

Regional

Associate professor makes mark composing

Most people are familiar with the names of famous composers such as Mozart, Beethoven and Bach. Less known are the names of famous female composers. In fact, unless you are a professional musician or a hardcore music aficionado, chances are that their names are largely unfamiliar.

Yet, from the Classical period up through today, female musical composers form a legion. The beginning of the second half of the 20th century marked a big surge in the number of women composers and their numbers continue to grow.

One such composer is Kim Archer. Born in Mendota, Ill., she grew up in Florida where she obtained her bachelor's degree in music education at Florida State University. She went on to obtain her master's degree in music composition from Syracuse University in New York and her doctorate in composition from the University of Texas at Austin.

Archer, an associate professor in the department of music at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, said that she decided to become a musician at the age of 13 and credits her first music teacher for her choice of career.

"I go all the way back to my junior high band director who took my earliest efforts to composition and encouraged me," said Archer. "My initial inclination to be a band

Aldemaro Romero Campus Talk

director was because of him."

Archer began her academic career as a music teacher in high schools, but found it so demanding that she decided to get out. When asked how well movies like "Mr. Holland's Opus" portray the reality of being a high school music teacher, Archer said that Hollywood gets some things right, but many things wrong.

"I think what they show of his life routine was true," said Archer. "What was unrealistic was the high level of performance on the screen without rehearsals."

After leaving high school teaching, Archer decided to get into composition. "When I was a music education major I learned how to use music notation software and learned some basic scoring," she said. Some of her work was publicly performed while she was an undergraduate.

Today, as always, many composers make their living creating works that are commissioned by either individuals or organizations.

"It works in two ways," said Archer. "A conductor hears about you and your music and contracts you. The other is that you



Kim Archer emerges from the dungeon of Warwick Castle while touring England with the SIUE Concert Choir in 2007. Photo by Michael Mishra.

approach a conductor and say 'I would like to write for you.' That is harder today because of the economic situation."

One of Archer's compositions is called "Westward Sentinel" and was commissioned by the United States Air Force Band of

Mid-America in honor of the 40th anniversary of the St. Louis Arch. The SIUE Wind Symphony recorded it in 2007. "I got the idea when someone told me to look at a cornfield looking westward," Archer recalled.

A more recent work by Archer is her "Concerto for Tuba and Wind Ensemble," which was recorded in 2010 by the Illinois State University Wind Symphony. "I have been at Illinois State several times and they like my tuba writing," she said, explaining her choice of tuba as the main instrument for the piece.

The American character of her music cannot go unnoticed in both its melodic structure and orchestration. Nonetheless her "Symphony No. 3," commissioned by Central High School in La Crosse, Wis., was based on the German hymn "All Creatures of our God and King."

She said that the root of her music comes from inside.

"What's the point of any artistic endeavor if not to project your own feelings? Inspiration is not a flash that makes you stop and write something. It takes time and effort more than divine intervention," Archer said.

Something that from time to time is noticeable in her music is a sense of melancholy. I asked her where that comes from.

"I am not sure that I have a good answer

for that," Archer replied. "My public persona as a teacher forces me to be very upbeat, while in my composing I express the other half of my personality."

Most of Archer's compositions have been recorded by college students. "I find that college groups are very good at performing new pieces of music because of their flexibility," she said.

She added that she does not like to conduct her own music. "I am a composer, not a conductor," she said. "There has to be a good collaboration between the composer and the conductor, but I don't have the ego to conduct my own work."

Archer teaches courses on composition at SIUE. When asked if there is a great deal of interest among students in becoming composers, she responded that many incoming freshmen do not understand what it means to have a career as a composer.

"As an academic endeavor, it is very rigorous," Archer said. "And it is very difficult to make a living out of freelancing."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.