



Environments

Environments

for Orchestra
by Steve Sauder

Music About Architecture

I felt my reliance on a narrative to coax the music forward, which had always been my crutch when writing program music, was a weakness.

In response to this, Michel Rochon my composition mentor suggested that I take on as an exercise, writing music about something static.

“Like ... architecture?” I asked.

“Like architecture!” He said, nodding.

So, I proceeded to ... do nothing at all about it. How on earth would I write music about buildings? It didn't even make sense!

Then one day I was visiting a friend who lives in an apartment block, and in front of his building was this truly enormous water feature, not quite a fountain, but something special. It was very obviously hand made, and equally obviously a labour of love for its creator. It had vertical sprays, large multi-level reflecting pools (did I mention it was huge? At least the size of a swimming pool), in the center was a sculpture of ... dolphins? ... or maybe seals? Because it was evening, the whole thing was lit up, very artistically. The back side of this extraordinary sculpture was a wall made of what appeared to be a large square lattice of pipes, artistically encased in concrete, into which holes had been drilled so that water trickled down on the levels below, which combined with all the rest to add a wonderful liquid sound to the mix. I was astonished.





The building



The seal(?) sculpture

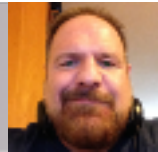


It's even in the plan!



1. 33 Rosehill Ave. Toronto

Patron:
Steve Sauder



This is it, the fountain that started it all. Standing in front of this handmade masterpiece of a water feature, I immediately thought of how I would describe it musically, and that was all it took. The whole project fell into place in my head. I would ask my patrons on Patreon to suggest buildings or places or public artworks that had inspired or made them feel a sense of wonder, and I would write a short, 3-minute piece for each one. With a little luck, I would be able to tie the whole thing together into a larger piece with some themes.

This album and book is the result. I'll briefly discuss the inspiration and decisions for each piece as I go through them.

To start things off, I begin by using syncopated pizzicato strings in imitation of water droplets, occasionally interrupted by the horns. When that finishes, I pull the horns to the foreground and give the trombone an odd and slightly drunken-sounding solo (I admit, I had the impression that the fountain may have been built during something of a binge on the part of the creator), which then gets carried by the orchestra. The piece finishes with some repeating figures that seemed to reflect the regular latticed back wall.

2. Sagrada Familia

Patron:
Michel Rochon



Another insight that my composition mentor had for me was that the formal forms (sonata, rondo, fugue, etc.) that pervade classical music, exist for a reason. They gave the composer a framework to work within, like a cookbook, telling them how to go from a musical idea, to a completed piece. That sounded promising! And then he asked me to do the awe-inspiring Sagrada Familia cathedral in Barcelona, Spain, as his environment.

Given it's Spanish setting, I decided to try my hand at an ancient Spanish classical form called the *passacaglia*. It involves what's called an *ostinato* bass, which in essence means that the bass line repeats continuously through the piece with counterpoint melodies above it, and it is usually done in triplet meter (i.e. 3/4, 6/8 or 12/8 time).

Here, I made the bass line "slide" chromatically rather than step, because the lush decoration on the Sagrada's exterior looked to me as if the whole thing was melting. I also use castanets for more Spanish flavour, and for fun I introduce the Trinidadian Steel Pan into the orchestra for the first of several times on the album. The basilica has been under construction now for over **140 years** if you can believe it, and it's still unfinished! Which is why, after a few repetitions of the bass-line you really notice it when, at the end, I also leave the piece unfinished.





3. Albuquerque Rail Yards

Patron:
Arlene Berenson



Despite being the bane of Bugs Bunny's existence (he always made that wrong turn at ...!), Albuquerque, New Mexico is home to an incredible until-recently abandoned set of gigantic 1920's industrial buildings, quietly rusting away into oblivion. Albuquerque was at one time the central repair facility for all of those big train locomotives that opened up the American West. That honour has in the latter half of the 20th century, fallen away and the massive site has been left to sit silent. Thankfully, the city has discovered the Art Deco masterpiece it has on it's hands, and the lands and incredible indoor spaces are being refurbished for bars, restaurants, farmer's markets, and will once again be bustling with activity.

