



**Editor's intro:** Each year the Forum honors an individual or ensemble that has made a significant contribution to the work and livelihoods of contemporary composers with its **Champion of New Music Award**. Past recipients of the award have been Dale Warland (2005), Zeitegeist (2006), Philip Brunelle (2007), and Osma Vänskä (2008). Late last year, Bill Ryan, composer, performer, teacher, and founder of the Grand Valley State University New Music Ensemble, was selected for this award. Biographical info on Bill Ryan can be found on page 6 inside; photos, press clippings, and audio files documenting his recent activities in all those roles are available online. Sounding Board posed a few questions to Ryan, and his answers appear below.

## Composer/Performer/Teacher: Bill Ryan – Champion of New Music



**Sounding Board:** What drew you to making your own music – and playing other people's music — in the first place? Was there a particular person or event that was a decisive moment in your life, or was it a gradual combination of people and events?

**Bill Ryan:** When I was sitting in my sophomore music theory class, as a music education major, my professor Paul Steinberg played an electronic piece of his called "Bethesda Fountain." Up until that point all my classical music experience was with music over a hundred years old. The idea that the composer was actually standing in front of me, discussing his fabulous piece, with all

these new timbres, had a great impact which started me on the path towards composition and contemporary music.

**SB:** As a composer, how do you begin working on a new piece? And how do you decide when a piece is finished?

**BR:** When I start a work I have ideas I want to explore in mind – a texture, a process, a shape. I try to figure out how to present these ideas so they sound musical and not abstract. I used to be pretty rigorous with my planning when I started, where every small detail was calculated. The more I compose though, the less I go to this degree of planning. My music still sounds very structured, so I guess I did it to such an extent in my past that it just became internalized. I consider a piece finished when I've heard it performed. This just lets me confirm that everything works.

**SB:** As a teacher, what above all else do you want your students to learn?

**BR:** The reality is that only a small percentage of my students will go on and be focused on new music. Others will become more general educators and performers, and some will leave the field entirely. Besides the obvious nuts and bolts that they're in school to learn, I want my students to leave with the recognition that contemporary music can be as dynamic, varied, and rewarding as any other type of music, and can be incorporated in whatever they choose to pursue. I hope that when they see how passionate I am, as well as the enthusiasm of the guests I bring in, that even though it might not be a choice they make, they see it is a valuable and necessary area within music.

**SB:** What expectations did you have when the Grand Valley State University New Music Ensemble played Steve Reich's "Music for 18 Musicians" at dawn in New York

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## Advice for the Emerging Composer: Competitions

By Eric Whitacre

Ah, composition competitions . . . there are hundreds, maybe thousands, every year, all over the world. Should you enter? Should you not? I've entered a lot of them over the years, and based on my personal experience, the answer is "yes."

Competitions are a good thing, and offer a number of benefits to the emerging composer, as long as you know what those benefits are.

To wit:

**1. Exposure.** Most of the time the judges in these contests are prominent conductors, or administrators, or publishers, and these are exactly the kinds of people you want to hear your music. Even if you don't win (you won't win – more on that later) you might leave a terrific impression on a single judge or the entire panel, and they may begin to follow your work more closely. Several times I've lost a competition and had the judges call me to ask if they could program my "loser" score.

**2. You'll finish the piece.** I don't think I've ever seen a competition that is looking for "sketches" of a piece; they all want a finished product, ready to perform. This is great for you, because the application date becomes a concrete deadline to motivate you to complete your masterpiece. Then when you don't win (seriously, you won't win) you'll have a finished work ready to shop around.

**3. It will steel your will and prepare you for a career filled with rejection.** Did I mention that you won't win? In the last 18 years I've probably entered a hundred competitions and I have never won anything. Nothing. I lost the ASCAP Young Composers award three times (in three different years I entered "When David Heard," "Lux Aurumque," and "Cloudburst," lost with all three). I lost the Dale Warland Singers competition, where I entered a never-performed piece called "Water Night" (although Dale decided to publish "Water Night" in his choral series, and the 'winning' piece from that year remains unpublished). Just last week I received a very nice letter from the good people at United States Artists, informing me that while my application was well received (all that interesting music you've written!), it didn't merit an award.

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## Bill Ryan – ACF's 2009 Champion of New Music

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City back in 2007? Were you surprised at the reaction that one performance and your subsequent innova CD release of that piece generated?

**BR:** What was so great about that project was that it was all very organic, much like the piece itself. All we set out to do initially was to be able to read through the piece without stopping. Then we performed on campus, then New York, then the CD. Nothing was forced, it all just seemed to be the next logical step because the ensemble sounded so good. There was a certain charm in the "back story," kids from the Midwest, etc., which definitely helped people take notice, but it all comes back to the content. If the group wasn't performing the piece so well, end of story.

