Grand Valley New Music Ensemble to perform at Bop Stop March 16

by Mike Telin

Since giving their first concert in April of 2006, the Grand Valley State University New Music Ensemble, under the direction of Bill Ryan, has been on a fast track to establishing itself as one of the premier collegiate groups dedicated to the performance of contemporary classical music.

To celebrate the ensemble's tenth anniversary, Ryan and his young musicians will begin their five-day tour with a performance at the Bop Stop on Wednesday, March 16 beginning at 8:00 pm featuring their new *Music in their Words* project. The evening will also include selections from their CD *In C Remixed* as a tribute to Terry Riley's 80th birthday year as well as commissions from their National Parks project, dance-inspired commissions, and a soundtrack to an animated short film. In addition to Cleveland, the tour will include stops in Oberlin, Columbus, Indianapolis, and Chicago.

Bill Ryan said that he was met with enthusiasm from the students when he formed the new music ensemble in Allendale, Michigan in 2006. "Although they didn't know what they were getting into, they trusted me," Ryan said during a telephone conversation. "They hadn't had a lot of experience with contemporary music, but they went with me. I was excited about it and I think that's what got them on board."

Since the ensemble's creation Ryan has commissioned 33 works for them, and he is particularly happy with the results of the *Music in their Words* commissions. For the project, Ryan asked six composers to write works that incorporate the speaking voice of another composer who has been important to them. "The project is similar to one the Bang on a Can All Stars did a couple of years ago," Ryan said. "I gave the composers no

guidelines, I just told them to choose a figure who has been inspirational to them. They didn't need to know them personally, but they could be as close as a mentor or teacher. So they decided on the composers and the texts."

When all was said and done, composer Sarah Kirkland Snider had chosen to incorporate the voice of Arvo Pärt; Todd Reynolds chose Meredith Monk; Anna Clyne, John Cage; Michael Lowenstern, James Brown; Gyan Riley, his father Terry Riley; and Marc Mellits, Steve Reich.

"Marc knows Steve Reich quite well and he asked him to recite what I think is the first line from one of his books, and Gyan Riley had his dad record some of his own writing as well," Ryan said.

Ryan, who is a composer himself, said he had entered undergraduate school with other plans. "I was a trumpet player and wanted to be exactly like my own high school band director," Ryan recalled. "But halfway through I had a theory class with a teacher who was also a composer. I was amazed that this living composer was standing in front of me every day. I became interested in his music and started taking lessons with him. I never really looked back."

How has Ryan managed to amass such an impressive list of composers and musicians who have worked with the Grand Valley Ensemble? The answer can be traced to his first job at Suffolk Community College on Long Island, where he took profit of the fantastic new music community that existed an hour away in New York City. "I started reaching out to composers and performers and asked them to come out to the college. That's how I started my relationships with all of these people. I was there for ten years. I ran a concert series and had a new music ensemble. I also commissioned quite a number of works. I just got to know this great core of people who introduced me to their circles, and I've maintained all of those relationships."

Ryan said that instilling a sense of relevance into everything the ensemble does is important. "Those practical, real-world things like bringing in artists and composers, taking them on tour, and talking about grant applications — that's all a piece of the real world. Hopefully the students will have less of an adjustment to make when they leave."

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