

Lingering in Brahms' footsteps

Concerts to feature world premiere of work by award-winning composer

By MARGARET POE
Cedar Falls High School

Far too often, upon hearing that someone is a classical music composer, people conjure up images of frenzied Beethovenesque men pounding away on pianos, hair flying every direction as they scramble to capture the elusive notes from the sky. Either that image surfaces, or people simply marvel at the revelation that classical music is still being composed.

Yes, the profession is alive and well, thanks to a generation of composers bringing this once hugely popular art form into the 21st century.

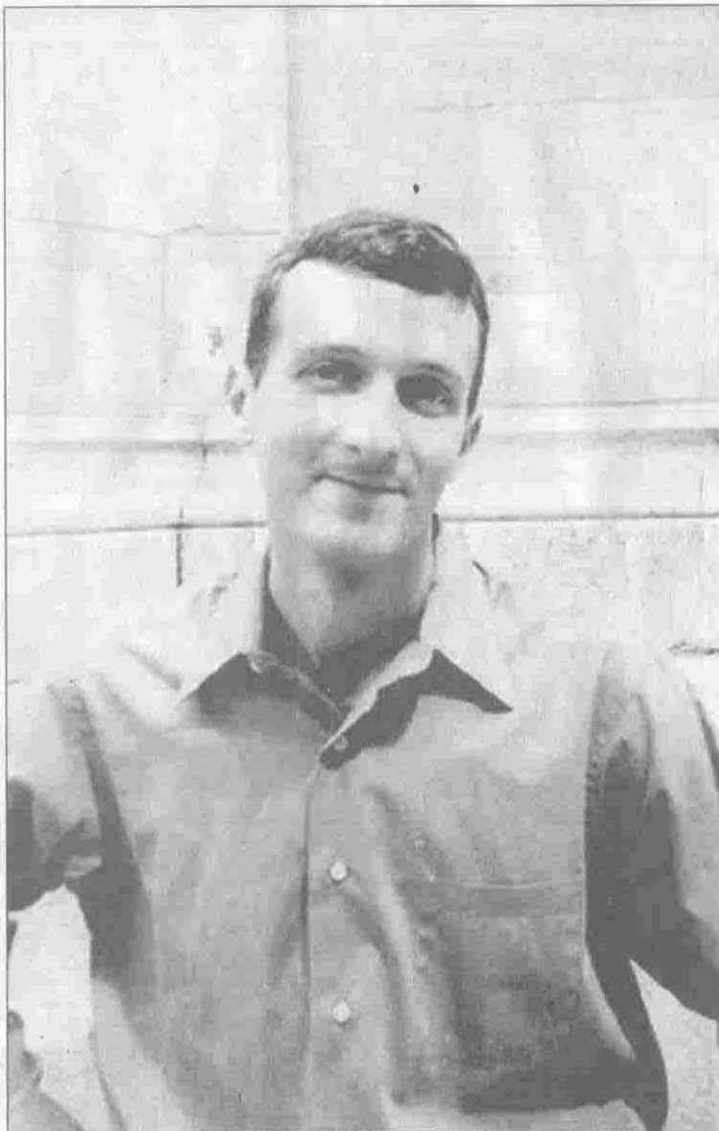
One of these composers, Philip Rothman, has barely passed the quarter-century age milestone and yet has composed pieces performed in Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center. The Waterloo-Cedar Falls Symphony Orchestra will debut his newest work, "Souvenir," at concerts on Friday and Saturday. Conductor Jason Weinberger specially commissioned the piece, intending it to serve as an intermezzo between two selections by Brahms, "one of the greatest composers of all time," according to Rothman.

Thus, the piece is inspired by Brahms, incorporating thematic elements or melodies from his works and reharmonizing them.

"It sounds vaguely like Brahms would have written it ... Brahms fast-forwarded 100 years," Rothman said.

The piece serves as a "musical commentary on those works by a living, breathing composer," resulting in a "complete concert-going experience," he said.

It is hard to imagine that a mere decade ago, Rothman was doing the same things all high school students do — sitting through physics lectures, chowing down pizza in the cafeteria, playing opera arrangements on the piano and studying theory. Well, practi-



Courtesy photo

The Waterloo-Cedar Falls Symphony will debut composer Phillip Rothman's newest work.

cally typical. He played percussion throughout high school and was encouraged by his band conductor to try composing.

