

# Where *music* begins

## FOR COMPOSERS, WRITING MUSIC IS AS NECESSARY AS BREATHING

By Amy Fuller

**YOU'D BE FORGIVEN** for thinking all composers have unruly hair, ruffled shirts and pale complexions. You might even have a white marble bust of Beethoven or Bach atop your mantel — reminders of a bygone era of great musicianship.

But a good number of composers are alive and well in Waterloo Region, and most are neither wild-haired nor pasty-faced. Leonard Enns, Glenn Buhr, Carol Ann Weaver and Peter Hatch, to name four, are some of the most active, devoted composers in the area.

Enns and Weaver teach in the music department at Conrad Grebel University College; Buhr and Hatch are at Wilfrid Laurier University.

Buhr plays piano with his jazz ensemble, the Glenn Buhr Band.

Hatch founded NUMUS, the new music society, and organizes the Open Ears Festival of Music and Sound.

Weaver makes regular trips to South Africa to perform with African jazz musicians, while Enns founded and conducts the DaCapo Chamber Choir, which explores unaccompanied music of the 20th century and later.

But frequently, each of them exchanges all that activity for a quiet room and a blank sheet of paper.

Composing is a difficult, isolated task. It's also one they can't live without. "I was born to make music," Weaver says. "Everything else is a detour for me."



Leonard Enns, shown conducting the DeCapo Chamber Choir, often composes for choirs and tends to use other people's words rather than write his own lyrics. Photography • Ian Willms

**I think a composer has to be a sensitive person, someone who is moved by beautiful things, but not just beautiful things: by war, by famine, by a sunset, by a starry night.**

Leonard Enns

Hatch feels a similar compulsion: "I completely love and need to compose."

Ask how they produce complex scores from thin air, and you'll get nebulous answers.

"Going for a long walk is my main method," Hatch says, laughing. He hikes the trails along the Grand River, hoping to meet with inspiration. Though he's taught composition at Laurier for more than 25

years, inspiration is the one ingredient he says he can't teach.

"It's so personal it wouldn't make sense to anybody," he says. "It sounds facetious — 'going for a walk' — but that's honestly it."

Weaver starts with long walks, too, along the Iron Horse Trail in Kitchener. Or she runs to Victoria Park. "I have to get some space to think out loud to get ideas to come together," she says.

Buhr and Enns offer more pragmatic suggestions. For them, the starting point is a theme or a particular text. Enns often writes for choirs, so he sees the composing process as a musical reading of text.

While he's written some of his own lyrics, he tends to use other people's words. For his current project, a piece about mortality

commissioned for a choir in Calgary, he got permission to incorporate the work of E. D. Blodgett, Edmonton's poet laureate.

"The worst thing is for someone to say, 'Write me a piece, period,' because that's just really difficult," Enns says. "It's nice to have parameters."

Information about the performance — setting, duration, instruments — helps him tackle the problem of the blank page.

Buhr also likes to build on a single theme. As he progresses through a piece, he asks himself whether each new idea fits with the theme.

Last year, knowing that soloist Sarah Slean would perform the premiere of his symphony commissioned for the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, he found words and a theme in poetry.

"I was reading Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass poems and commentary on it and became swept away by the idea of this cosmic consciousness," he says. "The whole symphony is about the expanded consciousness, with a subtext of the flow of seasons and the movement of a person's life from birth to death."

While Weaver accepts commissions too, cataclysmic world events often suggest more spontaneous compositions. The title piece on her most recent CD, *Every 3 Children*, is a tribute to African children suffering from AIDS.

When the Iraq war broke out in 2003, she wrote *Piece of a Rock*, a wish for peace for Iraq that features the names of Iraqi civilians killed in the war.

The 2006 slaying of five Amish girls in a

### DACAPO CHOIR'S SPRING CONCERTS

Leonard Enns and the DaCapo Chamber Choir have two spring concerts planned as part of their 10th anniversary season. *Water* (music inspired by snow, flood and rain) will be presented March 7; *Fire & Air* (celebrating the visible universe) on May 9.

The concerts take place at 8 p.m. at St. John the Evangelist Anglican Church in Kitchener. For details, check the web at [www.dacapochamberchoir.ca](http://www.dacapochamberchoir.ca)

Pennsylvania schoolhouse struck particularly close to her American Mennonite roots. Weaver's *Lobsang* (German for "praise song") is a lament about the difficulty of the Amish practice of forgiveness and thanks even in the face of tragedy.

She and Toronto-born vocalist Rebecca Campbell continue to perform *Lobsang* ▶





## INSPIRATION

Carol Ann Weaver's compositions begin to take shape while she's walking, often on the Iron Horse Trail. She says she needs a big, open space for thinking out loud.

► in the eastern U.S. "What makes me really happy is to let the music speak from my own heart," Weaver says. "That seems like the most honest kind of expression for me."

Enns agrees. "I think a composer has to be a sensitive person, someone who is moved by beautiful things, but not just beautiful things: by war, by famine, by a sunset, by a starry night."

