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music

## What would happen if ...

### New instruments and new sounds with new-music innovator Paul Dresher

By Jason Cassidy | February 28, 2013



“I always start with the question: What would happen if ... ?”

That’s Berkeley-based experimental musician/composer Paul Dresher explaining in an online video why he invents and builds new musical instruments. The invention in question is the 15-foot-long Quadrachord, an electric instrument with four 160-inch-long strings that (in the online video) he was playing during a show at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, and which he will be bringing with him this Friday, March 1, for a performance as part of Chico State’s annual two-day New Music Symposium.

“[With] the Quadrachord the question was: ‘What would happen if we made a string twice as long as a guitar?’ he continued. “And that turned out to be really interesting, so I said, ‘What would happen if we made it twice as long as that?’ And so we made it 14 feet long.”

What would happen after that would be a one-of-a-kind instrument that created a wide range of beautiful, atmospheric sounds being brought into the world.

“The essence of the question is: anyone is an experimenter,” said an affable Dresher when asked about his approach during a recent telephone interview. “It can be anything. It doesn’t have to be about sound.

“I’ve always been someone who likes to make things, to combine thinking about how the world works and then make something. I like to take on challenges about space, about objects and materials and space.”

After a flirtation with rock ‘n’ roll in the late-’60s, Dresher moved on to a long career of musical challenges, from contemporary classical performances to numerous experimental projects (with his long-running Paul Dresher Ensemble, among others) and commissions in musical theater. The highlight thus far perhaps was receiving the Guggenheim Fellowship for music composition in 2006.

The Quadrachord was born in 2001, as one of a handful of large-scale invented instruments in a musical-theater production called *Sound Stage*. Since its creation it has gone from that original show-specific incarnation, to being a regular feature of Dresher’s ensemble performances, to being showcased in a Dresher-penned piece commissioned by the Berkeley Symphony, for which he joined them in a performance as part of their season-opening concert last fall.

“That went great. It was an enormous project for me,” he said.

As big as the Quadrachord is, it is pretty sleek and fairly unassuming. From a distance it looks a bit like the body of a very long pedal-steel guitar. For most of its width the strings sit high above the frame until it gets to a short wooden neck at one end where the strings can be pressed into different notes. It can be plucked, strummed, bowed as well as banged on like a percussion instrument, with layers of sound being added via a looping effects pedal.

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Joining the Chico performance will be Joel Davel, who, along with playing the Marimba Lumina (an electronic, marimba-looking midi controller that's struck with special mallets), will pair up with Dresher on the Quadrachord. The both of them simultaneously tap out notes and rhythms across the length of the instrument (parts of which could be prepared with cymbals, tambourine other small percussion pieces under the strings) with sticks, mallets and even their bare hands.

It's no surprise that a performance like this most likely will be attended primarily by students of music and artists interested in experimental works. And to be sure, the intent is not to have you humming along or to get you shaking your thing on the dance floor. But there are potential rewards to be had for a wider audience. It's an experiment in finding out what new sounds—good or bad—are possible, and the fun in asking, "What happens if ... ?" is that it isn't a right/wrong proposition. The engagement that comes from testing the question (or witnessing others test it) is where the value lies. Or, as Dresher simply suggests in another question: "What can you do to have a physical dialogue with the world?"