

Arts & Entertainment

Composer's music progresses from 'academic' to distinctive and charming

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By Andrew Druckenbrod, Post-Gazette Classical Music Critic

In Nancy Galbraith's darkest hours as a composer -- before she got confidence, a voice or even performances -- she made do in an atypical way for one on the avant-garde.

"I wrote a piece for everyone in my family," Galbraith, 52, says. They were gifts, but the pieces kept her chin up and continued her development as a composer while living in West Virginia after graduating from West Virginia University in the 1974 with a master's degree in composition. "To motivate yourself to compose with having no contact with anybody or commissions was really difficult." To top that off, the composer moved back to her hometown of Millvale, two blocks from where she was born, with no prospects of a career in composing.

That's in sharp contrast to the woman you see today, brimming with self-confidence, overflowing with commissions and harboring a true voice. She's now a professor of composition at Carnegie Mellon University and music director and organist of Christ Lutheran Church in Millvale and has had numerous performances of her work.

"She is very smart and a fine composer," says fellow CMU composer Leonardo Balada, who gave Galbraith lessons when she was in her 20s. "She was very knowledgeable when she came to me, [but] she was insecure and humble. The success she has had lately has opened her up."

"I have always been impressed by Nancy's dedication to her art," says Pittsburgh Symphony pianist Patricia Prattis Jennings, who performs on Galbraith's newest album, "Atacama," released on Albany Records.

This is actually the second major disc devoted entirely to Galbraith's works; having one is considered a major achievement. Already one of Pittsburgh's finest composers, she's emerging as a national figure in a realm that has few women.

Quantity maybe not, but quality exists in droves. From Libby Larsen to Augusta Read Thomas to Joan Tower to Chen Yi, some of the most major figures on the scene are female. But, as Balada puts it, "I don't think anyone cares if you are a man or a woman if you are a composer."

To that point, eminent choral conductor Robert Page, who premiered her "Missa Mysteriorum" with the Mendelssohn Choir in 1999, says, "I put Galbraith in the same category as William Bolcom, Libby Larsen, Stephen Paulus."

"It is hard to be a woman composer, but that resistance has not hardened her," says Jennings. "She



Nancy Galbraith, in the studio in her Reserve home, has become an important figure in the local music scene, with many Pittsburgh groups commissioning her works. (Robin Rombach, Post-Gazette)

isn't bitter about it."

Although Galbraith refers to her immaculately organized composing studio at home as "the womb," she is not overly concerned by the gender issue. "I worked too hard and am too passionate about music that I would never want to think that somebody gave me a commission because I was a woman," she says. "When I got my first Pittsburgh Symphony commission ["Morning Litany"], somebody actually asked me that and ... it was an insult."

For her, the biggest concern is that networking opportunities are not the same. "Men will say, let's get a drink, but it's just not that natural for a lot of men to do that with a woman."

But music did come naturally to Galbraith growing up in Millvale and attending Carnegie Mellon Prep School. "My mother was a pianist and church organist, and my dad sang in a barbershop quartet and in the church choir," says Galbraith, who also studied clarinet. "My mother and I would play duets, and my family would sit around and sing four-part harmony all the time. Their whole attitude toward music was that this was fun."

That comes through in Galbraith's music, especially that written since the '70s. "Her music then was more academic," says Balada. "She became more minimalist, and therefore more traditionally harmonic, later." This move to the rhythmically charged and melodic music she writes today happened concurrently with the rise of the minimalist movement and pieces such as John Adams' "Harmonielehre."

From the vigor of her String Quartet No. 1, the brightness of "Aeolian Muses" the twirling melodies of "Rhythms and Rituals," the touches of Piano Sonata No. 1 and the warmth of Wind Symphony No. 1, Galbraith's music has both substance and accessibility. Most of these post-minimalist works stem from the '90s, when her career took off; now, she is spreading into different directions with every new piece.

A new flute concerto will involve extended technique and her recent "Magnificat" involves a more textual writing for voices. She has become an important local figure, with many Pittsburgh groups commissioning her works. The latest is "Four River Songs," which the Pittsburgh Camerata will premiere next month.

In everything, Galbraith's optimistic voice comes through. "I suppose it is part of her personality, She is always laughing," says Balada. "If you write naturally, you come through. Her charm affects her music."

And she doesn't change her approach for the other major aspect of her musical life, her work at Christ Lutheran Church. When her mother retired as organist, she took over the position, but on her own terms. In addition to leading the choir from the organ, Galbraith has written much of the liturgy that the church uses, a practice much more common in Bach's day than now. "If we needed a 'Gloria' for a day, I'd just write it," she says. "I have so much church music lying around."

Truth be told, Galbraith's studio is neater than most composers', not just because she is compulsively organized, but because her husband, Matthew, manages her career and maintains her Web site (www.nancygalbraith.com). It's sort of a role reversal that works well for the couple. "There is so much business in contemporary music," she says. "I don't know what I'd do without him."

Having seen their two children out the door, Galbraith is freer than ever to go to that room of her own to compose. The future holds few limits for a composer who has jumped the hurdles both in society and in herself.

Andrew Druckenbrod can be reached at adruckenbrod@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1750.