For him, writing music is a way to address other human beings, a form of communication that goes beyond what can be accomplished in words. It's a search for some spiritual, mystical dimension.

That search takes place in the composer's head, on paper, at the computer and, sometimes, at the piano.

Weaver scrawls her thoughts about what should happen in a piece of music on unlined scraps of paper, scratching out ideas here and there or taping fragments together. She sings tunes and rhythms that have collected in her head over time, or sits at the piano to improvise.

The core of a piece often emerges when she's at the keyboard. "Sometimes I think it's nothing," she says. "It's one little sound, but it's the distinguishing feature that lets me keep working."

Weaver records herself and listens to get some distance and decide whether the song has enough shape. Finally, "I come to this deadly piece of equipment called a computer."

### HOW COMPOSERS SPREAD THE WORD ABOUT NEW WORK

How do composers make their new music known?

As Carol Ann Weaver explains, few publishers ask composers to produce music for them.

"Mostly, the music which gains currency among performers and composers is not thought of as 'easy' enough or 'standard' enough for general publishers to be interested in promoting. So, composers pass around their scores via internet, via certain websites, and self-publishing outlets.

"Various composers have created their own publishing labels ... and sometimes including other like-minded composers' pieces. Niche publishers specialize in specific media, such as music for flutes, choral music, specific stringed instruments.... I've had mandolin music published by a unique mandolin publisher in the Washington, D.C., area.

"But the so-called 'standard' publishers ... ask for quite singable, non-experimental, very standard works which can be performed with little 'confusion' or innovation. That's why most composers work to create their own outlets for music, or they are lucky enough to have their music circulated by a place like Canadian Music Centre."

She works in Finale, popular composing and notation software that Enns likens to a fancy pencil or a word processor. Its playback feature lets the composer listen and evaluate harmonies.

Once finished, Weaver prints out the sheet music, which then circulates informally among musicians or via the Canadian Music Centre's library.

Whether a composition takes months, years or a few hours, it's hard work.

Last summer, Buhr overhauled his score for the full-length ballet *Beauty and the Beast*, a 100-minute production that premiered in 2003 in England with the Birmingham Royal Ballet. The overhaul took four months of 9-to-5 work and he wasn't even starting from scratch.

Hatch also recalls gruelling hours. To meet deadlines for four premieres last winter, he'd start work around 5 a.m., devoting five or six hours to writing before heading to Laurier where he taught night classes that ended at 10 p.m.

"It's like the runner's high, where people are so absorbed they're outside themselves, immersed into a different zone," he says. "I'll have worked six hours and it will have seemed like six minutes."

Enns can spend years mulling over a piece. Sometimes, the music comes more easily. "If you listen to Beethoven, Beethoven is constantly scrambling and bashing away to make the music, whereas with Mozart it just sort of shakes out of his sleeves," he says. "But I'd imagine both of them had some of those kind of days."

The level of difficulty also depends on the composer's goals. An orchestral score with 20 different parts requires much more work than a shorter, commercial piece.

Enns spent just one evening on *Sing Me a Song*, written for a children's choir and one of his most commercially successful arrangements. "I sat on the couch after supper one day and diddled something down."

By commercially successful, he means *Sing Me a Song* sold more copies of the published score than any other of his



Composer/professor Glenn Buhr of Waterloo sometimes finds his themes while reading poetry. Photography • Peter Lee

pieces. It was also included in an American music education text. "I think they've printed several hundred thousand copies, though it didn't translate into more than one hundred thousand pennies for me," Enns says.

"Still, that's what I mean by commercial success; in the concert music composition world you don't normally plan to make a living from composing. Most of us have paying jobs, and then compose because we

are driven to do it by our own creative needs."

Though the creative task itself requires seclusion, most composers appreciate the support they find in the local community.

Hatch acknowledges his bias when he cites Laurier's program as one of many opportunities for established and emerging composers. "My students are really, really lucky," he says.

Other institutions that commission ►



Like Carol Ann Weaver, Peter Hatch finds walking conducive to his work as a composer. Although he has taught composition at Wilfrid Laurier University for 25 years, Hatch says he can't teach inspiration: "It's so personal it wouldn't make sense to anybody."

Photography • Kristine Racicot



▶ and perform locally grown works include the Kitchener Waterloo Symphony, the Canadian Chamber Ensemble and the DaCapo Chamber Choir.

In September, Kitchener music producer Earl McCluskie organized the Composers' Choral Song Circle which saw more than 100 people gathered at Kitchener City Hall on a Saturday evening for an interactive concert, with a choir assembled to read music by numerous local composers. Weaver thinks this region could do

much more. In particular, she finds the new-music scene estranging and esoteric.

"I feel strongly that to be dedicated to finding (new music) often takes a person into tracks and traces not always recognized as necessarily being blessed or bona

fide or canonized or codified.... I would like to see a wider parameter of things that we accept as new music around here."

While some of Weaver's work is avant-garde, she refuses to limit her composi-

tions to one type of music.

