

Iron Composer returns to Baldwin Wallace: a conversation with director Joe Drew

by Mike Telin



On Friday, September 4 at Baldwin Wallace Conservatory, the creativity of five composers will be tested when they have five hours to write a brand new piece of music in order to win the coveted title of [Iron Composer](#). Competition director Joe Drew said that this year's contestants are all accomplished composers and college-level teachers whose musical styles are quite varied. "We try to select as diverse a group as possible. We are

putting on a show, and it wouldn't work if we had a group of composers who all write in similar styles, or who would all have a similar response to the stimulus of the challenge."

What is that challenge? On Friday at 9:00 am in the Chamber Hall, the five finalists will be assigned an instrumentation and a secret musical ingredient that must be incorporated into their work. Past challenges have paired piano trio with a Monet painting, pipe organ with 19th-century music boxes, and brass trio with audience participation. After five hours, the composers must submit a score and parts for their finished piece. Their work will be performed and judged during a free public concert at 8 pm in Gamble Auditorium. Following the performance, prizes will be awarded, and the title of Iron Composer will be bestowed.

This year, competition organizers received 205 submissions from composers around the globe. "During the initial vetting I only looked at the musical scores," Drew pointed out. "This year we had nearly twenty that we ranked very high, and that was when we began to look at the composers' bios and websites and listen to their other works."

And who are the five finalists? This year's competitors include [Kristen Broberg](#), associate professor of composition at the University of North Texas, [Dorothy Hindman](#), assistant professor of composition at the University of Miami Frost School of Music, [Ryan Keebaugh](#), assistant professor of music at Eastern Mennonite University, [Rica Narimoto](#), a lecturer at Aichi University of the Arts, Kanazawa University, Japan, and [Tawnie Olson](#), adjunct professor of composition at the Hartt School of Music.

That makes four women and one man in the 2015 group. "It's funny because composition is still such a male-dominated field," Drew said. "But when the initial sort was completed, and I looked at the group of the highest-ranked compositions, I was stunned by how many women there were. And as we began to look closer at their portfolios, it became clear that this would be the year for women."

What characteristics was Drew looking for during his initial vetting of the compositions? "I'm a score junkie. I will go to the library and read scores like nobody's business. Looking at scores is very similar to the way you can crack the first page of a book and decide whether to keep reading or not. When you look at the first page of a musical score, you react the same way — you can tell right away how developed someone's compositional voice is. The scores that I marked as 'very high' were the ones that I would love to hear performed live."

In addition to inviting a diverse group of composers, Drew believes it is equally important to have diverse voices represented on the jury. The 2015 judges include Stephen Hartke, chair of the composition department at Oberlin College, and Dee Perry, host of *Applause* on WVIZ and long-time WCPN radio personality. The identity of the performer-judge will be revealed on the day of the competition.

"Stephen Hartke will be able to offer remarks from the point of view of an accomplished composer and teacher. The performer-judge will bring a player's perspective into the mix, and we want the third judge to be a proxy for the audience — someone who is musically literate but is neither a full-time musician nor a composer, and Dee Perry fits that profile perfectly.

How do the organizers spread the word about the competition? "We use a lot of social media, but the best way is through composer opportunity websites like American Composers Forum and Composersite.com. I think those ones attracted the submissions from around the world. We also send a call for submissions to composition professors. In the early years of the competition we asked them to tell their students about Iron Composer, but we soon started receiving applications from the professors themselves. That's when we realized we were onto something."

Drew said he also looks forward to returning to Baldwin Wallace Conservatory, the competition host. “It’s wonderful to be at BW and it’s great to have all of the conservatory students in attendance. Having such a big audience at the concert makes it a lot more fun for the composers.”

In addition to being named Iron Composer, the winner will receive \$500 in cash and a \$500 commission from Blue Water Chamber Orchestra. The remaining finalists will also receive cash prizes. The concert will be broadcast live on WCLV, 104.9 FM and simulcast on <http://wclv.ideastream.org/>. On Thursday, September 3 at 5:30 pm in Room K115 at BW’s Kulas Hall, the finalists will discuss their music and careers and meet with the public.

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