

Max H. Smith
Sewanee Summer Music Festival
July 29, 2010

From the first week of June to the last week of July of 2010, I served as a Boyd/Stephenson intern at the Sewanee Summer Music Festival (SSMF), gaining music-administrative experience while filling the role of Festival writer and editor. I also held less specialized positions, such as librarian, event manager, salesman, and errand-runner.

On the most superficial level, my internship was atypical of Stephenson internships. Grantees have tended in recent years toward exotic-sounding plans that take them far away from Sewanee—or at least to places with opportunities not available on the University domain. While my experience was thus unusually local, it was nevertheless the most perfectly suited to my career path; no other internship, to my knowledge, could have so perfectly complemented my position. Specifically, it allowed me to hone my musicological skills in preparation for graduate school this fall, while correcting my lack of knowledge of the practical side of music.

My being offered a position with SSMF was the result of several happy coincidences. As a Sewanee alumnus poised to enter graduate school in musicology, I had a strong background in music history and performance and very little background in music in its most important habitat—that is, the real world, where music and business intersect. Coincidentally, SSMF was looking for a summer intern who could take charge of a number of musicological tasks while also contributing to more business-like operations in the Festival office.

I jumped at the opportunity. Working for the Festival would not only offer excellent supplementary preparation for my future studies in musicology; it would also give me the unique chance to witness, and even take part in, the administration of a real live business as it tackles real live problems. 2010 was a particularly ripe moment for me to join the SSMF team, largely because of the Festival's state of recuperation from the national economic downturn. In response to enrollment decreases, budget cuts, and even the threat of extinction, SSMF was in transition mode, reallocating its resources and operating under a new director, Professor Katherine Lehman. Consequently, working for the 2010 SSMF in any capacity promised a front row seat to an exciting comeback story. From the outset, Professor Lehman encouraged me to consider my job as a primarily

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pedagogical opportunity to study the inner workings of a festival as it weathers its most daunting challenges.

I was to accomplish this primary task of shadowing the festival administration while filling a number of varied positions; there were key places within the redesigned festival office in which I was able assume significant responsibilities. Writing and editing Festival publications were among the biggest of these. Most of the thirty-some concerts given over the season's four weeks required printed programs, and about one-third of those concerts required program notes. Under the guidance of Dr. Stephen Miller, I was in charge of formatting each program using Microsoft Word and maintaining a trans-seasonal consistency that would satisfy Dr. Miller's exacting standards. D. Kern Holloman's *Writing about Music* served as my guide to style, informing me on such miniaturist matters as capitalization within foreign language titles, transliterated spellings of composer names, punctuation in catalog numbers, etc. Correctly listing soloists and ensemble members was among the details that required the same miniaturist attention afforded issues of punctuation and capitalization.

Creating programs was a particular challenge on Sundays, when the student orchestras performed; the selection and performance order of pieces were many times decided that very day, during which I chased elusive conductors across campus to confirm the movements of a symphony the orchestra would be playing. With these publishing duties, in addition to daily unavoidable office tasks, concert days were hectic.

For the symphony orchestra performances (on Sundays) and the Faculty Chamber Recitals (on Wednesdays and Saturdays), I wrote program notes. DuPont Library's recent subscription to the Naxos Music Library Online gave me access to recordings of nearly all of the season's music and allowed me to familiarize myself with each piece's form and general aesthetic impression. I usually accessed Naxos at duPont, where I also conducted more academic research. To gather dependable knowledge that would comprise the main substance of my notes, I used library books. Oxford Music Online was also a reliable, substantial resource, particularly for biographical information about composers. In the occasional case that our library's CD collection had a recording of a

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given piece, I would skim the liner notes for tips on how to approach a note from an interesting angle.

The objective was to write for each piece of music a concise introduction that would stimulate audience interest while providing a small musical and historical context in which to place the music the audience was about to hear. The most challenging part was writing in a friendly, conversational tone without slipping into the academic journal style cultivated in the undergraduate classroom. At the same time, however, I was careful not to offend readers by writing in too elementary terms; although only a small percentage of SSMF patrons would be musicologists or musicians themselves, they are a quite sophisticated group. Therefore I aimed to write notes of real intellectual substance presented in an interesting and nonthreatening way.

