

Compose Yourself

The Hartford Symphony debuts a composition by an untutored local composer

by [John Adamian](#) - February 6, 2003

Connecticut has produced its share of businessmen and professionals who labored away at their 9-to-5 gigs and pursued artistic careers on the side. Poet Wallace Stevens did the straight-laced Hartford insurance-man routine by day, and in his off hours worked out his heady Modernist lyrics exploring the reality of the life of the mind. Danbury-born Charles Ives was a businessman who wrote his polytonal and allusive compositions after work. Add Albert Hurwit to the list. The 71-year-old retired Hartford radiologist has composed a symphony, part of which will be performed by the Hartford Symphony Orchestra Feb. 13. Just composing a symphony is one thing, and managing to have an orchestra perform it is another. But Hurwit had one more hurdle -- he couldn't read or write music.

"I play piano by ear, but I read like a second-year piano student," Hurwit said recently during an interview in his studio. "The average symphony-goer probably knows as much about music as I do."

Hurwit uses an elaborate computer and keyboard system to transcribe what he modestly calls his piano "doodlings" into music notation. From there he elaborates on the germinal phrases and sketches. But he tries not to let the technology get the better of him.

"In my mind, the computer and the synthesizer have to be your slave," said Hurwit. "It's easy to let (them) take over, but music's got to come through the brain from the heart."

Hurwit is cautious about not letting his story serve as a go-ahead for every aspiring composer. Like the good doctor that he is, Hurwit has this advice for every would-be Beethoven who suspects they might be inspired with greatness: get a second opinion. That's exactly what Hurwit did.

"If you go buy a used car, you're going to get a mechanic to look at it first," Hurwit said, speaking of his request for a "professional" assessment of the

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The music of his mind: Hurwit in his studio.

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merits of his compositions.

In 1997, Hurwit learned that the Hartford Symphony was accepting submissions, so he sent in a copy of *Adagio for Orchestra*, one of his early pieces. The composition was accepted and performed with former conductor Michael Lankester conducting. Encouraged by the experience, Hurwit said he decided to take on bigger projects.

"It was the only piece I had ever submitted, and since I was batting 1,000 I decided it might be feasible to have them consider my new work," said Hurwit.

Hurwit then asked Lankester to come over to hear some of the thematic material he had assembled and to be "brutally honest" with his opinion. In Hurwit's case, the second opinion was an encouraging one.

This began what has been a productive period of composing and learning in which Hurwit met with Lankester to hash out themes, ideas and structure for the symphony. Lankester also edited the score, adding in phrase markings and other notation for the players.

"(Lankester) has been an enormous help to me; he's given me a tremendous education," said Hurwit.

He started work on the symphony in 2000. After completing some initial work on the composition, Hurwit said he began using the idea of his family history as an organizing principle for the music.

The music is "dedicated to all who have paved the road to freedom," Hurwit writes in the notes to a recording of the piece. He took inspiration from the strength and courage of all those who have been displaced and dislocated by ethnic tension. And he used the idea of his family history, and the story of his grandfather's flight from pogroms in Russia and arrival in America, to create the underlying framework of the symphony.

"The first movement predicts the next three movements," said Hurwit. "As you build a symphony, you have to have some architectural plan. There's a musical argument that carries through the symphony."

Hurwit is the first to acknowledge the limits of his technical musical education, and in preparation for the debut of his composition he has been practicing reading through the score as the music plays -- so he can better offer comments to conductor Edward Cumming, should that be needed. And after the experience of hearing his *Adagio* first performed by live musicians in 1997, Hurwit is understandably excited by his upcoming symphonic debut. "One of the reactions I had was 'I wrote that?'" said Hurwit. "It was amazing."

Parts of Hurwit's symphony sound like snippets of "Pomp and Circumstance," other sections have the air of jumbled bits of circus music, and parts of the sombre third movement -- what Hurwit refers to as "the belly of the beast" -- remind one of Samuel Barber. But Hurwit said he doesn't compose with the intention of making accessible music, which, he's

been told by some, might translate to critical dismissal.

But, despite his view of professional opinions, Hurwit dispensed with much of the advice he received, especially from those who warned him to keep it short if he ever hoped to hear his symphony performed. The whole symphony clocks in at just under one hour.

Too long or too accessible, Hurwit is drawing a lot of attention for being what many are calling the first composer who couldn't read or write music to have a symphony performed. The folks from *CBS News Sunday Morning* have taken notice, and cameras are expected to be rolling when Cumming lifts his baton.

"I wind up going down alleys that a trained musician wouldn't go down," said Hurwit. "But, there isn't one 32nd note that isn't honest."

The Third Movement of Albert Hurwit's Symphony No. 1 will be performed by the Hartford Symphony Orchestra on Feb. 13 and 14 at 7:30 p.m. at Belding Theater of the Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts, 166 Capitol Ave., Hartford. For information or tickets, call 244-2999.

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