



Sounds of nature get a 'remix' for Phipps project

By [Bob Karlovits](#)

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Ludwig van Beethoven wrote his violin concerto for colleague Franz Clement.

Duke Ellington wrote alto saxophone parts for Johnny Hodges.

Abby Aresty is writing a work to be played by a building.

Aresty calls herself a “sound composer” and is constructing a piece of music built on the sounds of nature and everyday life in Western Pennsylvania. It is being installed at the Center for Sustainable Landscapes at the Phipps Conservatory & Botanical Gardens in Oakland as “a way of bringing nature into the building and to the staff,” says executive director Richard V. Piacentini. It will officially debut at the end of July.

They are the sounds of such things as water hitting metal, birds, wind in trees, frogs — sort of the horns and clarinets of nature.

While her work at assembling the sounds is noteworthy, so will be the performance of the piece. She says the music will be structured in an ever-changing fashion by a computer program that will measure heat, humidity, wind, precipitation and other features to determine what is appropriate.

The sounds will be produced by 12 speakers in the atrium of the LEED Platinum-certified building. But, she says, it also will be played by the building itself when some of the glass will be used as transducers.

Golan Levin from Carnegie Mellon University says Aresty is creating a “sound collage” that is “much more than anyone would believe.” He's an assistant professor of electronic art and director of the Frank-Ratchye Studio for Creative Inquiry, where Aresty has a residency during her time with Phipps.

Levin calls Aresty's work “generative music” because of the way it will be generated by the elements read by the computer program.

“Instead of fixed pieces, the computer will make it sound different all the time,” he says.

He says seasonal elements of the computer program will make sure the sounds in the atrium are not inappropriate. For that reason he calls it a “year-long piece of music.”

Aresty has gathered and is gathering sounds from all over the area — on the rooftop garden of the center, riverfront trails, neighborhoods. She says the place doesn't matter “as much as the time of day.”

Piacentini appreciates that comment. He invited her to his home in Highland Park, where a collection of starlings make great statements at the beginning and end of each day.

His appreciation of that noise — and the lack of others — led to Aresty coming to Phipps. He says he was attending a Living Futures Conference in Seattle in 2013 when he began investigating artists who might

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Details

Hear it!

www.phipps.conservatory.org/project-green-heart/ofearthandsun.aspx

Abby Aresty talks about the project
www.vimeo.com/77536951

create a soundscape for inside the center.

That search was prompted by his effort to keep the center an actively engaging building for staff and visitors. Another aspect was an effort to solve an issue created by the solidity of the building.

"I walked through the building once in February," he says, "and it was deadly quiet. All the windows are triple-paned, and it was eerie."

He calls that blockade of nature "un-Phipps-like" and decided he wanted to bring the sound of the outside inside.

In Seattle, he was led to Aresty, who had done a soundscape called "The Music of Trees" for the Washington Park Arboretum. For it, she recorded sounds at various areas and amplified them to emphasize the listener's aural experience.

The attempt appears to have worked, says Sarah Reichard, director of the arboretum, which is run by the city and the University of Washington.

"We kept getting comments from people on how different it was to actually hear things," she says.

Her soundscape in Seattle was on display for a month. Here, "Of Earth and Sun" will be an indefinite part of the center. At the end of July, it will join an art display in the building called the Beta Project, which focuses on works that represent the instinctive bond between humans and other forms of life.

Aresty has her bachelor's degree in music composition from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y., her master's from the University of Michigan and her doctorate from Washington. Her next project will be a teaching-research project in Iowa, where she will spend a couple years.

She says her studies always have been centered on using natural sounds, work that goes back to France's Pierre Schaeffer (1910-95), who also dabbled in electronics.

Aresty says she started adding electronics in her studies at Washington.

CMU's Levin says that mixture of composition and technology was one of the elements that made the pairing between the university and the conservatory seem attractive. The university could provide the electronics she needed while Phipps could supply the natural side.

He calls it a "great collaboration" in the way it gives the creative inquiry program an area of study and also helps Phipps.

"She is creating a piece of sonic architecture where sound co-exists with the building," he says.

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