

A MUSICAL PROBLEM-SOLVER

Jennifer Higdon tackles her students' questions and develops a model for publishing

BY LAURA C. KELLEY

How do you come up with fresh ideas after working 18 hours in a day?

That's the sort of question composer Jennifer Higdon is asked by her students. "Sometimes I'm stumped," she said. "It's not like how to finger a certain trill on a flute."

Of course, her students must also know about flute trills and how they might sound against other instruments in various ranges. So private lessons for Dr. Higdon's Curtis composition majors cover solving musical problems, facing creative blocks, developing a unique voice, answering computer questions, and managing business issues, all tailored to individual backgrounds, strengths, and weaknesses.

"I want to help them build a tool chest of possibilities that they can examine," she said of her students. "Because every one of them is going to create things differently from scratch. They'll all have their own language. And there's no right or wrong answer to a lot of the things a composer will encounter. You want to write a piece that sounds very logical within itself and is interesting. So the trick is to figure out what the student's thinking and present him with other possibilities to consider."

An array of teachers demonstrated distinctive approaches to Dr. Higdon. At Bowling Green University, she majored in flute performance and studied with Judith Bentley. At Curtis, she studied with David Loeb and Ned Rorem to earn a Diploma in 1988. Then she was a pupil of George Crumb, James Primosch, and Jay Reise at the University of Pennsylvania for her M.A. and Ph.D.

"When we were doing songs with Ned, it was how much music comes out of just the human voice," she said. "When I studied with George Crumb, it was color. Thinking about color. And with Judith Bentley, my flute teacher, it was always the line: Where is the line going? Every one of them gave something completely different."

She continued working with Curtis students while at Penn and in 1994 joined the Institute's musical studies faculty to teach 20th-century theory. In 2001, Dr. Higdon

became part of the composition department faculty. Now she teaches composition majors exclusively, in private lessons that occur in person weekly or, during her frequent travels, via e-mail or telephone.

This past summer, Dr. Higdon worked long-distance with student Sebastian Chang, who has received a commission from the Kimmel Center for a Mozart celebration. He is writing a five-minute piano piece in the style of Mozart — and Chang. By e-mail, he sent Dr. Higdon a manuscript draft as a PDF file, which she could print and, thanks to her training to look at music and hear it, review. "I e-mailed Sebastian back with a ton of questions. He talked about what he wanted to do, and he kind of changed the direction of his writing," she said.

"I think it's incredible that you can send these documents through the Internet. ... This helps Sebastian think constantly about the process, which a professional composer has to do. It's like performers. They're always practicing."

At Curtis, composition students are able to hear their chamber and orchestral works rehearsed. Dr. Higdon helps them maximize this rare opportunity by looking for problems, whether in orchestration or notation, before the first rehearsal, when they will face their peers' questions and struggles. The final performance, in a student recital, is recorded. "It's the ultimate learning experience," she said. "The kids who come out of Curtis in composition are really a couple of steps ahead of the game, because they're coming out with recordings done by a very good orchestra."

When Dr. Higdon was a student, it took six weeks to prepare the score and parts for the concerts, writing each note in ink and not being able to remove or insert a measure without having to redo pages. Today, students complete the task in two weeks, using computer software for notation. It's easier for both the composers and the performers. However, there's always the risk of rushing because of the relative ease of notating at the computer. "The trick," she said, "is to try to make the best of your imagination but also allow the computer to help you and not

hinder you in any way."

Computers deserve some of the credit for Dr. Higdon's prominence: Performance and publishing requests are handled through her website (www.jenniferhigdon.com) and her own publishing business, Lawdon Press.

"I didn't know it could get this busy," said Dr. Higdon, who has gained time for composing since her longtime partner, Cheryl Lawson, left her corporate job to work for Lawdon Press full-time. "We have a ton of music going out. But it's a really good thing."

