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A 'situational' symphony for the musical underground

Under a Santa Monica mall, Hugh Livingston is composing. He's also asking questions about performance and art.

By Scott Timberg, Times Staff Writer

Hugh Livingston seems an unlikely subterranean. Though at 35 he has lived all over the world — childhood in Tennessee, a teenage year in Rome, early 20s at CalArts, late 20s in China — he's adopted the uniform of a generic Middle American: khakis, tucked-in gray T-shirt and broad, open smile.

But the peripatetic, Oakland-based Livingston is in fact an experimental composer, an advocate of what he calls "situational music" — work bound to a piece of architecture, an acoustic space or the occasion of its creation — and lately he's been wearing this uniform while sitting at a Macintosh PC inside a Santa Monica parking garage. There, he keys off sounds that echo or circle around the underground lot: ocean waves, a jet taking off, a bird singing, a cello, a sitar. With his wide-eyed talk of Doppler shifts and trajectories, he seems less an avant-garde musician than a kid with a really ambitious science project.

When he's finished it, he'll have a sound installation called "LISTEN EDGEMAR" that merges environmental sounds with musical instruments in an effort to blur the distinctions between them. The result will be publicly unveiled Sunday with a series of performances and is scheduled to run indefinitely. But don't look for this composition to be performed later at Disney Hall or sold as a CD at Amoeba Music — it's designed exclusively for the parking lot.

"The idea is to respond to the space," Livingston says while surveying the garage, which sits under the upscale Edgemar shopping center on Main Street. Designed by Frank Gehry in the 1980s, Edgemar comprises a chic hair salon, a Peet's Coffee, the restaurant Röckenwagner, a design firm and an arts center and theater. Its courtyard includes a water fountain powered by a pump in the basement, which the composer has also recorded.

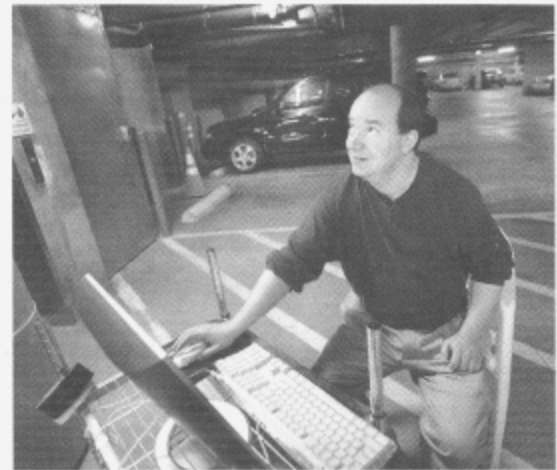
To Livingston, the mundane noise above him is a kind of human symphony.

"How does the noise that's here, upstairs and downstairs, suggest a musical effect?" he asks. "The fountain has its burbling. When the restaurant sets up for dinner at 5:30, there's the clink of glasses. There's a rush when the theater opens at 8. The design funnels street sounds into the courtyard. And the sounds of hair-cutting and coffee-brewing are also musical sounds.

"I thought it would be really interesting to re-create that downstairs. A mural is painted on a blank wall, after all, so what if you treated the garage as blank canvas and brought sound into it?"

The re-created sounds, he says, are like aural "driftwood," summoned randomly by the computer program he's tending — eventually it will contain a library of 1,500 sounds — and scheduled to repeat at intervals. The program was written by Michael Zbyszynski, his co-composer and technical consultant, who likens the project to "an acoustic Calder sculpture."

The idea came from Abby Sher, a longtime new music fan and the developer of Edgemar, which quite apart from Gehry's design is a thoroughly aestheticized space. The elevator, for instance, is lined with chalkboards, so passengers can get in touch with the artist within.



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AT THE KEYBOARD: Beneath the Edgemar center, Hugh Livingston mixes recorded instrumentation and environmental sounds for his "Listen Edgemar" sound installation.

When she met Livingston in Oakland last year and he told her about a project he was involved in, recording musicians on an Art Deco cruise liner in Oakland harbor, Sher realized she'd found a kindred spirit.

"It was remarkable to me," she says, "that he'd recorded more than 50 musicians improvising, with sirens and airplanes in the background, and that he appreciated those sounds."

Patron and composer bonded over their mutual fascination with composer John Cage, whose work dealt with silence, chance and the connection between music

and noise and who once wrote that composing music was “simply a way to wake up to the very life we’re living.”

