William Bolcom Retires from Teaching

William Bolcom, Ross Lee Finney Distinguished Professor of Composition, was feted by faculty, friends, students, and former students, at a two-day celebration in late March, with a night of performances of his work followed by a gala dinner. In lieu of writing yet another bio on Bolcom and his remarkable career, and since he is retiring from teaching, not composing, we thought it would be best to let his former students speak to their experiences as young composers learning from the grand master.

I had only recently transferred from pre-med into the School of Music when William Bolcom joined the faculty. I was aware of a hubbub in the School’s community regarding his arrival, but at the time I thought little of it. The next thing I knew, everyone was playing and listening to ragtime, and the two Bills (Albright and Bolcom) were banging out original rags while introducing us to James P. Johnson, Eubie Blake, and Scott Joplin. At the time, I was reticent about my own background in jazz, and then suddenly it was not only acceptable, but “cool” to be interested in music of a less-than-serious vein, even to the point of referencing it in one’s own music. There was no need to create Kunst with every stroke of the pen! I can’t tell you how liberating it all was for us young composers grappling with serial procedures and yet looking for a way to express our own generation’s concerns and exuberance.

I came to Ann Arbor as a master’s student in the early 90s because of Bill. Quite simply. At some point, before even setting foot in Michigan, he had become my greatest hero. I say hero, not mentor, not teacher, not advisor, et cetera. Hero because I saw him as the embodiment of a talent unlike any other in both property and proportion—kind of like a caped crusader with “composer” across his chest. Sonata for Nadia, no problem. Concerto for Galway, let me at it. Opera for Chicago or the Met, whatevah! My musical life was rocked harder by this man than by any other person or force. Love to you my man … and Happy Retirement!

Carter Pann, MM ’96 (composition and piano), DMA ’04 (composition), is one of the most versatile talents among composers of his generation. His Piano Concerto was recognized by the K. Serocki Competition Award for his Piano Concerto, premiered by Polish Radio Symphony, and nominated for a Grammy Award. Other recognition includes a Charles Ives Scholarship, a Leo Kaplan Award, and five ASCAP awards, including the Leo Kaplan Award.

Art Gottschalk, BM ’74, MA ’75 (composition and English literature), DMA ’78, chair of the department of music theory and composition at Rice University, is also an active film and television composer and teaches continuing education courses on music business and law. A regularly performed composer, Gottschalk has over a hundred works in his catalogue and has won numerous awards in music composition.
I'll never forget my first composition lesson with Bill Bolcom back in September of 1981. Fresh from Texas, I was young, brash, and armed with a swagger that was only surpassed by my equally impressive naiveté. Wunderkind that I was, I showed up to Bill's studio with what I thought was a respectable week's worth of creative work—certainly sufficient in quantity and quality to impress him, and to inspire an hour's worth of lively discussion.

Bill quickly looked over my masterpiece-in-the-making, playing it flawlessly at the piano while simultaneously saying, “Ah, yes, a melodic sequence; it goes up…”

“Now, what else do you have?”

“Well, uh…that’s it.”

“Ah, I see. Well, we all have our bad weeks.”

We were approximately two minutes into this, my first lesson. What now? My heart raced. My face flushed.

Coming to the rescue, Bill launched into a freewheeling monologue on a dizzying array of subjects—music, poetry, art, life, politics, religion—and in a manner that was at once entertaining and erudite, inspiring and intimidating, enlightening and going right over my 23-year-old head. He was by turns serious, silly, animated, reflective, roguish, passionate. I was as spellbound by his words as I was embarrassed by my inability to comprehend them. (I still feel that way sometimes when I'm around him.)

Even though only two minutes of that first session were devoted to my “music,” those two minutes taught me one of my most important lessons of all: that if I was going to call myself a composer, I had better start composing!

Bill drips wisdom and experience. He can’t help it; the choices he’s made as a music maker come from a very deep place inside. I’ve always appreciated how, for Bill, the expectation of artistic excellence is a no-brainer, career “success” is to be borne with humor, and at the end of the day, what matters most aren’t platitudes (musical and otherwise) but drawing ever closer to oneself in order to contribute more. All of this I saw in Bill, whether in lessons where he never minced words about the work before me or over lunch when casual conversation was anything but. Who needs another vainglorious yet ironically mute composer? Bill’s continued mastery over his storytelling abilities in order to communicate deeply is a shining, shining light, and I am all the more blessed for knowing him. Con saludos, Bill!

Early in my first year at U-M, I had one lesson with Bill Bolcom, and he combed through my piano duo, giving suggestions. Ten months later, I ran into Bill downtown, and he said, “I was thinking about your piano duo recently, and around measure 14-ish if that high F were an F-sharp, well! That would be exquisite.” A year after I graduated, I attended a lecture Bill gave about collaborating with Arthur Miller. I sat in the back of a packed lecture hall, and Bill spotted me during the Q&A. He stopped mid-sentence and shouted, “Oh, HI sweetie!” giving me a big wave. Bill is the larger-than-life, warm friend who once you've met you feel you've known and adored for a hundred years.

Bill Bolcom, DMA '01, is a composer and pianist whose work draws on Latin American mythology, archeology, art, poetry, and folk music, translating them into western classical forms reflecting her Peruvian-Jewish heritage. Her work has been described as “striking and original”, “luminous . . . bursting with fresh originality.” (LA Times) As a performing pianist, she recorded the complete solo piano and violin/piano works of Pulitzer Prize-winning composer and MT&D professor emeritus Leslie Bassett.