

POSTED: 02/02/2014 10:40:17 PM PST

New take on a Bach concerto

Former JPL consultant reworks 'Brandenburg'

*By CLAUDIA MELÉNDEZ SALINAS
Herald Staff Writer*



Robert Danziger, at home in Carmel Highlands, is a designer/inventor of many musical instruments and furniture. (VERN FISHER/The Herald)



Robert Danziger has reinterpreted Brandenburg Concerto No. 2. (VERN FISHER/The Herald)

Robert Danziger had been employed at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory for only a few days when he witnessed a historical moment for the lab — and for mankind.

It was 1979, nearly two years after the Voyager spacecraft had been launched. Danziger was on hand when the probe began transmitting photos of Jupiter back to the lab's headquarters in Pasadena from more than 365 million miles away.

Here he was, a recently minted lawyer who had lived much of his teenage years on his own, with a personal ringside seat to history.

"There were these televisions all over the lab — everybody saw them at the same time, we were all together in this process," said Danziger, 60, of Carmel. "I'm like the most junior guy at the lab. It was just fantastic. Finding myself in that kind of situation was amazing."

Included in the Voyager was a golden record, a time capsule intended to represent some aspects of life and culture on Earth at the time of its launch. One of the musical pieces selected for the odyssey was the "Brandenburg Concerto No. 2" by Johann Sebastian Bach. It was a work Danziger had fallen in love with.

That it had been selected to represent humanity was of great significance. And for Danziger, a man of elaborate ideas, the music would become a life's passion.

90-minute version

Thirty years later, Danziger launched a quest of his own to re-write the "Brandenburg Concerto" so a full orchestra wasn't needed to perform it.

He heard the results in December: a 90-minute modern interpretation of Bach's masterpiece using an electronic wind instrument, the collaboration of talented musicians and thousands of hours of hard work.

The final product is a vibrant, playful reinterpretation of the Baroque jewel, what Danziger describes as a jazz-classical crossover with instruments and recording techniques not available in Bach's time.

You don't have to be a classical music expert to appreciate Danziger's accomplishment. The "Brandenburg Concertos" were written for 17 mostly string and wind instruments. Described as a benchmark of the Baroque era, each of the six concertos requires a different combination of instruments and some highly skilled soloists.

To be able to play the concertos, Danziger extracted the main melody and counterpoints based on his own "feel," then re-wrote it for two instruments using the 12-tone technique, which treats all 12 semi-tones in the scale as equal. That allows for any two instruments to play in any octave. The pieces thus can be interpreted by one solo instrument, a duet or any combination technology allows.

But to arrive at his project, the "Brandenburg 300," Danziger traveled a riveting road that included touring with famed jazz pianist Cecil Taylor, establishing a pioneering company in alternative energy, playing the kalimba with British rock group Supertramp, and winning the New York Film Festival for best original music.

Among many other things.

Accidental bassist

The son of a music lover, Danziger learned to play bass guitar practically by accident.

After graduating from high school, he worked for a roofing company. It was July 27, 1971, and he had been working since 4 a.m. in El Centro. Danziger was taking equipment back to the truck when the ladder he was on broke. He fell 13 feet onto his back, missing hitting his head by a few inches.

"I'm laying on the dirt, and I look up at a billboard that said 'El Centro, where the sun goes to spend the winter,'" Danziger said, grinning as he anticipated his next comments. "And I remember thinking, the sun's here in the summer too. It does not leave for the summer."

Danziger laughs often and heartily. It's a tool he learned from his mother and that has served him well in painful and challenging situations.

"This man looks down and says, 'I hope you didn't break anything or you know we're going to have to shoot you,'" he recounted, laughing. "I could tell he was joking."

Danziger broke his back and lost the use of his left leg for 10 months. Suddenly he was bedridden with nothing to do. To help him pass the time, his cousin gave him a clear-plastic bass guitar that he still owns. He calls it Joy to the World Number 2.

"Sometimes I'd play 15, 16, 18 hours a day, exploring different ways of playing lying down. That led me to a number of techniques, sounds and ways of playing that you don't normally play. Things you can't do when you're standing up," Danziger said.

The skills he learned eventually landed him a gig with one of the most celebrated jazz pianists in the United States.

The only place Danziger could be loud was the auditorium at Antioch College in Ohio. One day he was playing his bass guitar when a "relatively short guy" approached him and listened.

"You should audition for the band," the man told him. "My name is Cecil Taylor."

Danziger didn't know anything about the man, and when he listened to a tape of his music, he felt as if it was put on backward. Still, he showed up at the 8 p.m. appointment. The rest of the musicians arrived by 10.

Taylor "handed me these pages of squiggles, lines, symbols and numbers notes on it," the musician said. "I didn't know what it was, but I noticed these patterns. I was looking at it, doing my sound effects, fooling around, not particularly doing anything and after a while I noticed everybody had stopped and was looking at me. (Taylor) said, 'That's perfect. You're in the band.'"

Danziger played with Taylor for six months, then he had to stop.

When talking about this period of his life, Danziger hesitates. With no money and no financial support to attend college, he returned to Los Angeles to get a job to support himself and his music career.

But there was something else going on, something he doesn't want to talk about out of respect for people who have to endure extremely difficult circumstances not by choice, but by chance.

Big challenges

Danziger is a big man. In the commencement speech he delivered at CSU Monterey Bay last summer, he said he was the biggest person in the school from the second grade on "and was

never in a room with someone my size for over 30 years. Starting at the age of 2, maybe earlier, I was told thousands of times I was going to die soon because of my size."

