

# SOUNDS LIKE ART




The orchestra on site at Farnham Glacier. PHOTO CREDIT: PAT MORROW

## An unusual orchestral performance fuses science, environmentalism and art

by John Threlfall

Most artists aren't very pleased when their work receives a chilly reception. But when University of Victoria visual artist Paul Walde created a four-movement orchestral requiem for an audience of one—the Farnham glacier in the Kootenays—he was expecting to get the cold shoulder.

Accompanied by a 70-person choir and orchestra, Walde and a film crew trekked up the icefield in July 2013 to bring awareness to melting glaciers in general, and to the Jumbo and Farnham glaciers in particular. The glacier area is the site of a controversial resort development.

While composing music for a glacier may seem a bit odd, it's simply part of Walde's wider practice as an artist exploring the boundaries between sound, landscape and art.

"Is listening a natural act? Is perception a cultural act? What does it mean to overlay something completely natural with something overtly cultural?" asks Walde. "Those are the kind of questions I deal with."

As an artist, Walde believes the combination of visual material with natural sounds allows

for a different kind of listening experience. "If you can convince your brain that what you're hearing is music, you're going to listen to those sounds very differently," he says.

Growing up in northern Ontario, Walde was influenced by his experiences with nature and landscape art. "On a larger scale, Canadian identity has always been wrapped up in landscape," he says.

"Then there's the larger socio-political dimension of climate change—if you consider the environment as integral to our Canadian identity, what does it mean when it's threatened?"

As an acclaimed intermedia artist, Walde has fused his passion for nature and art by transforming mushroom spores, flitting moths, falling pine needles, beaver-gnawed trees and improvised soundscapes into numerous gallery pieces over the years—including *Requiem for a Glacier*.

Originally commissioned by the Langham Cultural Centre in Kaslo, *Requiem* received international media attention. Conducted by UVic Symphony director Ajtony Csaba, the performance was filmed as the basis for a video installation.

The soundtrack also incorporates field recordings taken on top of (and beneath) the glacier's ice field. "The natural resonances of the glacial sounds almost elicit another melody," he says.

The final 9 x 32-foot, 40-minute projected video—which includes material recounting the history of the glacier, the advent of electricity and climate change, and the government's announcement of a year-round resort community in the Jumbo Glacier area (which Walde translated into Latin and used as the choral parts in *Requiem*) has already appeared in two Kootenay-region galleries.

"The video isn't simply a documentation of the performance," he explains. "I didn't want to make a music video, I wanted to make a unique art work which operated more like a painting."

As always, Walde leaves it to his audience to discover the impact of the art.

"I love leaving a gallery and seeing information in ways I never noticed before," he says. "That's one of the great experiences you can have with any art form—literature, theatre, film, visual art—the artist gives you a lens to understand the world."

### EDGEWISE

The proposed \$1-billion Jumbo Glacier Resort in the Kootenays continues to generate controversy. *Requiem for a Glacier* has created new awareness about the issues of global warming and the development of wild spaces. "I offer information and allow people to draw their own conclusions," says Walde.

The *Requiem for a Glacier* video installation runs Sept. 11–Nov. 1 at the Evergreen Cultural Centre in Coquitlam, then at Université Laval's visual arts gallery in Quebec City until the end of December.

Walde is the new chair of UVic's Visual Arts Department and an old hand at engaging students in the contemporary creative process. "I try to convince them that their first idea isn't always their best idea," he says. "Consider that first idea an initial impulse and see where else it can go."

Walde is excited by new opportunities in the art world. "There are great opportunities in technology," he says. "We're also seeing the development of an art market that's unprecedented; it's enormous compared to what it used to be. Really, it's a great time to be an artist."

Meet Paul Walde at <http://bit.ly/uvic-walde>



University of Victoria Research

We're going places.

**TIMES COLONIST**  
Your Island. Your Newspaper.

Supporting education in our community