

From *The Los Angeles Times*

WRITERS' BLOCK

With few opportunities and much competition, young composers show creativity in just getting heard.

by Chris Pasles, Times Staff Writer
July 22, 2007

STACKS of scores and CDs pile up on the desk of Chad Smith, the Los Angeles Philharmonic's vice president of artistic planning. Each represents an aspiring composer's dream of a Philharmonic performance or commission.

"I'd say we probably get 30 to 50 submissions a month," Smith says, before adding discouragingly, "To be fair, 98% of blind submissions are things that we can't program."

Multiply that scene by almost every orchestra office in the country and you have an idea of the difficulties faced by fledgling composers. When Philharmonic music director Esa-Pekka Salonen announced in April that he would be leaving his post at the end of the 2008-09 season to concentrate on his own music, few observers questioned the wisdom of his decision. After all, the conductor, now 49, had built an international reputation during his years on the podium. But for hopefuls without his name recognition, the outlook is bleak at best.

There have never been enough opportunities, but now more composers are graduating from schools and conservatories than ever. San Francisco's Kronos Quartet, which is famous for promoting new music, has received more than 1,000 submissions over the last five years for its Under 30 Project, dedicated to commissioning young composers, but it chooses to focus on only one composer a year. The New York new music group Bang on a Can listens to hundreds of CDs for its People's Commissioning Fund, but it has commissioned only about 30 composers since the fund's inception in 1997.

So what's an ambitious composer to do? In fact, conversations with several dozen suggest a variety of strategies. Some are forming ensembles. Others are starting festivals, webcasting or setting up streaming audio sites. And just about everyone has found an alternative way to pay the bills. The only thing that's certain is that waiting for a cloudburst of opportunities is not an option.

Starting something

CONSIDER Matt McBane, who graduated from USC in 2002 and then spent a year trying to get his music performed and obtain commissions from young ensembles.

"Things didn't happen as quickly as I hoped," the 28-year-old says. "I came to the realization that I'd have to make opportunities for myself."

So in 2004, McBane and his friend Benjamin Jacobson, first violinist of the Calder Quartet, launched the Carlsbad Music Festival in the Southern California coastal city. The idea was to create an annual alternative music festival to showcase themselves and the composers and performers they believed in.

“I was inspired by Bang on a Can,” says McBane. “They started about the same age as I did, and that’s been going on for 10 years now. I thought I’d take a crack at it. For the most part, it’s all next-generation composers and performers doing something new and fresh, with classical music being a part of it but mostly exploring new music.”

The festival has been modest — usually running over a single weekend. But it’s become stable enough so that McBane can run it from New York, where he moved recently and formed an ensemble, Build — a violin, cello, piano, bass and drums quintet, dedicated to his indie-classical music. This year, it has even added a Sept. 24 concert at Zipper Hall in Los Angeles prior to the Sept. 28-30 weekend in Carlsbad.

Still, like all his peers, McBane has had to find other ways to keep body and soul together. He’s taught and conducted, and as a violinist, he can get paying gigs. The problem with that is that he’s got to make time to practice.

“It’s tricky,” he says. “It’s not like I have several assistants. I just have to block off time — my writing month; another month to work on administrative stuff. Then I’m trying to get in practicing every day. It’s a pretty risky profession. I’m not living off commissions.”

At 37, Robert Voisey may seem to fall outside the “young composer” category, but in fact he came to composing late, after first majoring in math and computer science at Stony Brook University in New York. There he met Israeli composer Oded Zehavi and, inspired to try his hand at music-making himself, followed Zehavi to Israel, where he studied with him for two years.

When he came back to New York in 1994, however, Voisey found few opportunities. “It was hard to get a piece played, hard to get musicians to look at it,” he says. “There were no venues. There were and are very limited opportunities, no matter how you slice it.”

Finally, frustrated by years of knocking on doors with no success, in 2000 Voisey set up a website, Vox Novus, to promote his and his friends’ music.