For this piece, I took a step into Gershwin territory, leading with a jazzy piano solo that appears to end gently, but is actually the sound of the orchestra getting up a head of steam, to take to the rails, with the strings playing the part of the steam engine gathering speed, the brass blowing the train horn and the woodwinds responding in kind. The melody is from a southwest railroader's folk tune, to which I've added some Spanish trumpet. When the train begins to slow down, we swing back to the solo piano, this time with a slight sense of melancholy, to close the piece.



4. Хрущёвка

Patron:
Jay Gordon



In the Soviet Union, in the 1960's, Nikita Khrushchev had a problem. There were millions of people who needed a place to live, and the responsibility for that housing fell to the government. Khrushchev asked his best minds to come up with a way to house a huge number of people, quickly and cheaply. The result was what's come to be colloquially known as the "Khrushchevka" (or Хрущёвка when written in Cyrillic). Built using pre-fabricated modular blocks, with small but acceptable apartments, 5 storeys tall, because that was the maximum you could go without needing an elevator, and built very cheaply, these apartment blocks could be thrown up in a matter of days and a concrete pad. Soon they were everywhere.

This was one of the more interesting environments I was asked to describe. Right away, I knew what I wanted to do (given that some of my favorite composers are Russian) ... I needed a slightly sad Russian folk tune. Then, to highlight the awful sameness of these grey buildings, I was going to force the instruments to keep coming back to a unison note, a trick I learned from Bulgarian music, that gives an uncanny feeling of moving while staying still. And finally, near the end of the piece, I wanted it all to break down and have hammering and sawing noises, like the do-it-yourself tenants who had no choice but to effect their own repairs when things fell apart, which they all too often did.



Sometimes they've been kept up fairly well.



...sometimes not.





From the outside, it's beautiful, but forbidding, like the fortress that it is



Once you're inside, it all changes



5. Alhambra

Patron:
Mary Jane McKitterick



Situated in Grenada, Andalusia, Spain, the Alhambra palace is one of the most spectacular examples of Muslim architecture in the world. It was preserved after the *reconquista* (a conflict which removed all of the Moorish rulers from the Iberian Peninsula, and the Spanish monarchy re-established control of the entire peninsula) because King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella (the same ones that bankrolled Christopher Columbus' expeditions) were impressed with it and decided to make it their official palace. From the outside, it is very large and forbidding, belying its history as a primarily military fort.

This piece begins with a dark, foreboding melody that sounds vaguely middle-eastern, which gets more demanding as it goes (I had the image of approaching the palace in the evening, and coming to the main gate - I felt this was a slight relapse in my intent to forego narrative in my music, but oh well...).

Once you cross through the gate and into the interior the palace, however, everything changes. The various interior spaces are light and airy, with lots of water, and plants, and the most spectacular ornamentation ... mosaic tiles, geometric figures that seem to toy with infinity, ceilings that are scarcely to be believed. The piece finishes while contemplating the beauty of the interiors.

6. Monadnock Building Chicago

Patron:
Craig Sklenar



In 1891 Chicago, and the architecture firm of Burnham and Root were commissioned to design a building that would become the tallest masonry building ever constructed (16 storeys). Then in 1893, a different architecture firm, one Holabird & Roche, were told to design an extension, to be connected to the first, and while the south half is more traditional, the two halves rise above their differences and work harmoniously together.

I was initially stumped by this environment. How **do** you write music about architecture? I was struggling - it was a big square building, so it would have to sound blocky, rhythmic, so I knew I wanted to use snare drums with military-like precision. But what sort of melody?

Then it struck me: I could use the fact that musical notes in a scale are labeled from A - G, and if I extended that up another octave, I could do the whole alphabet, like so:



... and I had my melody, by spelling the building's name!





7. Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban

Patron:
Chester Wong

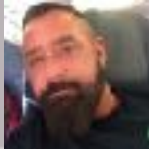


Before Bangladesh was a country, architect Louis Khan was tasked with designing a new parliament building for then-Pakistan. Part way through the construction, the Pakistani civil war broke out, halting building. When the dust settled, Pakistan had been divided into what is now known as Pakistan, and what is now known as Bangladesh. Louis Khan set to work with renewed vigor, creating the parliamentary buildings now for a whole new country. The result, the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban includes not only the main government buildings, but also a small city of houses for the use of the members of parliament for the duration of their term. It is one of the largest legislative complexes in the world, including park land, and a lake that surrounds it on three sides.

I was really pleased to get this environment, because I've greatly enjoyed both listening to and composing Indian music using *ragas*, and this seemed a great opportunity to stretch my skills in that idiom. In the end, however, I had to limit myself to a few gestures, because my overarching concept was to make the piece fit with the rest of the environments, which includes avoiding instrumentation that cannot be played by the orchestra players that I'm writing the whole thing for. So there's an initial introduction with *tanpura* and an expressive low *bansuri* flute, but then the orchestra takes over (except for some *tabla* and Indian percussion).

8. 32 Bright Street Toronto

Patron:
Sean Cribbin



In bustling downtown Toronto, just off Queen Street East, is a little side street called Bright Street. When you turn onto it, it's a bit like going back in time, it's a narrow curving street with row-houses down both sides, that front right up to the sidewalk. There's very little in the way of front lawns here. About halfway down the street, jammed between two sets of row houses, is a surprising little cottage - 2 windows with shutters and a colorful front door, and that's all there is ... it can't be more than 8 metres wide. When my partner Sean first moved to Toronto, he rented this little cottage from the owner, a friend of his, and lived there for several years.

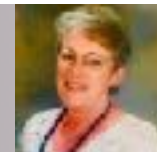
Because it was halfway down this tiny street, as we were looking at it, Sean kept humming something, and when I discovered what it was, I decided to do an arrangement that made use of the melody of the pop song "Our House" by the UK Ska/Pop group Madness, from the early 80's. The verses are voiced by the clarinets and other woodwinds, with the trumpets doing a counterpoint that is instantly recognizable. Then the choruses use scooped strings and bells to add shimmer.





9. Luna

Patron:
Alexandra Cribbin



One of my most recent patrons, my partner Sean's mom, Alexandra (Sandie) Cribbin, became a patron quite late in the process of doing this project, but of course, I wanted her to participate, so I explained the idea to her and she said she'd give it some thought and come up with an environment for me. Unfortunately, she never got the chance, as shortly thereafter she went into the hospital and passed away in January of 2023. Sean's family asked if I would write a song in her memory to be played at her Celebration of Life, and I said I would be happy to. I remembered a conversation we had had about classical music, in which she'd told me her favorite classical piece was "Clair de Lune" by Claude Debussy ... one of my favorites as well. I included several references to that piece in this one.

So, despite this not being necessarily an "environment", I felt it was right to include this piece, and it actually does fit with the rest of the pieces.

So Luna (for Alexandra Cribbin) is part of this project in memory of Sandie and with lots of love.

10. Tofino Lifeline

Patron:
Dave Platakis



This was an “emotional” environment, that, without putting too fine a point on it, involves a father’s love and concern for his daughter, who has been through a rough patch, where a rocky relationship, single motherhood, difficulty in completing needed education, among other things, created what felt like a mountain of things to be overcome only at great emotional cost. But, which in the fullness of time, with a great deal of grit on the part of the daughter, were surmounted, and partly as a celebration of that, they went on a vacation on Canada’s west coast (Tofino specifically), and during a zip-line adventure, this picture was taken, leading my friend Dave (who’s the father in the story above, in case you hadn’t guessed) to say that seeing his daughter smile like this felt like a weight being lifted.

The piece itself meant a lot to me because of the truly heartfelt emotions behind it. There’s a bass drum which beats out a heartbeat throughout, and the piece begins with soft strings, and an instrument doing quiet arpeggios in the background, which sounds like a harp, but is actually a ukulele (it was a specific request from Dave). The strings gently modulate, causing and resolving semi-dissonances, before in the center of the piece, it falls into a minor key and the rest of the orchestra comes in, first brass and then woodwinds, and then, in the silent pause before coming back to the original key, we hear a woman’s single intake of breath.





