



Local composer makes sweet music

Career began with 4th-grade play score

BY KAREN MASERJIAN SHAN • FOR THE POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL • OCTOBER 14, 2008

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NEW PALTZ - When Shirley Hoffman Warren was a little girl, she played the piano, sometimes composing her own music.

The composing part didn't last, however. By the time she got to high school, she stopped writing her own music.

"I'd always been around classical music - my father was interested in it," Warren said. "But there were no women (composers) that I knew and I didn't know how one would go about learning it."

Still, she sang in a choir and learned the clarinet, and later spent time in her high school's band room, picking up bits of various instruments.

When it came time for college, Warren set aside her love of music, studying psychology instead. Her career as a psychologist never took off as her post-graduation focus turned to motherhood, homemaking, sculpture and painting.

Then, her son's fourth-grade teacher, knowing Warren played the recorder, asked her to compose a score for an upcoming class play. Warren said she'd try.

"I wrote the tunes on piano," she said. "I had one trumpet, one saxophone, one flute player, one drummer and the piano. I wrote for what I had on board."

The resulting composition worked so well Warren also wrote the music for the following year's school play, including pieces for the few professional musicians who'd been recruited to play in the band.

She continued writing and playing for herself, eventually following the advice of a musician friend she enroll in an educational music program.

"It was wonderful," said Warren of her four years studying music under Ping Jin at the State University of New York at New Paltz. "It was so much better than studying psychology."

She had joined the school's Collegium Musicum ensemble years earlier, where she met Joël Evans, an oboist with the Hudson Valley Philharmonic and later took cello lessons with Susan Seligman of the philharmonic. She was able to tap both of their musical expertise.

She continued composing, including pieces for the SUNY New Paltz Concert Choir, the SUNY New Paltz College-Youth Symphony, the choir of Christ Episcopal Church in Poughkeepsie, and work commissioned by Evans and others.

In 2003, Warren's composition, "The Thing With Feathers," a piece based on Emily Dickinson's poems, was chosen for the Women Composers' Showcase at New Jersey City University.

"It's always an adventure when you get to hear the real performance," said Warren, as the piece always sounds different with live musicians than it does in her head, on her piano or through her computer program.

Prospects Look Up

According to the New York state Department of Labor, there were approximately 2,730 composers employed in New York in 2002. It is expected the figure will rise to about 3,080 in 2012.

Warren said reading the scores of favorite composers is a valuable way for people in her profession to educate themselves, as is listening to music.

Carey Nadeau, director of community and education programs for the American Composers Forum, said education and training for composers is as varied as the music they write.

Some may enroll in a liberal arts program while working privately with an admired composer. Others may



Music composer Shirley Hoffman Warren of New Paltz. (Lee Ferris/Poughkeepsie Journal)

JOB: COMPOSER.

Job description: Create original music such as symphonies, operas, sonatas, radio and television jingles, film scores and popular songs.

Nature of the work: Composers transcribe ideas into musical notation, using harmony, rhythm, melody and tonal structure.

Education: A bachelor's degree in a related field is the minimum formal education; however, many positions also require graduate school.

Earnings: In the U.S., the average wage for this occupation was \$19,680 for entry-level composers and \$55,370 for experienced ones.

Source: U.S. and New York departments of labor

On the Web

n Shirley Hoffman Warren: www.washalee.com

n Hudson Valley Society for Music: www.hudsonvalley.societyformusic.org

n American Composers' Forum: www.composersforum.org

n Society of Composers Inc.: www.societyofcomposers.org

n American Music Center, www.amc.net

PROFILE

Shirley Hoffman Warren

Age: 60.

Job title: Composer.

Years on the job: Eight.

Education: Bachelor's degree in music theory and composition from SUNY New Paltz. Also studied jazz theory with pianist Vinnie Martucci.

Major works: "Nocturne" (2001), scored for concert choir and

decide to enroll in university-based courses of study on composing, she said.

Nadeau knows a composer from Los Angeles who enjoys writing music for bands so much he relocated to Austin, Texas, where bands and commissions flourish.

"It's just a DIY (do-it-yourself) kind of thing," Nadeau said of a career in composing music. "If you don't sign up with a G. Schirmer or another other kind of professional publisher, you're on your own."

That means marketing, selling and printing up scores yourself.

"It's a daunting thing," Nadeau said of selling one's own compositions. "It's not for the feint of heart. It's a lot of work to not only be an artist, but then to jump up and down and talk about yourself and get people interested in what it is you do as an artist."

Composers are paid through royalties and commissions. Royalty payments vary by music genre, Nadeau said. For example, composers of popular music typically earn more royalties than those of classical music.

Commission amounts depend on experience, the complexity of the piece and who the piece is being written for - a soloist, ensemble or orchestra, for example.

For Warren, sometimes as much as a month passes between compositions; other times she works intently for days in a row.

Often she gets a tune in her head and works it out on her keyboard or by addressing each instrument, one at a time.

"I compose when I'm walking around, I compose while I'm driving - sometimes I just fool around here (on the computer)," she said.

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piano; "Ira Variae" (2003), written for oboe, cello and piano; "Cove Beach" (2004), three pieces for concert choir (in orchestral and piano versions); "Acadia" (2005), five pieces for oboe, viola and piano commissioned by oboist Joël Evans.

Affiliations: Warren sings with the SUNY New Paltz Chorale, the Bardavon Opera Chorus and performs with the choir of Christ Episcopal Church in Poughkeepsie.

Family: Married to Jason Warren, with whom she has two grown children, April and Jason.

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[woodlarkny](#) wrote:

Brava for this nice feature on Shirley! She's been deserving of wider notice for her compositions. Our community choral group Voices for Peace has sung two of her songs, and I've have the pleasure of performing two others for solo voice with Shirley at the piano. A terrific colleague who writes tuneful, original music! Danielle Woerner

10/14/2008 9:47:23 AM

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