Livingston is also inspired by the French modernist Erik Satie, who hoped to break free of the Austro-German tradition by producing “music without sauerkraut” and “furniture music” — part of the environment.

“I’m not afraid of creating a kind of music that’s experienced the way a painting is experienced,” Livingston says. “Where you drink a cocktail, talk to people, get up close to it, get far away from it. As opposed to ‘Shut up and listen to it from beginning to end.’

“I think the recital is one of the worst things ever. To me, it seems incredibly strange to hear a pianist play a Baroque confection along with a Chopin étude and a Beethoven sonata, with nothing but a small pause and some applause between them. It ignores so much of what that music’s about: the meaning, the context. It becomes a museum piece.”

His days beneath the shopping center, which start early and end late, are spent fine-tuning the installation — recording sounds from the courtyard upstairs, editing short pieces of “driftwood” out of long passages of music or sound, testing new speakers.

“There’s an accordion lick I really don’t like,” he says. “I’ve got to figure out how to get rid of it. I’m getting tired of hearing it.”

One of his most crucial tasks is to get the density of the sound right, to create an effect that’s not too thick or too thin and neither overly fragmented nor overly busy.

There are sounds he wants to hear more often, others (like that pesky accordion sound) he wants to hear less of. “You can just weight the dice,” he says of the computer program, “until certain numbers come up more often.

“And the next question is: How sophisticated does the computer’s understanding of the aesthetics of the sound have to be? I might like the combination of the shakuhachi, a Japanese bamboo flute, with the sounds of the ocean. So I might tell the computer to predispose itself to that choice.”

Another important decision is how to make the sounds change over time. One cycle is especially important: When a patron boards the garage elevator, a voice will announce the next high and low tide, which will be marked by the installation.

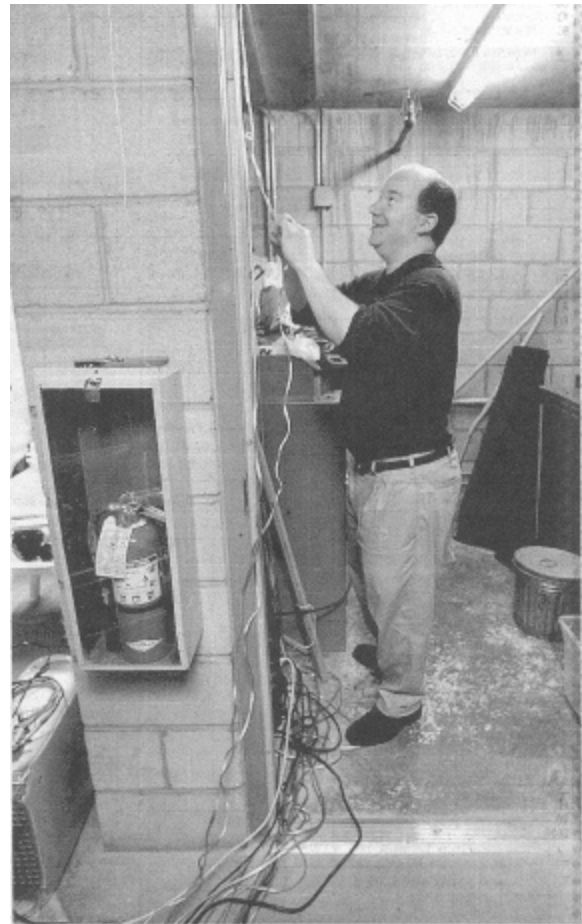
“At high and low tide, it’s our opportunity to do something really dramatic,” Livingston says. “All the rules are suspended. We’ll just make a lot of noise.”

He’s still working out how he wants the installation to reflect rush hour, the human equivalent of the ocean’s

tides. “Do we respond by making the garage a gentler, calming environment?” he asks. “Or do we reflect that energy?”

Either way, Livingston may be at this for a while. Last week, when he was working on the project, a man pulled up in a car and told him, “You’re going to be a millionaire! You’ll be doing sound installations in every garage in America!”

Recalling that, Livingston laughs. “Well,” he says, “one at a time, please.”



KAREN TAPIA-ANDERSEN Los Angeles Times
WIRED: Livingston fine-tunes his sound installation at Santa Monica's Edgemar center: "The idea is to respond to the space."

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