



Edward Schocker playing glass vessels

Credits: photo by John Kokoska

Edward Schocker -- building instruments, composing music, and working with Thingamajigs

By [Dan Godston](#), Experimental Arts Examiner

[Edward Schocker](#) is a musician, composer, and instrument builder who lives in Oakland with his wife and son. Recently I talked with Edward about his influences, composing music, inventing instruments, Thingamajigs, [Garden of Memory](#), and his ongoing projects.

DG: *Who are some of your influences?*

ES: Growing up my influence came from Rock and Punk bands then started to get into classical music in high school. Instantly decided I wanted to be a composer after my second listen to Stravinsky's *Les Noces* (after the first listening I was in shock). From there kept going forward into the 20th Century -- Bartok, Messiaen, etc.

DG: *How did you meet Lou Harrison?*

ES: I met him at Dartington in 1996, and he completely changed my life. Introduced me to non-Western music, alternate tuning systems and the Bay Area musical tradition (Cowell, Partch, Cage, Riley, etc).

DG: *What do you find so interesting about Harrison's work?*

ES: He was the master of integrating his made and found instruments seamlessly with Western instruments. His *Concerto in Slendro*, *Three Pieces for Gamelan with Soloists* (when it's performed with the Gamelan that Lou and his partner Bill Colvig built), and even his *Varied Trio* are great examples of this. Also, we can't forget that a lot of his instruments could not have been build without Lou's partner Bill Colvig.

DG: *Who are some of your other musical influences?*

ES: I'd say Pauline Oliveros and Alvin Curran at Mills College, when I worked with them in the late nineties. Then moved to Tokyo and became incredibly influenced by Gagaku and Korean musical forms (sanjo, shinawi, sijo, p'ansori, etc). Now my big influences are [Ranjit Bhatnagar](#), Dylan Bolles, [Suki O'Kane](#), and [Zachary Watkins](#).

DG: *Who are some instrument builders who have influenced you?*

ES: I would say Harry Partch would be the most important, as he really re-started this tradition for all of us here in the Bay Area. Not only his instruments but his philosophies and theories about music were so important to us. You really need to see and touch his instruments realize how unique and well built they are. In my eyes Partch is the most unique composer/artist of the 20th century. His music and instruments are instantly recognizable.

DG: *Who are some other instrument builders who have influenced you?*

ES: I really respect Walter Kitundu as an instrument builder. His Phono-instruments are as beautiful to look at as they are to listen to. He also seems to bring this tradition to a whole new audience by combining Jazz and Pop elements to his mix. Other greats that have been doing this for years include Bart Hopkin, Tom Nunn and Ellen Fullman. Also can't forget the amazing works of Trimpin. There's actually so many amazing instrument builders recently. Somebody should really write a book on this.

DG: *How long have you been building your own instruments?*

ES: Many people think that I'm an instrument builder, but I don't really consider myself that -- at least not like some of today's great builders -- such as Bart Hopkin, Tom Nunn, Walter Kitundu, Peter Whitehead, Stuart Port, and many others. My most of my instruments are created through found objects. For the past 10 years I have been slowly collecting glass vessels and bowls to combine them together to create one large instrument.

DG: *What do you find so interesting about working with glass instruments?*

ES: They are very versatile and create an amazing array of different sounds. You can also be very precise in the tuning. Currently I have the glasses tuned in a 7-limit Just Intonation. So, this collection of glass is the instrument I've been most instrument in developing, but also use objects such as rocks, aluminum, bone and bamboo to create sound.

DG: *What would you say is an important connection between your approach toward composing, and your interest in building instruments?*

ES: Instrument building and using made/found objects in my music was a way for me to get my ideas out there easier. It used to be (and still is) quite hard to find musicians who play Western instruments to play my music. There are so many composers out there writing for these instruments and I quickly realized that I didn't want to beg people to play my music, besides, many of the sounds and ideas I have in my head can not be emulated with these instruments. That's why I originally started experimenting with objects that I found in my environment. I started with cane and bamboo working on a very nasally reed sound. Also experimented with simple bamboo flutes and incorporating other found objects such as rocks, water, oil drums, rebar and aluminum rods and tubes. The early ensembles that I created were half made up of musicians interested in playing other instruments and also non-musicians just interested in playing music. I found that the

non-musicians were very easy to convey my ideas to because they weren't taught what made a good or bad interpretation of music. They were starting with an empty palette and were open to everything -took everything in.

