

The New York Times

For Unconventional Music, Build a New Orchestra

By Chloe Veltman | Published: March 17, 2011 | Photo Adithya Sambamurthy/The Bay Citizen

Don't look for conventional signs of music making in the West Oakland workshop of Paul Dresher, a composer. The piano has been covered to protect it from dust. A broken drum set sits in a corner.

But if you are interested in hearing a tune on the "Hurdy Grande," a 10-foot-long wooden sound box and aluminum frame with a motor-driven wheel for bowing the instrument's seven strings, you have come to the right place.

When Mr. Dresher — a composer whose output straddles commissions from the San Francisco Symphony and experimental works for musical theater and film — plucks or presses the contraption, he brings forth assorted sounds reminiscent of a sitar and a guitar played with a whammy bar.



Mr. Dresher is among a loose group of musicians based in the Bay Area who are working to create new musical devices. Building on the legacy that was started by 20th-century West Coast inventor-composers like Harry Partch and Lou Harrison, these musicians are paying special attention to the terrain between the world of computers and traditional acoustic musical instruments to expand musical frontiers.

"I'm interested in exploring the question 'what if ... ?' to make new music," said Mr. Dresher, whose Paul Dresher Ensemble is performing "Schick Machine" through March 27 at Z Space in San Francisco. "As in, 'what if we motorize the hurdy gurdy?'"

With digital music technology on the rise, the creation of physical musical instruments seems like an eccentric pursuit.

Laptops, which were once a phenomenon mainly used in nightclubs, are now used to compose symphonic music and are used by musicians in orchestras. And virtual instruments like the "Ocarina" [iPhone](#) app, activated by pressing circles on the device's screen while blowing into its microphone, are a wildly popular, low-barrier-to-entry way of making music. According to Smule, the developer behind the "Ocarina," there have been more than 50 million "performances" using the app. But instruments fashioned out of wood, metal and similar materials offer expressive control that purely digital music-making can lack.

Most electronic devices do not allow for the subtle fluctuations in timbre and dynamics that make performances by skilled musicians on traditional instruments so compelling...

...fans of the Hurdy Grande won't have to wait long to see the instrument in the spotlight.

The Berkeley Symphony has commissioned Mr. Dresher to write a concerto for its 2012 season for the Hurdy Grande and the quadrachord, which is like a giant electric bass guitar with a very long neck and no body. It is the first attempt by the composer to incorporate any of his new devices into a symphonic setting.

"My current challenge is to figure out how to integrate the sound of an invented instrument into a conventional orchestra," Mr. Dresher said. "You have to justify the creation of these instruments with the music that you make."