MSU alumnus and acclaimed composer returns to MSU

David Maslanka, author of more than 130 works, including 40 wind ensemble pieces, seven symphonies, 15 concertos and many concert pieces. A sparkling example of hard work and dedication to his craft.

Acclaimed composer and MSU alumnus returned this week for a guest residency with the MSU College of Music.

Before he was a celebrated songwriter with 50 years experience, responsible for widely celebrated works like “Symphony #4,” “Mother Earth,” and “Give Us This Day.”

Born in New Bedford, Massachusetts, Maslanka’s musical career began as a clarinetist in 4th grade. Maslanka said he found opportunities to play as he became more and more proficient, the most important of which came in high school.

“I took lessons at New England Conservatory, and I also played in what was called the Great Boston Youth Symphony Orchestra, which was a great high school-level orchestra. And so I think that experience pushed me in the direction of music, and also (made me begin) thinking about composing,” Maslanka said.

Maslanka went on to attend the Oberlin College Conservatory of Music, a well-known music school in Ohio, where he said he began his studies in clarinet and in composition.
“My actual degree was in education, music education,” Maslanka said. “But my interests at the time were not toward that, more toward composing.”

After graduating from Oberlin, Maslanka’s sights turned to East Lansing – he began attending MSU for graduate studies. He said some personal connections were what first brought MSU to his attention.

“My piano teacher at Oberlin had a son named Conrad Owens, and he was in school here (at MSU) studying with (Elsa Ludewig-Verdehr),” Maslanka said. Ludewig-Verdehr is an internationally recognized clarinetist who was named a University Distinguished Professor by MSU in 1997.

“Elsa Ludewig(Verdehr), who was and still is a teacher at clarinet here after all these years, was a graduate of Oberlin College not too many years before me, so there was that connection,” he said.

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Maslanka said he had applied to several schools, and one of the important factors in deciding on MSU was the teacher of composition, a man named Herbert Owen Reed.

“He was professor of composition at Michigan State, and he was my teacher for five years,” Maslanka said.

Reed, a doctor of music and alumnus of the University of Rochester, retired from his position as professor at MSU in 1976. He was chairman of the College of Music during his tenure. Maslanka said that he considers Reed his mentor, and a very important part of his development as a musician and composer.

“(Reed) was a very good functioning composer and practical musician who gave me not only a model of professionalism, but brought me into working directly with preparation and performance of his music,” Maslanka said.

In addition to Reed’s influence, Maslanka said one of his favorite things about his time at MSU was the faculty who taught music theory and composition.

“The rest of the theory faculty was outstanding – Paul Harder, Russell Friedewald, Theodore Johnson, Gomer Jones,” Maslanka said. “These people gave me the working technical foundation for my career as a composer.

“They were a powerful bunch of people, and it was interesting that they should all be blended here, at Michigan State, during that time,” he said. “I always (think) back to when I received. ... Basic training, real solid technical training in what I needed to know.”

Maslanka’s returns to MSU – such as this week’s residency – are organized through the band department, who often invite him to come. Maslanka will teach composition classes to band students during the residency, and has had nothing but praise for the different bands – Musique 21, Symphony Band, Wind Symphony and the Concert & Campus bands he has worked with this week.

This fall return marks the 50th anniversary of Maslanka’s graduate studies at MSU – 50 years of success and acclaim, exacerbated by the training he received all that time ago.

“It means, very quickly, a whole lifetime has gone by,” Maslanka said. “I started graduate school here in 1965, which is 50 years ago, it’s kind of an astonishing thing still to be walking on the earth, and to have all that time that’s gone by.”

Maslanka said it’s a personal amazement for him to go back and visit all the places he’s seen and to remember them.
“There is a wonderful sense of continuity in the presence of the old building,” Maslanka said. “Hallways, stairs and rooms that I used 50 years ago, now being used by people, most of whom weren't born at that time.”

Maslanka said he gets inquiries all the time from young, aspiring composers who want to know more about the craft.

“Start where you are,” Maslanka said. “Young people will approach me and ask ask me how to make a career, how to sell their music, how to do things of that sort, and I tell them all the time, don't even think the thought. Start by learning to be the best that you can at what you're chosen to do, and that has to start by making the effort.”

Maslanka said that a young composer, regardless of their education, has to have passion for wanting to explore how music works and how to write it down for music theory.

“I tell them to do that – write music for themselves,” he said. “Write for their own instrument. Write for people that they know, friends, if they're in high school, or at universities, talk to the people who perform music and ask them to help, the conductors and so on.”

For Maslanka, composing is a lifetime commitment – it is letting his music speak through him. He said there's a thing that “comes through you” in life, and that for him, it's music.

“I can get up every day as a composer, and it doesn't matter if I feel good or bad, or inspired or uninspired,” he said. “It is my intention to go to work, because if I do, then the opportunity is there for something to happen. If I don't, then the opportunity is not there.”

Maslanka is a true example of how hard work and dedication pays off. Through unending devotion to his music, Maslanka has achieved success doing what he loves, producing something meaningful, lasting, and sincere.

“The simplest form of that is that you do the study in the area that is interesting to you, and then you get up every day, and work,” he said.

MSU Wind Symphony will perform several of Maslanka's pieces tonight at 7:30 p.m. at Wharton Center's Cobb Great Hall. An additional performance, featuring Campus Band & Concert Band, will be held Tuesday at the same time and location.

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