By his sophomore year of college at Rice University, he decided to work toward his bachelor's degree in music composition. Rothman said the decision to become a conductor wasn't a "eureka moment," but it just seemed like "OK, everything's pointing toward this, I might as

well take the leap." Moving on to receive a master's degree from the Juilliard School, Rothman took a leap and a bound, aided along the way by great teachers.

The reality of the life of a composer differs from the pop-culture image embedded in many people's minds. Rothman is no Beethoven, and his writing process is decidedly 21st century. "Where I get my inspiration, believe it or not, is through run-

ning every other day — six miles. When I'm doing that, I literally let my mind run. Free-associate ... [it] frees me from the tyranny of the desk and piano."

After the endorphins bring all of his ideas to the surface, Rothman begins to write an outline for the piece, determining its overarching forms. All the separate sections are written first and then placed in the right order later. It seems very logical and organized, but Rothman says, "At some point your instincts take over; miraculously it does come together."

It's these instincts which set composers apart from laymen. Maybe Rothman is not so different from Beethoven, after all. Then again, when Beethoven or Brahms composed a piece, they did it entirely by hand.

New York-based Rothman utilized technology to compose "Souvenir" on a notation program, staying constantly in touch with Iowa via e-mail.

Weinberger received PDF versions of the score along the way, making the revision process smoother and faster. Rothman even finished the piece before deadline.

Despite all the conveniences of modern technology, composing is no easy profession.

"Being a composer can be tremendously frustrating. If you need instant gratification, find another line of work. You don't hear your product right away," he said.

In addition, a composer relies on many other people to make his or her work a success, from the conductor to the performers to the audience.

The audience is an integral part of the success. "If an orchestra plays my piece and no one is there to hear it, that's only half the story," Rothman said.

Too often, young people overlook classical music, dismissing it as archaic or not relevant to their lives. Rothman works to

counter this mentality by visiting schools and composing works especially for youth orchestras. He said he loves visiting with students because they are more receptive to new things than other people. He helps them see how classical music is relevant to what they're doing.

To prove to students the power of music, he compares it to other activities. As an avid football fan, he sees many parallels between the team aspects of sports and the camaraderie of an orchestra. He connects elements like pitch, meter and time signature to math.

"(Classical music is) part of a well-rounded education," he said.

To Rothman, music is just as important as the so-called "core subjects," and schools and parents need to fight to keep those programs in schools. Through exposure to classical music, students receive a classic, liberal education. In previous centuries, classical music was the popular music. Franz Liszt was the rock star of his day. Finnish composer Jean Sibelius appeared on the national currency of his country.

"People have been inspired by music for hundreds of years. The power of classical music — it's awesome," Rothman said.

Orchestras lag in popularity because that type of music is traditionally studied on an intellectual basis. But that's not how Rothman perceives his own work.

"I write music I want to hear and I think people want to hear," he said.

At the end of the performance, he said he doesn't care whether the audience appreciates his har-

monic progressions or understands every subtlety of the piece. He simply wants them to think, "That sounded really nice."

Despite all the virtues of classical music, Rothman maintained that the ultimate reason for attending a symphony is the sheer joy and excitement. The audience can feel the music and marvel at the coordination of 50 people all playing different parts at the same time to create one unified sound. "It's not only an aural experience. ... It can really stimulate you in a lot of different ways," he said.

This is an art form which, though its popularity has fluctuated, has been around for hundreds of years. Rothman said the fact that young composers like himself are around is a testament to the art.

When the Waterloo-Cedar Falls Symphony Orchestra is tuning up at the concerts this weekend, Rothman will be in the audience trembling with excitement. As the musicians warm up, stray passages from his piece will reverberate throughout the hall, giving Rothman the "unique thrill" only composers can feel. But the symphony's not only thrilling to the people who write the music. Rothman believes everyone should experience a symphony because, simply, "Going to a symphony is exciting stuff."

The Waterloo-Cedar Falls Symphony Orchestra will feature Rothman's piece as well as UNI music faculty visiting artist Sean Botkin on piano. Performances are at 7:30 p.m. on Friday and Saturday. Tickets can be purchased by calling 273-7469.

What I've Learned From Being A Courier Carrier...

Money
Managing