The most successful formula for such a note was simple (if not so simply come by): find a fun kernel of information (e.g., a personal idiosyncrasy of the composer or a quote from a famous scholar about the piece) and develop that single idea while injecting the necessary facts—those often including date and place of composition, commissioner, approximate length, overall mood, instrumentation, and formal structure. Following this format, most notes tended to be anywhere from one to three paragraphs and on average between 150 and 250 words. The opening paragraph or two generally introduced the catchy kernel and discussed the piece's historical context, while the final paragraph more often addressed aspects of the music itself, such as the contrasting nature of each movement or the texture of a given section. My note for the first Schumann piano trio is typical of the notes I wrote for the Faculty Chamber Music Series:

Robert Schumann, Piano Trio No. 1 in D Minor, op. 63

Robert Schumann presented the Piano Trio in D Minor to his wife Clara Wieck on September 13, 1847, her twenty-eighth birthday. A brand new Schumann piano trio: what a birthday gift! As impressive as it may seem, however, the Trio is a bit too serious for the sentiments of a Hallmark card. Its first and third movements are ironically two of the relatively few moments in Schumann's oeuvre that have earned the epithet "gloomy"—sinking at times to "morbid." (Happy Birthday, Clara!) Nevertheless, the more positive second and fourth movements re-balance the emotional scales to an appropriately brighter mood.

The first movement, marked "with energy and passion," features two contrasting themes that are interrupted mid-way by a hymn-like development section. Movement two uses a scherzo with dotted rhythms to frame a canonic trio, in

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which the instruments make consecutive entries of the same, hill-shaped tune. Returning to the first movement's gloom-tinged air, movement three ("slow with heartfelt emotion") presents a depressed complaint, behind which the gaiety of the final movement occasionally peeks through. The uninterrupted juncture between the last two movements is the only one of its kind in Schumann's chamber works and serves to launch one directly from darkness to the joyous heights of the finale. The central musical idea, derived from material in the first movement, is, as Robert Schaffler writes, "one of those great, simple, universal themes that can never be forgotten."

This blurb about the Schumann Trio was easy to write because the library was bursting forth with information about the piece. Many times, however, a composer or piece was so obscure, or so new, that no book in the library helped. This was a particular problem when I was researching living composer Jennifer Higdon's orchestral prelude *Light*, which had never been recorded (that is, before the Sewanee Symphony performance on July 11th). In situations like this one, I was forced to focus primarily on what information I could find about the composer herself and to then draw very general conclusions about the piece based on this information:

Jennifer Higdon, *Light*

We sometimes think that a composer needs to be dead to be any good—that only music having stood the test of time is really worth attention. Besides, living classical composers are only interested in unpleasant or strange music, more designed to please the intellect than the ear, right?

This is certainly not the case with the 48-year-old sometime Tennessean, Jennifer Higdon, whose accessible orchestral and chamber works have elevated her as one of the most performed living American composers. Not to mention her Pulitzer Prize and Grammy, these credentials more than qualify her for our stage. Titles of some of her works include *Summer Shimmers*, *Dash*, *Machine*, *An Exaltation of Larks*, *Voices*, and *City Scape*. It is perhaps in part Higdon's ability to conjure images that makes her work so successful and widely loved. *Light*, which was premiered by the Green Bay Symphony Orchestra under the direction of our guest conductor Bridget Reischl, is no exception to this theory. Who wouldn't identify with so polyvalent a concept as light? It is a thing of visual and conceptual beauty, at once literally and metaphorically the way we grasp the world around us. According to Reischl, *Light* symbolizes the process of illumination that orchestras, audiences, and concert-goers alike experience when they encounter a composition for the first time.

When I wrote this note, I myself had not heard the piece (and did not claim to have heard it); but listening to some of Higdon's other works and communicating with our guest conductor Bridget Reischl, who happened to be Higdon's friend, allowed me to write a blurb that was thought provoking if not full of concrete information about *Light* itself.

