



CSU composers score on professional benefits

by Donald Rosenberg / Plain Dealer Reporter
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Even the most inspired teacher doesn't have the power to transform a talented composition student into the next Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms or Stravinsky. The creative gift is there or it isn't.

But young composers can be guided beyond matters of harmony, form, thematic development and orchestration. They can be taught to be professionals.

In this respect, the composition program at Cleveland State University is setting standards. Along with a bold curriculum and opportunities for students to hear their music performed and recorded by noted guest artists, the program includes a Music Composition Resource Center unlike any in the nation.

The large, third-floor room in CSU's Music and Communication Building houses a bounty of technology that enables students to create pristine editions of their music, print and bind the scores, and mail them to ensembles, soloists and competitions. A virtually unlimited supply of blank compact discs is available to copy recordings of the composers' works.

Oh, and another thing: These resources cost the students nothing.

"It's a luxury," says Al Kovach, 29, a student from Cleveland. "I was here before the resource center was put in. It felt like a different place. Now we have a home for the composers. We congregate here. We're the only ones allowed in here."

The center is the brainchild of Andrew Rindfleisch, professor of music and head of music composition studies at CSU, who wanted his students to have opportunities about which most composers only dream. That would include Rindfleisch, who studied at the University of Wisconsin, the New England Conservatory of Music and Harvard University.

"Each one provided things that the others did not," he says. "When I got into a position of authority at a university as head of a program, I thought, 'Why not try to combine all of these things in one package?'"

With a start-up donation of \$50,000 from Lawrence and Mickey Beyer, former Clevelanders who live in Florida, Rindfleisch purchased printers, computers, notation software, binding machines and CD copiers and opened the center in 2005. It is maintained with an annual outlay of \$3,000 from CSU.

Rindfleisch knows of no other composition program in the country that offers the professional resources available at CSU. Nor does Jon Nelson, associate professor of music at New York's University of Buffalo, who has observed the workings of the resource center firsthand.

"This is a one-of-a-kind situation," says Nelson, a trumpeter and the artistic director of the Meridian Arts Ensemble.

"The handwriting is on the wall for composers. They've got to figure out how to get themselves out of academia and do something in the marketplace, the private sector. So Andy's set up the atmosphere and the situation at the center where they're in the academy with one foot out the door."

At the resource center, Rindfleisch's students become their own marketing directors. They enter their music into software notation programs (Finale or Sibelius) that allow them to put scores in optimum shape for printing and publication.

Missing notes, markings and accidentals -- sharp, flat or natural signs -- can be restored at the click of a mouse. Mistakes that would rack up hefty bills at a copying store are easily corrected at the center without expense.



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Students get their music ready for publication on computers in Cleveland State University's Music Composition Resource Center, the only studio of its kind in the nation.

"Most of the time I spend here has to do with self-publishing," says James Praznik, 23, a graduate student from Cleveland. "You're taking the time to get things the way you want it."

As fashioned by Rindfleisch and colleagues, the CSU composers get a lot more. The students have access to computer music studios designed by Greg D'Alessio and a recording studio run by David Yost.

Cleveland Contemporary Players, the organization Rindfleisch founded in 2004, imports major artists and ensembles for residencies. The guests hold workshops, perform student works and record each piece.

"The real benefit of the program is that it allows us to get professional feedback on our work," says Matt Rappoli, 27. "We have complete artistic freedom when we write pieces for the workshops."

With their printed scores and recordings, the young composers build portfolios to present to graduate schools, summer festivals and professional ensembles.

"In most programs, you're on your own," Rindfleisch says. "Career development, which should be a big part of a composer's education, is not found in most programs."

Although the compositional process "happens on paper and in your head," notes Kovach, it's crucial that printed scores and instrumental and vocal parts look clean and professional if they're to be taken seriously.

"The first battle is actually getting someone to open your scores and look at them," says Jenna Lyle, 24, a graduate student from Carrollton, Ga.

Trumpeter and Meridian Arts director Nelson agrees.

"They can't submit chicken-scratch manuscripts," he says. "I get a lot of unsolicited scores. I only have so much time in my day to listen to music people send me. So my expectation is that the parts look good."

Rindfleisch believes the CSU resource center is unique, because most composition programs are small and embedded in conservative musical environments.

"In some ways, that makes sense," he says. "Most music is from the past, and there's a lot to cover in a four-year program of study. But we can't live in an arrested culture. We have to move forward. The way to do that is to create as many innovative, progressive programs as possible that focus on contemporary culture."

And spoil aspiring composers, as apparently is the case at CSU, according to graduate student Praznik:

"This is the most convenient experience I'll ever have as a composer."

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CSU student composer James Praznik, right, confers with Andrew Rindfleisch, head of the university's composition program, in the Music Composition Resource Center.



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