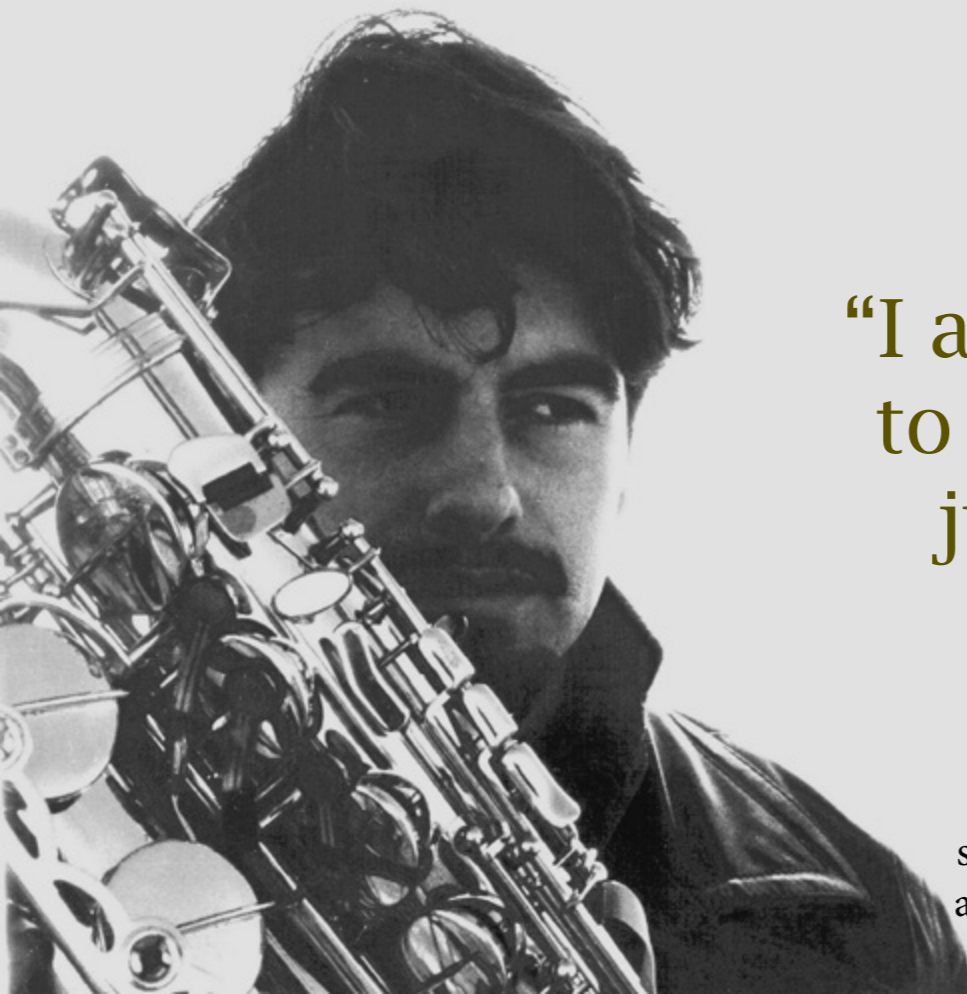


# Matthew Burtner

The Sounds of Wind and Snow

By Eric Price

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**You've been described as a composer and a sound artist, how would you differentiate between the two? Or are they one in the same when it comes to writing music?**

I make music primarily for live performance, so I am a concert music composer. But my music is highly indebted to the conceptual dimension of contemporary art. I am just as interested in ideas as I am in sound, and my work reflects those parallel interests. The work has a sonorous dimension and an equally evolved conceptual dimension. I anticipate a listener experiencing and considering both levels of the piece. I have called myself a sound artist and a composer since the mid 1990s. I found that it was somehow easier for people to understand my music if they thought of it as “sound art”, like a work of contemporary visual art they would encounter in a gallery. Some listeners have expectations of what constitutes music and they measure a work according to those presumptions. I do not share these pre-formed notions of music, so to me the difference between “music” and “sound art” is just semantics.

