

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

## **Richmond Symphony to feature music grad's original composition in spring of 2004**



### **Winning composer makes his *Escape***



**COMPOSER ERICH HOLT STEM ('96)**, who received his doctorate this spring, will hear his original *Escape* performed by the Richmond Symphony at the Carpenter Center on May 22-24, 2004, as part of its Masterworks Series. Stem is one of eight composers chosen from 143 applicants to participate in the second annual Reading Sessions and Composer Institute sponsored by the Minnesota Orchestra and the American Music Center. The institute provides winning composers with a week of reading sessions, seminars on the art of composing and a weeklong immersion into the world of a major American orchestra. Topics include copyright law, promotion, self-publishing, music preparation, public speaking and community residencies. Stem worked closely on his original composition, *Escape*, with members of the orchestra.

Prestigious groups such as the Opus 3 Trio, Sunrise Quartet and the Plymouth Music Series Orchestra have also performed Stem's original work at music festivals and conferences. His works have been featured on several regional and national radio programs including *The Latest Score*, *FOLDOVER* and *Vast Field*. Stem's chamber music can be heard on the Living Artist Recordings label, which released *Bay Images* on a 1999 compilation CD.

Stem has received grants and awards from a variety of organizations, including the Jerome Foundation, Meet the Composer, the University of Maryland and ASCAP. He was recently selected as one of the four winners of the Walsum Competition for his latest chamber piece, *After Rain*. Stem has also taught at the University of Maryland and has held positions with various non-profit organizations that promote new music.

**Hometown:** Richmond, Va.

**Major:** music industry with a concentration in violin; minor in business administration; doctorate in composition

### **How did you get interested in writing music?**

Well, it's a funny story. I got interested in writing music after seeing the movie, *Amadeus*. I was in junior high school at the time and thought that if Mozart could compose a symphony at the age of 7, then writing something similar at the age of 12 shouldn't be a problem. My training was limited since I had just begun violin lessons and couldn't read the bass clef. The symphony would have to wait. But I did write a good number of violin duets as a result, and the rest is history. Along with my formal violin training, I am self-taught on the piano and guitar.

## **Who are your favorite music professors and how did they affect your career choices?**

John Hilliard and Robert McCashin. Even though I never became an "official" composition major at JMU, John always treated me like one. He showed a lot of interest in my work and always made a point to encourage me to write. His music and approach to composition always intrigued me. I can hear some of his influence in my music today. Robert was JMU's director of orchestras, and in addition to being a great conductor, he was a terrific mentor. I would visit his office to seek advice or have him help me with some administrative task, and we'd always end up in some bigger, more engaging conversation about things like the state of orchestras, the fiscal health of music schools or life as a musician. What was interesting to me about Robert was that he had a lot of vision, enjoyed taking risks and worked very hard to make things happen. I eventually ended up working with him through an independent study on developing grant possibilities for the orchestra program. John and Robert were (and I imagine they still are) really unique in that they went above and beyond their roles. They had a genuine interest in their students' work. That by itself is, I believe, a real influence on me today, especially now that I've taken the role as a composition professor.

## **Would you recommend JMU's music program to future students?**

Absolutely! I even hear that they are planning to build a new arts complex where the old Anthony-Seeger building used to be. The JMU School of Music has done a lot since I started there in 1992, and I can't wait to see where it will be in another 10 years.

## **Tell us about your original piece, *Escape*, which will be performed by the Richmond Symphony:**

*Escape* was originally written for string orchestra in 2001 and later expanded to the full orchestra as part of a project I did with the University of Maryland Symphony Orchestra in 2002. When I started writing the string orchestra version, *Escape* was just another exercise in composition - almost like putting a puzzle together. My idea was to take a five-note motive and develop it into a dynamic and evolving piece of music without actually altering or expanding the original motive. So, you would essentially hear the same melody but through different atmospheres or textures. This idea stayed with me to the end of the piece, but as I reached the middle of the work, the music began to take a life of its own. During this time, my wife and I went to San Francisco and visited the island of Alcatraz. When we reached the top of the island, I looked out at the distinctive blue water of the Bay and began playing the theme over in my head. I recall the chilling experience I got from looking at the surrounding water, clear sky and gentle breezes moving through the leaves of the nearby trees while thinking about the dark history of the prison that was situated several yards behind me. This mixture of tranquility and darkness is what governed the language of the music as I finished the piece. It was a fun, yet difficult task in some respects.

