

# FROM THE PAGE TO THE STAGE

*Bach festival Composers Symposium takes a turn*

BY BRETT CAMPBELL

Here sits the composer, scrawling (or, these days, typing) notes in her study/office and hoping that someday, someone will play what she writes. And over there is the performer, who seldom writes music and spends most of his time practicing to perform works written decades or centuries ago.

That's how most classically trained composers have worked for the last century. But that bifurcated arrangement is changing. "We are becoming a field of composers who are also performers," says UO music professor Robert Kyr. "We will always create music for other performers, but we are becoming more personally involved in the performance medium as conductors, instrumentalists, and vocalists. This is gradually bringing about a major transformation."

So Kyr is creating "a new paradigm" for the Oregon Bach Festival's Composers Symposium, inviting not only composers but also composer-performers

and performers skilled in playing new music. The ultimate goal: opening innovative avenues for music.

Kyr's model wouldn't surprise pre-20th century composers, most of whom were also performers — often of works they'd written themselves. Mozart, for example, was the original soloist in many of his piano concertos and also wielded a mean viola in some of his string quartets. Bach played his music in a coffeehouse band as well as in church. But, Kyr explains, last century's world wars fractured Europe's musical training institutions, resulting in diverging paths for those who wrote music and those who played it. Moreover, much of the complex music written during the post-WWII reign of serialism placed extreme demands on even virtuoso performers, leaving it unplayable by its creators. With a few exceptions, composer-led ensembles were scarce in the contemporary classical world until quite recently, when New York's Bang on a Can All Stars, Laurie Anderson and a few others seized control of their own musical destinies.

Now Kyr, who heads the UO composition department, wants to repair the rupture created when composition was sundered from performance. In 1994, he created the OBF's Composers Symposium to give young composers the opportunity to work with well known composers in residence such as Lou Harrison, Arvo Pärt and George Crumb; participate in workshops and exchange ideas; and write music for expert performers.

This year's symposium is one of the largest in the country, drawing applicants from major universities such as Yale, Harvard and Columbia. Among the 60 participants, Kyr has selected some top notch composer-performers — saxophonists, percussionists, vocal improvisers, even an accordionist and a specialist in a Chinese string instrument. At Beall



Lisa Moore

Hall on July 7, they'll play new and earlier works created by themselves and their colleagues, and some will also compose and play new pieces for the UO's Pacific Rim gamelan instruments at a July 9 Beall concert. Many will join a new composers improvising orchestra that will perform at three Wild Night improv cafes at 10:30 pm July 6-8. It's Kyr's way of moving new music beyond the concert hall; listeners and musicians will be able to roam the UO's Collier House and outdoor deck.

"I think audiences are thrilled when composers are performing their own music because they are at a live event where a creator is sharing his or her own music with each listener. It makes it more personal," Kyr says.

He's also invited acclaimed Can-Banger pianist Lisa Moore to perform new works written by the symposium participants and give master classes that will improve their ability to play and write for piano. On July 7, she'll play and narrate a piece by celebrated contemporary composer Frederic Rzewski and perform a multimedia work with video based on the drawings of William Blake composed for her by one of the most celebrated composer/teachers in contemporary music, Yale prof Martin

Bresnick, who has influenced some of today's hottest young composers.

The symposium will continue its daily seminars, workshops, master classes and presentations, with Bresnick also talking about his music and that of one of the 20th century's greatest composers, Gyorgi Ligeti, who died this year. After this year's piano-centric focus, future symposia might concentrate on percussion, wind ensembles or string quartets.

Kyr hopes the composer-performers will maintain the connections forged here so they can give concerts of each other's works in their home regions. "I'm hoping that this will create the first truly diverse and ongoing network of composers who are working in both the composing and performing media," he says. This will benefit audiences as well as composers, providing national outlets — not just in New York or L.A. — for new music.

"In the 18th and 19th centuries, composers were also performers, and finally, we are returning to that ideal," says Kyr, whose performances as a pianist enhanced his own compositional development. "I hope that the Composers Symposium will help to bring about a major transformation in the musical culture of composers." ♦



Martin Bresnick

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