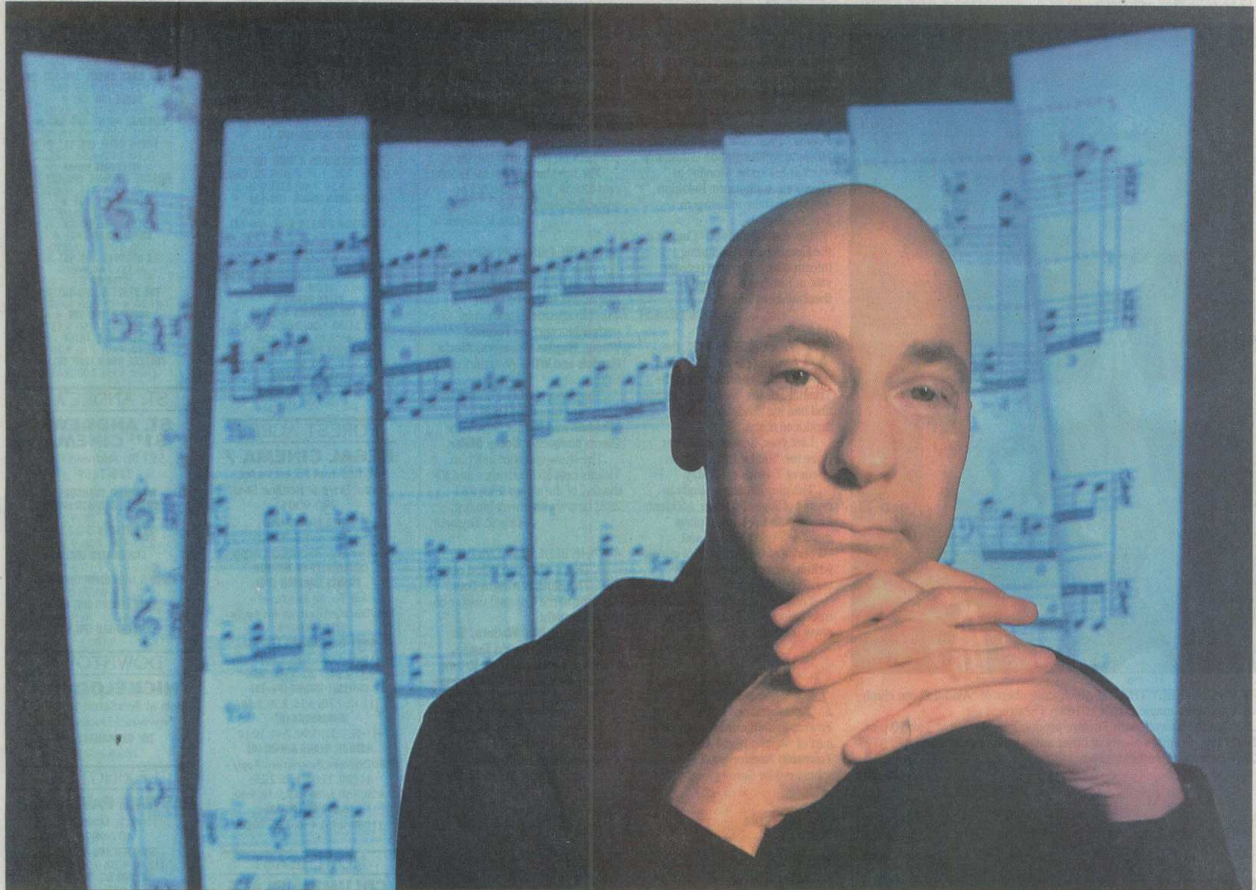


LIFE & ARTS

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'Talent is important,' says John Fitz Rogers, a music composer who teaches at USC, 'but persistence is more important.'

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Striking the right note

For John Fitz Rogers, composing music is an 'act of faith'

By JEFFREY DAY
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JOHN FITZ ROGERS HAS BEEN writing music since he was 13, but he by no means has it figured out.

"There's very little about music composing that's clear to me," said Rogers, 44. "It's a very mysterious process."

That doesn't mean he doesn't know what he's doing; he's created well-crafted music for symphony orchestras, solo saxophone, electric guitar, solo and duo piano and many other instrumental lineups.

Still, he faces the terror of the blank page whenever he sits down at the keyboard and computer in his home studio.

He knows what kind of ensemble he's writing for and how long the piece needs to

be, and he has a few ideas.

Then he plunges in.

"Writing music is an act of faith," said Rogers, who's been an associate professor at the USC School of Music since 2000. "It can be a scary proposition, and I always feel overwhelmed by what I'm doing."

