

## Song of the road

Composer Bertolozzi unveils 'Bridge Music' installations

by Mike Townshend

Joseph Bertolozzi walks down the sidewalk of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Mid-Hudson Bridge with a sense of familiarity and ease bordering on pride. He walks through the light rain with a smile, greeting pretty much everyone he sees as he goes to search for tools. Bertolozzi grabs age-worn hammers -- a claw and a ball peen -- before lifting a bonfire log-turned battering ram from his car seat.



Tossing the implements on the ground, he cranks up the car radio to 95.3 FM -- a special station that transmits within 200 feet of Highland's Johnson-Iorio Park.

College kids near the car ask him about the strange, percussive melody. It has the faint sound of bells, a resounding beat like that of a big kettle drum.

Composer Joseph Bertolozzi demonstrates percussive techniques on the FDR Bridge which were used in the creation of "Bridge Music," a ground-breaking project spanning the past five years.

[ Lauren Thomas ]

Like most people who see the composer, the undergrads don't know who he is until he explains himself. He wrote the song coming from the radio using just the Mid-Hudson Bridge.

"I used only the sounds of the bridge," Bertolozzi explains. "We recorded all the sounds so we'd know ahead of time what I'd be composing for. I didn't know how many melodic tones I'd have, if any."

During the course of the past three years, Bertolozzi, a sound crew and workers from the New York State Bridge Authority recorded more than 1,000 sounds: logs crashing against steel beams, the wooden handle of a claw hammer clanging on sidewalk railings, a rubber mallet playing a suspension cable like a slap bass, ball bearings poured down the hidden access chambers in the bridge's towers.

"I recorded every surface that I could," he says.

From those original sounds, he kept about 150 and arranged them with special computer software into the notes of his songs. And what you hear is what you get -- none of the sounds were enhanced with distortion, pitch or octave changes, flanging or compression.

But why the hell would you compose something for a bridge? "I looked at the bridge and I got this visual of a harp," he says. Bertolozzi explains that he wasn't trying to make a specific statement -- just trying to see if it could even be done. "My only point was that I thought it was cool."

At first, he hoped to take that musical score and have teams of percussionists play the bridge live for the Hudson Quadricentennial Celebration. Logistics and costs kept that from happening, so the Poughkeepsie native scaled back his plans.

Johnson-Iorio Park in Highland, and Waryas Park in Poughkeepsie, both have 24-hour, short-range radio broadcasts of Bertolozzi's "Bridge Music."

"Bridge Music" comprises the 10 songs created as the fruit of the composer's recording experiments.

From idea to final installation on the Mid-Hudson Bridge, the entire project has taken about 5 years. In that time, Bertolozzi has been interviewed by NPR, the BBC, Reuters, the New York Times, slews of foreign press outlets and Internet blogs.

Last week Bertolozzi and the Bridge Authority cut the ribbon on the two in-park radio transmitters. But for those who aren't afraid of heights, there are two other options.

On the sidewalk under the bridge's two towers, listening posts with outdoor speakers are set up. They play all 10 songs on the CD, plus a guided tour of how the album was made and an orchestral song Bertolozzi wrote about the bridges along the Hudson.

Out on the bridge itself, the composer grins and presses play at the listening station. The real-life sounds of traffic roaring over the bridge melt and blur with the recorded songs.

"This is the most visceral part," he says, pointing to the speakers on the bridge as a tanker cruises north up the Hudson. "You couldn't have a better theater."

For more information, head to [www.josephbertolozzi.com](http://www.josephbertolozzi.com). "Bridge Music" can be purchased on iTunes and at many local record stores. You can also listen to the album by driving to either Johnson-Iorio or Waryas parks and tuning into the FM station posted on the signs in each park.