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Rachel Hatch
Illinois Wesleyan University

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McGowan Poetry Comes to Life in Reading, Composition

March 16, 2011

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. - "Speak poems or be silent" declared Illinois Wesleyan University Emeritus Professor of English James McGowan in his poem "Prefatory."

More than 50 years of McGowan's poetry was honored last week with an afternoon reading of his works titled "Poems in Five Decades: A Retrospective." Sponsored by the English Department, the event enabled McGowan to choose some of his favorite poems to read. Later that evening, in a special tribute at the New Music Café, Professor of Music David Vayo debuted a suite he composed titled "Sandpails," based on several of McGowan's poems.



*(From left) Emeritus Professor James McGowan
and Professor of Music David Vayo*

"Words have a certain music to them," said McGowan. "Whatever the poem, whatever the imagery, it is the sounds that really reverberate in my mind. The two are intricately connected."

McGowan, who retired from Illinois Wesleyan in 2000, has been writing poetry since the 1960s, and spent 20 years teaching it to IWU students. He has worked together with Vayo for years. The seeds of the suite Vayo composed stemmed from an invitation in 2003 to visit McGowan's classroom. "I wanted to talk to the students about the connection between music and poems. David is very good at improvising," said McGowan. "You can present him with a poem and he'll just go for it."

Vayo took interest in McGowan's "Quiet Poem," and created what would be the first of several inspired compositions. "You can hear the musicality of the poems when you read them," said Vayo, who incorporated eight of McGowan's poems into the suite. "One of the things I love about working with artists in other art forms is what it draws out of you. I always find myself pulled in new and wonderful directions. That is especially true of Jim's work, which has helped me grow as an artist and as a person."

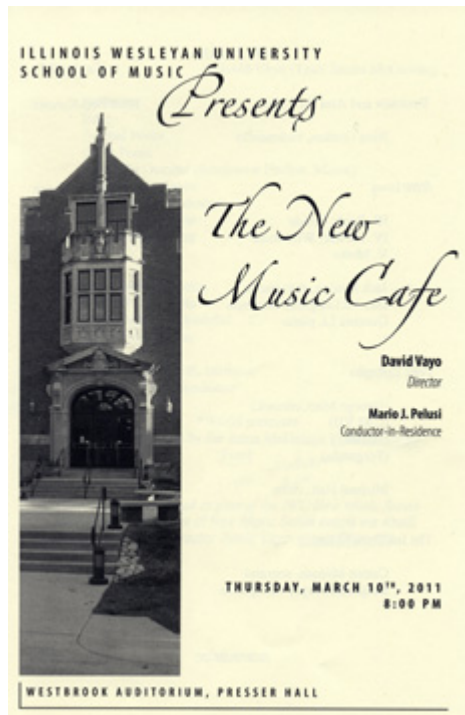
At the afternoon reading in the Turfler Room of the Memorial Center, McGowan's voice was low and calm as the sounds of "Quiet Poem" flowed from his lips. "'Turn your face to me. We two have slipped in spirals down the rocks and deep pools of each other, drunk our souls' refreshment from these wells this secret swimming.'" He told the audience the poem could be a love poem about him and his wife, or about anyone. McGowan's wife, Anne, sat at a nearby table and smiled.

Presenting the poems by decade, McGowan took the audience on a small tour of moments in his life - working in the hot sun painting fences as a young man, walking through the woods with his wife, or taking in scenes from the ocean where he spent his summers growing up in New Jersey. "They shuffle the tideline, cloaked in their dark distraction," he read from "Fantasy on a May Beach." "They have gone to the beach for a mirror or a miracle, and find its smooth shells, scooped and convoluted. Her image swims along the nacreous inner surface, and he holds and turns her, tiny in his hand."

By the 1980s, McGowan said his poetry took a backseat to translation work. He is known internationally for his translation of the French poet Charles Baudelaire, which English Department Chair James Plath noted is the standard resource used for studying Baudelaire's works. McGowan also graced the audience with several translations, and included a poem by German poet Wolfgang Borchert, which he translated with Illinois Wesleyan's Isaac Funk Professor Marina Balina for [a 2006 book](#).

In the 1990s, many of McGowan's poems were travel poems, stemming from his journeys to Greece and Italy. "I said I would never write a travel poem," said McGowan, who followed the statement with a simple shrug. "So...I lied." His poems in the 2000s were closer to home with such titles as "Flower Poem at Comlara Park" and "Walt Disney at Dawson Lake, a Fantasy." He included a

tribute to the graces of growing old in "Happy Poem for Anne," which tells of an elderly couple sitting on a park bench. "It's just a drowsy day," he read, "a day to think slow thoughts. No wonder they nod and slump and drift off into dream."



That evening at the musical tribute, the imposing deep red curtain of Westbrook Auditorium juxtaposed the intimate feel of the afternoon reading. When Vayo took the stage to introduce the suite he composed, he was only half-joking when he declared the day "a mini-Jim McGowan festival." The crowd gathered in Westbrook laughed appreciatively, including John McGrosso, who served on the Illinois Wesleyan University music faculty for more than 30 years, and whose fund, the Anna McGrosso Visiting Artists Fund, helped sponsor the Vayo performance.

Accompanied by a small group of musicians conducted by the Director of the School of Music Mario Pelusi, Vayo brought McGowan's words to life with dramatic swells of strings and piano. The clear and captivating voice of Visiting Assistant Professor of Music and Opera Theatre Director Robert Mangialardi varied between reading and carrying the poems into song. Images of the words emerged likely ghostly apparitions, bringing forth visions of rising water with the poem "Prefatory" - "these are endless as the waves, each poem a sampling retained, as in a child's bright sandpail, rinsed in salt and foam."

For the spirited "Animal Poem," Vayo chose deep, sonorous notes of the cello to resonate alongside Mangialardi's rendition of a bear, and the sweet, high strings of the viola and violin to capture a timid deer. In "Quiet Poem," the soft melody of the piano curled around the poem's words, giving way to the caress of stanzas

by the strings.

Talking in an interview before the performance, Vayo noted McGowan's words lent themselves easily to music. "Several of the earlier poems flowed together so seamlessly," he said, noting the three poems he strung together into the final continuous piece - "Little Venice, Mykonos," "Tide, Rising, Maine," and "Deepening Evening." Each poem wove into a piece of a story, Vayo said. "'Little Venice' is about friends just taking in the scene. It invokes life and vigor," said Vayo. "'Tide Rising' is a wonderful evocation of sitting on a rock with the tide coming in. It's a funny story, but also could be a metaphor for encroaching death. 'Deepening Evening' contains mystical images of docking a boat at dusk that seem to be beyond the mystery of what happens after death."

McGowan, who called last week's reading his "swan song," embraced the way Vayo interpreted his words. "I'm getting older and don't really write anymore," he said, "but when David discusses the poems, he sees things in them I'm not sure I even intended when I wrote them. They seem to take on a life of their own."

Vayo agreed. "I think one of the things we both love about art is that it can mean one thing to you, and then blossom into something entirely different for someone else."

Contact: Rachel Hatch, (309) 556-3960