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Deeply Heard

Tim Obermiller

Illinois Wesleyan University

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Deeply Heard

Bringing forth the creative voice within, Professor David Vayo inspires both his students and music listeners around the world.

Story by **TIM OBERMILLER**

Portrait photos by **MARIE-SUSANNE LANGILLE**



David Vayo (above) says he "is a firm believer in active collaboration between composers and performers." He is both a prolific composer and busy performer.

"I listen, mostly," writes David Vayo, the newly appointed Fern Rosetta Sherff Professor in Music, in a haiku about how he approaches composing. "Trying not to interfere / with the sounds inside."

By bringing those sounds to life through musical performance and inspiring his students to do the same, Vayo has become a creative force both on campus and around the world. He has earned dozens of awards and commissions for his musical compositions, including a prestigious fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. More than 400 performances and broadcasts of his compositions have taken place throughout the United States and in many other countries, including Mexico, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, Thailand, Germany, France and Brazil.

A native of New Haven, Conn., Vayo earned bachelor's and master's degrees in music composition at Indiana University (his undergraduate degree included a second major, jazz studies) and was awarded a doctorate in composition from the University of Michigan. As head of the School of Music's Composition Department, Vayo teaches composition, improvisation and contemporary music. He is also a busy performer, playing piano and synthesizer in contemporary-music, free-improvisation and jazz venues.

Vayo was formally installed as the Fern Rosetta Sherff Professor during this spring's Commencement. It was "not only a delight but a profound honor," he says, to assume the chair previously held by Professor of Piano C. Lawrence Campbell, who died last year, and before that by R.

Bedford Watkins, who served on the music faculty for three decades, retiring in 1988.

Vayo's strengths as both a composer and teacher exemplify what it means to serve on the University's music faculty, says School of Music Director Mario Pelusi, who himself is a successful composer of numerous chamber and orchestral works.

"David has been a remarkably productive composer, and it has been my pleasure to conduct the premieres of a number of David's compositions," says Pelusi. "His music is always highly imaginative and very well crafted, which explains why his compositions are so attractive to an amazingly large number of performers of new music. Also, as my colleague in our Theory and Composition Department, I know David to be a very fine teacher and an excellent role model for budding young composers."

This spring, Vayo took time out from his busy composing and teaching schedule to reflect on contemporary music and where the “sounds inside” have taken him.

You’ve had dozens of performances of your compositions take place all over the world. Are there any that stand out as the most memorable?

Every once in a while I get the chance to hear my music performed by transcendently talented musicians (the St. Louis Symphony, the Orquesta Sinfónica de Galicia in Spain and the New York New Music Ensemble, among others) who can play and understand anything that’s on the page. Hearing one’s music performed by folks like that is an unforgettable rush, with all the nuances and colors ablaze.

What do you find most rewarding about your work as a teacher of young composers here at Wesleyan?

Helping young artists spread their wings, take chances and listen more discerningly.

Do you think these are difficult times for young composers? What sorts of opportunities are out there?

The current generation of young composers is hammering away at the already-weakened walls between concert music and pop music, and they’re crashing down — hooray! There are many young composers like Nico Muhly, Jonny Greenwood (of Radiohead) and Mason Bates who have pop bands and also write concert works, and there’s a growing audience of adventuresome young listeners who seek out new music of all kinds.

Software has made it possible for composers to have successful film-music careers outside of the Hollywood scene, and the video-game industry has created a market for composers that didn’t exist a few decades ago. Of course, all of these opportunities are less robust than they would be with a stronger economy, but on balance it’s a good and exciting time to be a young composer.

You are an active performer with a free-jazz/improvisational group and also teach an improv class at IWU. Does it surprise anyone that, as a composer, you are so into improvisation?

Not that I’ve encountered. There’s a wonderfully named jazz group in the Netherlands called the Instant Composers Pool, and that’s what improvisation is — instant composition. When composing, you edit things and write them down, but the creative spark is the same.

You often collaborate with School of Music colleagues in performances of your compositions. Do you feel a sense of community in the school where faculty are supportive of each other’s work?

Yes, it’s quite wonderful to work with colleagues; many have lent their talents to my music over the years, and I’m really grateful to be in a place where that happens.

You are assuming the professorship that was previously held by Larry Campbell and R. Bedford Watkins. Do you have any personal



At commencement, Vayo was invested with the Fern Rosetta Sherff Professorship.

feelings related to this legacy you are continuing?

While I arrived at IWU too late to have had the pleasure of hearing Bedford perform, I treasured Larry's eloquent and accomplished performances and can only hope my music approaches that level of achievement.

You are coordinator of New Music Activities at IWU. What is "new music" exactly?

Within the context of my position, I'd define it as concert music (otherwise known as classical music) written in recent decades. However, we have a big tent; jazz and improvisation events are also part of IWU's New Music Series. Further, there are so many styles in new concert music — from poppy stuff based on loops to gnarly, detail-packed ear-twisters — that using one term for all of it is almost meaningless.

From where do you draw inspiration?

I've worked on cultivating a state of mind in which musical ideas bubble up freely, as my haiku describes; when things are going well I sometimes feel more like a secretary or a radio receiver than a composer. Nature, people, travel, spiritual experiences, things I've read and listened to undoubtedly all affect my music. However, unless I'm setting a text or otherwise working in conjunction with something outside of music, I'm not usually consciously aware of the influences — the nonmusical ones, anyway.

That's probably for the best, as otherwise I might start getting self-conscious while composing, and self-consciousness is to this artist what a swamp is to a car. If the influences are subliminal, they're likely to have a more organic and balanced effect on my music.

TO READ MORE ABOUT IWU'S NEW MUSIC PROGRAM, [CLICK HERE](#).

TO READ DAVID VAYO'S RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LISTENERS WANTING TO EXPLORE NEW MUSIC, [CLICK HERE](#).

TO GO TO DAVID VAYO'S WEBSITE, [CLICK HERE](#).