

KSU's Frank Wiley to retire after 39 years at the University

by Daniel Hathaway



This Saturday evening's concert by the Kent New Music Ensemble on April 28 at 7:30 pm in Ludwig Recital Hall will mark the end of an era at the University. Composer Frank Wiley, who founded the group in 1980 and now co-directs it with saxophonist Noa Even, is retiring from the KSU faculty at the end of the current academic year after nearly four decades — but not to a life of shuffleboard and crossword puzzles.

When I asked him in a recent telephone conversation what he'd do first thing the morning after he retires, he didn't have to think. "I'll probably be composing," he said.

Wiley has a long list of promised pieces in his inbox. "I've got a violin concerto I'm going to be writing for Jameson Cooper, a wind ensemble piece for Jesse Leyva, a percussion quartet for Michael Burritt and his Eastman percussion ensemble, a flute and clarinet duet, and the second version of a piece we're going to perform on Saturday night," he said. "That'll keep me busy."

Though he will continue in his post as music director at the Methodist Church in Kent, retirement will give Wiley longer stretches of time to compose than he's been able to string together while holding down a university professorship. "If I only have

twenty minutes, I really can't get anything done except for mindless tasks like entering notation into the computer. I really need at least two hours to do any creative work.”

Wiley joined the faculty of the Hugh A. Glauser School of Music in 1979, after studying composition with Donald Erb and Roger Hannay. He holds a B.Mus. degree in organ performance and an M.Mus. in composition from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and a DMA in composition from CIM and CWRU.

His compositions span a broad range of solo, chamber, orchestral, vocal, choral, multimedia, and electronic music. He has received grants and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Ohio Arts Council, the Bascom Little Fund, the Kent State University Research Council, the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP), and the American Music Center. In 1986 he was awarded the Cleveland Arts Prize for music composition.

Given all the possibilities, how did Frank Wiley choose which pieces he wanted to program for his last New Music Ensemble Concert? The self-effacing composer told me that he originally wasn't planning to emphasize his own music on Saturday. “But Noa Even said, ‘What are you thinking! This concert has to be about you!’”

Wiley said it's going to be an interestingly shaped concert because it begins and ends very quietly. “Also, the pieces are in chronological order, which is just a coincidence. The first piece, *Horizon*, I wrote in 1986 for the Cleveland Chamber Symphony when Ed London was directing it. And then I have a set of songs on poems by James Agee from 1990 to be sung by Susan Fletcher, a Kent alum, then *Rituals of Earth and Fire*, a violin solo from 1999, to be played by Jameson Cooper, and finally *Violet Spirals of Twilight*, which I finished in March.” The program also includes works by Jeffrey Mumford and Joan Tower.

I asked Wiley to name some highlights of his long career at Kent. “In addition to creating the New Music Ensemble, I also conducted the Kent Orchestra for 14 years, which meant I had to give up the New Music Ensemble for a while. I finally stepped down at the request of the graduate students who wanted to get the New Music Ensemble going again,” Wiley said. He noted that one of his students finally sealed the deal by promising to do all the organizational work if he would conduct.

Prompted to recall other highlights, memories of compositions and performances began spilling out, stream of consciousness-style. A Cleveland Orchestra premiere under Dohnányi in Severance and Carnegie Halls that was broadcast all over the country. Crumb's *Ancient Voices of Children* at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Annual Third Friday performances at W. 78th Studios. Works written for organist Karel Paukert, “who always wants crazy pieces,” including *Labyrinth*, a liturgical piece for three organs, five sopranos, and a cast of dozens that was performed at St. Paul’s in Cleveland Heights twice last season.

After we hung up, Wiley emailed a list of other notable performances and recordings of his works that have happened over the decades:

Star-Fall Dances for clarinet and marimba premiered and recorded by Dennis Nygren and Michael Burritt.

Incantation and Spirit Dance premiered by clarinetist Dennis Nygren at the international clarinet conference, and recorded by Nygren on his CD *A Clarinet Collective*.

Caverns for solo tuba premiered by Cleveland Orchestra principal tubist Ronald Bishop.

Laments and Exultations: Concerto for Viola and Orchestra premiered by violist Yu Jin (KSU faculty at the time, now principal viola of the Indianapolis Symphony) and the Kent State University Orchestra, Frank Wiley conducting.

PRIZM for clarinet and percussion premiered by the PRIZM Duo.

Desert Rose premiered by Scott MacPherson and the KSU Chorale, performed by Scott MacPherson and the Isthmus Vocal Ensemble, Madison, Wisconsin.

Laudate Dominum premiered on tour of Italy by C. M. Shearer and the KSU Chorale.

Chamber Concerto, for harpsichord, flute, oboe, and string quintet premiered and recorded by Karel Paukert and the Coventry Chamber Players, Frank Wiley conducting.

Passages for saxophone quartet premiered by the Assembly Quartet.

Earth Dances recorded by the percussion quintet of the Kentuckiana Brass and Percussion Ensemble.

Wiley will leave the Kent New Music Ensemble in good hands. “Noa Even has been co-director for the last few years, and having a young, virtuoso performer who’s a

specialist in new music and improvisation is wonderful,” he said. “And she knows everybody.”

In lieu of a retirement party, Frank Wiley is suggesting that performers and friends meet up at Bricco in Kent after Saturday’s performance.

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