11. Horstman Glacier Whistler

Patron:
Brian Moses



The Horstman Glacier in Whistler, B.C. is certainly an environment that would inspire awe (and not a little bit of terror!), but in this case, my friend Brian (on the left in the photo) asked me to do something about this place as his environment because it was the last vacation he and his partner Drew had taken before the COVID-19 pandemic, at the very beginning of which, Drew caught the virus, was admitted to hospital and placed on a respirator, and terrifyingly quickly died of the disease.

So I wrote a “day-in-the-life” of the glacier, opening with a gentle sunrise, followed by a busy day, and ending with a grand sunset-filled finale. But there is something more in this piece ... a private joke between Brian and myself: a television theme song for a show that we both grew up with, and whose theme song he would holler at me, badly out of tune, constantly. But far from being ridiculous, which it could have been for sure, I followed in the footsteps of a long line of composers (Stravinsky, Copland, and Britten to name a few), who took sometimes hammy folk tunes, and turned them into respectable music by pouring on the orchestral sparkle.

This piece is dedicated to the memory of Drew Finney.

12. Saturday Mall 1986

Patron:
Jason Johns



This was another interesting environment. My friend Jason tasked me with the following: “suburban American mall, spring 1985, Saturday. What’s on the sound system?”

The first thing to come to my mind was: “Muzak!” So I did some research. “Muzak” is a trademark of Muzak Inc., which had actually done legitimate scientific research on the effect that background music has on people’s moods, their alertness and productivity levels, and much more! Every note that was produced by Muzak served a purpose, whether to encourage spending, or excite or relax your mood.

So this piece is based on the things I learned about how Muzak is made (alternation between major and minor chords, alternation between “smooth” instrumentation, and percussive instrumentation, slowly increasing musical intensity, etc.). Because the brief was to focus on the 80’s (specifically 1986), I had to include some conga drums in the mix, because everything in the 80’s had congas!





13. Union Buildings Pretoria

Patron:
Barry Short



My friend Barry is South African, and an accomplished organist who's been playing most of his life. Here's what he said about his environment:

Much reviled under Apartheid the buildings saw many mass marches ending there. I myself took part in demonstrations outside the buildings. Things changed in 1994 with the election of a democratic government led by state president Nelson Mandela. I recall being at his inauguration. Hundreds of thousands of people occupied the lawns. In 1995 I was seconded to his office to work on the Reconstruction and Development Program. That was the first time I'd ever entered those halls. It was a wonderful experience working with such an icon.



I'd never written for organ before, so I took a chance and decided to write something Barry himself could play. The first section describes the formality and classical symmetry of the gorgeous orange sandstone buildings, and the checkered history of the place under Apartheid. The piece ends with a rendering of the South African national anthem, which is one of only two anthems in the world with a key change in it. One of the things I love about the organ is how many different timbres it can take on, from quiet and gentle to deafening.

14. Skydive

Patron:
Chris Alger



I suppose it could be considered an environment ... my friend Chris told me that the place he most wanted to be, the place that filled him with wonder, was jumping out of a plane. And while I may think he's certifiably insane for actually doing this, I can certainly write about my take on it. This one gets away from the "static" element of Environments, because there's a definite narrative to it, but I'm hoping you can forgive me one piece in 18.



The piece begins with the sound of a propeller plane, via a drone in the strings, punctuated with claves and introducing the Wind Machine, which is a real orchestral instrument, pictured at left. When the tension is at it's highest, the wind machine ramps up and a big glissando in the strings signifies the leap of faith.

The music immediately after the jump is still tense, waiting for the chute to open , but with a fanfare in the brass, that happens successfully. All that's left is a gentle drift down to the ground accompanied by a soft and wandering trumpet solo..