"I tell my students that to be a good artist, you have to be comfortable living with creative chaos. You have to accept that things will be messy for a while."

The way to get through the mess is to work hard, to rewrite and rewrite and hone and sharpen.

"Talent is important," he said, "but persistence is more important."

He calls it "getting clear."

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ROGERS

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'UNIQUE YOUNG MAN'

Being a composer doesn't seem that unusual to Rogers, but then again, he's been doing it since he was a teenager.

"He was a unique young man," said Gerald Plain, who taught the then-13-year-old composer in 1976. "He was hard-working and enthusiastic."

Plain was teaching at the University of Wisconsin in Stevens Creek, the small city where Rogers lived with his mother, father and three older sisters. Plain was a young composer just off a year in Italy after winning the Prix de Rome Prize. He had returned with reel-to-reel tapes of music by modern composers Iannis Xenakis, Karlheinz Stockhausen and Luciano Berio and played them for his student. This sent Rogers scurrying to the library to listen to even more modern composers.

Rogers began piano lessons at 4, but after a few years, he liked making things up better than playing what was on the sheet music. He tried to put his ideas down on paper, but didn't have the technical skills.

That's when his parents began searching for a teacher. They found one who taught Rogers the rudiments before moving away. Then Plain taught him for a year before leaving as well. His father, a commercial artist, began driving John 90 minutes to Oshkosh every two weeks for lessons.

Rogers gives much of the credit for his success to his parents, who supported his artistic dreams, and teachers like Plain, who took on such a young student. He's humble, but at the same time very confident. He doesn't show serious doubts about his talent or skills.

Others take his talents seriously as well.

During the past 10 years, his music has been played throughout the United States, Europe and China. It has been commissioned and played by Ensemble X, the Albany (N.Y.) Symphony, guitarist Michael Nicoletta and others.

His "Prodigal Child" will be on an upcoming release by the New Century Saxophone Quartet. Last month an Iowa ensemble recorded "The Rivers," and Columbia pianist Marina Lomazov is performing "Variations" at a contemporary music concert in New York this week.

A CD of his music, by some of those artists and others, will be released early next year.

His newest piece, completed last week, is "Songs of Time and Tide" by singer Tina Milhom Stallard and pianist Lynn Kompass.

INSPIRATION OF LIFE

Those who attend the Southern Exposure new music series at USC know Rogers as the bald man wearing a stylish-but-not-flashy suit who introduces the concerts. The series, which has included everything from electronic to classical Indian music, started in 2001. The first concert drew about 30 people; now they often have overflow crowds.

Sometimes Rogers' music is played, but that's rare.

"I don't want it to be a vehicle for my work," he said.

Before the concerts, he doesn't talk too much about the music, and it isn't because of laziness that the audience isn't given program notes.

JOHN FITZ ROGERS

AGE: 44

HOMETOWN: Grew up in Stevens Creek, Wis.

EDUCATION: Doctorate in music from Cornell University and master's from the Yale School of Music

OCCUPATION: Associate professor of music, USC, since 2002

AWARDS: The Southern Exposure series won the 2007 Chamber Music America / ASCAP Award for Adventurous Programming.

Rogers is a three-time recipient of fellowship residencies at the MacDowell Colony for artists in New Hampshire.

MAJOR WORKS THAT HAVE BEEN FREQUENTLY PERFORMED:

"The Rivers," alto saxophone and wind ensemble, 2006
 "Symphony of Cities," for orchestra, 1995
 "Verge," for orchestra, 1997
 "A Savage Calculus," saxophone and piano, 2002
 "Transit," electric guitar, keyboard, computer playback, 2001
 "Sonata Lunar," piano and violin, 2005
 "Once Removed," two marimbas, 2003

You can hear Rogers' music at johnfitzrogers.com.

Performances of "The Rivers" and "Once Removed" can be seen on youtube.com.

MEASURES OF THE MAN

'Abide With Me'

"When I was 4 or 5 years old, I came home from church one day and plunked out the melody on the piano. My parents said, 'Hmm, sign this kid up for lessons!' When I graduated from college with a music degree, my parents gave me a plaque with the first three verses of that hymn. That plaque still hangs in my studio today."

'Rite of Spring'

"I first heard a recording of Stravinsky's 'Rite of Spring' in high school and 'Les Noces' in college. I had never encountered music as powerful as that before."

"I want people to have their own experience," he said.

That goes especially for his own music.

"As composers, we have stories and ideas that help create the music, but these aren't narratives (of what the music is about)," he said.

His ideas come from all over. He's a big reader, currently working his way through "From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life." He recently finished "The Rest is Noise," a survey of 20th century music by critic Alex Ross, and a short story collection by Alice Munro.

