

Celebrating 10 Years of Composition

Dr. Daniel Deutsch – Composition/Improvisation Chairperson



NYSSMA is happy to celebrate the 10th anniversary of our Young Composer Program. Libby Larsen, one of America's most performed living composers, who was NYSSMA Composer-in-Residence in 2005, sends this anniversary greeting:

“Many congratulations on the 10th anniversary of the Young Composer Program in the New York State School Music Association. As practicing composers, I know we recognize the restless energy of young people who need to put sound in order in time and space in order to communicate why they are alive – in other words, need to compose – and I know we do our very best to help them out. What you have done with the Young Composer Program is to identify and articulate this need and capture the young ones at the precise moment in time when their passion seeks mentoring. My hat is doffed to you, yours, and the New York State School Music Association.”

Why Teach Composition and Improvisation?

Composition and improvisation are the creative wellsprings of music itself. Let's face it. If there were no composers or improvisers, there would be no music at all. For too long, many have assumed that composition is suitable only for a specially qualified few. However, in 1994, when the National Standards for Music Education were published, composition and improvisation were listed near the top as Standards 3 and 4.

Why? Because composition and improvisation are not just for a chosen few. They are necessary

ingredients in every student's education. Just as a complete literacy program teaches students to be readers, writers, and speakers, so, too, a complete music education program must give students the resources to become singers, instrumentalists, appreciative listeners, composers, and improvisers. When students are taught to compose and improvise, they enter the internal world of music. They begin to understand musical ideas much more deeply, and their performance as singers and instrumentalists usually improves dramatically.

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composition and improvisation led then-President Richard Rabideau and the Executive Council to create the Music Composition/Improvisation Committee. The committee's charge was to provide resources that would help the students and teachers of New York State to learn, teach, explore, create, and achieve in the areas of composition and improvisation. Over the last 10 years, NYSSMA has built a program that, in the words of Past President John Krestic, "serves as a model nationally."

Building the NYSSMA program has been a team effort. Peter Brasch and Herbert A. Deutsch had already laid the groundwork by creating a showcase for student electronic music composition at the winter conference. NYSSMA assembled a dynamic team of talented composers, improvisers, and educators to serve on the Composition/Improvisation Committee.

Current members are Dr. Rob Deemer, Herbert A. Deutsch, Dr. Paul Moravec, Carol Purdy, Dr. Patricia Riley, Dr. Stephen Shewan, and Dr. Paul Siskind. I serve as chair. Former members John McNeur and Dr. Robert Washburn played important roles in the early days of our program. Indispensable help has also been contributed by Frank Doyle, J. Peter Hansen, David Stringham, Dr. Bert Nelson, Dr. Steven Schopp, Thomas Gellert, Terry Nigrelli, Clara Sugar, Joseph Sugar, Debby Super, and NYSSMA Presidents William Mercer, Richard Rabideau, Earl Groner, John Krestic, James Orgar, James Cassara, and Susan Weber.

The NYSSMA composition/improvisation program has three major components:

- Student composition evaluation and feedback
- Winter conference Young Composer Program
- Educational training in composition and improvisation

Student Composition Evaluation and Feedback

Every year, NYSSMA provides composition assessment and feedback through its Call for Compositions and Call for Electronic Compositions, which are announced in *School Music News* and on the NYSSMA Web site. (The electronic music program is administered by the Technology in Music Education Committee.)

NYSSMA has provides positive feedback to hundreds of student composers concerning more than 1,000 compositions. The goal of the evaluations is to nurture the students, affirm their achievement, and encourage them to keep composing. The evaluations highlight areas of success and offer suggestions for future growth. They are written by highly skilled composers and educators.

In response to our evaluations, many students, parents, and teachers have contacted me to tell me how helpful they are. Even after teaching composition for 36 years, I personally gain valuable insights when I read the evaluations of my own students'

pieces. Whether you are a seasoned composition teacher or you are just beginning to incorporate composition into your curriculum, I urge you to have your students submit pieces in response to the Call for Compositions. This past year, 107 "acoustic" compositions and 66 electronic compositions were submitted. This is a record turnout, but we would very much like to see the number increase.

