

Sounding Beethoven: with ASO, Eroica Trio, and a Bertoia premiere

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There has long been a connection between art and music, with one often inspiring the other. Many musicians are also artists and vice-versa.

Years ago, when I first started conducting the Allentown Symphony Orchestra, someone asked me if I had ever heard any of the sound sculptures created by the artist Harry Bertoia. At that point I had not, so they invited me out to Harry's Barn and Studio in Bally, Berks County, along Route 100, about 15 miles from Allentown.

What I saw were all sorts of instruments created from metal rods, with heavy metal discs on the ends. They came in different sizes and shapes. When touched with the hand, the rods vibrated, striking the metal discs together at the top, creating all sorts of wonderfully colorful sounds.

Bertoia (1915-1978) designed chairs for Charles and Ray Eames in California and Knoll Inc., East Greenville, Montgomery County. His wire pieces became known as the Bertoia Collection for Knoll. Among these is the Diamond Chair, made from a lattice of steel.

Harry Bertoia's barn was of fascinating instruments, and also gongs and pipes that swung, clinking in the air. The image and sounds of these "sonambient sound sculptures" stayed with me through the years.

When creating the programming for the Allentown Symphony Orchestra for this season, I knew that I wanted to perform Ludwig van Beethoven's 8th Symphony, one of the happiest pieces he ever wrote, but I wasn't sure what to pair with it for the concert.

I had been attending an event at the Allentown Art Museum and realized that they had three original sound sculptures by Harry Bertoia. Suddenly, I had my answer. I would commission a piece for Sonambient sound sculptures by Harry Bertoia and symphony orchestra.

As I spoke with officials at the Allentown Art Museum, and with Val Bertoia, a son of Harry Bertoia, the project began to take shape. With the help of the staff at the Art Museum, we were able to borrow Harry Bertoia sound sculptures from Muhlenberg College, the City of Bethlehem, Ursinus College, the Allentown Art Museum and a gong from the collection at the Bertoia Barn.

We commissioned Doug Ovens, composer and percussionist, and retired Department Chair at Muhlenberg College to compose a composition that would showcase these wonderful sound sculptures with the accompaniment of the Allentown Symphony Orchestra.

In order to establish the proper tonalities for the composition, Doug recorded the sound from each piece of art and analyzed the pitch or the frequencies of the sound sculptures.

The sculptures will be amplified for the performance so that the audience will be able to hear the qualities of the sound clearly.

“Visible Music for Bertoia Sound Sculptures and Orchestra” will be an exciting new piece and a once in a lifetime experience to see the this exhibit of nine Harry Bertoia Sound Sculptures performed live.

Sandwiched after the new composition by Doug Ovens will be another piece by Beethoven, his popular “Triple Concerto” for, yes, you guessed it, three soloists.

When it was originally written, “Concerto for Violin, Violoncello and Piano, Op. 56, C major (Triple Concerto)” was a very novel piece in that no one else had ever written a concerto for a triple soloist combination: piano, violin, and cello, with orchestral accompaniment. Therefore, Beethoven was also well ahead of his time with his l experimenting with new sound combinations.

To perform the solo parts on the Triple Concerto, we will feature the International-renowned Eroica Trio, with Erika Nickrenz, piano; Sara Parkins, violin, and Sara Sant’Ambrogio, cello.

The Eroica Trio has performed this work more times than any other trio in the world. They have appeared with renowned symphonies such as Chicago, St. Louis, San Francisco, Mostly Mozart Orchestra, Nashville, Indianapolis, Atlanta, Pittsburgh, Houston, New Jersey and Seattle.

The Eroica Trio’s recording of the Beethoven Triple with the Prague Chamber Orchestra was so successful that it was listed on the Billboard Top 20 for the first time in recording history. It will be great to have them perform this work in the Lehigh Valley.

The concerts of the Allentown Symphony Orchestra will take place at 7:30 p.m. Nov. 4 and 3 p.m. Nov. 5 in Miller Symphony Hall, Allentown. Included will be the two works of Ludwig van Beethoven, his “Symphony No. 8 , Op. 93, F major Symphony” and the “Triple Concerto,” with the premiere of the new work for Harry Bertoia Sound Sculptures and orchestra. Add to that the appearance and performance by the Internationally-acclaimed Eroica Trio and you have an event not to be missed.

The Young Musician’s String Festival performance is at 1:45 p.m. Nov. 5, preceding the Allentown Symphony Concert, featuring young string performers in the 4th - 8th grades from throughout the Lehigh Valley.

“Meet the Artist” with Allentown Symphony Music Director-Conductor Diane Wittry, the Eroica Trio, Doug Ovens, Val Bertoia and an Allentown Art Museum official, noon-1 p.m. Nov. 3, Miller Symphony Hall, Allentown. The talk is free and open to the public.

Diane Wittry is Music Director and Conductor of the Allentown Symphony Orchestra, Artistic Director of the Ridgewood Symphony, N.J., and author, “Beyond the Baton” and “Baton Basics” (both, Oxford University Press).

Tickets: Miller Symphony Hall Box Office, 23 N. Sixth St., Allentown; allentownsymphony.org; 610-432-6715. Free student tickets, underwritten by a grant from the Century Fund, are available for Allentown Symphony Orchestra concerts.