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Listen

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When you think composer, do you think dead, which has fostered a number of composers who are neither the medium of music in a variety of ways to express

LISTEN

Joshua DeScherer '99 knew he wanted to be a musician from an early age but made a conscious decision to pursue his dream at a liberal arts college rather than a conservatory. Now he's studying for a doctorate in composition at SUNY-Buffalo so he can teach as well as compose.

Anna Bridges '99 came to Colby to become a scientist, but she also wanted to take voice lessons. As a double major in music and biology, she was doing genetics research and singing opera in London by her junior year. Now she's a doctoral student in composition at the University of Pennsylvania.

Eric Thomas, director of band activities at Colby, had a conservatory training and was bound for a career as an orchestral musician. Following his own curiosity about music, however, he soon branched out into conducting and composing. "I don't really feel like a musician unless I'm doing all those things," he said.

Jonathan Hallstrom, associate professor of music, saw his career as a composer of electronic music launched by a three-week stint in

the Stanford lab of a renowned computer-music pioneer. Now he's passing on the principles and the passion to music majors and non-majors alike.

Adam Souza '06, quite possibly the next generation, is part sound sculptor, part mad-scientist, and he relishes the control afforded when a composer works with state-of-the-art technology.

Arthur Levering '75 couldn't read music when he arrived at Colby (toting an electric guitar and Jimi Hendrix albums) but has forged a successful career as a composer of contemporary classical music and winning a coveted Guggenheim Fellowship in 2002, an honor he shares with some of the most renowned American composers of the 20th century.

"The idea of composition must have been burning within," said Peter Ré, fellow composer and emeritus professor of music, who taught at Colby from 1951 to 1984.

Ré came to Colby as a student of Paul Hindemith, one of the few modern masters who was concerned about the growing gap between

**te, male, with scary hair? Well, think again. Colby
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ess their artistic ideas, and they want you to . . .**

TREN

composers and their audiences. Hindemith taught his students to be active as performers, scholars, and teachers as well. Ré took that to heart, conducting the Colby Symphony until he retired in 1984. He is also widely credited with rejuvenating the Bangor Symphony Orchestra, which he led from 1964 to 1974 and which is now the oldest continuously operating community orchestra in the country. He hasn't stopped conducting either, leading the Bangor Symphony recently in *Celebratory Overture*, a work he composed for the symphony's 100th anniversary.

Sometimes that burning desire to create music just can't be ignored. Ask Bridges, who graduated and landed a job working on vaccine development at Massachusetts General Hospital. She continued composing and shadowed DeScherer in his masters composition seminars at Tufts. Though Bridges is still publishing scientific papers from her time in the lab, music composition is her main focus at Penn.

Hearing her own music played is "addictive," she says. But the

creative process in the academic context is not for the faint of heart. "You don't have the luxury of [waiting for] inspiration in graduate school," she said. "I've never done anything harder. It's painful! But I can't not do it."

DeScherer knows the feeling. At a liberal arts college, he said, "You're putting more into your head than just music." Now, rather than a career playing someone else's music in a symphony orchestra, he is bound for a life of composing and teaching.

Unlike DeScherer, Levering didn't foresee music as a priority when he came to Colby, but after taking a music theory course with Dorothy Reuman, he borrowed his housemate's acoustic guitar and later decided to major in music.

It was the right choice.

Awestruck by a performance at Colby by classical guitarist Eliot Fisk, Levering went on to study with Fisk at Yale, earning an M.A. in performance. For five years Levering played in the Orpharion Duo, did music transcription, and began arranging music for the guitar

By Rebecca Green Photos by Fred Field

and lute ensemble. He then realized that “composing was the most deeply satisfying thing I’d done musically.”

Levering earned another master’s in composition, studying with renowned composer Bernard Rands at Boston University. Ultimately he decided not to pursue a university career, and now he is a rare breed: a full-time composer who doesn’t need a day job to make ends meet. He has received numerous commissions for his music and a string of awards.

Yet even as a successful composer, Levering is frustrated. “Audiences are so rarely exposed to contemporary classical music, it’s no wonder they have anxiety about going to hear it,” he said.

Hallstrom already had music in his head when he took a mandatory course in electronic music as a graduate student at the University of Iowa. But it was after hearing a performance of music by John Chowning, a major figure in the computer music scene at Stanford, that the sparks began to fly.

