

Austin American-Statesman



Jay Janner, Austin American Statesman

With John Cage's 'Musicircus,' the audience is free to wander the museum while the music plays

By **Luke Quinton**

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The first time I saw Steve Parker play, I wasn't sure he'd actually started his set.

His sheet music sat, without ceremony, on the floor. He stood in front of a plastic chair in his jeans and flip-flops — facing the stage — in the middle of the audience. Everyone was talking, when a few sounds came barking and wailing from the bell of his trombone.

Was this his warm up, or what?

After a few seconds, the crowd clued in: This was his first piece.

As they seem to do with Parker, things only got weirder from there, (although he did step on stage). There was clown music and a duet with a cattle auction (actually, with a recording of the auctioneer).

"I don't take myself too seriously," Parker said, with a wry smile. "How can you, as a trombonist, the clown of the orchestra?"

He grinned, "It's basically fart or motorcycle sounds."

We spoke outside the cafe of the Blanton Museum, where Parker, as the museum's artist in residence, is about to coordinate the latest Soundspace, a music series in the museum's galleries, with John Cage's "Musicircus," literally a "happening," with music, dance and performance art, timed by "chance."

Parker, in appearance and practice, is casual in a way that can be very disarming. But one glance at his résumé gives a fuller picture, one of a young Ph.D. candidate with a generous fellowship, festivals in Switzerland and Tanglewood, and summer orchestral gigs in Hong Kong and Malaysia. Then there's his upcoming gig at the Guggenheim Museum with New York's Signal Ensemble, or a solo show at Austin's Church of the Friendly Ghost, with the U.S. premiere of an obscure Japanese composer's work. In his still-young career, Parker has commissioned or premiered more than a hundred pieces of new music.

And he's in good company for Soundspace.

It'll begin with acclaimed Austin pianist Michelle Schumann playing a tiny toy piano in the Blanton's huge, soaring atrium. Then things will break up a little. We'll hear from Mongoose, the strangely compelling ensemble that improvises based on composer John Zorn's "Cobra" rules (using flash cards to direct the music). The Bel Cuore sax quartet, the New Music Co-op, a Sun-Ra tribute band, ballet, John Cage's poetry, clarinets in the elevator, percussionists, violinists — amplified cactus. It goes on, with 40 players or more. But here's the key. In the spirit of Cage, whose music relies so much on chance, the audience will be free to wander, expected to wander, as if they were watching a symphony orchestra split in pieces and playing in different rooms; as if the musicians were works of art in a museum.

"It's approaching the concert from the point of view of an art curator," Parker said. People are "involved physically. They can leave a room, like in art."

This speaks to the next generation of classical musicians, who are starting to succeed in yanking music out of the ritualistic environment of concert halls.

"It's almost like being in church," Parker said, of the auditoriums. "If you want to leave, you have to step over people."

Nor can you move or make noise, he said. "It has a really negative effect on the way you experience a performance. People are very on edge for this stuff."

John Cage, whose 100th birthday is being celebrated this year, played no small part in Parker's career, through the composer's monumental influence on those who followed him.

"I knew I didn't want to just do a recital of his music," Parker said.

Cage thought deeply about art, silence, space and chance. Hearing the Blanton come alive with his "Musicircus" is as fitting a tribute as one could imagine.

"Musicircus"

When: 2 p.m. Saturday

Where: Blanton Museum of Art, Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. and Congress Ave.

Cost: Free with museum admission (\$5-\$9)