For those interested in learning more about the piece, I plan to create a special write-up about it (including audio clips), before the Richmond Symphony performance this spring, on my website at [www.erichstem.com](http://www.erichstem.com). As far as it being programmed by the Richmond Symphony, I think it was a combination of a lot of factors, mainly being at the right place at the right time. I don't think any composer can say for sure why his or her piece gets programmed over others. The only thing you can do is write your best work and let people know about it.

## **How did you get chosen for the Minnesota Orchestra's Composer Institute?**

I heard about the composer institute after receiving their score call, which is usually distributed to members of composers' organizations and universities. It was set up like a competition. Composers submitted their orchestra pieces and a panel of judges selected the works to be included in the program. A total of 143 compositions were submitted for this competition, so, needless-to-say, I was very pleased to be accepted. Upon selection, the orchestra invites you for an all-expenses-paid week to listen and talk to professionals in the orchestral world. The seminars take place at the Minnesota Orchestra's Minneapolis Orchestra Hall.

## **How many composers were involved?**

Eight composers of varying styles, ages (the youngest was 23 and the oldest was 37), and backgrounds were selected to take part in the institute. All eight of us had the opportunity to work with the head of the institute, Aaron Jay Kernis, one of the most well-known American composers living today.

## **Tell us about the experience:**

It lasted for a week and was, in a good way, an intense experience. Some people even characterized it as boot camp for orchestral composers. Basically, we would get up around 7 a.m., eat breakfast, then start a full day of back-to-back seminars starting at 9 a.m. and ending at 5 p.m. We'd take a little break for dinner and reconvene for more presentations and discussions. But, the time, in most cases, seemed to go by too fast. We had professionals from all walks of life and from around the nation talk to us. There were music critics, performers, composers, lawyers and music publishers - a wide range of people that engaged us in real-life, honest discussions about some of the issues facing new "classical" music today. We always found some time to go visit the bars and hang out, which made it fun with such a dynamic group. After a full week, we got to know and enjoy each other's quirks and personalities. As for doing it again - well, yes, minus getting up at 7 a.m. every day.

## **What types of training does the institute incorporate?**

Everything you can imagine, ranging from self-publishing to audience development. Some seminars were straight forward; others went outside of the norm and ended up being a lot of fun. For instance, in a public speaking seminar, we had two actors come in to show us the effects of using body language in speech. As part of one drill, each composer had to come up with some emotion from a real scenario in their life and give a "face" that best described it. When you have a bunch of composers in a room doing this, you can get some hilarious scenarios and faces! We also got the chance to see what goes on behind the scenes in a typical professional orchestra - from the time the composer gets a commission to the actual performance.

The "real" experience of the entire institute was, however, the performance of our pieces by the Minnesota Orchestra. I'll never forget that. I remember standing at the front of the stage and the conductor handing me a wireless mic. He then gave the go-ahead to the orchestra, "OK, let him have it!" He was referring to, of course, any problems and gripes they had with the legibility of my parts, since they had prepared the piece a week before we arrived. After we took care of a few issues, I turned off the mic and sat down in front of the orchestra with the score on my lap. The next thing I know, there was dead silence until the first chord emerged from the dark timbres of the low strings. I remember how its unusual clarity sent chills down my spine. I think all of the composers experienced something similar with their pieces. And, that's no surprise to me, since the orchestra is one of the top-rated groups in the country.

## **What was the hardest part of the institute?**

The endurance factor. We all enjoyed each other's company, but 13 hours a day with any group can test one's social stamina for sure.

## **Who are your favorite composers, and why?**

Tough question. I would have to say, however, there are three composers that come to mind who have noticeably influenced my music over the years. Elliott Carter was my first real influence since his craft is solid and his music is very powerful (even though his style completely changed in the 1950s). John Cage, oddly enough, was also another influence. Even though his music can never be directly connected to my aesthetic, I found his philosophies on music and composing very liberating. As a result, I believe he indirectly affected my approach to composition, especially in some of my more recent works. The most influential composer to me, however, is the Japanese composer, Toru Takemitsu. I believe he was one of the most creative orchestrators of the late 20th century. His music is very subtle and seldom relies on extremes to convey a powerful meaning - a very difficult thing to do in music. If you are not familiar with the music of these composers, I would recommend starting out with the following CDs: Takemitsu's *Music of Takemitsu* (I Fiamminghi Orchestra), Carter's *Music of Elliott Carter* (CRI American Masters), and Cage's *In a Landscape* (Stephen Drury).

## **What are you doing career-wise, right now?**

I graduated this past spring with a doctorate in composition, and I'm looking for a full-time faculty position at a university. I have a part-time adjunct position teaching music theory and composition at St. Mary's College in Maryland, and that is giving me good experience.

Learn more about Erich Stem at [www.erichstem.com/](http://www.erichstem.com/)