Committee member Dr. Paul Siskind, a wonderful composer who is Professor of Music Theory and Composition at the Crane School of Music, describes the non-competitive nature of the program eloquently:

"Working for the NYSSMA Young Composers Program has been an extremely rewarding and transformative experience for me. It has broadened my perspective and understanding about the nature and value of creativity within music education as a whole. To be sure, it's thrilling to discover the incredible diversity of talent among young people from throughout the state and to help nurture the development of the next generations of composers. But it's not just about discovering the Coplands of the future. It's equally as heartening to help foster the creative thinking and the sense of accomplishment that composing brings to all music students, regardless of their level of achievement or their career goals.

"Our program is unique: unlike typical composition 'contests,' our program helps to create a supportive community among the young composers, as well as integrating composition within broader musical training. Whenever I meet composers/teachers from other parts of the country and tell them about our program, their typical response is, 'What a great opportunity; I wish I had had something like that when I was a student!' We are very fortunate to offer such a unique and effective program for students in our state."

Winter Conference Young Composer Program

Although our primary focus is on providing feedback and evaluation for a large number of students, NYSSMA has also created an exciting program at the winter conference for the highest-achieving student composers. Each year, the Young Composer Honors Concert and the Electronic Music Composition Showcase present the most outstanding works that are submitted. The concerts have become a conference highlight. Please join us for two spectacular concerts on Friday, December 5, 2008! You will be amazed by the quality of the compositions and performances.

Beginning in 2000, every winter conference has featured a Composer-in-Residence who works with the student composers and conference attendees. Our first Composer-in-Residence, thanks to the recruiting efforts of then-President Earl Groner, was internationally renowned William Bolcom.

KEY POINTS

- Improvisation and composition are as fundamental as reading and writing.
- These skills improve performance levels.
- You can learn from student composers.

As Prof. Bolcom recalls, “I remember the NYSSMA convention I was invited to in 2000 in Rochester, NY, where NYSSMA was showcasing the young talents involved in this then-fledgling Young Composer Program. Ranging from a plucky middle school student who bounced to the piano to a much more developed 17-year-old (who later came to our University of Michigan as a composition major), the several young composers showed great, excellent schooling, and enormous enthusiasm. What NYSSMA has done is fill a gap in the development of burgeoning composers. I wish there were more programs like NYSSMA’s throughout the country, and they should take this work as an example. Bravissimo to NYSSMA for sponsoring the program for 10 years!”

The middle school student Prof. Bolcom refers to is Michael Brown, who was a NYSSMA Young Composer every year from 2000 to 2004, and is now a double major in composition and piano at Juilliard. “NYSSMA’s Winter Conference played a significant and important role in my development as a composer and musician,” Brown says. “As composers, we’re naturally isolated, and to hear all of the wonderfully talented composers from the state opened me up to new and creative possibilities. The reactions and opinions of the distinguished Composers-in-Residence have stayed with me and influenced my compositional growth. It was also wonderful to be introduced to their music and have the opportunity to delve into their creative thought processes. I consider myself a lucky guy to have been included in this exploratory and inspiring atmosphere.”

The 17-year-old student Bolcom mentions is Christopher Fisher-Lochhead, a composition graduate of the University of Michigan. Fisher-Lochhead is currently active as a freelance composer and performer, and plans to apply for his graduate studies in composition next year.

“I vividly remember participating in the NYSSMA Young Composer Program from the age of 14 until my graduation from high school,” he says. “Because those years were crucial to my development as a composer, my experiences at the NYSSMA conferences are inextricably bound up with memories of my musical growth. The thing I remember most about the NYSSMA conference is that it gave me a venue for the performance of my music.

“When learning the craft of composition, it is important to see the creation of music as more than an abstract, private act. Having a venue for the presentation of a new piece of music forces the composer to see the performance through from beginning to end, from perfecting the visual appearance of the score and parts, to assembling performers, to getting through the jitters during the performance.

