

James Romig, interviewed by Jerry Owen

Please trace your background as a composer and how that history led to your position as a teacher of composition in a university

My first “compositions,” starting probably around age 4, were improvised on a neglected, horribly out-of-tune piano in the basement of my grandparents' house in Madison, Wisconsin. At 6 I started playing Suzuki violin, and a few years later my parents bought a proper piano and started my brothers and me on lessons. I was fortunate to have a creative piano teacher who asked me to write some music of my own to perform in addition to weekly etudes. I still have a few of these early works in a folder somewhere, and they are (of course) not especially interesting. They show an enthusiasm, I suppose, for unusual rhythm and meter, but they are quite unsophisticated harmonically. In junior high and high-school, I turned my attention to percussion (orchestra, wind ensemble, marching band, and my rock group: Eating Crayons). Violin and piano quickly faded into the distance, and after high-school I enrolled at the University of Iowa to study percussion with Tom Davis. Iowa, at that time, was a vibrant center for contemporary arts of all kinds, so it seemed quite natural for me to start writing works to perform with my colleagues in the percussion department. Writing for percussion eventually led to writing for other instruments, and before long I was hooked. I began serious composition study with Martin Jenni and started preparing for graduate work in composition. I ended up at Rutgers University from 1996-2000, earning a PhD and studying with Charles Wuorinen. Wuorinen's highly rigorous, yet always musical, approach to composition was a revelation and a challenge. Additionally, I had the great privilege of working with Milton Babbitt, who lived just down the road, in Princeton. Milton was kind enough to serve as outside reader for my doctoral dissertation, and he was very generous with his time and friendship. Rutgers is only 45 minutes, by train, from New York City, so in addition to my regular meetings with Wuorinen and Babbitt it was also possible to experience a variety of encounters with other musical heroes: Boulez, Carter, Xenakis, and many others. After graduating from Rutgers, I spent two years in sabbatical-replacement teaching positions (the first at a small state school in Kansas, the second at Bucknell University in Pennsylvania) before landing a tenure-track job at Western Illinois University. I've been at WIU for the past 9 years.

How do you reckon that interaction with students and working in a university environment influences your compositional work?

I have been in a university environment for the past 23 years, so I can't really imagine what my compositional work would be like without that influence. The university is a

place where ideas are meant to be explored, where experimentation is the norm, and where individuality is respected. At WIU we are very fortunate to have many truly remarkable performers on faculty, and some excellent student performers as well. This kind of access to great instrumentalists, especially here at a school where new music is treated with respect and enthusiasm, is a tremendous privilege for a composer. In the university setting it is possible for one to write music purely as an artistic pursuit, with little worry about the commercial viability of that music as purchased entertainment. That said, though, I must stress that I always strive to write music that any attentive listener—whether inside or outside the university—can absorb and appreciate.

Why do you compose music?

Like most composers, I suppose my answer is pretty simple: I compose music because I am compelled to do so, and in fact I really can't imagine NOT doing it. Composing music is a way for me to react to the world around me, and to express inner thoughts and ideas that can't be articulated in any other way. A composition, for me, is an opportunity to carve out a small span of time and then control what happens within those moments. In a way, I guess I could say that each composition is an opportunity to create a world that I would be happy to live in, if only for the few minutes that the composition lasts.

Who do you intend as the audience for your compositions?

My audience is anyone who is willing to listen carefully and make an effort to interact with an artwork. Though I strive to make my work attractive from the very first note, my deeper goal is to create music that will reward careful, attentive listening. I hope to encourage a listener to enter a soundworld and explore its contents, its rules, and its boundaries. And since I am asking something of the audience, I feel obligated to make sure that the music I write is worth this effort.

Recently, you attended a conference at Wright State University at which you participated in a panel discussion about Milton Babbitt and his music. Please talk about that event, why you were chosen for the panel, and what your summary impressions are.

