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MSU takes the plunge with four plugged-in, multimedia composition profs

BY LAWRENCE COSENTINO (HTTP://LANSINGCITYPULSE.COM/BY-AUTHOR-88-1.HTML)

It's a public health crisis. People are on the edge. One more syrupy piano tinkle, one more cheap imitation of Philip Glass, one more "Carmina Burana"-style devil chant, and somebody might get hurt.

Who will save us from the manufactured music that pounds, oozes and drips into our ears, uninvited, from TV, movies, video games and the speakers behind the shrubbery?

Spartans will.

Michigan State University's College of Music has hired four new composition professors, all of them young and plugged in to the myriad forms and formats of the 21st century.

"We're going to take over the world," declared Alexis Bacon, 40, one of the four new hires.

"We're going to explore all aspects of music technology, interactive media, video and all kinds of collaborations."

"There's a lot more emphasis on different ways of performing," added Lyn Goeringer, one of Bacon's new MSU colleagues. "We can do a real intervention in the field."

MSU isn't breaking with the old conservatory model, Bacon said, but rather "opening it up." Students will still learn the craft of writing concerti, sonatas and the like, but they will also dive into the fluid universe of music for film, television, video gaming, experimental music and multimedia mash-ups yet undreamt of.

With two veteran faculty members, Jere Hutcheson and Charles Ruggiero, retiring, MSU went for broke. The four new faculty members – David Biedenbender, Zhou Tian, Goeringer and Bacon – are already hip-deep in collaborations with MSU's English and film departments and the Broad Art Museum, and that's only the beginning. A new music technology lab is in the works, and non-music majors will have a chance to study sound production and composition.

While students will still write pieces for the concert hall, veteran MSU composition professor



Clockwise from top left: Composers Alexis Bacon, Zhou Tian, Lyn Goeringer and David Biedenbender were recently hired by MSU's College of Music, filling the void left by retiring faculty members Jere Hutcheson and Charles Ruggiero. Courtesy Photos

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Mark Sullivan also expects they will put their creative stamp on “music for use,” from commercial jingles to film scores.

“Instead of saying, ‘That’s trivial bullshit,’ let’s try and make it so it’s not trivial bullshit,” Sullivan said. “You can’t sit back and wait for the industry to suddenly start turning out art. You have to get in there and start creating art, in spite of the fact that other people aren’t.”

“Being a composer nowadays isn’t only working on commission or getting a university job,” Bacon added. “We’re just trying to recognize what composers end up doing when they get out of school.”

Sullivan, a proponent of new and experimental music, was one of the chief instigators of the college’s great leap forward.

“In 40 years, I’ve never seen this kind of opportunity come along,” he said. “There should be all kinds of cool stuff coming out of it.”

A livelier concert scene on campus is also likely once the quartet of composers gets up a head of steam. Goeringer and her colleagues will provide a preview of coming attractions Sept. 16 at the first installment of a new film series, Broad Underground, as they improvise live to a curated set of films.

“Lyn, Alexis, David and Zhou have all been involved in new kinds of performance,” Sullivan said. “They’re interested in starting things like a laptop orchestra or a new music improvisation ensemble.”

Individually, let alone collectively, the new faculty members run an impressive musical gamut. Biedenbender, a graduate of the University of Michigan, has studied Carnatic music in Mysore, India, played electric bass in jazz groups and tuba in New Orleans-style brass bands and written music for everybody from avant-garde ensemble Alarm Will Sound to the U.S. Navy Band. One of his projects used brain scan data to create live music and video.

Zhou, perhaps the most traditional composer of the four, grew up in a recording studio with his father, who composed for TV commercials. Zhou’s neo-romantic music has been performed by symphony orchestras all over the world, but he’s no snob.

“Some of my best memories growing up is practicing Brahms for an hour and then going into the studio with my dad to play some jazz on the piano or sequencer for a commercial,” Zhou said. “That’s my life, and that’s the kind of openness I’d like to bring to MSU.”

Zhou said he wants to develop a curriculum for the 21st century, using technology and “giving our students a complete set of tools they need to be a composer of tomorrow.”

But gadgets aren’t enough. To Zhou, musical training must include “open-mindedness toward writing in all styles of music.”

“Now we see new music ensembles, mixed media and even the symphony orchestra is having a comeback,” he said. “More and more major works are being commissioned, so we should focus on that too.”

In the conservatories of 30 or 40 years ago, no student dared mention Tchaikovsky, let alone John Williams, to a composition professor. Such music was considered below academic consideration. But attitudes are changing.

“You bet, absolutely,” Zhou said with a laugh. “I was fortunate to be born in 1981. We’re in a really good place for music right now.”

Bacon agrees with her new colleagues that technology is great, but training in the basics of composition will still be crucial.

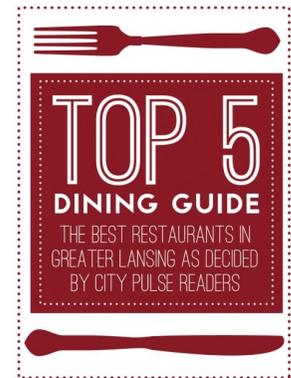
“We still consider ourselves to be an artistic program, not a job training program or a service



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to industry,” she said.

Bacon studied as a Fulbright scholar in France and studied composition at the University of Michigan with stalwarts like Michael Daugherty and William Bolcom. She teaches at Interlochen in the summer.

Check out Bacon’s weird and haunting “Cowboy Song,” for percussion and recorded voice, on YouTube, and you might never guess that she started on piano and viola at a young age and fell in love with the ballets of Tchaikovsky. But there’s a common thread that links the Russian composer and her mentors.

“They have an amazing gift for melody, and they use it in a logical way, a way that tells a story,” Bacon said. “Not everything I write has a melody, but having the music tell a story – follow a logic and form – is important to me.”

Goeringer, the most experimental of the four, creates her own instruments out of found objects and coaxes them to sing in strange and wonderful ways. One of the most interesting is a sodium vapor street light.

“I started playing with the voltage, making it pop and make these rustling, aggressive sounds, various groans,” she said. “It’s not a pretty instrument, it’s more of an aggressive, percussive sound centered on one tone.”

She got her first big musical thrill as a kid from her brother’s “Dr. Who” soundtrack recordings.

“I devoured them – the sound effects, the music, everything,” Goeringer said. “That was the beginning of real weird electronics for me.”

Later, in elementary school, a teacher took her to hear the Denver Symphony Orchestra play Krzysztof Penderecki’s harrowing “Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima.” The music calls for string players to generate horrific vibratos and eerie screeches and to slap and scrape their instruments in unholy ways.

“It was like, ‘Holy Cow, we can do anything with an instrument,’” Goeringer recalled.

Goeringer is likely to become the go-to person for local creators who want to blend non-traditional sound into their work. She’s the first MSU faculty member to have a joint position in music and film studies.

“I’ve done a lot of work with maker spaces and environments to work with people on thinking differently about sound production, visual digital media like video games or sound production and music performance,” she said.

Her own performances, and those of her students, are likely to stretch local ears. Sullivan has been centered in the world of experimental and avant-garde music for decades, but he said Goeringer’s radical approach to sound makes him feel like a “fuddy-duddy.”

“I’m tickled pink,” he said.

One of the early pleasures of MSU’s composition plunge is seeing Sullivan, one of the department’s most indefatigable white-haired lions, light up over it.

“I’m close enough that I could retire, but these people are the future of composition,” Sullivan said. “I never liked going fishing anyhow.”

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