15. Palace of Fine Art San Francisco

Patron:
Kevin Sonnichsen



Now back to music about architecture. The San Francisco Palace of Fine art started life as an exhibit in the Panama-Pacific Exhibition in 1915, designed by architect Bernard Maybeck. It was intended to invoke a Roman ruin.

Musically, I felt like this needed some ancient music, so I used as the inspiration for this piece, "O Virtus Sapientiae", a melody by Saint Hildegard von Bingen, a quite remarkable nun, Abbess, and polymath born in 1098. The melody uses what's known as "Phrygian Mode", one of the ancient Greek and Roman musical "modes" that are roughly equivalent to our concept of scales today. The piece begins with an interpretation of the original melody, which is quite halting, emotional, and beautiful. Phrygian has a flat 2nd, 3rd, 6th and 7th, so it sounds very minor and a bit sorrowful.

But you can't keep a good nun down, so following that, the piece kicks up a bit, using some authentic ancient Roman percussion instruments including a large frame drum, and "bones" (literally, at the time, though now they're made of plastic), and playing around with some of the melodic motifs in rounds that flow through the orchestra.

16. Hallgrímskirkja

Patron:
Serge Riou



My friend and patron Serge told me a story of wandering around the tidy streets of Reykjavik, Iceland surrounded by quaint shops, and turning a corner to see this stark, imposing structure, the tallest building (by far) in Reykjavik, and suddenly he couldn't see anything else, it just commanded his attention. The edifice in question is the stunning Hallgrímskirkja cathedral.

Commissioned in 1937 by Icelandic architect Guðjón Samúelsson, construction took 41 years, starting in 1945 and completing in 1986. The cathedral is named after the Icelandic cleric and poet Hallgrímur Pétursson (1614–1674). Samúelsson is said to have been inspired by the basaltic columnar landforms found around Iceland because of the extensive volcanic activity on the island. While the front of the building above is the most famous view of Hallgrímskirkja, the whole building is awe-inspiring, if more traditional in style, though the conical nave at the opposite end of the building is unique, often described as resembling a Viking helmet.

I knew that Björk had recorded in this cathedral, and she's been an inspiration and hero of mine for a long time. One of my favorite of her songs is "Unison" from her album "Vespertine", and I incorporated elements of that melody in this piece. This environment is as much an homage to her creativity as it is to this stunning building.





17. Great Warsaw Synagogue

Patron:
Richard Levine



I was visiting the New Mexico home of my patron and long-time friend Arlene Berenson (#3) and her husband Richard during Passover, so I got to experience my first Jewish Seder. One of the many topics that came up was Jewish music, and I learned that there was a traditional song called “Oyfn Pripetchik” that Richard particularly loved. Richard’s birthday was coming up during my visit, so I asked Arlene if he would appreciate me doing an arrangement of this traditional song for him, and she thought so. I was only able to get the bare bones down of it while I was there, but after I returned, I fleshed it out and we decided it would be his Environment entry. The building he chose has deep resonance with the song.

The song is about the Rabbis teaching the children to read by the light of the fire, and holds a very dear place in the hearts of many Jews. The great Synagogue of Warsaw was the largest and most elegant in the world when it was built in 1878. And, as it sat in the middle of Warsaw’s Jewish Ghetto after the Nazis invaded Poland, it was the centre of Jewish life there during WW2. It was destroyed during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, blown up personally by SS-Gruppenführer Jürgen Stroop on 16 May 1943. This was the last act of destruction by the Germans in suppressing the uprising. It has never been rebuilt, as there were too few Jews left in Poland.

