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Local composer's 'bridge playing' to become a permanent feature

Musician also hopes to be a part of New York's quadricentennial celebration of Henry Hudson's journey up the river

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Local composer and percussionist Joseph Bertolozzi used a variety of hammers to play and record sounds on the steel of the Mid-Hudson Bridge. (Spencer Ainsley/Journal file)

A local composer's plans for celebrating 400 years of Hudson River history by "playing" the Mid-Hudson Bridge in Poughkeepsie like an instrument have evolved into a permanent installation.

Joseph Bertolozzi for five years has been working on a plan to strike the bridge with a wide range of percussion implements during a live performance that would coincide with this year's quadricentennial celebration.

The poor economy and lack of financial backing, have forced Bertolozzi to reduce the scope of his percussive project. The new plan features a recording of "Bridge Music" and listening stations on the bridge, as well as what he calls "park radios" in the City of Poughkeepsie and Town of Lloyd.

"Bridge Music" is a musical suite featuring Bertolozzi "playing" the bridge.

Bertolozzi is scheduled to announce the project today.

His initial budget was \$2.2 million. The revised budget is about \$13,000, with \$5,000 from the Dutchess County Industrial Development Agency, distributed by Dutchess County Tourism; \$5,000 from Ulster County Tourism; and the remaining amount from sponsors.

This project is being presented with the support of Bertolozzi's main partner, the New York State Bridge Authority, as well as the Town of Lloyd, City of Poughkeepsie Hudson-Fulton-Champlain Quadricentennial Committee and Dutchess County Regional Chamber of Commerce.

"This is a real coming together of the different communities, producing public art," Bertolozzi said. "I think it's really a beautiful thing for these groups to work together."

Many special events are planned for 2009 to mark the 400th anniversary of Henry Hudson's maiden voyage up the river that would later bear his name; Samuel De Champlain's exploration of the lake that would bear his name; and the 200th anniversary of Robert Fulton's maiden steamboat journey up the Hudson.

The centerpiece is the planned opening of the Walkway Over the Hudson, a pedestrian trail on the old Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge.

A spokesman for the New York State Bridge Authority based in Highland, said the composer's grand plan reflects well on the mid-Hudson Bridge.

"Joe is an artist and it's a very cool project," spokesman John Bellucci said. "The bridges in the Hudson Valley are part of its history now. The Mid-Hudson Bridge is an icon."

Bellucci added Bertolozzi's plan has "developed into quite a unique feature."

Sound tests

Bertolozzi spent several days on the bridge in July 2006 and June 2007, with a team that included a sound engineer and New York State Bridge Authority employees, armed with a laptop and microphones.

Bertolozzi and his team recorded sounds made when the bridge was struck by a variety of objects - hammers, a sledgehammer and small log among them.

Bertolozzi then cobbled those sounds together into a song - "Bridge Funk" - which he used to pitch his project. "Bridge Funk" is part of a musical suite called "Bridge Music" that lasts about 38 minutes.

Bertolozzi had hoped to assemble a team of 24 percussionists to "play" the bridge, with speakers set up in Waryas Park.

Those plans now call for a recording of "Bridge Music" to be played at four listening stations.

Two stations are planned for each of the bridge's two towers, with weather-resistant speakers.

FCC-approved radio transmitters, which only broadcast in a 150-foot radius, will be installed in Waryas Park in Poughkeepsie and Johnson-lorio Park in Highland. Visitors will be able to listen to the recording by tuning in to 87.9 FM on a radio, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The listening stations on the bridge would operate from April 1-Oct. 31. There is no cost to listen at any of the sites.

Signs will explain the project, as well as outline which parts of the bridge were used to create which sounds.

Four ribbon-cuttings, one at each station, are set to launch the project June 6.

Bertolozzi plans to release a CD, "Bridge Music," during the last week of May, as the ribbon-cutting ceremonies draw near. He also hasn't given up hope of staging that live concert.

"The live event is postponed," he said, "until we can finance it."