The Melody of HIV

You've heard of HIV—now you can listen to it.

February 3, 2011 By Tim Horn

Alexandra Pajak, a mental health counselor and musical composer in Atlanta has drawn inspiration from a most unusual source for her latest musical creation.

Sounds of HIV: Music Transcribed From DNA (Azica Records), available at Amazon.com as a compact disc or an $8.99 download, is a 52-minute musical translation of HIV's genetic code, which when played from beginning to end allows listeners to hear the entire genome of the virus.

POZ spoke with Pajak about her dulcet interpretation of a pathogen rarely associated with beauty.

What inspired you to musically interpret HIV's genetic code?
I was interested in doing a piece that was socially relevant. If I composed music based on hemoglobin or the DNA of a fruit fly it might appeal to some people, but not as many.

By focusing on a major virus, [I thought] the music would be more meaningful to me and would allow it to be of more interest to others and raise money for a good cause. [A portion of the proceeds from the sale of Sounds of HIV will be donated to the Emory Vaccine Center.]

So how did you go about this?
To translate genetic code into music, I assigned musical pitches to the four nucleotides, three of which—A, C and G—are already in the Western melodic scale [a fourth nucleotide abbreviation, T, was assigned a pitch of D].

I also assigned pitches to the amino acids, with [some notes] in the A-minor scale, while [others] got higher pitches in a spectrum. I added my own rhythms and built sequences around the various instruments used.

HIV is a thing of disease, death and great despair, yet *Sounds of HIV* is a beautiful interpretation. How do you reconcile this paradox?
The most surprising thing was how such an ugly virus can produce such beautiful melodies. In an artsy way, I'm not sure how to feel—confused that a deadly virus can produce music enjoyable to listen to, or hopeful that even in despair beauty can be found.

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