18. Breakwall Kincardine

Patron:
Moira Gracey

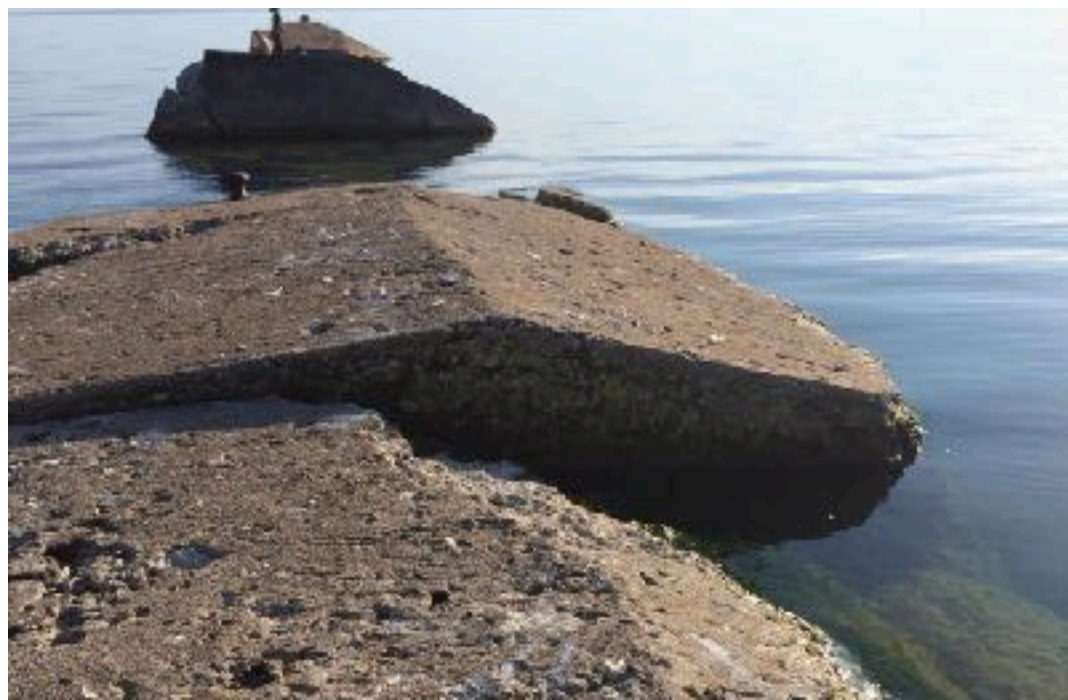


They say you should end your pieces on a high note, with a “big finish”, but I’ve never been much good at that. I find much of my music is cyclic, ending much where it started, and that’s at least partially true with *Environments* .

In my hometown of Kincardine, there is a breakwater that is called “the breakwall”, built about a hundred years ago. It sits some few hundreds of feet offshore, angled to protect the harbour by preventing the majority of the waves from travelling down the harbour channel. There are very big waves on Lake Huron, so the breakwall takes a beating..

So, just like I began *Environments* with pizzicato strings representing water splashes, so I begin this final part, as though standing on the breakwall and listening to the wavelets splash against it. This time, though, the waves grow (accompanied by the wind machine), and eventually break over the surface of it. In the distance, the Kincardine Pipe Band can be heard playing *Amazing Grace*, which then gently flows into an evocative tune of my own. The solo instrument is one I’ve long wanted to write a solo for, the English Horn, whose plaintive quality seems to draw out all the longing and nostalgia and homesickness that I feel whenever I think of Kincardine.

The tune ends, and the piece ends, and *Environments* ends ... peacefully.



Afterword

Like any long-form piece of music, Environments was a labour of love, that sometimes felt like it would never end, and sometimes like if it ever did, it would be too soon.

I have a habit of feeling a sense of relief mixed with depression when I finish a piece. There's always a sense of accomplishment, to be sure, but also of having emptied myself in the process of making it. There's always a bit of a void, that always frightens me a bit ... what happens if nothing else comes along to fill it up, to make me want to write music again? So far, I've been lucky in that the muse has, perhaps after taking a bit of a vacation, always returned to me after every piece. I'm sure that will be the case now too, but in the meantime, I'm going to enjoy feeling a bit lighter than usual and let Environments speak for itself.

I owe my patrons on Patreon a huge debt of gratitude for putting up with my questions about their environments and the multiple copies of each of them that I peppered them with. I truly appreciate you all.

Environments is dedicated to the memory of my dear friend Brian Moses, and my wonderful mother-in-law, Alexandra Cribbin.