Hallstrom received a grant to spend three weeks at Chowning’s lab in the mid-1980s, which he refers to as the “wild west days of computer music.” The electronic music studio was in an abandoned phone company office where a bunch of computer nerds basically camped out, waiting eight hours for the mainframe computer to process about 10 seconds of music.

Told he’d never get anywhere in just three weeks, Hallstrom was determined. With little more than a manual and an account on the system, he too started spending days and nights in the studio, teaching himself how to get sounds out of the computer. When he inadvertently typed in the wrong commands and “blew up” the system, a cascade of unexpected but intriguing sounds came tumbling out of the speaker.

Chowning, who happened to be walking by, was impressed. Serendipity? Perhaps. Hallstrom was given a grant to spend two years at Stanford’s Center for Computer Research in Music and, essentially, a permanent membership in an exclusive club for computer composers.



Associate Professor of Music Jonathan Hallstrom and Allison Dunn '07 discuss Dunn's work in Hallstrom's Introduction to Music course. An English major, Dunn sees her work as creative writing with sounds.

Today Hallstrom, like his predecessor Peter Ré, conducts the Colby Symphony Orchestra as well as the Colby Sinfonietta, a smaller group devoted to contemporary music. Unlike Ré, Hallstrom’s keyboard is the data entry device for a cutting edge of computer-generated art—a portal to “intermedia,” the intersection of interactive and multimedia technology.

Enter Hallstrom’s computer music studio in the Bixler Art and Music Center and you’ll find racks of synthesizers, a very powerful computer, and the electronic keyboard a.k.a. data entry device. There are no conventional musical instruments, no sheafs of staff paper. The occasional violin strain floating in from the adjoining practice room is the only reminder of the traditional acoustic world out there.

A lot of what Hallstrom does is experimental. “You start with a

Listening to the Bells

Editor's note: Twenty Ways Upon the Bells is audible online at www.colby.edu/mag/music. Musicologist Rebecca Green suggests ways to “read” the piece to hear more as you listen online.

Twenty Ways Upon the Bells, by Arthur Levering '75, was commissioned and performed by the Dinosaur Annex Music Ensemble, a new-music group based in Boston with which Levering often has collaborated. There are many ways of listening to the composition; here are a few.

The 20 in *Twenty Ways* refers to the number of variations of the basic theme heard at the beginning—a spiky line in the viola and left hand of the piano echoed by clarinet fragments with a slower theme in the right hand of the piano, which goes its own way. The form is inspired by Elizabethan lute music, which Levering mastered as a performer, but it sounds quite modern to anyone who has heard minimalist composers like Steve Reich. Levering sews his compositional seams elegantly, so it may be

hard to pinpoint the beginning and end of each of the 20 sections, but that’s not essential to an appreciation of the way the thematic material circles around itself, revealing something new with each statement.

Color is essential to Levering’s style. (“Need that color!” he said.) The primary tone colors (timbre) of this piece are strings, woodwinds, and percussion, but they are mixed to form a vibrant palette throughout. The viola-piano-clarinet hue of the opening shifts to strings, celeste, and piccolo in the second variation, then to strings with piano and flute. By contrasting the shrill piccolo with the sepulchral bass clarinet, the composer creates a sense of space. Piano becomes celeste, and vibraphone turns into glockenspiel for a kaleidoscope of shifting color. Notice how many bell-like sounds Levering creates without actually using any bells.

Bells mark time, and this piece plays tricks with our temporal awareness—at first speeding

by in virtuosic showers of sound, then suspending in the quiet center of the piece where the piano tolls out the theme somberly in repeated strokes and chords. Eventually other instruments return with their recollections of music we have heard before, like the ever-changing poetry of memory. The various strands merge in the final unison of the tam-tam (gong), which marks the horizon between the present of the composition and the future beyond it.

One of Levering’s favorite quotes is from Stravinsky: “Music is powerless to express anything at all.”

Said Levering, “It’s a shocking statement for a composer to make. But I think he meant that music, in and of itself, is purely abstract, just pitches, rhythms, etc. Listeners bring their own baggage to the experience of hearing music, and they form their own idea of what it all means. I hope they get something meaningful out of hearing my work.”

vision. Can I do this? How can I do this? You're making sounds and you can massage them. The most inspiring things come from mistakes," a lesson learned early, he said, in Chowning's lab at Stanford.

