

The winner of the First International Composition Competition

Interview with Matt Van Brink

By Andrea Angelini, ICB Managing Editor

Andrea Angelini (AA): *When did you first get interested in music? How old were you?*

Matt Van Brink (MVB): I have been playing the piano since age 5, composing since age 13, and my first compositions, perhaps predictably, were for piano.

AA: *How did you begin composing for choir?*

MVB: I have sung in choirs since elementary school, eventually singing with Indiana University's Contemporary Vocal ensemble, and my first (wild) efforts in composing for choir were for that group.

AA: *What would you say are the most important influences on your music?*

MVB: Who knows? Setting, goals, time and place. To steal a notion from Vladimir Nabokov, I enjoy solving puzzles, even ones of my own invention.

AA: Do you consider the audience when you're working on a composition?

MVB: When I'm composing, I am working with an audience of one – myself. It is certainly challenging to see one's own work objectively, especially in the midst of its creation, but I try to approach my own work with open ears and fresh perspective. I am almost always open to new revisions, even on completed works.

AA: How important is it that music be accessible on first hearing?

MVB: Some aspect of a piece should be accessible on every hearing! Hopefully, other more subtle characteristics will be revealed on subsequent hearings. In the end, though, if a piece isn't attractive in the first place, what's the incentive to listen again?

AA: What are you working on at the moment? Do you have anything else coming up?

MVB: I am working on several arrangements for Polkastra's new album, composing a pair of one-act musicals for the students of Concordia Conservatory in New York, and writing a new set of piano pieces to perform myself.

AA: Artists almost always have their methods for working in their craft. How would you describe your general process for creating a new score?

MVB: I always begin with a stressful hair-splitting period of gestation and procrastination. When it becomes too late to wait any longer, I dive in and allow the piece to evolve as

quickly as possible. I enjoy developing my ideas, but conjuring up those first ideas is a mysterious process to me. I suppose I rely on improvisation and luck.

AA: Could you discuss the role that text plays in your compositional process?

MVB: For me, a text creates both an emotional landscape and a structural foundation for a piece. Some excellent compositions, though, use just one of these, or neither! I am interested in striking a sort of balance.

AA: What piece of music (any medium) do you wish you had composed?

MVB: Gershwin & Gershwin's song "Fascinating Rhythm."

AA: What would you say defines your style?

MVB: My music is intellectual, optimistic, and fun.

AA: Tell me something for our ICB readers.

MVB: I write quite a bit of music for the young students of Concordia Conservatory. Coaching these young performers has been revelatory for me, and for the students, it has driven home the simple idea that classical music is not solely the province of non-living composers. As they get older, I hope these students continue to engage with new art and new artists all around them.

Cantemus series. (www.earthsongschoralmusic.com)

Matt Van Brink is an American composer, lyricist, pianist and accordionist. He has received multiple ASCAP Morton Gould Young Composer Awards, the Northridge Composition Prize, a residency from the MacDowell Colony and prizes from VocalEssence, San Francisco Choral Artists, TransforMusic, and the Delius Competition. He has performed and recorded with Gamelan Galak Tika and the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra, and he is a composer member of the BMI Musical Theater Workshops. Van Brink is piano faculty and composer at Concordia Conservatory (Bronxville, New York), which has commissioned and given the premieres of many new works of chamber music and musical theater for its student performers, including the song cycle *Kiss the Stars Goodnight* and the family musical *Christmas Every Day*. He has also been commissioned by Schott Music, Collage New Music, New York Youth Symphony, Celebrity Series of Boston, Lara St. John, and others, and his compositions and arrangements are published by Schott Music and Tenuto Publications. Van Brink has held positions at Hofstra University, M.I.T., Boston University, and Concordia Conservatory. He studied composition with John Harbison and Lukas Foss at Boston University, where he received a doctorate, and with David Dzubay, Samuel Adler, and Don Freund during his undergraduate years at Indiana University. He now lives in Brooklyn, New York City. Email: mattvb@gmail.com



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