For her, "new music" encompasses accessible forms, rhythms and colours: music about real people, places and times that everyone can appreciate.

She recalls a concert with Rebecca Campbell at a township high school in South Africa. Partway through a piece, hundreds of Zulu students began whooping and hollering and singing along.

"New music has stepped around the world," she says. "Let's get some dirt on those boots."

Hatch counters that composers here have been changing perceptions about new music. Some people imagine dissonance, difficulty and complexity, he says, but in this area people know to expect an eclectic mix of influences and instruments.

Weaver also says in the broader community of composers, men find it easier to succeed.

The local numbers are telling. Though

“It's like the runner's high, where people are so absorbed they're outside themselves, immersed into a different zone. I'll have worked six hours and it will have seemed like six minutes.”  
Peter Hatch

roughly 65 per cent of Laurier's first-year music students are women, only 25 to 35 per cent of them take the composition class, according to Hatch.

However, the numbers have improved over the years, and role models like Linda Catlin Smith, a part-time composition instructor, offer support.

Because composers not only produce the score but must also ensure their work gets performed, the process requires self-esteem that younger women sometimes lack.

"My partner, Margaret, is a women's studies professor so I can say this," Hatch says. "The ability to be grounded and brave enough to go out and say 'Play my

piece' takes a certain amount of whatever. We try to make that as easy as possible at Laurier.... We do all we can. It's still skewed."

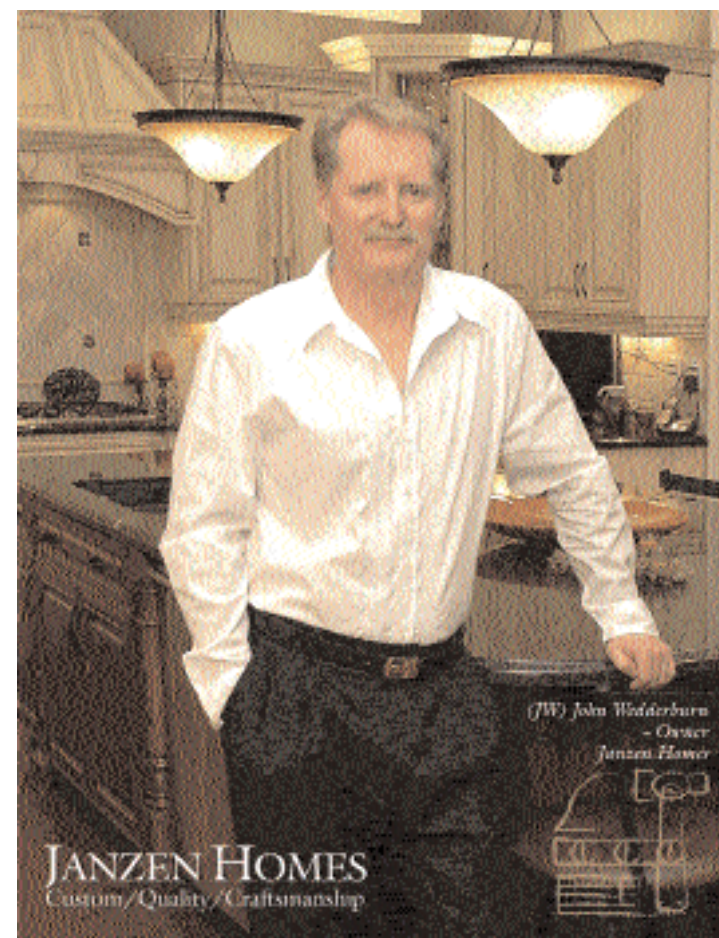
Despite the challenges, Weaver calls composing the biggest form of joy she knows. Although getting paid by a performer for the use of a piece of music is far from guaranteed, "most composers I know write music as a means of 'breathing.'" she says. "And somehow, making music is more important than making money."

Hatch, Buhr and Enns concur. Whatever the outcome, there's a special satisfaction in the creative act.

"Everybody leads a creative life, but it doesn't always end in a sonata or a jazz composition," Buhr says.

"People seeing music see a symbol of their own work." ☺

To read more about these composers and hear clips of their music, see the Canadian Music Centre online at [www.musiccentre.ca](http://www.musiccentre.ca)



## setting a precedent for custom design

CUSTOM HOMES... ON YOUR LOT OF OURS!

John Wedderburn has been creating custom homes in Waterloo Region and the surrounding area for over 25 years. Janzen Homes' uncompromising attention to detail has awarded them with a solid reputation for both quality and service, and has led to multiple achievements in the industry.

### AWARDS

- winner • Most Outstanding Single Awards of Distinction 2008
- winner • Most Outstanding Single Awards of Distinction 2006
- finalist • Most Outstanding Kitchen Awards of Distinction 2006
- finalist • Most Outstanding Bathroom Awards of Distinction 2006
- finalist • Built Green Award Awards of Distinction 2006



[www.janzenhomes.ca](http://www.janzenhomes.ca) 519-662-4494