He's a regular at art shows and is starting to purchase art. He also likes the outdoors. His last big vacation was scuba diving in Belize.

The suite of songs for Stallard and Kompass is based on poems about children and parents by an Indian poet; both Stallard and Kompass recently had their first babies. Stallard showed him the poems, and he was immediately taken with them.

Each of the three movements in "The Rivers," for solo saxophone and wind ensemble, is named for a mythical river. The solo saxophone, like water in a river, remains essentially the same throughout, but the ensemble changes like the landscape through which the water passes.

He had read about the mythical rivers somewhere, but admitted, "I have no idea where."

"Prodigal Child" came more out of just looking at the news: "It was inspired by my concerns with events in the world. It's an angry piece. I'm going to leave it at that."

'LEARN AND GROW'

In the mid-20th century, dissonant, seemingly structureless and

West African drumming

"It taught me to hear how musicians play together in a completely new way and expanded my sense of rhythmic complexity."

Building furniture

"After college, there was a period when I thought I might be a furniture or cabinet maker. I especially loved Shaker furniture, and actually read up on the Shakers themselves and visited a number of former Shaker communities. Building furniture taught me about design, balance, practicality and letting the beauty of the materials show through."

overly intellectual music dominated the academic world. It turned its back on much of the music that came before.

When Rogers began graduate school in the 1980s, things had changed and composers drew from many genres — classical, rock and world music. The stars were Philip Glass, whose music was stripped down and at times nodded to pop, and Steve Reich, who explored music from around the world.

Rogers was informed by all of it: modern, classical, Reich and maybe even John Lennon and Paul McCartney.

"I played in cover bands. I played jazz and studied West African drumming," he said. "But I'm also part of classical music. I'm engaging a lot of different things. One of my goals is to learn and grow. That's why I like writing for electric guitar and why I like writing for symphony orchestra."

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Miles Davis are his models, not for their sound, but for their soundness.

"They never wasted a note," he said.

Clifford Leaman, a USC faculty member and saxophone player, has hired Rogers to write three pieces.

He likes that Rogers' music "provides a handle for the average audience member to grasp, but also gives enough to keep the musical sophisticate interested. John never sells out, but he provides things for people to grab on to tonally or rhythmically."

Guitarist Nicoletta, who lives in Seattle and plays both classical and ear-shredding electric guitar, has commissioned two works.

"Ultimately it was John's willingness to take chances which most endeared me to his work," Nicoletta said in an e-mail. "He can write a

relentless five-minute barrage of distorted solo electric guitar or a 45-minute epic for electric guitar and electronic virtual ensemble, but also has a willingness to wear his heart on his sleeve and write a gorgeous melodic passage or sculpt an unashamedly beautiful orchestration."

THE JOB

Getting the music onto stands and into ears is a big job. First someone has to commission a piece, find money to pay for it and line up musicians to perform it. Rogers can write as much as he wants, but if the music isn't heard, the job is incomplete.

"What I do is completely dependent on the performers," he said. "These are talented people who care about my music and take great care with my music."

Often, several groups and organizations co-commission a piece, as did seven saxophone groups for "The Rivers," through the assistance of Leaman.

"They get a brand-new piece for less money than if they commissioned it alone," Rogers said, "and I get multiple performances in different venues."

Rogers has his own publishing company. He sells his sheet music and has a Web site where one can download his music. His price for a commission varies greatly — from a few thousand dollars upward — depending on how long the piece is, how many times it will be performed and if it will be recorded.

He trusts himself, but he also has to trust the musicians who commission and play his music. Usually that trust develops over time as musicians and the composer learn about one another. The musicians might present some ideas (like the poems Stallard suggested), but they aren't involved along the way, unless he has a technical question about what a particular instrument can do.

They learn the music, and he usually hears it for the first time at a rehearsal a few days before the public premiere. He and the players might tweak a few things, but not much.

"Often performers bring ideas that may make the piece richer in ways you couldn't anticipate," he said. "But you can't make a lot of changes."

When Rogers delivers a score to a musician, he hands over more than paper with notes. In a way, he has passed on the life of the music. The piece may get played often, maybe once or twice. Maybe never.

Although those who play his music care about it, that doesn't guarantee they'll play it well. Or they might play it better than he thinks it can be played.

Taking the music to the audience is the final step: The composer writes, the musicians play and the people in the seats bring their own ears and experiences to the music.

"There's a certain amount of control you have to relinquish," he said. "You can't predict what's going to happen to a piece. Any artist who says they don't care if their work is out there in the public realm isn't being truthful. But at a certain point, it's about writing the music."

Reach Day at (803) 771-8518.