

THE ORIGINAL TESLA

Eugene's Harmonic Laboratory takes an artistic look at a tech pioneer

Clean energy. Wireless charging. A world connected by invisible communication technology. For many, these technologies are today's reality and tomorrow's hope — but they were first realistically envisioned more than a century ago by a Serbian-American immigrant whose name most of us know only because a new car is named after him.

Nikola Tesla, born in 1856, conceived some of the crucial underlying technology that makes it possible for us to flip a switch in our homes to cause light and heat and the internet and *Game of Thrones* to magically appear. Tesla's nearly 300 patents include early contributions to radio, alternating current and more. Some speculate that had his visions been realized, we'd have much cleaner, cheaper, non climate-change-inducing energy today, using renewable sources like wind, magnetism and hydropower, and requiring less expensive infrastructure.

Chances are you didn't read about him in school, though. Tesla's quirky personality, perhaps even on the autism spectrum, made him a difficult fit for relationships, both personal and financial. Many of the eccentric genius's most visionary ideas (he had some crackpot notions, too) were swiped, subverted or suppressed.

Contemporary legends like Thomas Edison and George Westinghouse gained riches and renown, while Tesla, after achieving worldwide notoriety and his own fortune, died penniless in 1943, his closest friends being the pigeons he consorted with in the various New York City hotels he called home.

Tesla's tumultuous story has been told in books and documentaries, but a new, born-in-Eugene multimedia pro-

duction aims to bring his ideas to life in an unconventional, multidimensional way appropriate to its imaginative subject.

In *Tesla: Light, Sound, Color*, premiering Jan. 10 and 11 at the Hult Center's Soreng Theater and repeating in Portland and Bend, Eugene's **Harmonic Laboratory** explores the trailblazing scientist and inventor's world and works through a combination of dance, music, animation and onstage physics experiments.

"He's an unsung hero," says **Brad Garner**, who choreographed and directs the show. "We wouldn't have cell phones and power in our homes without his work."

Garner, a dance prof, is one of four UO faculty members who make up Harmonic Laboratory, a nonprofit interdisciplinary collective unaffiliated with the university. Founded in 2010, the lab creates art that eludes conventional genre categories and often tries to involve marginalized, underrepresented and emerging voices, usually involving interactions between art and science.

Previous Harmonic Laboratory projects include Platform Festival, (*sub*)Urban Projections, *Four Corners*, an interactive dance piece about volcanoes and another that transforms literary classics into Mozartean music. The group has worked with the city of Eugene's Cultural Services Division and has produced arts projects as far away as James Madison University in Virginia.

After receiving a prestigious Creative Heights grant for *Tesla* from the Oregon Community Foundation, the group storyboarded concepts. Then its composers, **Jeremy Schropp** and **John Bellona**, wrote music that Garner choreographed, and finally **John Park** created animations.

"All of us have a propensity for abstraction," Garner acknowledges, so to give the audience historical and biographical context and a clearer narrative thread, they added explanatory slides, a silent role for a performer who represents Tesla himself and a physicist who will demo several brief experiments onstage. Performers include dancers from **Eugene Ballet** and the UO, Eugene's superb **Delgani String Quartet** and more.

The show pairs original traditional artistic styles (ballet-influenced movement, Schropp's classical-form acoustic chamber music, straightforward representational imagery) with contemporary approaches (modern dance, Bellona's electronic sounds, abstract animations to illustrate electromagnetic energy fields, for example) to create a kind of conversation between past and present — embodying Tesla's vast reach across the decades.

While structured chronologically, the mixed-media production is less a biography than an exploration of the cultural, social, scientific and philosophical implications of Tesla's life and legacy.

"You're going to come away knowing more about him than you did coming in," Garner says, "but we're still being true to ourselves as artists."

That's important to *Tesla's* creative team, who not only admired their subject's achievements but also his stubborn persistence despite setbacks.

"As contemporary artists we feel a bit misunderstood, not nearly to the extent he did," Garner explains. Tesla provides a model of how "to stay creative when no one understands your vision." ■




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