“The idea was to create a community of composers, artists and musicians to work together to promote each other,” he says. He started with five composers. “Now there are 120 and a few loose musicians I promote here and there.”

Subsequently, in 2003, Voisey created the 60x60 Project, which every year showcases 60 composers, each contributing a 60-second piece. “I’ve had more than 1,000 composers submit to the project over the past five years,” he says. “It’s completely open to anybody. Spread the word. The more the merrier.”

For all that, Voisey too has had to earn a living. “I’ve been a bookkeeper, a customer service rep, a telemarketer, an integration manager for a computer company,” he says. “I haven’t driven a cab yet” — an allusion to one of the jobs Philip Glass held before he made it big. “Now I’m a financial comptroller for a labor union. I do that part time. But composing keeps me sane.”

Learning to compete

THERE are, of course, less unorthodox ways for composers to get noticed. Among those who have taken a more traditional approach is Andrew Norman, 27, a 2004 USC graduate who won the prestigious American Academy Rome Prize last year.

“One of the best ways to get my work out there is through entering it in various competitions,” Norman says. “Even if you don’t win, people might hear it. Several opportunities came my way just by people hearing things.”

One of those listeners was Steven Stucky, the L.A. Philharmonic’s consulting composer for new music, who programmed Norman’s “Gran Turismo” on a Monday Evening Concerts performance in February. “This is a guy clearly at the beginning of a big career,” says Stucky. “This is the kind of person we have our eye on.”

“All of his music appeals to me because it makes such original connections either to visual phenomena or to architecture or to thinking about design in some way,” Stucky adds. “At one kind of simple level, this piece seems like a quasi-Minimalist, supercharged, drug-addled Vivaldi — eight violinists sawing away. It’s immediately visceral and exciting and like being behind a race car. It’s a white-knuckle kind of music. But in the end, its appeal is in the big design that it has, which it carries out fearlessly and unsentimentally. It’s music that’s tough-minded.”

Still, even with his Rome Prize and more than a year’s worth of commissions ahead of him, Norman has a few concerns. “I could spend as much energy and time promoting my music and getting it out there as in the actual side of creating the works,” he says. “It’s very difficult to find that balance.”

“As a young composer, I’m still dealing with how to expand my own music and find my own voice while writing pieces to other people’s specifications. Composers should be versatile, but sometimes I feel that people commissioned me based on what they’ve heard and they might expect me to write the same thing for them. It’s a challenge to go in a different direction when money gets involved.”

Leanna Primiani, 32, also believes in versatility, and in search of it has branched out to work with rock producer Bob Ezrin.

“It’s time composers turn off their snobbery,” she says. “The thing is that classical musicians make a mistake and stick with one thing. The reality is people need music for everything. There’s music on websites, so much commercial music and so much need for it. Why should we who work so hard, know so much, sit back and let someone else who buys a computer and calls himself a composer do it? People who want to can make a good living.”

To date, Primiani has written music for reality TV, a horror movie and video games, as well as serious works such as “Sirens,” to be premiered by conductor Leonard Slatkin and the Nashville Symphony in 2008-09. She also came to composing late, having first studied conducting at the Peabody and San Francisco conservatories. She changed direction after working with Hungarian composer-conductor Peter Eötvös in Amsterdam in 2000.

"I came back and really started to compose," says Primiani, who's completing a doctorate at USC. "I had never thought about doing it until then."

She's had a number of works performed, including the pilot of an opera, "The Truman Project," based on President Truman's angry letter to a Washington Post critic over his review of daughter Margaret's recital, presented at an Opera America conference in Seattle last year and currently in development in a Los Angeles Opera workshop.

"Trying to get something new programmed is hard enough," she says. "But is an audience going to want to hear something by a Mr. Smith or by John Corigliano? Not only is the pot small, but it actually becomes more limited because of the name recognition."

