

# An artist, an architect and a composer walk into a conservatory...

Veronika Krausas

The [Chicago Architecture Biennial](#) this year featured a project that really was at the intersection of music, art and architecture. Four musicians from the [Chicago Sinfonietta](#), each in their own surrounding enclosure, performed a walking meditation around the Conservatory (plants and such ... not the musical studio type) at Garfield Park.



Garfield Conservatory (Chicago) September 13, 2017; photographer Veronika Krausas

Sharing a serious concern for air pollution, artist [Ana Prvački](#) and [Florian Idenburg](#), co-founder of the New York architecture firm SO-IL, constructed 'wearable enclosures' made of an air filter fabric that purifies air. They wanted to offer a lyrical gesture for the Biennial concerning the issue of air pollution. And thus, L'air pour L'air began.

Each enclosure houses a musician, performing a walking meditation.

The original quartet is for voice, flute, tenor saxophone and tenor trombone, all wind instruments. I chose to use text by the 12th Century composer, abbess, visionary, and botanist Hildegard of Bingen. The words are extracted from the AIR section from the second book of Elements from Physica, her treatise on health and healing. Both English and Latin are used during the performance.



Kimberly Jones (soprano), Janice MacDonald (flute), John McAllister (trombone), Jeremy Ruthrauff (tenor saxophone); photographer Iwan Baan

Aer spiramen est quod in rore humorum germinantibus insudat,  
ita quod omnia virescunt,  
et quod per flatum flores educit,  
et quod per calorem omnia ad maturitatem confirmat.  
Aer autem qui proximus dispositioni lunae et stellarum est,  
sidera humectat,  
velut terrenus aer terram et animalia ...  
vivificat et movet...

by Hildegard von Bingen LIBER SECUNDUS – DE ELEMENTIS - Physica

Air is the breath that saturates seedlings with dew-drops  
so that they grow green and strong,  
and with its breeze brings flowers,  
and with its warmth leads all to ripeness.  
The air, nearby the moon and stars,  
waters the celestial body,

just as the terrestrial air  
 vivifies and animates the earth and its creatures.

Translated by Tom Sapsford © 2017 (used with permission of translator)

The composition presented a few obstacles. The first constraint was that each musician is in their own tent/construction (although somewhat translucent), isolated physically and visually from their fellow musicians. Each musician is walking around the conservatory so the notion of music stands and conductors of course was not possible. How to coordinate the musicians if they potentially can't even see each other very well? After 3 different versions I finally took inspiration from Renaissance mensuration (or prolation) canons (the same melodic line in canon but at different tempos) and Terry Riley's landmark 20th Century work In C.

## L'air pour l'air

veronika krausas

A walking meditation for quartet

Text by Hildegard von Bingen (English translation by Tom Sapsford)

Starting Bell *sempre L.V.*

Voice

(Bell)

UNUM SAX

Air is the breath. Air that sat - u - rates young seed - lings  
 Aer spir - a men Aer - est quod in ro - re hu - mo - rum ger/mi/na-ti/bus

TMB

with dew dew drops so they grow so they grow green and strong.  
 in - su - dat i - ta quod om - ni - a vi - - - res - cunt.

There are 5 sections in L'air pour L'air that may be ordered in any manner and repeated as necessary. Within each section cells maybe played in any order or repeated ad lib. The move to the next section is signaled by a bell played by the soprano. Each musician starts the same melodic line or chant and performs at a different tempo and con molto rubato. The result is an overlapping of the chant—an aural tapestry.



photographer Iwan Baan

I've been very fortunate to be involved in all sorts of wonderful collaborative and interdisciplinary projects from operas performed in limousines driving around Los Angeles (The Industry's Hopscotch Opera in 2015) to five bass players performing inside a tent (Porcupine). Each comes about in unexpected ways. I was initially introduced to Ana Prvački by Patrick Scott, the director of Jacaranda Music in Los Angeles. He had seen a work by Prvački titled *Elbows and Bows* with a string quartet performing in a tent, where you hear the musicians and only see their movements poking through the fabric of the tent. He thought we might be like-minded and, indeed we were.

Then it's all about serendipitous timing. I mentioned playing in a tent to my colleague David Moore at the Thornton School of Music at USC, who is also a bass player in the Los Angeles Philharmonic. The next thing to happen was the LA Phil called to commission a work for five bass players in a tent. *Porcupine* premiered at the first Noon to Midnight, A Day of New Music at Walt Disney Concert Hall in 2016. Since the basses are only heard with the movements of their bows and bodies disrupting the tent, another of the compositional challenges was to consider the choreography of their movements through the music.



Walt Disney Concert Hall, "Noon to Midnight" New Music Marathon 2016; photographer Patrick T. Fallon (LA Times)

The performance was a success and we started talking about other possible projects.

Ana showed me a video of a goat lung expanding and contracting exactly like bellows. It was super cool and she suggested we do something dealing with AIR. Of course, I agreed. This initial notion of air then transformed when Ana talked with Florian Idenburg of SO-IL architects in New York. The resulting individual pods presented an entirely different sort of choreography, a walking or floating individual entity playing a meditation both separated from their fellow musicians yet aurally constantly intertwining.

The first and only rehearsal at the conservatory was a typical first rehearsal trying to figure out the music with the added complication of constructions! All fit perfectly except for the trombonist. The original musician was a foot shorter than our final performer. Because of the hurricanes in Florida, she was stuck and John McAllister volunteered at the last minute. Slight adjustments and modifications were made and he even suggested performing on a sackbut that fit a little easier into the pod's space yet was in keeping with the chant-like (early music) feel of the piece.



John McAllister (trombone) working with Seunghyun Kang & Danny Duong from SO-IL; photographer Veronika Krausas

Before the first performance we anticipated the worst-case scenario of 200+ architects at the convention being quite chatty and the musicians having to compete with conversation. We were astounded...the moment the pods started to walk through the conservatory there was dead silence. It was amazing. The stillness and quiet floated along with the pods as they entered the main performing area.

The musicians were such heroes working within slightly uncomfortable circumstances and promenading with these enclosures around the conservatory. It's always such a joy when musicians are not only brilliant performers but also game to try the unusual.

Now onto the next unusual artistic and musical venture.



**Left to right:** Florian Idenburg (SO-IL founder & architect), Ana Prvački (artist), flute pod, Amy Rule (Chicago's first lady), Veronika Krausas (composer), Todd Palmer (Executive Director, Chicago Architecture Biennial); photographer Christine Bernstein

CODA: Since it was a goat lung expanding and contracting that was our initial inspiration, my unofficial and private title is The Goat Lung Promenade. There were no goats in the conservatory but there were several birds, some bees and a fearless squirrel.

[l'air pour l'air - a walking meditation](#)