Ms. Lawson works six days a week, eight to 10 hours a day, printing and binding music — or grabbing sets of parts from the well-stocked shelves in their storage-rich Center City Philadelphia home — to package and ship to distributors, school libraries, and ensembles nationwide.

Dr. Higdon's compositions are heard on more than 100 programs annually, by chamber groups, high school and college ensembles, and various orchestras. According to a survey by the American Symphony Orchestra League, she is the most frequently performed living American composer of an orchestral work written in the past 25 years — *blue cathedral*, commissioned for Curtis's 75th anniversary in 1999/2000. This season's slate includes the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra (in Dr. Higdon's home state of Tennessee); Grand Rapids, San Antonio, Utah, Mobile, and Florida West Coast symphonies; Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (with which she has a six-week residency); and a New Mexico high-school honors orchestra.

Lawdon Press accommodates small rental budgets. After all, its philosophy is that the music should be available to those who want to play it. "The Wooster Symphony out in Wooster, Ohio, wants to do *blue cathedral*," said Dr. Higdon. "I think they can rent one piece a year. But we can figure out a way to make it affordable for them. It's kind of nice to have that control." They even loan orchestras a set of the Chinese harmony balls required in the score.

Dr. Higdon can deliver one orchestral order by hand: the score and parts for her tone poem "river sings a song to trees"



Composer Jennifer Higdon ~ PHOTO: CANDACE DICARLO

from *City Scape*, to be performed by the Curtis Symphony Orchestra in April, with Christoph Eschenbach conducting. *City Scape* was commissioned in 2002 by alumnus Robert Spano, music director of the Atlanta Symphony and the former teacher who first steered Dr. Higdon to Curtis. The piece is the middle of a three-movement symphonic work that was recorded with Dr. Higdon's Concerto for Orchestra. The Telarc album earned four Grammy nominations and received an award for best engineering.

She considers the Curtis concert to be the highlight of her season. "When you get the Curtis orchestra, first of all, they're really, really good," Dr. Higdon said. "And they have a kind of interest and enthusiasm, a freshness that you can have only when you're at the early stages of the learning experience."

Furthermore, the concert is a tribute to retiring president/director Gary Graffman, who began his tenure in 1986, Dr. Higdon's first year as a student at Curtis. "He's done so much for the school," she said. "We didn't have that much financial aid. I used to work a job outside Curtis to make ends meet. So what they've done now is incredible, and I know a lot of that is the result of Gary's persistent work. It's very nice to be a part of that concert, makes it thrilling."

She is spreading the word about the April concert, and in Philadelphia, her fans are not only many, they're ubiquitous — like the elderly woman who stopped her as Dr. Higdon walked home from the post office in August. Dr. Higdon described a typical encounter: "They're like, 'Oh, honey, you don't know me, but I've come to all your preconcert talks. I've been following you for

years.' It's so sweet that they feel comfortable enough that they can talk about that. That's what music's supposed to be about, anyway. That just gets me all the more excited."

So how *does* a busy composer find fresh ideas?

The solutions may work their way into music history, because at Curtis, there's a cycle that builds repertoire. Dr. Higdon traces it back to the days when Samuel Barber was a Curtis student and his violin concerto was performed first by student Herbert Baumel. "These are additions to the repertoire that will change what I write," she said. "The fact that that happened here means I can say, 'Well, I don't think I want to write in the style of Schoenberg. I think I want to write more in the style of Barber.'"

Today faculty members Ida Kavafian and Steven Tenenbom commission and play new works, then share them with their students. Likewise, Jeffrey Khaner annually commissions a flute piece from a Curtis student.

Dr. Higdon also credits the performers. "They're an active part of the creation of their works. Making the history of them. These soloists will play these pieces enough that they become part of the repertoire, then they become part of the consciousness of the American music scene, and it will influence the composers who are writing down the road, which will influence the performers who might be working with those composers. It keeps the art alive and imaginative and fresh.

"It shows how pivotal a place like Curtis is, because where you have a high level of composing and a high level of performing, things are happening that are going to have a permanent effect on the music world." ☺