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Notes of her own making

By Michael J. Solender
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Three years ago Elizabeth Kowalski set out to find a musical boot camp where she could spend part of her summer learning theory and composition from accomplished musical educators.

With limited funds and a desire to stay close to her home in north Charlotte, she discovered her options were nonexistent. So she decided to create her own workshop and composers' festival. The first Charlotte New Music Festival was born.

On the heels of last year's success, Kowalski has expanded the program offerings this year and has included composing for dance as part of the programming.

The Charlotte New Music Festival is being held this month and will feature eight separate performances open to the public. Venues include Grace on Brevard, St. Peter's Episcopal Church and 301 E. Ninth St.

Kowalski, 26, an emerging composer with a graduate degree in composition from UNC Greensboro wanted to workshop her own pieces in a venue where others would play her work. She also looked for a program that allowed her to put together unique arrangements and orchestration, see her work performed in front of an audience, learn from peers and contemporaries in similar situations and collaborate with other emerging and established composers and musicians.

"There just wasn't anything locally that would meet my expectations ...," said Kowalski. "I simply started making calls and assembling talent and reaching out to others who share this kind of passion – it snowballed and before I really knew what I was getting into there was a group of us sharing a rental house on Lake Wylie for two weeks last summer."

The dozen or so participants held five composer lectures, numerous student-led discussions, and performed three concerts for the public.

- Charlotte New Music Festival

What: Eight performances at three venues.

When: June 17-29.


Tickets: \$10-\$15.

Schedule, details:

www.charlotteneWMusic.org/concerts.

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Lawrence Dillon, composer in residence for the past 26 years at UNC School for the Arts in Winston-Salem, was on the faculty last year and is returning this year.

“What Elizabeth has managed to do in such a short span of time is remarkable,” said Dillon. “I’m highly impressed with the quality of talent she has attracted and the service she is doing for the arts community at large.”

Broader support

Last year’s efforts paid off as composers, performers and instructors all gained exposure and benefited from the collaboration and camaraderie that accompanied the festival.

With little more than word of mouth endorsements and an active social media presence, especially on Facebook, Kowalski was able to garner an even bigger following for this year’s festival.

Among those attending are students from as far away as Canada and China and commitments from some notable composer/instructors such as Armando Bayolo, founder of the Great Noise Ensemble and artistic director/curator for the new music series at Washington, D.C.’s Atlas Performing Arts Center.

A grass-roots effort

Bayolo was particularly impressed by the grass-roots efforts and enthusiasm Kowalski has demonstrated in getting her and other’s music “out there, where it can be heard and experienced.”

“She reached out to me on Facebook, and what she is doing spoke to me as both a teacher and one who has benefited from other’s intervention,” said Bayolo.

“In today’s musical arena it is imperative that composers take charge and write for those around them, develop venues where their work can be explored and not wait for publishers or symphony conductors to call – it isn’t going to happen.”

A new dance component

The festival this year has branched out to include composition for dance, and there will be additional opportunities for choreographers, dancers and composers to collaborate.

The workshop component of program is sold out this year, topping out with 22 students, six lecturers, three choreographers and more than a dozen musical performance groups.



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