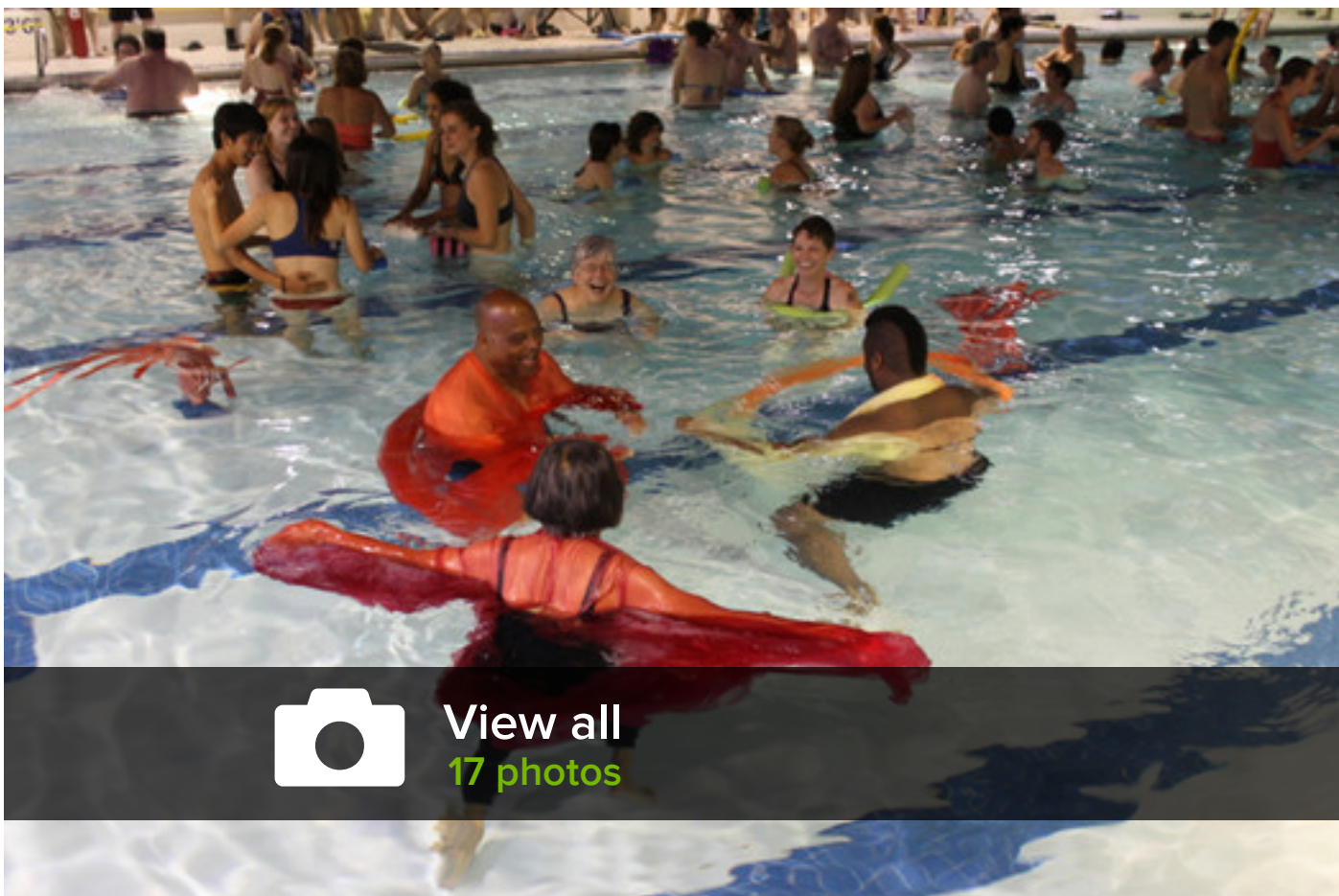


## A marriage of Tai Chi and music made in water

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Last Saturday Aug. 31, [HEARding Cats Collective](#) premiered the first underwater concert *AQurld Waves* in St. Louis, Missouri. It had a huge success. [Tai Chi](#) (Taiji) was part of this multimedia project.



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Sifus LeRoy Alsup (in Red, facing the camera) and Anna Lum (in Red, back to the camera).

