



Composed in Southern Maryland

By David Froom,
professor and chair, music department

I am a composer. It is an odd kind of work. As one of my former students liked to say, we put dots on paper.

We use a language that almost no one in the world can read with fluency (I am defining fluency as we do for reading prose: without sounding it out, to find meaning – large and small scale – while scanning the page many times faster than it would take to produce it out loud). We require a quiet place to work, and must be allowed to make a lot of noise, often repetitive and clangorous.

We create music that, because it is new, is currently needed by no one, and that, at best, will come to be desired by only a tiny percentage of the classical music audience. Further, we lay our offerings on the altar of a repertoire overflowing with riches: one could spend a lifetime getting to know the works of Josquin, Palestrina, Monteverdi, Bach, Handel, Beethoven, Mozart, Haydn, Verdi, Brahms, Puccini, Debussy, Ravel, Wagner, Mahler, Bartok, Rachmaninoff, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Ligeti, and Britten, to mention only a handful of the hundreds of great composers, each of whom left hundreds of works for us to treasure – not to mention the tremendous and important music in other genres (pop, rock, jazz, country, blues, world music) that forms such a crucial part of our daily lives.

I'm not complaining. I love my work, and have had the great fortune of having found an audience for it. But, for all the reasons above (and more), it is a solitary and admittedly quixotic thing to do.

Much of the joy of being a composer comes from the fact that writing music is necessarily collaborative. My music exists only as dots until performers translate it to sound. Beyond this, most composers have found immense inspiration in, and need for, each other's company. We tend to be a gregarious bunch when together, comparing notes (in all senses). As a student and early in my professional life, I had daily friendly contact with many composers. When I came to St. Mary's, however, I found myself to be the only classical composer within a 60-mile radius. I knew that Haydn had said working in isolation (he lived a half-day's trip outside of Vienna) forced him to be original. But his is an anomalous example – and he did

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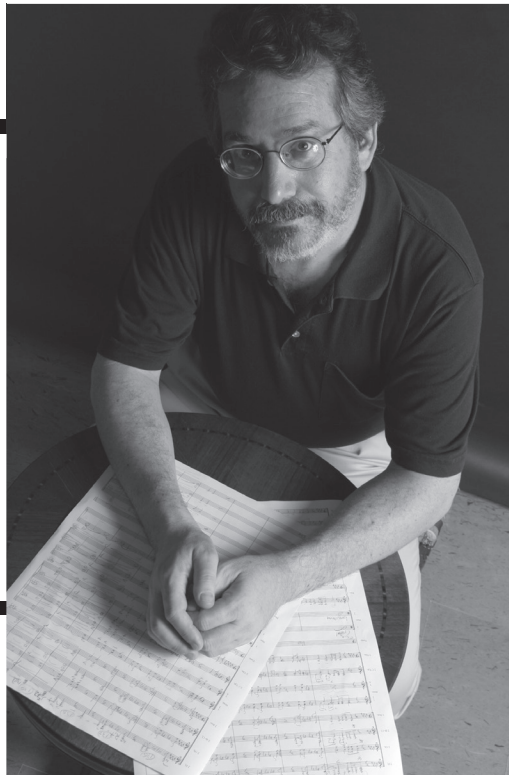


Photo by Bruno Muraldo

often travel to Vienna, where he was close with Mozart and Beethoven (talk about a community!)

Later, he lived for a number of years in London, which was then, as now, a thriving musical hub.

In my first years here, I spent a lot of time driving back and forth to Washington and Baltimore. I became an active member of those composer communities. As time went on, though, communication with composer colleagues became phone calls and e-mail, as time spent in this community and with my family became more precious. I still travel, especially to performances of my own music, though no longer to all or even most of them.

I do not miss the travel. The College and St. Mary's County have provided a complete community, abundant with personal, intellectual, and artistic blessings. In addition to the privilege of being a member of this College's community of fine scholars, I am surrounded by a music faculty of first-rate performers, all of whom

have become great friends. And these performers have helped to attract a steady stream of visiting composers who come to the College to hear their music being performed so well. Eliza Garth, who has national renown for her many splendid recordings of modern music, plays regular solo piano and chamber music recitals that always include music of living composers, many of whom have visited here. Larry Vote's choirs present the music of living composers, including many works written by my students. Professors Sterling Lambert and Deborah Lawrence are ardent proponents of new music in their classes – and as scholars who study dead composers, they evince deep sympathy for those of us still living. Music director Jeffrey Silberschlag has been a genuine advocate for new music. Not only has he attracted touring groups to play here, usually asking them to bring new music, he has seen to it that the River Concert Series always includes at least one or two newly commissioned works. The College's Alba Festival in

Italy has become an exciting venue for new music, and has always included a visiting composer on the faculty, as well as three or four visits by other composers.

Most gratifying, students come to me wanting to join the compositional community. Especially in recent years, no doubt connected to the environment we've created, the students are writing music worth savoring, and a few of them are on their way toward fine careers. One of the most crucial lessons they learn here is the importance of working with and among a community of musicians – writing pieces for their colleagues and friends while forming the musical bonds with fellow student composers and performers from which a musician's life begins.

As I head into a full year of composing (I am on sabbatical leave for 2010-11), I am often asked if I'm going anywhere. I am – to my home office for a year of clangorous and repetitive noise-making in connection with figuring out which dots to put on paper, emerging, when possible, for the fellowship of my colleagues, the performers, and visiting composers whose presence contributes so much to the musical life of our beautiful campus.

David Froom's sabbatical projects include a work for flute and string orchestra for Italian flutist Giuseppe Nova, an ambitious work for saxophone and piano for Iowa-based saxophonist Kenneth Tse, the rewriting for baritone and orchestra of his "Amichai Songs," and working with his wife and two daughters to civilize a new puppy. His 17-minute "Sonata for Solo Violin" has just been released on Navonna Records.