



DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE

HOST FRANCES ANDERTON LOOKS AT DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE FROM A LOS ANGELES PERSPECTIVE.

Ravel's Bolero performed with sewing machines

Written by Gideon Brower Jul. 26, 2016 **ARTS**

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French composer Maurice Ravel debuted his *Bolero* in 1928, with a full orchestral arrangement. Since then, it's been performed with just about every possible arrangement, and in every style. There's a [marimba Bolero](#). A [swing Bolero](#). A *Bolero* featuring [four guys playing one cello](#), all at the same time. But there's never been a version using sounds sampled from sewing machines — until now.

"I always wanted to make music from the sewing machine," says artist Lun*na Menoh. "The sewing machine as a musical instrument."

Born in Japan, Menoh has been living and making art in Los Angeles for more than 25 years. As strange as a sewing machine *Bolero* sounds, it's a logical evolution of [her past work](#). Menoh uses the language and tools of fashion to create wearable art, sculptures, paintings and music. Her work centers on clothing, a fascination that dates back to childhood.

"I was raised with Barbie dolls, so I made lots and lots of Barbie clothes," she says.

One of her art pieces, an ensemble that comes complete with hat, shoes, violin case and wearing instructions, is in the permanent collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. In L.A. she's exhibited [a clothing line](#), including a Chanel suit and a wedding dress, made out of dirty white shirt collars stitched together to make fabric. She's also painted portraits of famous

people, depicting only their clothes. And she's been in pop bands including [Les Sewing Sisters](#), with collaborator Tsugumi Takashi.

Menoh's home in Silver Lake is full of artifacts of her art and music production: mannequins, sewing machines, a stack of vintage Marshall amps. She picked *Bolero* as her first foray into classical music because it's simple – just one movement, with the same phrases repeated over and over. She figured the project would take her a week.

"It's already seven months, and I still haven't finished yet," she laughs.

Menoh knows that a sewing machine *Bolero* is a pretty wacky idea. She wants her work to be whimsical, even funny, but with some serious ideas underneath. For Menoh, the sewing machine is a feminist object, associated with women and with work. It's also a symbol of the industrial age.

"Now we have so many machine appliances everywhere, but the sewing machine was the first machine brought into the home," she says.

Working on *Bolero*, Menoh learned that its distinctive rhythm is said to have been inspired by machines Ravel heard as a child. That gives her confidence in her own industrial version.

"I feel like everything make sense. I just [went] back to his inspiration," she says.

Menoh generated the sound samples for her piece by recording her own electric sewing machines. To get a variety of effects, she recorded a tiny battery-operated sewing machine inside her washing machine, oven and bathtub. When she had all the samples she needed, Menoh chose one to represent each instrument in Ravel's score, and used a computer to fit all of them into the piece.

Lun*na Menoh will debut her completed recording of *Bolero* on Saturday, at a [live show at the Velasavasay Panorama](#) near USC. She'll pretend to conduct the piece while dancing in front of a slideshow of images of sewing machines. What will she wear for the performance?

"Of course, a tuxedo," she says.