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A Shared Experience

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A Shared Experience

Today, R. Kent Cook feels like practicing some Bach — a composer whose ability to craft puzzles of logic into works of beauty has appealed to him from a young age.

“Sometimes I’ll study a piece because I feel an affinity at the time for that composer,” he says.

“I think within all of us we have so many layers to our personalities, and that’s one of the wonderful things about music. There are so many different kinds of music that you can find the kind of music that’s going to fit the mood you’re in or will express an emotion you’re feeling. I find that’s a great gift of music for me; it’s an emotional outlet.”

This is something he can share with both students and audiences in his dual roles as teacher and performer, he says.

An international performer who studied as a Fulbright Scholar at the Hochschule für Musik in Frankfurt, Germany, Cook credits much of his interest in taking up the piano to a recording of the nocturnes of Chopin that he listened to as a child. This inspiration – and a lifelong enjoyment of staying awake late into the night – were behind his 2001 CD, *Nachtstücke*. In the liner notes, he invites listeners to enjoy the collected nocturnes’ “evocations of the beautiful images and colors of the night.”

Cook speaks readily of emotional connections forged with composers, students, and listeners. Yet when he first entered college at Baylor University, his intention was to become a dentist. Music seemed more appropriately a pastime than a profession.



R. Kent Cook introduces students and audiences to contemporary music. (Photo by Jamie Stukenberg)

It soon became his major. Sagely advised by teachers to equip himself for a university-based career, he went on to earn his master’s and doctoral degrees in piano performance from Indiana University. He came to Illinois Wesleyan after teaching for four years at DePauw University in Greencastle, Ind.

“I knew from the beginning I’d be performing and teaching, but I don’t think you realize until you’re out of school the reality of juggling those two ... *careers*, really.”

It can be tough to find the emotional and physical energy to practice after a full day invested in students, he admits. When he has a major performance approaching, Cook tries to fit in three to four hours of personal practice daily — which can amount to 14-hour days in Presser Hall.

“So if it’s going to be that much time, it’s a really great thing that I love it,” he says. “I love the teaching and I love the practicing. It’s all about music so I love it, but it’s not for everybody.”

Neither does everybody love contemporary music, but it’s Cook’s goal to offer some to both students and audiences. Even if an unconventional modern piece is a stretch for a student, Cook believes the experience of playing new music is how they’ll gain an appreciation and

understanding for what they may at first deem “a bunch of banging.” He believes it’s important to foster a transition from the music of Beethoven, Bach, and Mozart — great works of humanity which may nevertheless, with passing time, become more like museum pieces — to music representing living composers.

As he strives to ease this transition by including a contemporary selection in most of his recitals, Cook has found people usually enjoy the chance to sample contemporary music, despite its unfamiliarity.

Aware of their faculty sponsor’s appreciation for modern sounds, Illinois Wesleyan’s chapter of the music fraternity Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia has commissioned for Cook a piece by Temple University’s Jan Krzywicki, as a show of its gratitude.

Cook’s interest in helping his students and audiences discover merit in contemporary music reflects his commitment to both teaching and performing.

“What I love about teaching is sharing my ideas with a student, sharing what I’ve learned. In a performance, you’re sharing your ideas with the audience, or you’re sharing what you’ve learned about this composer with the audience.”

The shared experience of music can be a wonderful feeling, he says. “It’s always fulfilling after you play and someone will come up to you and say, ‘This piece really touched me.’”

Yet helping students open themselves to the possible impact of their performances isn’t always easy.

“Forming an emotional connection with the piece is part of the learning process, and that’s hard to teach sometimes. Some students — especially students who are 18, 19, 20 — aren’t necessarily in touch with their emotions anyway, and to ask them to get connected with their emotions and express their emotions on stage in front of other people, that’s asking a lot.

“That’s part of the learning process for someone who’s learning to perform on stage — being vulnerable, expressing emotions through the piano or through whatever instrument they play.”

In guiding students to that level of vulnerability, Cook may be ushering them into the same creative worlds that he has spent his own musical life exploring.

“(Music is) something I love,” Cook says. “It’s my passion, it’s my life.

Ann Aubry works in the IWU University Communications office as an administrative assistant. Previously, she was an award-winning newspaper journalist. She lives in Bloomington and describes herself as an amateur but enthusiastic pianist and flutist.