Violet Li



*Violet Li*

The attendance for *AQurld Waves* was free. The event was made possible through an Innovation Grant from Regional Arts Commission. With months' planning and preparation, it took place in the swimming pool of Webster University's Recreation Center. The concert opened the door at 7:30 p.m. but audience started to line up at 6 p.m. Most of them brought swimsuits. Floating devices were provided so that the audience could hear the music underneath the water while floating in the pool.

Due to a capacity constraint, only 150 people were allowed in the pool area. With that, **HEARding Cats Collective** decided to run a show every 30 minutes. There was a thunderstorm after the first show. The pool was closed for an hour per safety regulation. But a couple of hundreds of people refused to leave and waited until the pool was reopened. Many considered the wait worthwhile.

Audience listened to a live underwater concert from an ensemble that was situated in the pool with some musical instruments submerged in the water. Artistic Director **Rich O'Donnell** designed the instruments by utilizing common household items, e.g. cookie sheets. During the concert, Rich and Ted Rubright were standing in the pool while playing the instruments. Analog synthesists **Mike Murphy** and Kevin Harris were outside the pool and enhanced the event with their sonic creations, which were piped into the water with submersible speakers.

There was a large screen exhibiting abstract graphics and the outlines of Tai Chi movements. Webster University Professor of Electronic and Photographic Media and Guggenheim Grant Recipient **Van McElwee** created the abstract video art in collaboration with **Zlatko Cosic**. The Tai Chi movements, played by Sifus **Anna Lum**, LeRoy Alsup and **Nicholas Alsup**, were pre-recorded and digitally manipulated. The video was also projected onto the surface of the water. Sifus Anna, LeRoy and

Nicholas also performed Tai Chi live in the pool during the concert.

According to Rich, “Floating in the water focuses all attention on the sensation of a gravity-free body, the aquatic acoustics of the water, and the lens shifting magic of the video projection on the water. The experience is like nothing else...not a swimming party with music and video but a deep experiential encounter with art.”

*AQurld Waves* included Tai Chi movements just to enhance the overall experience. Initially, Rich thought about using dance but his wife Anna Lum persuaded him to use Tai Chi instead. Grandmaster Cheng Man-Ch’ing once described Tai Chi movements like swimming in the air; Anna thought it would be more flowing to do Tai Chi in the water. The energy trails from their Tai Chi movements were enhanced by the lights of Bryan Erdmann.

Anna made an outer robe for LeRoy and herself, which created more impressive image when they did Tai Chi in water. After the show, LeRoy stated that he had a fun experience of performing Tai Chi in water. It was impossible to root due to water’s floating power. Consequently, he could not do any footworks. He did solo movements of Yang Style Tai Chi and also performed two-person Push Hands with Nicholas, which was very interesting. Anna, LeRoy and Nicholas all agreed that Tai Chi is all about harmony and peace. The water concert added another layer of tranquility to their practice. At the beginning, all three Tai Chi Sifus stayed in a corner of the pool. With requests from audience, they moved around and mingled with the crowd. Some people even mimicked their movements. You can see the attached video clip how Tai Chi movements were presented on the screen.

I interviewed a few people after the concert. All described it as a fantastic experience. Some preferred to hear the sound underneath the water even though it was not as clear. But they enjoyed the unpolluted quality of the underwater sound opposed to the music through air, which mixed with noises. One person had her unique preference, which was putting one ear in the water while the other one out of water. Rich, who is the creator of *AQurld Waves*, stated that “there is a beautiful world of sound beneath lakes, rivers, and oceans; some of it we can hear – some we cannot – but mostly we *aren’t* listening”. *AQurld Waves* certainly accomplished that goal and made people listen to underwater sound.

Most people interviewed enjoyed either watching the Tai Chi movement outlines on the screen or Tai Chi movements performed live. They said that Tai Chi movements were very soothing and helped calming their mind down. Tai Chi movements were in harmony with the concert music and they were beautiful to watch. Few wished that they could see the Tai Chi players closer.

Both Anna Lum and LeRoy Alsup were veteran Tai Chi practitioners and senior Tai Chi instructors. It was nice to see that they were willing to step out their comfort zone and perform Tai Chi in a very different setting to create a brand new experience for others. Overall, this multimedia event was a hit. It pushed



music appreciation and Tai Chi performance to a new front. Critically acclaimed documentary director [Debbie Lum](#) and her filming crew were onsite recording the event.

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