As a boy, Danziger had bad chemistry with his father, an immigrant of Jewish background who had endured extreme difficulties, he said. This translated into constant fights and a very challenging family life.

By the time he reached high school, the athletic, accomplished student was kicked out of the house. He started living in an alley across the street from school before being taken in by friends of friends. Two years later he became student body president of his high school in Los Angeles, president and captain of the golf team while working, and often living on the streets.

On the opposite side of his father's rage was his mother's humor. If she had a good joke to tell, she would phone 30 of her best friends, one after the other, to retell it — without announcing herself or giving them time to react.

"Mom used to say, 'What funny happened?'" asking about his trips throughout the world. The anecdotes he would scribble for her on small pieces of paper became the basis for "A Funny Thing Happened on The Way to Energy Independence," an account of his experiences working on alternative energy and starting a company that operated for 25 years, built two power plants and made him a pioneer in the field.

Shining musically

While still working as a consultant for the Jet Propulsion Lab, Danziger started Sunlaw to take advantage of a law that allowed alternative energy companies to sell electricity to utilities. The only money he had to start it was \$10,000 from the workers' compensation settlement from the accident that broke his back. To support Sunlaw, he consulted for companies trying to create wind farms, solar electric power plants and energy conservation programs, among others.

Working on alternative energy did not keep him away from music. He had a band for a year or so, and constantly played the kalimba, an African instrument made of wood and metal. His kalimba-playing abilities landed him a gig with British rock band Supertramp in their recording of "Some Things Never Change" in 1997.

In 1987 he won the New York Film Festival Gold Medal for best original music. Danziger saw one of his power plants as a sculpture, conceptual art, and among the several unusual things he did for the company was produce a video so the workers could show their families what it was like. He recorded the score, entered it in the competition and bested well-known feature film score composers John Williams and Elmer Bernstein.

"When my mom heard who the other nominees were, she was convinced they had made a mistake," Danziger wrote in the book. "She may have been right."

The medal is now part of many other souvenirs and instruments in his home studio.

Using his skills

Danziger moved to Carmel in 2000, and ever since he has looked for projects that can engage his intellectual pursuits and musical skills. He put together "musical sculptures" for the National Steinbeck Center and its exhibits on the ethnic communities of Chinatown. As the Steinbeck projects were winding down, he began work on the "Brandenburg Concertos."

As he rewrote the concertos, he enlisted the help of his friends — saxophonist Albert Wing, known for playing with Frank Zappa and Michael McDonald; and Mike Miller, who has played with Bette Midler and Queen Latifah.

Danziger would record the first two or three lines, then send them over to Wing and Miller, who would in turn record their contributions and send them back.

"They would record between 10 and 50 tracks each," Danziger said in an email. "When I had all the files, I would go through each track and pick out the gems. ... I loved going through the tracks and figuring out what worked with what, and I got to savor their tremendous creativity and musicianship."

Danziger then would do rough mixes and send them to studios to have them polished up.

"Because of my background, I was never concerned with making it a strict classical interpretation," he said. "I would not know strict classical interpretation if I fell over it. I don't have a classical background but I have a jazz background, so I thought about it since the beginning as being a jazz crossover interpretation of the 'Brandenburg Concerto.'"

Each song is dedicated to a historical figure Danziger admires, a person he was thinking of when recording the tune: Benjamin Franklin, Chinatown resident and Filipina guerrilla fighter Paulina Morales, and Marie Curie, among others.

The project is earning some accolades. Andrew Weintraub, chair of the music department at the University of Pittsburgh, congratulated Danziger for re-creating "a work of lasting beauty and depth for this time and place." Respected Bach tenor David Gordon calls the recording "one of the most fun things to happen to Mr. Bach in a long time."

Danziger "took all that music, all those notes, and somehow reconceived it all — it is still Bach's music, but it's also something very new," Gordon wrote in an email. "B300 is a sort of sonic translation, created by following 18th century instructions while using a varied mix of 21st century tools, both digital and acoustic. It will take me awhile to get my head around the whole marvelous concept.

"Voyager I and II sent Bach's music into outer space in the 1970s. Maybe Bob Danziger is Voyager III, sending Bach's music into our inner space."

Resonance for future

It's hard to miss Danziger when he enters a room, an imposing man preceded by the chair he designed to alleviate his back problems. But what makes the musician notable is not his physical size but his all-encompassing ideas. When he composed the commencement address for CSU Monterey Bay last summer, he wasn't just thinking about the graduates, but about their ancestors, many of them likely immigrants like his father.

Whether he's engaged in music or alternative energy, Danziger is not just thinking about the challenge, but how it's been influenced by history and how it will change it. How could his power plant improve the surrounding environment? What were Japanese families feeling when they left their possessions behind to go to internment camps? How could these feelings be expressed musically?

Ultimately, it was the inspiration behind the "Brandenburg 300," the musical selection that could be the first heard by other lifeforms millions of miles away, wherever the Voyager goes.

"The Brandenburg is one of the artistic components of my life that could potentially have currency 200 years from now. Who knows?" Danziger said. "I'm terrible at predicting the future. But you never know what people are going to focus on. Something I never thought of as being special could resonate with the future in some way."

Claudia Meléndez Salinas can be reached at 753-6755 or cmelendez@montereyherald.com.