“Perhaps the biggest effect of my participation at the NYSSMA conferences was how it influenced my choice of college. At the NYSSMA conference in 2000, William Bolcom was the Composer-in-Residence. After the performances, I began talking with him and because of his continuing encouragement and support, I eventually decided to attend the University of Michigan. At Michigan, Bill was one of my teachers, and I have remained in touch with him to this very day.”

In the years following 2000, NYSSMA continued to feature highly prominent Composers-in-Residence: Morton Subotnick, Tania León, Joseph Schwantner, Murray Schafer, Libby Larsen, and Steven Bryant. At the 2008 conference, the brilliant composer Paul Moravec will serve.

Dr. Moravec, University Professor at Adelphi University, is the recipient of many prestigious awards, including the 2004 Pulitzer Prize in Music Composition. His music is gratifying and immediately accessible, but beneath the attractive surface there are rich treasures that reward repeated listening. The *San Francisco Chronicle* has described his music as “tuneful, ebullient and wonderfully energetic.”

Dr. Moravec is looking forward to his residency in Rochester: “I am honored and privileged to serve as Composer-in-Residence during the 10th anniversary of NYSSMA’s rare and wonderful program! I have attended all of the NYSSMA winter conferences over the past decade as a member of the Adelphi University music faculty and have happily participated in the composition program for much of that time.

“The standards and commitment of the faculty advisors are exemplary. The intelligence and accomplishments of the student composers continue to amaze me year after year. Congratulations to Dan Deutsch and all who have worked so hard to support and develop this most valuable program for today’s emerging composers. Looking forward to December!”

Both student composition concerts will feature works by Dr. Moravec, and he will present the Young Composer Seminar on Friday, December 5, at 2:30 p.m. All conference attendees are welcome to attend.

Educational Training in Composition and Improvisation

Many educators appreciate the importance of composition and improvisation, but feel that they lack the training to teach it. In response, NYSSMA offers several educational sessions at every winter conference to address this need. We strive to feature outstanding clinicians who demonstrate practical hands-on strategies that teachers can apply in their own classrooms the day after the conference.

One of the best ways to learn about mentoring young composers is to attend the Composition Coaching Workshops, which will take place on Friday, December 5, at 10:15 a.m. These are small-group sessions in which the NYSSMA Young Composers meet with professional composers and composition teachers to discuss their pieces. All interested teachers and college students are invited to come to learn coaching tips and to join in the discussion.

Some teachers are eager to teach composition, but just do not know how to get started. At the request of President Susan Weber, Dr. Stephen Shewan and I will present "Composition from Day One," at 10:15 a.m. on Saturday, December 6. We will work with a group of young musicians whom we have never met before. Relying on the natural musicality of the children, we will help the students develop their own creative musical ideas as the attendees watch and listen. Some observers will undoubtedly be surprised to see how easy it is to get started.

On Saturday, December 6, at 8:30 a.m., Carol Purdy will present "Composition in the Moment," which will demonstrate many successful fun activi-

ties in non-jazz freestyle improvisation that work with all types of students at all grade levels. At 1 p.m., Drs. Janice Smith and Michele Kaschub will present "Composing Music, Composing Me: Composition in Grades 6-8," which will show activities that are very effective in the middle school. At 2:30 p.m., Dr. Paul Siskind will offer "Practical (Re)Arranging to Suit Your Ensemble," an expert look at how to arrange music to better fit the needs of your performing group.

Come Join Our Celebration!

We hope that you will join us in celebrating our 10th anniversary by attending the young composer concerts and composition/improvisation sessions at the 2008 Winter Conference. Please visit our committee's Web page at <http://composition.nyssma.org> for information about our program, MP3 files of award-winning student compositions, and sample composition evaluations. To request further information, or to send comments and questions, please contact me, the committee chairperson, at danddeutsch@gmail.com.

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