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Vermont College of Fine Arts Composers aren't all classical



Pianist Robert Frankenberry and violinist-composer Roger Zahab rehearse music of John Cage at Vermont College of Fine Arts.

Jim Lowe/Staff photo

By Jim Lowe
Staff Writer - Published: August 25, 2011

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MONTPELIER — On Friday evening, they were listening to the Callithumpian Consort playing the latest in contemporary classical music; on Saturday, it was new jazz performed by seasoned pros; and on Sunday, it was music of John Cage and much more cutting-edge composers.

But, this wasn't a typical audience — it was made up of five veteran composers, 15 wannabe composers and their friends.

Vermont College of Fine Arts was completing the first residency of its new two-year MFA in Music Composition program, Aug. 12-14, on its Montpelier campus. And, although the entrance requirements are similar to those for any graduate music program, this new low-residency VCFA program is marked by its diversity of offerings, ranging from traditional classical composition to jazz, film and commercial writing and any mix thereof.

"This is not a top-down school," explained composer Tamar Diesendruck, faculty chair. Diesendruck's contemporary classical compositions have been performed by the likes of the Pro Arte Quartet, Boston Modern Orchestra Project, and Eastman and New England Conservatory wind ensembles.

"It's a bunch of expert composers in different areas working with students that have multiple interests, different backgrounds and somewhat different skill levels," Diesendruck said. "Some are already professionals; some are right out of undergraduate school.

"So we are not directing them where they should go," she said. "We are not saying here is a set of standards and skills that you need to bring to a certain point."

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Rather, it is the individual student who must identify goals, and work with one or more of the faculty in achieving them. That often includes a mixture of styles and approaches, from traditional to electronic, concert to commercial.

"It's about them: Where are they going? What are they interested in?" Diesendruck said. "If they have an idea of mixing song writing with some kind of classical instrumentation woven in, if they want to mix jazz in with something, this is the place where it's going to be supported and they'll be helped by people on different sides of it."

Jazz pianist, composer and faculty member Andy Jaffe, who just stepped down after a decade as artistic director of the Williamstown Jazz Festival, praised the student level. (Jaffe's daughter Ceora is a Montpelier High School graduate who went on to the Cleveland Institute of Music and is now a professional flutist in Boston.)

"They've already got experience working professionally," he said. "They've already got experience playing professionally, writing professionally. So really we just have spent this week assessing just where their interests lie, where their strengths lie and what their goals ought to be for writing music to complete their degree."

Like each of the five Vermont College of Fine Arts

For information about Montpelier's Vermont College of Fine Arts and its master's degree in music music composition program, call 802-828-8600, or go online to www.vermontcollege.edu. faculty members, Jaffe is mentor/primary advisor to three of the 15 students.

"Many of these people are going to want to do a semester along the way with somebody else to complement their primary interest," Jaffe said, adding, "We've already used conference time for some arranging and orchestration lessons and listened to models."

As all three of Jaffe's students have similar goals, they each will be expected to write a sextet or quintet arrangement, a couple octet or nonet arrangements, which basically means four or five horns and rhythm. And they will create a big band final project, as well as other works.

Jaffe will ask his students to transcribe recordings to score form.

"You need to do the deep listening and you need to have experienced the sounds on the bandstand as a participant," Jaffe said. "Otherwise you can't write successfully because you don't get the idiomatic relationships between the sections and the instruments and how melodic development relates to what's composed — all that stuff."

Rick Baitz, another faculty member, is primarily a film composer whose credits include HBO's "The Vagina Monologues" and "Life Afterlife," but also a concert composer who recently had a quartet premiered by Vermont native violinist Mary Rowell's avant-garde quartet Ethel.

One of Baitz's three students has been primarily a concert composer, but the other two are experienced writing for film.

"One already makes a living writing for film," Baitz said. "But there are other students here that are also interested in working with me who basically do everything. Almost everybody here wants a piece of me at one time or another — all the students here are multi-defined."

Composing for film is very different than writing for the concert stage or jazz clubs, though all employ many of the same tools.

"They learn to be sensitive to picture, and to be able to sculpt their music so it is moving with the elements of film rather than responding to itself," Baitz said.

"You watch films and see how the music works — very carefully — from shot to shot."

They must analyze music in film from a psychological perspective.

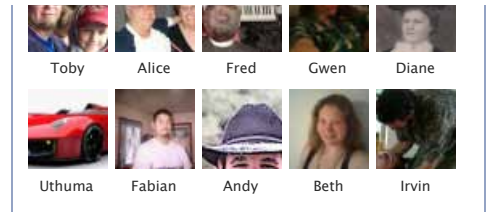
"Music in film is like another character — it's telling the story," Baitz said. "It's like the composer is the co-dramatist in telling the story, but in a nonverbal language. And often time, it's functioning somewhat subliminally, not that you don't hear it, but it's acting on the unconscious."

How does a new composer learn to make that happen?

"It happens through study and through doing it over and over again," Baitz said.

"They analyze film scores and they also take snippets from films and re-score them."

Baitz gave his three students an assignment to re-score a fight scene from the movie "The Matrix" or a



scene where someone falls in love in "Vertigo."

"These are places we can take the sound out and put the new music in," Baitz said.

"At the next residency, they'll come back and record the music for a film they're working on with members of the Calithumpian Consort. At the end, they'll probably score a film."

To graduate, students must create a portfolio of work and show defined progress.

"Number one, they need to create the goods," Diesendruck said. "They have to write their pieces. As long as the faculty they're working with can attest to their growth, that's it. That is success."

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