

Music for 150 Carpenters requires a different sort of listening than most music. There are no notes or beats, instead there are acoustic cloud formations, made up of simple sounds that are multiplied until they metamorphose into a new sort of sound field. The piece unfolds as a moving sculpture, using sound to tilt the architecture of the room.

The conception of Music for 150 Carpenters arose from two principal roots: a particular digital synthesis technique I work with, and a long history of working at carpentry jobs.

I spent many years working in construction to fund my music composition habit, starting as an assistant framer and eventually doing cabinetry. My fellow carpenters were for the most part artists, musicians, and writers. Carpentry afforded a flexible form of labor, with considerable autonomy, ideal for musicians and artists involved in absorbing projects. You could always pick up some decently paid work. So the idea of combining the image and structure of manual labor with experimental sound composition seemed to me a natural fit, and a suitable tribute to my toolbag days.

My sound compositions are generally in the realm of electroacoustic music, the extension of Pierre Schaeffer's *Musique Concrète*. This often involves highly sophisticated computer processes like granular synthesis, which involves snipping sounds into thousands of minute grains, performing various operations on them, and reassembling them into cloud-like masses, thus creating completely new sounds. I often wondered if it would be possible to do it manually. Increasingly I find myself drawn to simpler techniques in the quest for more articulate expressions. I look for processes that are readily comprehensible, not involving the magic of algorithmic transformations. While I enjoy the digital operations, I have been looking for their origins in simple acts. For example, by layering dozens of recordings of hammering nails or filling bottles with water; the original action disappears, revealing a harmonic structure and a progression of forms.

I see this as the reverse of a Chuck Close painting: Close paints hundreds of abstract squares that together make a figurative portrait. I take hundreds of literal soundings and combine them to make an abstract gesture.

I also work extensively with the potential of multi-channel ("surround") sound to alter architecture, and even to develop palpable, dimensional shapes in space. I experiment with ways to thoroughly incorporate the dimensional aspects of sound into composition (space and form having primary roles, equal to or precedent over pitch, rhythm, and timbre) to make the progression of forms, the changing divisions and reformations of the playback arena, a source of counterpoint and harmony in the composition.

I stumbled onto the initial sound palette for Music for 150 Carpenters while rummaging around in out-takes from another piece about a steel fabrication plant. I liked the version I then made by layering recordings of a single carpenter hammering nails, but I wanted more different styles of hammering, a wider variety of sounds, and I wanted to do it as a live performance. I figured that if I could develop a score that would organize people in the manner of a construction site, I could readily put together a large enough group to perform it. The performers could be organized into work crews with lists of tasks and schedules, and arranged in a circle around the audience. Employing a devolved structure, like a construction plan, I could maintain musical and spatial control without relying on performers' virtuosity. Within this scenario is an emotional distillation of purposefulness, threaded with the individual's loss of identity in the scheme of manufacture.

The final output of this concert is a sound/video installation work: video is shot from overhead and, amid the debris of the performance, later projected at nearly full scale on the floor. The audio is also recorded and played back through a 10 channel system to get the most out of its architectural aspects. The visitor can walk on the “screen” and gets a super-human view of the proceedings, as if floating above the audience and performers.

I am exceedingly pleased and honored to be able to stage and install this work at the Berman Museum, and for such a wonderful event as the 150th anniversary of Ursinus College.

Douglas Henderson