**SB:** That New York City performance was on the occasion of Reich's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday – and the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his "Music for 18 Musicians." You followed up that CD with a 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary "remix" recording of Terry Riley's "In C." Do you have a thing about anniversaries, or are you just passionate about these two pieces?

**BR:** As my wife will be reading this, I need to say: "Yes, I have a thing about anniversaries." But while each recording was the result of a string of events going back to these anniversaries, I certainly would have covered them at some point with the ensemble. They are among the greatest works of any kind of music to come out of the twentieth century, and yes, I am pretty passionate about them both.

**SB:** You told one interviewer that you went to music school because you couldn't get into journalism school – do you still feel a pull towards journalism? How would you rate the press coverage of your two innova releases?

**BR:** Wow, you've been digging! Yes, at one point I thought it'd be cool to be a sports journalist. At that time I guess I was a better trumpet player than writer, so that quickly changed. I don't feel that pull so much now because it easily gets satisfied (and exhausted) in academia. Through my degrees, grant applications, committees, accreditation reports, promotion applications, plus all the text for the ensemble, there are enough writing requirements to keep me busy. The press coverage for our CDs has been simply amazing. I worked closely with a great publicist, Steven Swartz, as well as the fabulous team at innova. The tools that developed this decade really helped too – mp3s, iTunes, YouTube, and various social media applications. Again though, these tools are available to everyone, so it all still comes back to great content.

**SB:** Do you have any final words of wisdom for young and aspiring composers and performers of new music?

**BR:** I'm not sure how unique this wisdom is, but I would suggest that no matter what it is they're doing – a student project, a community event, a donation of services, or something more professional – that they are humble, professional, timely, and go well beyond the expectations of that particular project. You never, ever know when the people you previously worked with will call on your services again, or refer someone else to you, whether later that month, year, or ten years down the road. In many cases, those people have continued to climb the professional ladder and it will be a much more significant project. I know dozens of examples where hard work on a seemingly irrelevant project led to career-defining work later on.



Bill Ryan (center) with the Grand Valley State University New Music Ensemble

### Bill Ryan's concise MySpace bio:

"I compose, produce events, conduct, and teach. I run marathons. I cook. I backpack. I climb mountains. I use a Mac. I take photographs. I own many power tools. I spend way too much time online."

### Bill Ryan's longer (official) bio:

Whether composing, conducting or teaching, or producing concerts or recordings, **Bill Ryan** is passionate about contemporary music and bringing it to diverse audiences. His compositions are consistently heard on the concert stage, radio, and with dance throughout the country. Bill has received numerous composition honors including an ASCAP Young Composers Award and a Meet the Composer Education Program grant. In 2009 his music was performed over fifty times in cities including New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Atlanta, St. Louis, and Houston. Other recent activity includes commissions by Opus 21, the Robin Cox Ensemble, violinist Todd Reynolds, and projects with Travesty Dance of Houston. Bill has produced over 45 concerts in his "Open Ears" and "Free Play" concert series, gaining national recognition with three ASCAP/Chamber Music America Adventurous Programming Awards. As a conductor he has commissioned and premiered dozens of works by composers including Phil Kline, Marc Mellits, Belinda Reynolds, Evan Ziporyn, and Pulitzer Prize winner David Lang. In 2006 Bill founded **The Grand Valley State University New Music Ensemble** and shortly after produced their critically acclaimed recording of Steve Reich's "Music for 18 Musicians." Named among the top recordings of 2007 by *The New York Times*, *LA Weekly*, *The Rest Is Noise*, and *New York Magazine*, the CD reached the top of iTunes' and Amazon's classical charts, and spent eleven weeks on *Billboard's* top 25 classical crossover chart. WNYC's John Schaefer most recently named it one of his top five classical recordings of the decade, and it was named the #1 classical recording of the decade in the *Soundcheck* listener poll. In late 2009 the ensemble released their second CD, *In C Remixed*, featuring Terry Riley's "In C" along with 18 remixes. Critically acclaimed in numerous publications, the recording was named a top release of 2009 by *The Washington Post*, *Time Out Chicago*, and *All About Jazz*, and was named the #2 release of the year in WNYC's *Newsounds* listener poll. Bill and the ensemble have been profiled in numerous publications, including *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, and *Billboard Magazine*, and featured on NPR's *Weekend Edition* and *All Things Considered*, and WNYC's *Radiolab*. They performed at the 2007 *Bang On a Can* Marathon in New York, at the 2008 *College Music Society National Conference* in Atlanta, as members of the all-star ensemble assembled by the *Kronos Quartet* to perform on the "In C" 45th Anniversary concert at *Carnegie Hall*, and this past fall at New York's *Le Poisson Rouge*. In 2008 Bill won the *Michigan Governor's Award in Arts Education* for his work at *Grand Valley State University*, where he has been since 2005.

For more information, video clips, etc., visit:

[www.myspace.com/billryanmusic](http://www.myspace.com/billryanmusic) and [www.newmusicensemble.org](http://www.newmusicensemble.org) ♦