At Colby he started in a closet with a custom-made synthesizer and a Kay-Pro computer that had 64K of memory. Now the studio has powerful processors and sophisticated software that can generate in nearly real time what used to take many hours to process.

Contrary to the notion that technology makes things easier and faster, it takes much longer to compose computer music on today's state-of-the-art equipment. "The range of possibilities is so much greater. You really have to think about process," Hallstrom said, sinking into his final word as if it were a comfy armchair. Describing himself as a sculptor of sound, he thinks of music largely in terms of structure, even though it unfolds over time.

Hallstrom is concerned with the dramatic curve of a piece—how musical gestures or ideas are linked together to form a musical shape. He likens this musical structure to the way that sentences, paragraphs, and whole arguments are linked to form a single large event or story—an essay in music.

Allison Dunn '07 is an English and classical civilization major who compares her work in Hallstrom's Introduction to Computer Music course to creative writing but with everyday sounds rather than nouns and verbs. Her first recording assignment in Music 213 was to record three non-musical sounds in the studio—she chose a zipper, water droplets, and crumpling paper—and then to process them using an array of options in the program Metasynth. To be successful she needed to manipulate the noises into elements of repetition that are organized to create and develop a theme that is brought to some kind of conclusion.

There are no musical prerequisites to Music 213, and it attracts students from many different departments. "If you couldn't read music when you came into the class, you can't read it when you leave either," Hallstrom said.

Rather than mastering the art of counterpoint or orchestration, students learn to use computer programs to analyze and manipulate sounds. For Adam Souza, Music 213 is a course in aesthetics, where music is treated not as a beat or tune but a process of organizing sound over time. "It's not that melodies are bad," he said, "but [Hallstrom] wants us to take away our conventional ways of organizing music so we think about it on a meta level."

Clearly the technology itself is seductive, and that's partly what drew Souza to the class. He had already made a few sound sculptures on his home studio, which he assembled from his parents' cast-off music equipment. Always looking for the avant-garde, Souza wanted to learn more about the technology as well as hear some new music. For him, computer music offers potential for complete creative control. "There's no performer in what we're doing," he said. "No compromise."

But Hallstrom is not ready to dispense with the performer just yet. "All my pieces use performers," he said. Since coming to Colby, Hallstrom has worked closely with Mary Jo Carlsen, who has taught

Composing a Life

"The computer sound can't match real players," explained Anna Bridges '99, as we listened to *Shifting Towers*, *Dunes of Stars*, a piece she composed for a string nonet and then input into—and edited on—the computer. She's right. A few minutes before, she'd played *Snacks for a Giant*, her post-9/11 reflection recorded on CD by a real string quartet, and that piece evoked more human feelings, more emotion.

Read more about Anna Bridges at www.colby.edu/mag/bridges.

violin and viola at Colby since Hallstrom hired her in 1985.

Recently, she performed Hallstrom's *In Memoriam*, a kind of duet for violin and computer. The piece is in memory of Toru Takemitsu, the brilliant Japanese composer who

died in 1996, and its elegiac landscape is a tribute to the evocative colors of Takemitsu's music. The computer-generated sounds evoke an otherworldly place, but the poignant violin line is like a human protagonist guiding us through a voyage to the beyond. There always seems to be a human voice somewhere in Hallstrom's work.

Though Carlsen practiced and performed with the digital recording, this composition does not count as intermedia. "I wasn't involved in the computer part. I just had to push 'on,'" she said.

Recently Thomas, an accomplished jazz musician, performed one of Hallstrom's pieces in which a computer was programmed to respond to certain pitches as Thomas played the clarinet. In this case, the computer sounds were not inert but actually responsive to a performer in live time.

Intermedia takes computer-artist interaction to another level, making it possible for performers to interact using computer software and hardware, like the MIDI Data Glove. The basic technology of MIDI (which stands for Musical Instrument Digital Interface) allows movement to be connected to musical parameters like pitch, volume, timbre, and speed so that the movements of a dancer can actually participate in generating a musical sound or a visual image.

Intermedia not only introduces a techno-dazzle factor into art, it complicates the notion of the composer as the originator of a musical work. Because it is fundamentally interdisciplinary, intermedia requires artists to relinquish disciplinary ownership. And that, Hallstrom confesses, can be hard to do.

But who ever said life on the frontier was going to be easy?



Composer Arthur Levering '75 at work in his studio in Cambridge, Mass.