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## Vayo Composes Inventive Piece Inspired by Nature

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— For Illinois Wesleyan Professor David Vayo, the sounds of nature took precedence this past winter. The Fern Rosetta Sherff Professor of Composition and Theory spent the month of February surrounded by mountains in Saratoga, Wyoming at the Brush Creek Foundation for the Arts, a program that offers artists of all mediums an opportunity to continue their professional development.

As an artist in residence, Vayo composed “Winter Into Spring,” which is written for an orchestra of approximately 25 primarily Chinese instruments, featuring three varieties of plucked string instruments, two cellos, a hammered dulcimer called the yangqin and three percussionists.



David Vayo (standing right) was present for the premiere of his composition, "Winter Into Spring," by the Taipei Liuqin Orchestra in Taiwan. Photo by Hung Ruei-Ren.

Vayo created the piece in about three and a half weeks, which he said took a great deal of creative energy. He related his work to any large endeavor when he explained, “If you’re writing for a big group of instruments, a lot of the process has to do with breaking up a large chunk of work down into small tasks.”

“Winter Into Spring” premiered on September 1 in Taipei, Taiwan, just months after it was completed. “It’s relatively rare, usually I have to wait many months or years for a performance after a piece is finished. The turnaround time was quite lovely,” said Vayo. The composition was performed by pipa soloist Yang Wei and the Taipei Liuqin Orchestra.

The recipient of 26 consecutive awards from the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, Vayo said the roots of the composition have been developing throughout the years. About eight years ago, the Orchid Ensemble, a Vancouver-founded group that focuses on Chinese instruments and traditions, sparked his interest when they visited Illinois Wesleyan. He then created a few solo pieces for one of the Orchid Ensemble’s instruments, the gu zheng, a Chinese plucked zither.



David Vayo

Vayo also discovered the pipa, another traditional Chinese instrument, about four years ago upon hearing Yang Wei and cellist Mike Block, who met as members of Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble, perform at Illinois Wesleyan.

The pipa (pronounced pí-pah) dates back almost two thousand years ago and is pear-shaped and wooden, with a short neck, four strings and 29 or 31 frets. As a plucked instrument, "The sound is quite different from the sustained sort of singing tones of violins," said Vayo. The pipa's name refers to the way it is played: "pi," for how the right hand strums the strings in a forward motion and "pa," for a backwards motion.

Celebrated musician Yang Wei began his musical career at the age of six. Wei, who plays several classical Chinese instruments but focuses his talent on mastering the pipa, has performed with various orchestras and ensembles throughout the world.

Wei and Vayo quickly formed a connection, both musically and personally. In 2010, Vayo composed "Color Garden," a solo piece for the artist, which was performed as a part of Illinois Wesleyan University's School of Music guest recital series in January 2011.

After Wei invited Vayo to compose for the Taipei Liuqin Orchestra, the group he plays with in Taiwan, Vayo was inspired to write "Winter Into Spring" for the orchestra.

Vayo said that as a real advocate of the music and role model for the group, Wei's charismatic performance of "Winter Into Spring" encapsulated the significance of the piece. "He was able to help the group understand the music's meaning and really bring out the expression."

Throughout the writing process, the prolific composer said his surroundings changed his perspective of the song. Originally, he thought the piece was going to be about the efflorescence of flowers and plants in the spring. However, in the middle of winter, he witnessed, "A clear night, gorgeous sky with the stars blazing," inspiring him to portray his surroundings in that season as well.

The final piece includes several movements about the progression of winter, titled "Piercing Winter Stars," "Hard Freeze" and "Snowfall." The last two movements, "Melting Ice, Warm Winds" and "Pushing Upwards: The Force of Life," focus on the transition from winter to spring with flowers and plants sprouting up from beneath the earth.

"I've never had my physical surroundings directly influence the music I was writing in that way before," the composer said, "It was really something."