

A composer's legacy lives on: Robert Avalon new music competition hosts winners concert

BY JOEL LUKS
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Had composer Robert Avalon lived to witness the first contemporary classical music composition competition that he started to organize back in 2004, he would be thrilled at the outcome. Had he lived long enough to see that his efforts carried on for another six years, he would have been ecstatic. But Avalon died of a cardiac arrest shortly after being diagnosed with cancer. He was 47.

The Foundation for Modern Music (FMM) continues his legacy on Saturday, 7:30 p.m. in Cullen Hall at the University of St. Thomas.

"This signature event year after year brings home to Houston audiences the reason we believe in Robert Avalon's dream," Paul Boyd, associate artistic director at FMM, says. "Every day, musicians are still creating notes that must leave the page in order to realize their magic. The foundation launches their music."

At the sixth annual Robert Avalon International Competition for Composers Concert, the chamber works (up to five players) of the winners will be performed alongside pieces by the distinguished panel of judges whose task was to parse the submissions and make the tough calls.

This year's panel included Boyd, opera composer Daron Hagen, whose Amelia was staged by Moores Opera Center and whose Vera of Las Vegas was produced by Opera Vista, and Renaissance woman Kyong Mee Choi of Roosevelt University in Chicago.

The competition started at a local high school level. Now, it awards prizes in four categories: Junior high school, high school, college and professional, with applications coming in from as far as Taiwan, South Korea, Greece, Brazil, Mexico, Australia and Canada.

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"Since we have entrants at all stages of their careers, it's exciting to see both newly forming voices and established artists who continue to create a body of work," Boyd, says.

Avalon's goals were clear: He wished to fashion an international competition that nurtured the art form, helped composers get their works published, create recordings and award cash prizes — a Van Cliburn for tunesmiths.

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Spiritual minimalism, pentatonic materials, modality, tonality and atonality gave rise to extra-musical associations that stepped outside references to popular or traditional styles, something which Boyd points out has not been the case before.

"The finalists were apparently steeped in their knowledge of concert art music and drew from this very effectively," Boyd says. "As I looked through the scores it was striking to see influences from Bach, Ravel, Stravinsky, Corigliano and Pärt for example. Virtually all displayed a fondness for note-cluster colors varying from dissonant to lush."

In the winner's circle . . .

Washington State-resident high schooler Daniel Karcher's *Gift for the Darkness* for string quartet caught the judges' ear. Inspired by William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, it was the first time the young composer had manipulated a four-voice texture. His approach complemented the tension between the fictional characters with collections of pitches and intervals as the thematic anchor.

"Placing in the Robert Avalon competition and receiving a professional recording are two extremely helpful things for a budding composer like myself because they allow me to get my name out into the musical community, and to let other people have access to my music," Karcher said. "When applying to a music college, a professional recording can help me stand out and also demonstrates how serious of a composer I am."

Also from Washington State, Miles Jefferson Friday's *Call to Mind* for clarinet, violin, contrabass, percussion and piano contrasts an ambient opening with a rough, crass and furious B section. Though the 18-year-old's opus wasn't composed with narrative allusions in mind, he opens up the possibilities that listeners create whatever imagery that comes to mind — there isn't a right nor wrong.

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Seasoned composer Greg A. Steinke's *Expressions III on the Paintings of Gustav Klimt (Image Music XXIX)* for clarinet, violin, violoncello, percussion and piano is part of a larger series mused by visual arts or poetic metaphors. Taking cues from Klimt's style, the Oregon resident strived to create idiomatic and interesting partitures for each musician.

The exposure from the competition is something that Steinke hopes will result in more performances of *Expressions III* and other pieces in his oeuvre, and leads to future opportunities for commissions.

Matthew Tommasini, 33, has established himself in the professional world of new music already. *Awaken this Feeling* was premiered last year at the Hong Kong-based composers/performers festival, The Intimacy of Creativity, where he serves as associate artistic director. He hoped to garner interest and attention for his initiative overseas.

Tommasini works with a tonal framework dotted with experimental elements mirroring the persona he was trying to honor with his music, Alfred Einstein. Tommasini represents the fusion of art and science with tonality and avant-garde as a way to "awaken a sense of cosmic order."

Other winners in the junior high school division include Zachery Detrick and Dara Li; in the high school division is Christopher Poovey; in the university and emerging artist category are Ka Chun Ng, Alexander Winkler (a student of Rob Smith at Moores School of Music) and Youn-Jae Ok, and in the professional group is also Geoffrey Gordon.

The Robert Avalon International Competition for Composers Concert is set for 7:30 p.m. in Cullen Hall at the University of St. Thomas. Tickets can be purchased online and at the door, and are \$20 for general admission, \$10 for seniors over 65 and students.