THE CLASSICAL BEAT

The Classical Beat | UMKC student’s composing career blasts off

UMKC student’s composing career blasts off as his works are played around the world.

BY PATRICK NEAS
Special to The Star

The University of Missouri-Kansas City’s Conservatory of Music and Dance has outstanding composers on its faculty, including James Mobberley and Chen Yi, but the conservatory is helping nurture up-and-coming composers among its students as well.

Nicholas Omiccioli, who recently turned 30, is one of the conservatory’s rising stars. He’s already seen his works performed all over the United States, Europe and Asia, and recently he’s had an exceptional burst of activity that marks him as a composer to be reckoned with.

“It’s been a crazy summer,” Omiccioli said. “One of my works, ‘Invisible Worlds,’ was performed in Kansas City and in China at the Beijing Modern Music Festival by Kansas City’s own NewEar Contemporary Ensemble. It also was performed in Lithuania by the Curious Chamber Players from Sweden.

“My piece ‘Insights,’ for solo bassoon, was performed a few times in New Zealand and at the International Double Reed Festival in Ohio. I had the premiere of a chamber orchestra work performed by l’Orchestre de la Francophonie in Ottawa, Ontario, and later this summer I will return to Canada to work with Le Nouvel Ensemble Moderne for a performance in Quebec. Plus, I’ve had additional works performed in Bangkok, Vienna, and Boston. And this has all happened since May.”

Omiccioli was born in Belleville, Ill., just east of St. Louis, at Scott Air Force Base. With a father in the military, Omiccioli’s family was constantly on the move. Along the way, Omiccioli developed a love for music.

“I listened to what my parents were listening to — Motown and golden oldies,” he said. “One day, I remember playing volleyball outside with friends from the neighborhood, and someone played Metallica’s ‘Black Album’ on the CD player.

“Something happened inside me, like a light switch being turned on, and I was instantly hooked. Not only did I buy more of their albums, I also bought a guitar and I learned how to play all their songs. From there on out, it’s been quite a journey to where I am today.”

Omiccioli expanded his outlook beyond popular music, seeking out teachers in the classical tradition, and eventually ending up at UMKC where he will graduate in May with a DMA in composition.

“The first person that influenced me was my composition professor at Heidelberg University in Tiffin, Ohio, Brian Bevelander,” he said. “Not only did I study composition with him, but also theory, orchestration and piano.

“We shared ideas over numerous cups of coffee in between and after classes, so I saw him pretty much every day for three years. He was a fantastic teacher with an old-school approach, which I found motivating.

“Having studied the music of James Mobberley and Chen Yi prior to attending UMKC, I thought it was an
obvious choice to come to Kansas City. It has been great working with them and hearing their music over the years.”

At UMKC, Omiccioli learned the nuts and bolts of composing, including the latest trends. But he has a mind of his own. For example, electronics and computers are an important part of many contemporary composers’ works, but for the most part, Omiccioli eschews them.

“The music I write is strictly acoustic and makes no use of technology,” he said. “I’m not afraid to write in both consonant and dissonant styles, sometimes both in one piece. However, my work usually takes on a dark or introspective aura. I am fascinated by the use of resonance, color, texture, space, and virtuosity.

Omiccioli acknowledges the frustrating fact that the audience for contemporary classical music is rather small.

“From what I have seen over the last few months during my travels, it is hard to draw a crowd anywhere,” he said. “Classical music, or as I like to call it, ‘art music,’ will most likely never regain the popularity that it once had. The influence of pop music on our culture has forever changed that.

“People are fickle when it comes to art. They embrace (Wassily) Kandinsky, (Jackson) Pollock and (Mark) Rothko, yet reject (Arnold) Schoenberg, (John) Cage and (Pierre) Boulez. But the shelf life of most popular music is good for only a few years, while Schoenberg’s ‘Pierrot Lunaire,’ written in 1912, still sounds fresh a hundred years later.”

Although it may never have mass appeal, Omiccioli sees hopeful signs that lofty, rarified classical music is here to stay and will, indeed, thrive.

“With the opening of the Kauffman Center, it has been great to see the arts featured in the media and all the attention it has been getting,” he said. “Funding for the arts also seems to be going well, the Charlotte Street Foundation has been promoting young local organizations such as KCMA (Kansas City Electronic Music and Arts Alliance) and Black House (Improvisors Collective) and the Fringe Festival started an experimental music showcase this summer. Kansas City has only has one new music ensemble, but many local composers are using resources to create their own opportunities.”

Local audiences will have a chance to hear Omiccioli’s music later this year.

“I am the 2012 Missouri Music Teachers Association commissioned composer, so I will have a new work performed in early November at Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Mo. I was also commissioned by a friend of mine at UMKC to write a new work for two bassoons, two percussionists and two pianos. The performance will be either late fall or early spring semester at UMKC.

“First and foremost, I want to create something that takes the listener on a journey and something that performers are going to enjoy playing. With all the resources available for composers, I find it liberating to use any and all means necessary to get my point across.”

To learn more about Omiccioli and his music, visit nicholasomiccioli.com.

Metro men’s choirs

Six fine area men’s choirs will join their voices in a concert at 6 p.m. today at the Pavilion at John Knox Village, 520 Murray Road, Lee’s Summit. Lee’s Summit UMC Men of Note, Circuit Riders, Harmony Handful Heart of America Barbershop Chapter, Men of Praise, Kansas City Metro Men’s Chorus and John Knox Village Men’s Glee will perform separately, then will join at the end of the concert for three selections, concluding with a rousing rendition of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” with brass and percussion.

The concert is free and open to the public, but donations will be accepted to support the John Knox Village food pantry.

At the cathedral

The Summer Music at the Cathedral Series continues this afternoon with a performance by mezzo-soprano Andrea Pope at 2 in Grace and Holy Trinity Cathedral, 415 W. 13th St. Accompanied by pianist Lamar Sims, Pope will sing songs by Aaron Copland, Ernest Charles and Irving Fine. There is no admission, but donations will be accepted to send the Trinity Choir on a tour of Great Britain in 2013. For more information, go toghtc-kc.org.

Show goes on

The death last week of composer and musician Marvin Hamlisch got the programming wheels turning at the Kansas City Symphony. Hamlisch was to play in the spring on the Symphony’s Pops series in a program that included singer Jennifer Holiday. Officials say Holiday will perform April 12-13 in a program to be announced.

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