

Dr. Daniel Deutsch and Dr. Rob Deemer – guest contributing authors

Celebrating 20 Years of Composition

NYSSMA® is delighted to celebrate the 20th anniversary of our groundbreaking Composition/Improvisation Program. Our goal is to provide teachers and students of New York State with support and resources that enhance the teaching and learning of music creativity.

Through our annual Call for Compositions, we have provided young composers and their teachers with supportive, in-depth evaluations of approximately 2,000 student compo-

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Each year we invite a distinguished composer in residence to participate in our conference and all-state ensembles perform their works. The composers in residence interact with our young composers, conference attendees, and all-state ensembles. We also present many educational sessions at our conferences to help teachers and music education students learn effective

strategies for teaching composition and improvisation.

A model program

Professor Michele Kaschub of the University of Southern Maine, a prolific author and expert in the field of composition in music education, highlights some of the strengths of the NYSSMA® program: “Bringing composition to life through direct interaction with the creators of new music is an exciting, transformative experience. NYSSMA® has assembled a brilliantly comprehensive composition program in that professional composers interact with outstanding young performers in honors ensembles, provide insightful feedback to all festival composers, and directly engage with equally impressive young composers through workshops, performances and panel discussions.

“The NYSSMA® program has been an aspirational leader, providing models for other states, the Eastern Division and even NAFME itself in creating opportunities for young composers to hone their craft as they pursue artistic excellence.”

NAFME Past President Denese Odegaard adds: “Continuity and creativity are two components that have made the NYSSMA® Composition/Improvisation Program successful for 20 years. The vision to create an opportunity for students and teachers to have a venue to spotlight composition many years ago provided the groundwork for this program to be successful over time. Student creations are spotlighted at the conference each year along with a learning experience to gather feedback and input from others. What a great opportunity to encourage and support young composers as they develop their skills.”

continued on next page

The importance of creating

Composition and improvisation are the creative heart of music. When students compose and improvise, they enter the inner world of music. Shaping the elements of music to express their own ideas, emotions, and imaginations, they deepen their musical understanding and grow as creative artists.

Just as language arts programs teach reading, writing, analysis and verbal expression, a complete music education requires experience in creating, performing, responding and connecting. It is no accident that creating is at the top of the list in the National Core Arts Standards.

The creative process — from imagining an idea to planning what the finished product might be, to the initial attempt at making something, to evaluating that first draft against the aforementioned plan, to continued revising of the work — is a process that can be mapped onto any number of musical or non-musical endeavors. Creative thinking and the understanding of the creative process are quickly joining critical thinking as priorities in both higher education and the professional world, regardless of discipline.

The strength of music composition as a creative activity is that it is both solitary and collaborative. Many composers enjoy the ability to let their minds explore new sonic worlds and be free to experiment with sound and music all by themselves, while others enjoy the collaborative relationships that working with performers requires. Ultimately, all music students should have multiple opportunities to play in these solitary and collaborative sandboxes, and composition and improvisation are two of the best environments in which to let them do so.

Twenty years ago, then President Richard Rabideau and the NYSSMA® Executive Council created the Music Composition/Improvisation Committee to provide resources to help the students and teachers of New York State to develop their skills in composition and improvisation. Herbert A. Deutsch and Peter Brasch had already

opened the door to composition by creating the electronic music program three years earlier. The current members of the Composition/Improvisation Committee are Dr. Rob Deemer (Chair), Dr. Daniel Deutsch, Dr. Daniel Ott, Dr. Patricia Riley, Dr. Margaret Schedel, Dr. Stephen Shewan, Dr. Janice Smith, and Brian Zeller.

Evaluations and feedback

One of the most important functions of our program is providing feedback to students and teachers from across the state who submit pieces in response to our annual Call for Compositions. Our team of evaluators has helped to mentor hundreds of young composers and their teachers with more than 2,000 evaluations. Our evaluators spend a great deal of time and care on each evaluation and write in a supportive, encouraging tone. Readers can view sample evaluations at the committee's webpage (nyssma.org/composition).

Teachers, students, and parents have told us how helpful the evaluations are. One teacher wrote this about the evaluations two of his students received: "Please pass on my sincere thanks to the composers who took the time to evaluate and comment on Jon and Mackenzie's pieces.

"The comments by [the evaluators] were supportive, knowledgeable and helpful. It is clear that they took significant time to write thoughtful mentoring comments that both encourage young composers and challenge them. Jon and Mackenzie will benefit tremendously ... Through your work, my two students have made helpful connections with mentors and with peer composers, connecting with a composition community that has inspired and informed their work."

A student wrote, "I wrote two solo piano pieces and submitted them to the NYSSMA® Call for Compositions. I received back thorough, well-thought-out, sensitive, and carefully written comments that showed a depth of thought about my music that was incredibly inspiring. His comments helped me take the music in new and previously

unanticipated directions." One student's father said, "Thank you so much for that detailed critique of Jasper's piece. I can't believe you even imitated his style! It was amazingly thoughtful. Jasper is very much encouraged!"

Winter conference composers

NYSSMA® invites outstanding student composers to attend the winter conference where student compositions are featured in the Young Composer Honors Concert and the Electronic Music Composition Showcase. Be sure to attend these concerts, which take place in the Rochester Convention Center Lilac Ballroom on Friday at the winter conference. Many attendees are amazed by the quality of work the students produce.

