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LOCAL FEATURE

Sounds of 'Jubilation' (Gay)

GWU Orchestra performs piece by gay composers part of fall concert

By [AMY CAVANAUGH](#)
Friday, November 17, 2006

Gay composer Brian Wilbur Grundstrom discards traditional methods of composing music and instead embraces innovation and technology.

"I don't write with a key signature," says Grundstrom, who also composes on a computer, "I need to do something challenging that holds attention."

This recipe for composition has succeeded, and Sunday, Nov. 19, marks the world premiere of Grundstrom's "Jubilation! Dance for Orchestra." The piece is part of the George Washington University Orchestra's fall concert scheduled for 3 p.m. at Lisner Auditorium. The concert also includes Beethoven's Symphony Number 6 and Mozart's "Die Zauberflöte" overture.

When Grundstrom, 43, began composing "Jubilation!" he wanted something upbeat, easy to shop around and under 10 minutes long. In typical Grundstrom fashion, the piece is written in 5/4 time, a rhythm not frequently heard in standard music.

"I use 5/4 and 5/8," he says. "It keeps things interesting, accessible and melodically fairly complex, even though it's still simple."

Nancia D'Alimonte, the director and conductor of the George Washington University Symphony Orchestra, is conducting Grundstrom's work for the first time. She notes Grundstrom's use of meter in "Jubilation."

"It's not in straightforward 4/4 or common time," D'Alimonte says. "The music is accessible ... but there are an awful lot of challenging rhythms that the orchestra has been able to handle."

Grundstrom, who lists Chopin, Joplin and Shostakovich as influences, attended rehearsals for the GWU Orchestra's fall concert.

"It was fun to watch them and watch the piece mature with them," he says, "Normally with professional orchestras you have limited rehearsal time, but with the university orchestra, it's a course, so they're really dedicated and focused on it."

D'Alimonte has also valued the shared time with the composer.

"It's nice that he's there, because there have been questionable notes or a harmony that didn't line up," D'Alimonte says, "Since the score had never been played before, these kinds of things do



Gay composer Brian Wilbur Grundstrom's work, 'Jubilation! Dance for Orchestra' premieres at the George Washington University Orchestra's fall concert on Sunday, Nov. 19. (Photo courtesy of Brian Wilbur Grundstrom)

MORE INFO

World Premiere of 'Jubilation! Dance for Orchestra'
Sunday, Nov. 19, 3 p.m.
George Washington University
Lisner Auditorium
730 21st Street, NW
Free
www.brianwilbur.com

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happen. He's there more as a resource. Since he's alive and well and kicking, you can ask him what he meant, unlike with deceased composers, where you sometimes wonder, 'what did Shostakovich want here?'"

GRUNDSTROM BEGAN COMPOSING in high school, and he earned his BA in music from Gettysburg College, before earning an MBA in arts administration from SUNY Binghamton. At Gettysburg he took several courses in composition and studied piano. Despite his experience with the piano, Grundstrom composes for other instruments as well and delves into various types of composition.

"I had a brief venture on the baritone [horn] in high school, but I love all the instruments, and it's fun getting to know them and what they can do," he says. "When you have an orchestra, it's probably easier to compose for since you can switch between instruments and provide variation."

In October, the Trinity Chamber Orchestra of Washington premiered one of Grundstrom's pieces, "Before the Fall," at St. Ann's Church in D.C. He also did a commission, "How I Met Sam," for Colla Voce in San Francisco. Children's author James Skofield wrote the lyrics for the piece, and it was sung at the 2006 Out Games in Montreal.

"It was performed in an 850-seat hall, where everyone [was] in a jovial mood," says Grundstrom. "I had a hard time getting my friends in since every ticket was gobbled up. There's a live recording on my website, and the piece is very campy."

Grundstrom also sings, and was part of the New York City Gay Men's Chorus for eight years.

"Performing wonderful music as gay men, just being up there openly gay makes a statement," he says. "The chorus was very important to me in New York ... and being in a room full of gay men that wasn't a bar was extraordinary."

ORIGINALLY FROM LEWISBURG, Penn., Grundstrom lived in New York City for 17 years where he worked at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. He moved to D.C. two and one half years ago with his partner and now works doing database administration for the Washington National Opera.

"Washington has been a good place for me," he says. "I've made good connections with music and found opportunities for playing. When you move, you're able to re-prioritize everything, and I am really able to just focus on the music."

Focusing on the music has paid off. Last year Grundstrom received an artist fellowship from the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities and has been commissioned to do a piece for the New Jersey Gay Men's Chorus.

He also hopes to do more film music. He has composed music for three short films, including "Machinations," a film by Tohubohu Productions and directed by William R. Coughlan, which will be screened on Friday, Nov. 17, at the Georgetown/Adams Morgan Film and Music Festival.

Though it's difficult for instrumental works to be considered "gay," Grundstrom notes that gay films and gay choruses often use the work of gay composers, musicians and lyricists.

"I think it's important to be out as a musician," Grundstrom says. "It's gay works that come out and speak about our love and tell our stories in our context."



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