**(dis)integrations was written for Carsten Schmidt and Jim Wilson and was premiered by them a few years ago at the Augsburg Mozart Festival. The piece is influenced by a short sketch by Mozart himself, can you describe the piece and some of the technical aspects involved in its performance?**

**“I ask them [the audience] to think and engage, not just listen passively.”**

The commissioner asked me to use a recently discovered Mozart fragment to compose my piece. I had a recording of the fragment for piano and cello as source material (played by Jim and Carsten). Rather than continuing Mozart's composition, I decided to fragment the fragment, slicing it into micro-sonic shards that fracture and disintegrate. In the process of working with the computational analysis of the Mozart music, I also discovered a kind of spectral gestalt arising from the notes of the fragment. I extracted this harmonic essence and it becomes the primary melodic and tonal body of my piece. It doesn't sound like Mozart at all but it comes from something I found inside the Mozart. In my piece we hear two levels of temporality at work across a tonal spectrum; the “disintegration” of the fragments and the “integration” of the fragment into a beautiful, distilled harmonic form. Hence the title.

**You compose multimedia operas, which can include photography, video, social media, and even audience participation. This seems like a daunting project to take on, when it comes to these kinds of pieces how involved are you with the other aspects of the opera like the video or photography?**

I enjoy complexity. I wanted to be an architect because I enjoy thinking about large scale forms made of many layers and systems. My multimedia operas are like massive buildings with many rooms and parallel systems that interact. Multimedia is a part of this layering and interaction.

Sometimes I am very involved in the visual media. For my first multimedia “opera”, Winter Raven, I created the dancer’s masks, and I created the video. In Kuik I also created the computer video. For these pieces I also created the computer controllers used by the dancers and singers to process the multimedia in real time. In Auksalaq I collaborated with a video artist and a media creator who gathered the imagery and made the video. But I created the audience interaction smart phone apps that allow the audience to contribute elements of the music and libretto in real time.

**In the multimedia opera “Auksalaq” the piece is performed simultaneously over the internet on four to six stages. What gave you this idea? And how difficult was it to coordinate a performance like this in several different locations?**

The idea with the dispersed concert stages for this piece is sonic and conceptual. The work is about climate change, particularly the warming of the Arctic. The music was composed using global climate change data and it is performed globally across these interconnected stages. I wanted to show the interconnectivity of our world through the performance media itself. This is a difficult idea for humans to understand and I hoped the music could physically enact a global network, like climate. And like our planet’s climate, the music is in fragile balance across all these interconnected spaces. The musicians play in counterpoint but they face unusual performance challenges such as synchronization and balance. The time zone differences make it difficult to coordinate but also kind of exciting. We had to book the concert at a time when both Alaska and Norway could perform for an audience. So it was a late-night show in Bergen and a mid-day concert in Fairbanks. The audiences feel like they are involved in something very special and important. And because they can interact with the work directly they become an active voice in the opera. I ask them to think and engage, not just listen passively.

“We all have experience with the music of the wind.”



**Ecoacoustics is the process of converting environmental systems into musical sounds. You've used objects such as stones and melting ice in this process, what object is your favorite to use with this technique?**

I love this question because it makes think of the musicality of all things in the natural world! If I had to pick one... wind. We can all play the wind by moving our heads, and we all have experience with the music of the wind. And it creates beautiful data sets that are pulsed but asymmetrical. And wind gets its tonality from the things it touches, from the friction of objects. I have written a lot of music for wind.

I have also written a lot of music for snow --- "Syntax of Snow" for percussion, "Snowprints" for flute, cello and piano, "Fragments from Cold" for cello, and others. Snow is also my favorite.

**What composer or artist are you really into right now? Who is currently on the top of your itunes playlist?**

Well, according to iTunes I am apparently listening to a lot of field recordings. A recording of yaks in the rain in Tibet came up prominently, as did many of my Alaska glacier recordings and this amazing recording of a singing sand dune we made on EcoSono this summer. In terms of artists/musicians, lately I've been listening to the electronic music of Iannis Xenakis, particularly his UPIC pieces and Diatopes. 20 years ago I moved to Paris to work in Xenakis' studio and lately I have been thinking of that time, and looking at my notes and pieces from Paris. Xenakis was a huge influence on me, and these were the pieces that inspired me as a young composer. My first piece using computer sound (Incantation 1 for cello) was written using Xenakis' software. And of course I mostly listen to music composed by my students, and things I am teaching in my music classes. There is nothing like listening to fresh music.

Photos Courtesy of: [www.matthewburtner.com](http://www.matthewburtner.com)

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