd learned from Olson when it came to creating loudspeaker enclosures. Wilson experimented with different shapes, including tubular formations shunned by Olson.

Michael then learned to trust his own instincts and to work outside the rulebook, and has far surpassed the work of those he studied. He started working with double drivers, and over the past decade has also been focusing on the right colours for his spheres, which he calls Sophera.

He painstakingly searched the world for the best drivers to complement his spheres, and after finally finding a place in Japan that created them, they stopped producing them, leaving Michael heartbroken but ever more determined to perfect something that had been obsessing him for five decades.

Fifty years later, Michael has sold some 500 pairs of speakers. They range in cost from \$3,500 for a small pair to \$30,000 for the double system, which includes four

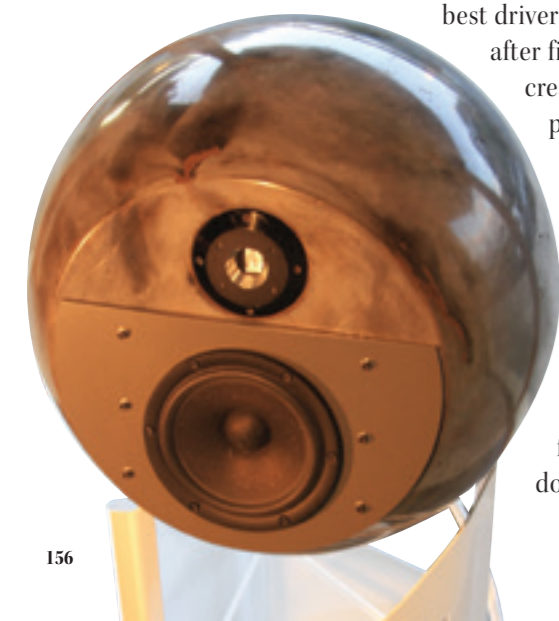
spheres. Music-lover Glyn Fuller from NSW recently bought a pair, and he's not shy about singing his Sophera's praises: "There's a multitude of hi-fi speakers available across the world, and over 50-odd years I've listened to many, ranging in price from three-figure up to six-figure sums. Most make a reasonable stab at producing sound, some doing this quite well, but none that I have heard has ever come close to the ability to connect the listener to the music in the way that Michael's spheres do. They sing to you, communicating the full emotional spectrum of the artist's intent.

"Sophera speakers are a mixture of art, experience, expertise, experimentation, and Michael's fanatical drive. They have always had a unique sound, and this has developed and improved over the years, in the same way that a good artist's art matures over time. Like a good chef, Michael only uses components that pass his exceptionally high standards, with the result being more akin to a fine musical instrument than a technical object."

If you aren't the curious type with a penchant for music, art, science, and technology—let alone someone who takes the Old Hume Highway through Gunning on a road trip—then you might not have peered through those old 1880s windows. Luckily for you, Sophera spheres will soon roll out of their hideaway for some well-deserved limelight. After 50 years in the making, it's about time Michael's spheres were heard. ■

sophera.com.au

Above Ross Gengos, owner of Abels Music in Canberra, and his Michael Brown spheres.



IT'S LONELY AT THE TOP

For more than 20 years The CEO Circle has been a recognised powerhouse of connectivity, bringing leaders of industry together. It's a less lonely existence. Take advantage of hundreds of years of combined experience and a wealth of peer support.

+61 3 9888 2800 | ceo@theceocircle.com

www.theceocircle.com

[johnkaragounis.com](https://www.linkedin.com/company/johnkaragounis)