DG: *How did you get involved with Thingamajigs?*

ES: I co-founded Thingamajigs in 1997 with my fellow classmate Dylan Bolles at Mills College. It was originally conceived as a concert for artists who create music by unusual means, such as original instruments or alternate tunings, but we had no idea that the time that it would continue for so long and grow into what it is today. Basically the two of us were interested in instrument building and tuning and wanted to organize an event with other students who did similar things. I think we wanted to carry on that kind of Mills College tradition from Henry Cowell, Partch, Harrison, and Terry Riley. We are now in our 13th year of putting on our annual festival and we have added other programs such as artist exchanges and educational programs.

DG: *What are some things that happened during Thingamajigs' 2009-2010 Season?*

ES: We performed underground in an abandoned subway station in the former East Berlin as part of the [Internationales Klangkunstfest](#). The theme of the festival was 'Material and Situation' and we created a piece for glass objects and computer sampling using the area and acoustics of the subway station. In April we had our first Pacific Exchange concert in the US where we brought over Japanese artist and instrument builder Tomomi Adachi. For our educational program called Thingamakids!, we organized an instrument building workshop at the North Oakland Community Charter School and instrument demonstration assemblies at other local schools. As mentioned earlier we premiered our marathon work *Remarks on Color / Sound* last month at the Headlands Center for the Arts where I'm currently an artist in residence. And I'm happy to say that after 13 years we've finally incorporated as a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. It's been a busy year!

DG: *Next Monday you'll be participating in Garden of Memory. How would you describe what that is?*

ES: Garden of Memory happens at Oakland's Chapel of the Chimes -- a labyrinthine Julia Morgan-designed columbarium and mausoleum with gardens, fountains, and stained-glass sky lights. This event happens every year to celebrate the Summer Solstice, and it includes many artists stationed throughout the columbarium. The audience will walk through the maze of many different rooms and follow their ears to the various sounds that are going on.

DG: *What will you be performing during Garden of Memory?*

ES: [Adam Fong](#), [Ken Ueno](#), and I will be performing together. Adam will be playing double bass, Ken will be doing extended vocal techniques, and I'll be playing glasses.

DG: *What is being planned for the Thingamajigs festival this year?*

ES: We have the 13th Annual Music for People & Thingamajigs in the Fall. We're also planning on

a Pacific Exchange concert in Seoul, Korea, and waiting for Stephen Ratcliffe's next set of 1,000 poems to start working on. Besides that we hope to do more educational programs with local schools and community groups, and a concert featuring of all things, the piano (but of course it will be done in a Thingamajigs kind of way).

DG: *Would you describe Thingamajigs' recent collaboration with the poet Stephen Ratcliffe?*

ES: Recently Thingamajigs created a work in collaboration with Stephen which is called *Remarks on Color / Sound*; it was premiered at the Headlands Center for the Arts last month. This piece was based on Stephen's set of 1,000 poems that he wrote in 1,000 consecutive days. It's a marathon piece that takes 14 hours to perform. Stephen read all 1,000 poems, while Thingamajigs created a continuous sound score.

DG: *How has that collaboration been developing?*

ES: We performed Stephen's first set of 1,000 poems, entitled *Human/Nature*, at UC Davis in 2008. Stephen's second set of 1,000 poems is entitled *Remarks on Color / Sound*, and we are planning on setting his third set of 1,000 poems, which he is scheduled to finish in December, 2010. These pieces require a tremendous amount of focus, pacing and stamina. It's really like running a marathon.

DG: *What else have you been working on lately?*

ES: Lately I've been studying Asian instruments and writing music for a Japanese gagaku group in Tokyo and a Chinese orchestra in San Jose. Besides that I spend my time working on developing ideas for Thingamajigs. We are creating works more in a collaborative process and really blurring the lines between composer and performer.

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Arts & Entertainment | June 17, 2010

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