The colloquium at Wright State University was part of a yearly series there called “American Innovators.” The topic for this year was Milton Babbitt, and I was invited to participate because I recently contributed a composition to a Babbitt memorial compact disc and book, both published by (and in) the journals *Perspectives of New Music* and *The Open Space*. What struck me most was that presentations given at the colloquium varied widely in subject and scope, yet all were traceable back to the musical and theoretical work of one very dedicated and brilliant musical mind. I'm pleased to see that we've come a long way from “Who Cares If You Listen,” and I'm very grateful to have had the opportunity to be a small part of that big event.

American contemporary classical music (for want of a better, more accurate, term) has an extensive history and impressive cast of participants: composers and performers and institutions; but is systematically overlooked as a medium of expression by the public at large. Composer Libby Larsen, co-founder of the Minnesota Composers Forum (now American Composers Forum) has said “We need another system,” implying that the current classical music industry, with its institutions and standard repertoire, will not make room for a significant number of additions from the American School. Does the new-music composer have a place in the future of American culture?

This is a very important question, but it's one that's difficult for me to answer. I think that as a composer I need to remind myself that—for the most part, anyway—what sells in the mass market is entertainment. By entertainment I mean music that does not require much effort from an audience. Though the works from the standard classic repertoire that are played over and over by orchestras and chamber musicians are unquestionably great works of art, they have become so familiar that they no longer require much effort from audience-members who wish to have a meaningful aesthetic experience. The consequence of this seems to be that some composers strive to create new works that are similar enough to the familiar works in the canon that audiences will be able to feel comfortable with them right away. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but if we write new pieces with ONLY the goal of “easy accessibility” in mind, then we are ignoring the example of innovation and exploration that Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven so clearly set for us, and instead we are merely trying to imitate the familiarity that audiences have with their work—hundreds of years after the works were written!

As composers, we can't control what the general public wants. All we can do is create the music that is in our hearts and minds, render it with as much integrity as possible, and then take satisfaction in knowing that we have expressed something personal and created something unique. In rare circumstances (Philip Glass comes to mind), a composer's passions and the public's interests overlap. I've met Glass, and I'm of the opinion—though I can't prove this, of course—that were he NOT famous, he would still be writing the same music he is writing now. I don't think he spent a lot of time worrying about becoming famous; I think he just did his work—work that was meaningful and interesting to him at the time—and the resulting music just happened to connect with a large audience, ultimately leading to fame and fortune. For most of us, this will never happen. But I think that if we want to be artists, we need to make peace with this fact. We can't chase recognition. Awards are nice, and they can provide opportunities for one's work to be heard by larger audiences, but if our only goal is recognition by the general public then I think that most of us, if not all of us, will ultimately be doomed to disappointment and envy.

That said, I don't think that established professional orchestras, chamber groups, and soloists “owe” us composers anything. They should feel free to program what they want, and what they think will sell (if selling is their aim). For a long time, now, adventurous composers have been circumventing the established “system” and putting their own

concerts together, often with generous assistance from like-minded performers, with a goal not of making money or achieving fame, but of helping interested audience-members to learn and appreciate a new repertoire of unfamiliar work. This sort of do-it-yourself approach is precisely what the Iowa Composers Forum is about, and it is my hope that the ICF will continue to put on concerts of musical works that are meaningful, and worth sharing with an audience. And by “sharing” I mean not only presenting performances, but presenting opportunities for discussion and interaction between composers, performers, and listeners. Institutions such as the Iowa Composers Forum are essential to the creation of a vital and thriving culture for the contemporary American composer, and we should all feel fortunate to be members of such an organization.

Dr. James Romig is Professor of Music Composition and Theory at Western Illinois University, a school of 15,000 students in Macomb, Illinois. Romig has been on faculty there since 2002, teaching composition, orchestration, analysis, and theory. This interview with ICF Chair Jerry Owen was conducted by e-mail.