



ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

One of America's most prolific composers is still in the classroom. **C-11**

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Rutgers' prize: a composer

By RUTH BONAPACE

Charles Wuorinen was having, by anyone's standards, a bad day. A recurring disc problem had flared up so severely he couldn't put on his shoes. He could not even sit without pain.

Outside, another late-season snowfall posed a challenge for even the most intrepid New Yorkers. And relentless storms

had made his country house in New Jersey, a cherished getaway for creating music, impassable for much of the winter.

Yet, padding about his Upper West Side brownstone in a navy blue bathrobe and slippers, the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer with impeccable manners kept each of his appointments, including tutorials with his Rutgers

University students on semester break.

"Sometimes I start to ask myself why I do this, that maybe I should stop," he said of his teaching. "But I feel I have to inculcate some serious artistic values in young composers."

Wuorinen, 56, is a virtuoso pianist, conductor, and one of America's most prolific composers. His richly varied and rapidly growing catalog of 185 pieces are performed regularly in the New York area and abroad, and many are available on compact disc.

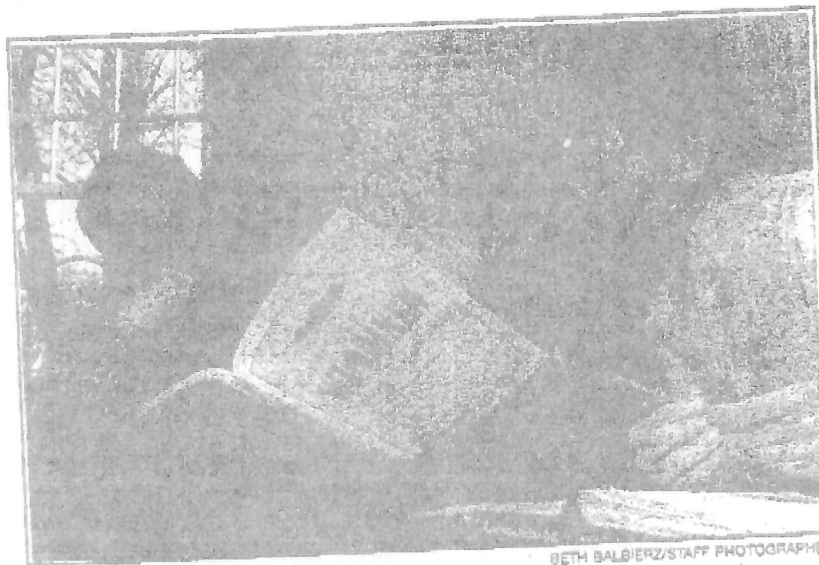
Last month, for example, the Rascher Quartet performed his new "Concerto for Saxophone Quartet and Orchestra" with the Beethovenhalle Orchestra of Bonn at Raritan Valley Community College in North Branch. Four days later it premiered another of his compositions at Lincoln Center.

Wuorinen currently is composing three major works commissioned by Peter Martins for the New York City Ballet, with the first, "The Mission of Virgil," to be premiered this fall. They follow the success three years ago of "Delight of the Muses," now part of the company's repertoire.

"In my mind, the three new ballets are reflections on 'The Divine Comedy,'" said Wuorinen. "However, Peter is only now doing the choreography and whether he chooses to follow these impulses remains to be seen."

These ballets have been taking shape, musically, at his cottage in Long Valley, a tiny Hunterdon County community about an hour's drive from Lincoln Center. A native New Yorker, Wuorinen has been spending an increasing amount of time in New Jersey, composing and teaching

who can't stop teaching



BETH BALBIERZ/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Graduate students follow the score while listening to a recording.

Of his country house, he said, "I go there whenever I can. It's isolated in the woods and I can get quite a lot done when I'm there."

Wuorinen began teaching at Rutgers a decade ago, after a 14-year hiatus from the classroom that followed early teaching jobs at Columbia University, where his father was a history professor, and the Manhattan School of Music.

At Rutgers, his classes are open to all grade levels, even though a composer of his stature could choose to work only with a handful of advanced graduate students.

"I've never disdained undergraduates," he said. "In many ways, it's more important to give good instruction to people close to the beginning of their activities in composing."

"I sometimes also teach performers who are not going to be professional composers, because studying composition creates in them a completely different attitude toward music than as mere interpreters."

A pioneer in electronic music — he won his Pulitzer in 1970 for "Time's Encorium" — Wuorinen later abandoned that medium in favor of conventional instru-

ments. But he continues to be an innovator.

Fascinated by parallels between fractal geometry and musical composition, he has launched a seminar at Rutgers on that topic in addition to working individually with about a dozen students.

To the average listener, Wuorinen's music is not melodic, and concerts devoted solely to his works and those of other new music leaders like Harvey Peterson, Elliott Carter, and Milton Babbitt are often sparsely attended in American concert halls, compared with those of more accessible modern composers like Joan Tower and Ned Rorem or renegades like John Cage.

Calling populism "the curse of American life," Wuorinen has chosen to follow his own path of intellectual rigor and experimentation. In the process, he became, at age 32, the youngest composer to win a Pulitzer. And he has been rewarded with enough new commissions from major orchestras and performers to allow him to opt for a teaching career rather than enter it out of financial necessity, as is often the path for composers who share his progressive idiom.

Wuorinen's richly complex mu-

sic is often dramatic and multi-textured. It is part of a tradition that began with Bach and Hayden and evolved through Schoenberg and Stravinsky's 12-tone works.

As for the future of serious music, Wuorinen's vision is grim.

"We are in a terrible time culturally, top to bottom, from pop culture to so-called high art," he said.

"Many young composers tend to be opportunists, sincere in a very convenient way with music cut to measure for a very badly educated audience. There's a confusion between art and entertainment. The idea is, 'Let's please people.' Well, we have television for that. It's very sad. We have a generation of utter trash."

Wuorinen said there's still time for civilization to be salvaged, but it's up to artists and teachers to redeem it.

"We have a generation of kids who not only can't spell, but have never heard of Stravinsky and Beethoven. They certainly never heard of me and never will," said Wuorinen, who composed his first piece at age 5.

"But there's a simple solution — make basic musical literacy a fundamental requirement in schools. No gimmicks. Just take children and teach them to sing or play simple music on real musical instruments and teach them to do this with music that is good, not music education stuff. If that's done on a wide scale, all our problems with aging audiences will go away."

And that's part of what has kept him at Rutgers, trudging off to class in spite of his ailing back and professional commitments.

"I have to keep teaching," he said. "We're a musically illiterate nation that's experienced a wholesale rejection of civility, tradition, culture, and the contributions of the past."

"But I don't blame the public. If the leadership among us has values and aspirations, the public will follow."