On February 28, 2008 the University Symphony Orchestra, Kenneth Kiesler, conductor, will appear at Carnegie Hall, performing Mahler’s Symphony No. 5 and a new work, The Old Burying Ground, by composition faculty member Evan Chambers.

Jascha Heifetz made his American debut there, so stunning the audience that Fritz Kreisler was heard to comment, “We may as well break our fiddles across our knees.” Jan Paderewski appeared there for the first time, having swept Europe with huge successes in Vienna, Paris, and London; by the next day, American society was at his feet. And it was there that native son George Gershwin premiered his Concerto in F, under the baton of Walter Damrosch who had commissioned the work.

These benchmark moments in the history of great performances could have happened one place only: Carnegie Hall, a concert venue that has launched so many careers over its august lifetime that it has become the mecca — symbolic and real — for any musician.

Walking onto that stage, into a hall famed for its warm yet lively acoustics, its four tiers rising above, its
walls witness to such rare and magnificent moments in musical history, must send a thrill through any performer new to the hall.

And in February, the University Symphony Orchestra will walk onto that stage. On the program that night will be Mahler’s 5th Symphony and a new work by composition faculty member Evan Chambers, *The Old Burying Ground*, the latter of which will be recorded at Hill Auditorium before the orchestra leaves for New York.

“I wanted to select works that would show the depth and breadth of the extraordinary faculty and student musicians at the School of Music, Theatre & Dance,” said Kenneth Kiesler, Director of University Orchestras.

The USO, considered one of the world’s leading student orchestras, performs eight concert programs annually, presenting a wide range of major orchestral works, repertoire for chorus and orchestra, new music, and opera. Recent performances have included symphonies by Mahler, Beethoven and Brahms, Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, Moussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Respighi’s *Roman Festivals*, Ravel’s *Daphnis and Chloe*, the Verdi Requiem, and the Vaughan Williams *Sea Symphony*, as well as many premiere performances. For two years running, the USO won the ASCAP Award for Adventurous Programming.

“Mahler’s 5th Symphony has a huge range,” says Kiesler, “emotionally, musically, and technically.” Probably the best-known of the composer’s symphonies, the 5th was written in 1901 and 1902 during the summer months at Mahler’s cottage. It opens with a trumpet fanfare followed by a funeral march. The first two movements are tumultuous, a struggle between forces of darkness and light, but the work resolves on a redemptive note. The fourth movement is an ethereal romantic ode for strings and solo harp, inspired by Mahler’s passion for a new love, Alma, the woman who would become his wife.

Evan Chambers’ *The Old Burying Ground* continues the theme, running the gamut from grim death to exultant affirmation, taking listeners on a journey meant to open their eyes to the ephemeral nature of life. “I wanted to grab people by the throat—‘wake up and live!’—and there are a couple of songs that do just that,” Chambers says. “Others are very gentle and beautiful.” (See story, p. 11.)

As the USO begins rehearsals on the new work, Evan Chambers will be on hand to coach students on interpretation and make adjustments to the score as he hears the work that so far exists only as notes on a page.

“I consider it a privilege and a responsibility to work on a premiere,” says Kiesler, “to be one of the first to see the score, to hear directly from the composer through the music and in words what the piece means, what the intention is, what the motivation is—that’s really exciting to me. And often the performing tradition of that piece begins with the premiere.”

The USO has not toured in some years, most recently in August of 1989, to Salzburg, where they served as the orchestra for a conducting seminar at the Internationale Sommerakademie Mozarteum Salzburg, during the Salzburg Festival.

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Audiences in the Ann Arbor area have the luxury of hearing the orchestra perform live each season at Hill Auditorium. And recordings by the USO are available to those who live outside the area. In 2000, excerpts from four operas by Jewish composers, a project of the Milken Archives, were recorded on the Naxos label. In 2003, the USO recorded *Bolcom Bassett Daugherty*, a CD of works by noted U-M composers William Bolcom, Leslie Bassett, and Michael Daugherty, released on the Equilibrium label. And in 2004, the USO, along with five choirs and a host of soloists that stretched the stage at Hill to its limits, some 450 musicians in all, performed and recorded Bolcom’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, again on the Naxos label. That CD went on to win four Grammy Awards.