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Another piece of music about which information was not readily available was Bob Becker's xylophone medleys; apparently, scholars have not found occasion to write prolifically about recent xylophone showpieces. Luckily, the SSMF faculty percussionist was able to contact Becker himself, who sent some liner notes he had written specifically for his medleys. I used Becker's notes to flesh out some broader historical research I had done earlier:

Bob Becker, *Bye Bye Medley* and *Girlfriends Medley* for Xylophone and Piano

During the 1920s and '30s, the American songwriting industry, based at Tin Pan Alley in New York City, was booming—not least because of the new developments in recording technology that allowed the dispersal of music like never before. It wasn't simple coincidence that these same decades also saw the “golden age” of the xylophone. The first record labels favored instruments with percussive timbres that could be more easily detected by early recording equipment; especially effective were xylophones, which became fashionable instruments: they appeared solo, as novelty acts throughout the vaudeville theatre circuit, in dance orchestras, and with piano accompaniment, often playing the catchy tunes cranked out of Tin Pan Alley.

Later the xylophone's popularity ebbed somewhat, but its foremost modern proponent, Bob Becker, has resurrected the instrument in its early 20th-century context by means of his teaching, performing, and composing. Becker's *Bye Bye Medley* (2000) uses two Tin Pan Alley songs from the 1920s. The first is the popular jazz standard “Bye Bye Blackbird,” and the second is “Bye Bye Blues,” a banjo tune that has often been used as a solo xylophone showpiece. Becker's earlier *Girlfriends Medley* (1987) also uses 1920s popular songs—each named for a girl: “Margie,” “Jean,” and “Dinah.”

My ability to connect indirectly with Bob Becker (and Jennifer Higdon) was not simply a stroke of luck; it derived entirely from the nature of the SSMF faculty members, who are not only well established in the social networks of their fields but also kind and sympathetic toward summer interns.

As with Becker's Medleys and Higdon's *Light*, each piece posed unique challenges. Although in retrospect most of the season's notes seem to follow a rough pattern, creating each note was in reality a completely new undertaking—not at all like plugging information into a template. György Ligeti's *Atmosphères* was perhaps the most extraordinary piece of music in the entire festival and thus required prefacing of an entirely different kind:

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György Ligeti, *Atmosphères*

Don't expect to hear Ligeti's *Atmosphères* as much as to breathe it in or to feel its weight in the air; it is something like a pool of gas that diffuses to fill the hall. Ligeti's very precisely notated tone clusters, from which diatonic and pentatonic chords come in and out of focus, create a new sound of silence, so to speak—or a new backdrop in front of which sits the already present silence. This static mass of sound, according to the composer himself, represents the reverberations of a requiem mass taking place in a distant realm.

Written in Vienna in 1961, *Atmosphères* exhibits the Western-inspired modernist style Ligeti adopted after fleeing his home in Soviet-controlled Hungary. The work's detachment from the elements that had traditionally defined music—melody, harmonic progression, and rhythm—placed unprecedented emphasis on the sound itself and challenged the way mid-century composers approached their art. Ligeti explained, “the involuntary conversion of optical and tactile into acoustic sensations is habitual with me.” Such a preoccupation with texture laid the foundation for the modern computer-based method of composition called spectralism.

Ligeti's nontraditional understanding of “music” clearly trumps facts about the work's dedicatee or the city in which it was composed—information that a note would more typically center around. It was the sound that shaped both *Atmosphères* and the note I wrote for it.

Many other, more traditional pieces were also shaped by the sound itself. Some small scale chamber works (the Schumann Trio, for instance) were often compact enough to allow for fairly specific discussion of musical content, such as types of texture and shapes of melodies. However, Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*, and similar monumental orchestral works, required a more sweeping approach:

Sergey Prokofiev, *Romeo and Juliet*, Suites 1 and 2, selections

The professors of the St. Petersburg Conservatory would have laughed if someone had told them that their young pupil, Sergey Prokofiev, would one day write a full-blown ballet that treated a tragic tale with emotional poignance and delicacy. After all, his piano playing and early compositions were fraught with adolescent sarcasm and a knee-jerk revolt against the Romanticism in vogue. He cultivated this reputation as the “terrible child” even beyond his conservatory days, leaving Russia in 1918 for America and, eventually, France—where his jarring, motoric sound garnered more negative than positive attention. But his return to Russia in 1935 saw a change. Perhaps Prokofiev had simply grown up—or perhaps the stifling presence of the Soviet regime served to temper his aggressive style. Either way, his gentler and more mature works of the '30s and '40s were praised worldwide.