The students also participate in Composition Coaching Workshops before the concert where they discuss their compositions with peers and teachers and in a session after the Honors Concert where they discuss a wide range of compositional subjects. Many students respond enthusiastically to their experience in the program.

Scott Feiner, who attended several times and is now studying composition at Yale University said, "I had my first-ever experience performing my original music for a live audience at NYSSMA's composition program! Over the years, the program provided a fantastic support system and professional network to help me grow as a composer through the years but, more important, also fostered collaboration and a framework for constructive feedback among the young composers.

"I'm very thankful for the collaborative spirit and supportive atmosphere of the NYSSMA® composition program which helped me grow as a composer and as a person!"

Every year, NYSSMA® features a distinguished composer in residence who serves as one of the coaches for the student composers and also visits rehearsal of all-state ensembles that perform his or her works. Therefore, hundreds of students get to benefit from working with a prominent, real-live composer.

Dr. David Hagy, Teaching Professor and Orchestra Director at Wake Forest University, said about his experience as a NYSSMA® all-state conductor, “NYSSMA® not only provides students of its all-state ensembles the opportunity to perform music of living composers by programming it and acquiring the music, but it also hires the composers to come to the rehearsal process and speak to the students and directors about the reasons behind the piece, the intentions of the notations, and answer any questions about the piece. What could inspire the students more than to be involved in the performance of a piece by a world-famous composer WITH HIM/HER THERE!

“Our experience with Chris Theofanidis was outstanding as he told us he was seeking something very positive after finishing several pieces that were darker emotionally. What a difference in the sound this made! What an experience this was!”

The experience has been positive for the composers in residence as well. Dan Welcher, of the University of Texas at Austin’s Butler School of Music, reflected, “I’ve spent most of my life teaching college students, and many of those have been graduate students. When Rob Deemer and Daniel Deutsch approached me about working with younger students for the NYSSMA® convention, I was skeptical. I expected that the students might not have the tools yet to write music and then undergo criticism by a professional composer. I was wrong!

“My entire experience with the Composition/Improvisation Program was thrilling: the students were well-prepared, they attended the sessions with open minds and a very positive attitude, and they seemed receptive to what I had to say to them about their work.

“The concerts of new pieces by student composers were very well attended: there was an excited atmosphere in the room, and the concerts were full of enthusiasm. My sense is that everyone connected to this program — students, faculty, parents,

and audience — left the conference with a new appreciation for what young composers can achieve.”

The 2018 composer in residence is Dr. Roshanne Etezady. Currently teaching at the University of Michigan, Dr. Etezady has become well known nationally and internationally for her work in both chamber and large ensembles and for having an exciting and visceral musical voice.

She will be working with both of the NYSSMA® all-state bands as they each perform a work of hers. In addition, she will work closely with the student composers as a clinician, her chamber music will be performed at both the Young Composer Honors Concert and the Electronic Composers Concert, and she will give a session on her own music and career.

Winter conference educational sessions

Every winter conference the Composition and Improvisation Committee sponsors a large number of sessions to allow educators throughout New York to discover new techniques and helpful guidance for their own work with student composers and improvisers. This year, the winter conference will include a number of sessions on composing, including “Composing with Very Young Composers (Pre-K to Grade 2)” with Dr. Janice Smith and “Inspiring Creativity through Effective Composition Mentoring” with Dr. Patricia Riley.

In addition, three sessions will focus on improvisation, including “Improvising in Concert Band and Orchestra” with Drs. David Stringham and Christian Bernhard, “Assessing Music Improvisation” with Drs. Alden H. Snell II and Christopher Azzara, and “Improvisa” with Dr. David Rudge and members of the Fredonia Improvisation Collective. Finally, Erik Piazza will be covering creativity more broadly in his session, “Finding Time for Creative Musical Activities in Ensemble Rehearsals.”

Dr. Christopher Azzara states: “The Composition/Improvisation Program has been a highlight for me

at NYSSMA®. Over the years, I have developed deep and meaningful relationships — I especially appreciate the work of Daniel Deutsch, Steve Shewan, and Rob Deemer, who have dedicated so much thoughtful time and energy to making the Composition/Improvisation Program a success.

“Through the C/I program, I have had the opportunity to present many sessions for NYSSMA® on the topics of creativity, improvisation, and composition. The teachers involved place student creativity at the center of the learning process. This distinctive program provides terrific opportunities for students to express themselves creatively and for teachers to experience professional development on teaching composition and improvisation.”

Conclusion

In the 20 years since its inception, the NYSSMA® Composition/Improvisation Program has become a national model for fostering creativity at the statewide level. As we venture further into the 21st century, this program will continue to explore the pedagogy of creativity and encourage New York music educators to nurture young composers and improvisers. Distinguished composer Libby Larsen sent these final words in celebration of this achievement: “Many congratulations on NYSSMA’s [Composition/Improvisation Program’s] 20th Anniversary. I can’t believe it’s been 20 years already — that’s an entire generation!

“The program experience you’ve crafted to identify, nurture and mentor young composers is such a fine way to encourage them and give them a sense of a community with their peers. When I had the pleasure of working with NYSSMA® composers, I was left with the feeling that these young artists are secure in their talent and in their joy for creating music. “Over these 20 years, I’ve heard many great works by composers who proudly cite NYSSMA® as part of their history. Here’s to the next 20 years and the next generation of composers!” ||