Yet she believes composers aren't unique in that respect. "Doing anything in any performance field is the same, especially in Los Angeles. There's a lot of talent. The trick for anyone in any field is to get yourself noticed and for someone to take a chance and say, 'Yes, I'll use you.' "

Other USC composers say they're prepared for a divided future as well. Steven Gates, 31, who is also finishing a doctorate, has had two songs for guitar and voice published and recorded by Doberman Editions in Canada.

"This type of music doesn't sell a lot of copies. It's not 'Harry Potter,' " he says. "I don't think it will amount to much of a financial impact at all. The windfall is in getting published. I'm interested in academia. I want to teach — not that I don't want to pursue a career as a composer, but I'm also pragmatic."

Gates, another prize-winning composer, has several commissions lined up, including one for a string quartet that came about through a friend. He regards such connections as critical.

"It's simply not enough to write good music," he says. "A composer has to create a strong network of people who want to work with him or her. I write the music I want to hear, to be sure, but I also try to put myself in the performer's head as I compose."

Juhi Bansal, 22, who's at work on a master's at USC, feels the same. "The more contacts you have with performers and the more they hear and like your music, the more it gets played," she says.

Otherwise, advice on how to build a career has been spotty. "I've had teachers who didn't even touch on how to make a living," she says. "Others have been more helpful, urging us to participate in as many music festivals as possible, do things over the summer or enter competitions."

Like Norman's, Bansal's strategy has been to focus on competitions. Last year, she won an ASCAP Morton Gould Young Composers Award.

"There is a monetary award to it, which isn't too much," she says. (It's \$750.) "They expect you to fly to New York for the ceremony, which eats up most of it. Still, it's incredibly helpful as a career thing. Being able to put something like that on your résumé, because it's such a big competition, people definitely look at your work twice."

For Bansal and her peers, the hardest thing is that “so many people, particularly so many performers, are so caught up in old music and classical repertory they’re not even interested in looking at things that are new,” she says. “That definitely causes problems. All of us want to work as composers, but pretty much everybody will be teaching privately or working other jobs like being a copyist. Everybody has something lined up as a fallback.”

Breaks and fallbacks

EVEN Harold Meltzer — one of the few lucky enough to have emerged from that stack of scores on Chad Smith’s desk at the Philharmonic — has a fallback.

Meltzer’s “Virginal,” a concerto for harpsichord and 15 other instruments, was played at a Philharmonic Green Umbrella Concert in 2004. That led to a Philharmonic New Music Group commission: a piano concerto, “Privacy,” composed for Ursula Oppens and scheduled to be premiered in March.

“That was the biggest break I’ve had,” says Meltzer, 41. “At the time, I was on a Guggenheim Fellowship. A couple of months later, I won the Rome Prize. I was winning lots of awards but not getting many performances, which was puzzling. The L.A. thing happened, in a sense, out of nowhere.”

Says Stucky: “It really has happened occasionally that we discovered somebody in the mailbag. ‘Virginal’ was a piece that charmed us, and we put it on a program on the spot. It was the beginning of a relationship that led to commissioning a piece.”

Meltzer, who has other commissions pending, also came to composing late, after working as a lawyer in New York. “I didn’t come out of the gate of grad school and have a career,” he says. “I went to grad school at 28. All sorts of things are set up to help young composers 25, 26. Already, I wasn’t in that kind of ‘golden boy’ mode. Really, my first breaks came from senior composers like Steve Stucky who were not my teachers. These people seemingly all at once, five or six years ago, took a liking to me. I found them very helpful.”

His career sums up everyone’s so far: Be prepared to go the distance, but in your own way. “It doesn’t seem consoling to tell people to persevere, to have faith in their work,” he says. “But there is no other way.”

Meltzer now teaches part time at Vassar College and, like McBane, has his own ensemble, Sequitur, which he set up to play his music but which now performs a wider range of works.

“I feel pretty comfortable now,” he says. “My income is evenly divided between teaching and composing. It’s not a huge income. I have the option of teaching more than I do. And if I flop, I can practice law.”