

# Art installation over four concerts explores environmental themes

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Sep 18, 2016

The perfume of charred pine curls through the expansive Ashurst Hall — now a room teeming with hundreds of blackened ponderosa poles. Hands stained with soot, installation artist Shawn Skabelund is arranging the visual component of a faceted conversation between sound and sculpture: “Composition for Forests.”

At the grand piano in the room’s center, collaborative pianist and Northern Arizona University professor Janice Chen-Ju Chiang will craft the show’s auditory foundation. Challenging traditional performance, audiences will find a complete sensory experience in a forest overwhelmed with the possibility of catastrophic wildfire.

This unique recital and installation has spent years in the making, and will jumpstart the NAU School of Music’s 10th season of the Horizons Concert Series, celebrating global and local issues.

“Composition for Forests” unfolds at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 22; Saturday, Sept. 24; Monday, Sept. 26 and Wednesday, Sept. 28 in Ashurst Hall. Tickets are required for this free show. To learn more, call 523-3731 or visit [Nau.edu/CAL/Music](http://Nau.edu/CAL/Music).

## Spatial influence

This collaboration began when Chiang and Skabelund met at the opening of the artist’s award-winning 2013 exhibition, “Virga: The Hunt for Water.” Moved by its assembly and message, Chiang felt sculpture would fit in the progression of her interdisciplinary projects.

Skabelund then went to work designing the features of the space. True to his mission of environmental stewardship, audiences might recognize recycled elements from “Virga,” too, particularly an expanded flock from “Corvus” and the char of “Standing at the Fire’s Edge.”

With grant funding from the Arizona Commission on the Arts and the Puffin Foundation, the pair has been able to fulfill their shared vision: one that discusses the most pressing issues of our time while challenging both space and guests.

“I think this production is, in a way, going to test the basic understanding of what performance is because it deconstructs audience; it deconstructs performance space,” noted School of Music Director Todd Sullivan.

## Settlement policy

“Composition for Forests” is also part of the Festival of Science events (Sept. 23-Oct. 2). The “Science of Change” theme parallels humanity’s effect on forests.

Until the late 1990s, policy among fire management agencies sought to extinguish each and every blaze, regardless of its human or natural source. Hot and dry trends of climate change has experts noting, especially in the Southwest, devastating “mega fires” will soon ravage too-thick forests grown from the policy of suppression.

Colonial settlement’s effect on the forests — Manifest Destiny — is the heart of his conceptual work, noted Skabelund.

“Fire, just like wolves and all these other things we’ve tried to get rid of, it was because of Manifest Destiny — how we settled this country,” he said. “How we settled this country by getting rid of fire is part of that 110 years of poor fire management.”

## Sound and fury

Taking into account the difference between catastrophic and slow-burning, cleansing fires is what informed both components of “Composition for Forests.”

Chiang’s auditory design is divided into three movements — Nature, Fire, Love and Death — and augments the global theme with music from five continents and composers. Her fluid gestures at the piano communicate the charged emotion of the works that discuss the beauty of Mother Earth, symbolic ravens and a changing landscape.

The pianist’s concluding piece will complete the circle of the collaborative effort as audiences reflect on the emotive works set in a burnt forest.

“At the same time, we don’t know how they’ll see what this is: a recital, art, something else,” Chiang said of guests’ reactions. “They are able to walk around as they choose. With the different angles while they’re seeing this and listening, I’m pretty sure it will stimulate something different than just sitting in a traditional concert or going to a traditional art exhibition.”

With a laugh, she added, “You could say it’s an experiment.”

And the experiment will continue to test itself against place and meaning in other forms. Skabelund, too, said it will take months to process exactly what will transpire — just as he regularly questions the validity of ongoing forest management.

“Yes, there’s this message you want to get to the public that fire needs to be brought back into the ecosystem, but what does it mean to have this circle of burnt timbers around someone playing the piano?” Skabelund posited of entrenched meaning.

And just as the imprint of “Virga” has been lasting for Chiang, she noted this collaboration could offer even stronger reactions at the confluence of music and monuments.

She added, “Combining these two things together could be a much more powerful tool.”