Paul Matisse

The Inspiration for The Musical Fence

I was in Greece, I was waiting for a ferry to go to the mainland from the Peloponnesus, and I was wondering around this little port, and I found what looked like a WWII gun emplacement, concrete pad, with big bolts sticking up out of the concrete. And I sat down and it was dry, and the insects were humming, and it was the middle of the day, or early afternoon, and nothing was happening, and I tossed some pebbles at the piece and to my delight, they made a beautiful sound. A beautiful ringing sound. And so, just in that way where you do something over and over, I sat there and gave everyone a turn, and missed some and got some and so forth. And that was the heart of realizing that I would just love to have something that would be that music. When I had the invitation to make the piece I thought, “Well, let’s just put a whole bunch of bars in a piece of concrete and see what happens.”

How The Musical Fence is Flawed

I could say that the piece is flawed because the way you make it, or the way I made it was I took these big chunky pieces of aluminum, and cut half circles out, and drilled them so that I could put them around pipes and then of course I knew just exactly how long that pipe was going to be exiting that piece. And really just 10,000th of an inch, 100th of an inch too long or too short would be off-key. But I
knew that to get a good tone I would really have to go at them tightly. And so I got an impact wrench and used high-strength bolts through the clamp, and slathered them with epoxy and put them all together, and then cranked them up. But at one point at the deCordova, they found that one of the bars was off. And there was no sign of any bending in the pipe, it had just broken in a fracture. So I can only assume that the power of my squeezing was such to put the bar inside these things under great compressive stress. And sooner or later the stress creates a fracture. The first thing I did is make a little cup on a bar to hold to hold sticks. That's a cover up so to speak, but I think my goodness. Nothing is forever!

Paul Matisse
His Dislike of Definitions
I don’t even mess with the definitions because, I don’t know. It seems the definitions are often a struggle for people who don’t know what something is. And they just think if they can only define it then they will be all set, and they’ll know. And most of the time a definition fails by becoming too narrow or getting off track or something. I mean, when I think of artists, I think of the artists that I’ve known and each one is totally individual. What do you need a definition for? The guy’s right here. That’s the treasure, when they’re not here, then their work will be, but I cannot get any mileage out of thinking I know something because I’ve defined it. So I don’t do much by definitions. And definitions I feel are, they’re sort of the logical thing. The idea that if you could really define a brick totally, then by implication you would have defined all the buildings that you could build out of those bricks. But there’s not a hope that you would ever define any building. Even if you knew those bricks to the gram and to the centimeter, it wouldn’t tell you what could be. So I like to leave the windows open.

Pamela Worden, former director of the Cambridge Arts Council
The History Behind The Musical Fence
We asked Paul to develop a proposal and he came back to us with this idea of putting a fence in front of city hall in Cambridge. I remember so clearly taking it into the Head of Community Development and saying, “We’d like to do this piece, we’d like to do it in front of City Hall.” and then he looked at me and he said, “You know what? This is so beautiful, and City Hall has two sides to the entry. I think we should come up with enough money to double the commission and have two pieces.” And when I told Paul that he said, “Oh yes, I can do a minor key on one side and a major key on the other, and that’s in fact what happened. And it was installed and people absolutely loved it! The more popular it got, the more one city councilor got upset. He had a supporter who lived around the corner who used to sit up at night documenting all the times that The Musical Fence got played in the middle of the night. And when word got out to the community that he wanted the piece removed, the community itself pulled together and came to the Cambridge Arts Council, came to me and said, “We would like to raise money to hire somebody to create a fabric piece that could go over this at night.” And I said, “Oh my goodness, that’s just brilliant, and generous, and a true sign of how much this piece means to this neighborhood.” And I presented this idea to the full City Council, and this one City
Councilor said, “No, I want the piece gone.” So we told the community that there was still a problem, that we didn’t know what was going to happen, and they asked if they could be put on the agenda for the next City Council Meeting. And dozens of people showed up at City Council, dozens. This does not happen often for the arts to be defended in this way. There was a little sort of subcommittee that met behind the scenes, and they came out and said, “This item will not be heard tonight.” The next thing we knew it had been scheduled for removal. It’s just that the piece itself spoke more eloquently and beautifully than the politicians were able to accept, I guess.

Pamela Worden, former director of the Cambridge Arts Council
Community Support for The Musical Fence
As a society we spend millions and billions of dollars to do what this one piece actually did. As much as we try through the process of urban development to get things to happen that will create community in a city, very little actually manages to do that, but this piece really did manage to do that in Central Square. And for people who are familiar with Central Square it is not, just in terms of its physical layout, it’s not an easy place to build a sense of community because it’s basically a lot of traffic going straight through a neighborhood, but this piece drew people together. People would come in the evening sometimes and they would play the piece. These sort of ad hoc performances would begin to happen. I remember a man who use to open his briefcase and take this little stick out of his briefcase just as he would come off the subway, come down the street, and on his way to wherever he lived. And he would open his briefcase and he would start to play the piece on the way home. It was just part of what he did on the way home. People would bring their children after school in the afternoons and the sound was so beautiful as I am sure it still is. So it was a big success and everybody loved it.

Mystery Family Tour
This is a sculpture you can look at, listen to, and play. It is by Paul Matisse and is called The Musical Fence. Find a stick and play this sculpture. Now that you have played with this sculpture, you probably realized that it is both art and a musical instrument. Can you figure out which of the pipes make high sounds and which make lower sounds? Look closely and you will see that Paul used short and long pipes to create the sculpture’s shape. Why do you think he chose to create changes in height between the different pipes? Hmm, I wonder if it has anything to do with the sound? Let’s try it. Not everyone has enjoyed listening to the sounds created by this sculpture. It was originally created for a sidewalk in Cambridge, a city near deCordova. People played with it day and night but it began to upset the people who lived in the city, so it was moved here. Do you think this is a better place for this sculpture? Why do you think the artist originally wanted this sculpture to be on a busy city sidewalk?