But audiences outside Ann Arbor have not heard the orchestra perform live since that trip to Austria. The tour will begin with stops at Oberlin and Cornell en route to Carnegie Hall. “The School has a long performing tradition,” says Kiesler. “This is an opportunity for us to tell our story, which is a great one, and to spotlight one of our faculty composers. I think any time you play this hall, it’s an extraordinary experience.”

A pre-concert forum, Composing Michigan: Legacy and Leadership in New Music, moderated by Dean Christopher Kendall, will open the evening at Carnegie Hall. Scheduled for 6:30 p.m., the forum will feature composition faculty members Evan Chambers, Michael Daugherty, Erik Santos, and Bright Sheng. The forum is free and open to the public. The USO will take the stage at 8:00 p.m.

Ann Arbor audiences can hear *The Old Burying Ground* on December 10, the Mahler on February 5, both at Hill Auditorium.
New York Premiere of The Old Burying Ground

While the official premiere of the orchestrated version of Evan Chambers’ The Old Burying Ground will happen in Ann Arbor on December 10, it will make its east coast premiere at Carnegie Hall on February 28, 2008.

Inspiration for the work came to Chambers during a stroll through an old cemetery near Jaffrey, NH, when he was in residence at the famed McDowell Colony for artists in 1998. “I love walking in cemeteries,” says Chambers, who lives across the street from one in his Ann Arbor home. “They are an ideal place to make a meditation on how lives appear and disappear in this world.”

The work that evolved from this seminal impulse is a hauntingly compelling musical portrait of the imagined voices of residents who inhabited rural New Hampshire two hundred years ago.

“When I visited the cemetery for the first time,” Chambers says, “I was floored by the power of the epitaphs. So I wrote them down, but didn’t know what I would do with them.”

Chambers finally had the time to begin sketching out ideas during a residency at the U-M Institute for the Humanities. The work found its earliest expression in a dance by faculty colleague Peter Sparling who resonated both to the music and the subject matter, so much so that he was inspired to choreograph to the still nascent work. Old Burying Ground was performed at the annual Power Center dance concert in February 2006 (see photo, left). Chambers and composition colleague Erik Santos, dressed in severe clergyesque clothing, sang the songs while student dancers in Prairie-style costumes whirled about the stage.

Since then, the work has grown to two complete song cycles. A chamber version for voices and accompaniment was performed at Ann Arbor’s Kerrytown Concert House in September, a performance that “transported listeners to another time and place” (The Ann Arbor News). Now the work for soprano, tenor, and folksinger, with original poetry readings by Tom Lynch, Keith Taylor, Jane Hirshfield, Richard Tillinghast, and Paula Meehan between songs, is being set to orchestration.

The composition draws from the diversity of Chambers’ musical influences: Irish balladry, sacred harp singing, Albanian folk music, and the American folk music he heard growing up. “My Dad was a 1950s folk revivalist. When I was younger, my parents loved hootenanies where people would play guitar and sing songs. I remember in particular one Christmas when there was a big sing-along. My Dad had this incredible, full-tilt style, banging on the guitar, singing at the top of his lungs, belting out songs like John Henry and O Sinner Man.”

“When I was sixteen, I would drive to the Dayton Public Library. There were bins and bins of recordings by contemporary composers,” Chambers says. “I’d pick up everything in one bin and take it to the desk and check it all out.” As music continued to play a more central role in his life, Chambers went on to study viola, earning masters and doctoral degrees in composition at Michigan.

But on a snowy drive to Cleveland one Christmas Eve, “I was listening to an NPR program, The Thistle and Shamrock, and I heard a version of Auld Lang Syne, sung by the Tannahill Weavers,” Chambers recalls. “I had a conversion experience. Something shifted in me; I think it had a lot to do with reclaiming my folk heritage, my Dad’s singing and guitar playing.”

Put all of those influences into a pot, and stir. Add a pinch of love of the new. “As an orchestra player, performing new music was always electrifying for me,” he recalls. “In fact, that’s where we literally, physiologically, grow new brain cells, through exposure to the new. So in that sense, I think it’s really important for young musicians to have the experience of putting up a new piece. There are some technically challenging parts, but I think the real challenge is that the way I write forces musicians to throw themselves into the performance and really push their sound over the edge.”

“I had a teacher who insisted that to sing for someone didn’t mean simply to sing while someone listened,” he says, “but rather to sing for them, or in their stead.” Those New Hampshire voices will live on in Chambers’ work.