Thus the ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, from the year of his return to Russia, combines some of the quirkiness of early Prokofiev with an added dose of emotional

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sensibility. Prokofiev's arrangement of the Ballet into three orchestral suites (the first two from 1936 and the third from 1946) gives precedence to the sense of musical progression among the dances, sometimes requiring a transposition of the events in Shakespeare's storyline. In this spirit, Bridget Reischl has selected a small group of dances that form an aesthetically pleasing whole. Included among the scenes presented today are the dance of the knights at the Capulet's ball ("Montagues and Capulets"), Romeo's duel with Tybalt ("Death of Tybalt"), Friar Lawrence waiting to perform the marriage ceremony of Romeo and Juliet ("Friar Lawrence"), the lovers' final parting in Juliet's bedroom ("Romeo and Juliet before parting"), and "Romeo at the Tomb of Juliet."

It was not practical to pinpoint specific motives or textures found within each selection of Prokofiev's ballet. Rather, it was more helpful and interesting to explain the work's import and to situate it within the composer's entire life and work.

This was the bulk of my writing and editing duties at SSMF. A smaller portion included writing weekly Sewanee Mountain Messenger articles, which gave an overview of the coming week's events.

My other duties were less specialized but no less important. Among those which I shared with fellow interns, Samantha Gribben, Rebekah Bennett, Tajji Abney, and Josh Hall, were organizing, distributing, and tracking printed music. Samantha quickly became the office expert at this gargantuan job, but everyone took part. Distributing hundreds of copies of music between 145 young musicians and attempting to retrieve every copy at the end of each week was daunting. Sets of rented music invariably turned up incomplete, in which case we interns scoured the entire SSMF library for the missing pieces; sometimes, an intern (usually Samantha) had to hunt down individual students who were suspected of not returning their music.

If we were not sorting music in the office library, we were likely managing concerts under the expert guidance of Dr. Stephen Miller. Each intern was assigned particular concerts at which he or she would be the front-of-house manager—in charge of organizing volunteers and student ushers, overseeing ticket and merchandise sales, and interacting with patrons before the concert. For me, this was the most exhausting job of the summer.

The myriad other tasks I performed—besides clerical office duties, such as filing, copying, and running errands—were largely one-time, spur-of-the-moment tasks that solved mini emergencies. The guest conductor wasn't issued a meal card? The

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merchandise cash box has no change? Print services ran out of our special ivory program paper? Someone needs to pick up a gong from Huntsville? Mark O'Connor missed the airport shuttle!? We were constantly on our toes and, by the end of the season, had developed lightning-fast improvisational skills. This capacity for quick and practical thinking was perhaps the most important skill I began to acquire. Arts administration, it turns out, requires a lot of improvisation.

While we interns were hustling to put out small fires around the office, however, it was always comforting to know that the largest administrative duties were in the hands of experienced adults—Professor Lehman, office manager Sally Hubbard, stage manager Jack Ray, and head dorm parent Donna Cotter. 2010 being her first season as SSMF director, Professor Lehman ran the Festival with extraordinary bravery and calm competence—all the while taking part as a faculty instructor and performer. Executing her job with the utmost patience and composure, Professor Lehman was the model administrator.

The practical skills and personal virtues which I observed (and some of which I began to cultivate within myself throughout the summer) will undoubtedly benefit me in future years. I will therefore be forever thankful to Career Services and to the Stephenson and Boyd families, without whom this invaluable experience would have been impossible. Although the musicological experience I gained as a writer and editor will be directly applicable to my curriculum at graduate school, my acquired business skills will be more generally applicable to almost every aspect of my future personal and professional life. In the years to come, I will seek out similar positions, and I encourage my fellow students of any field to do so as well.