



Hitting the High Notes

Composers and students make beautiful new music together

By Jan Ferris Heenan

One year ago, Land Park resident Lisa Oman closed the door on a finance career to do something she has dreamed of for more than a decade: bring high school music ensembles and accomplished composers together to expose students to the joys—and career potentials—of new music.

Her program, *Composers and Schools in Concert*, recruits prominent composers to create new pieces of music for high school musicians to perform. It's a collaborative endeavor, designed to connect composers with young musicians.

The program has attracted interest from artists and educators around the country. In fact, from the moment Oman put a survey on her website earlier this year to gauge public interest, she was besieged with requests and offers for help. Now the trick is to raise enough money to meet demand.

"Until we get funding going, we're a little bit in limbo," says Oman. "We're not talking about a lot of money to get started. For \$1,000, we could hire two composers to coach the kids and be a part of the program. For \$3,000, we could put on more commissioned events with high schools in the area."

A trumpet player since childhood, Oman came up with CSIC to show music as a viable career and not just a hobby. "You're in high school, you tell your parents you want to study



Rio Americano band directors Max Kiesner (left) and Josh Murray (right) with Lisa Oman, founder of the Sacramento-based *Composers & Schools In Concert* initiative

music in college and they grimace," says Oman, who received her own undergraduate degree in history. "I really wanted to create an apprentice-type relationship between the students and the real world."

Oman spent a decade honing her business skills. Before launching CSIC, she was finance director of Associated Students, Inc., at Sacramento State University. Students' openness to learning and pushing the boundaries were all the proof she needed, she says, to quit

her day job and launch the nonprofit organization.

Composer Steve Horowitz was one of the first to offer his help. He has written for film, television, cartoons and videogames, in addition to chamber and concert music. He asked to be paired with his alma mater, Berkeley High School, and wrote a piece—"Massive Musical Multiplayer Organized Game"—for the school's concert orchestra.

Jazz composer Omar Thomas, an assistant professor at Boston's

renowned Berklee College of Music, was the next professional to sign up. This time around, Oman went in search of quality band programs in the Sacramento region and didn't look further than Rio Americano High School, whose music ensembles have won numerous awards over the years.

Rio Americano band directors Josh Murray and Max Kiesner welcomed Oman's offer to pair the school up with two composers, one for Rio Americano Jazz Ensemble and the other for Rio Americano High School

like to work with passionate people. That makes it easier for me. What's exciting for me tends to be exciting for the kids," he says.

Thomas created "Prelude and Meditation," a piece of music for the jazz ensemble that gave students concepts but left room for them to use their own creativity. Taylor Mesich, a Rio Americano sophomore who plays tenor sax, was amazed the composer tailored the piece so well to band members. "He really got what we were capable of and really brought it out in us," Mesich said. "It gave us the freedom to play. It let us improvise and be creative."

Kiesner, who also directs the Rio Americano bands, was similarly impressed with Caliendo, who started work on his composition last spring—long before he knew the aptitude and instrumentation of the concert band's 60 incoming students. The band is performing in Spain this summer. Caliendo wrote a piece of music with that in mind. He also brought flutist Sheridan Stokes, who has performed for numerous Hollywood scores, including "Jaws" and "E.T.," to talk to students.

"I think (students) realized there are so many careers in music," Kiesner said. "They also took away the joy of bringing something new into the world, a piece that had never been heard before."

Oman's hope is that professionals and educators will use Composers and Schools in Concert as a social network to forge their own partnerships, and that schools will also use the website as a resource for new music. The nonprofit group offers several different types of grants.

And she is pleased with the endeavor's first year. "Typically in high school music programs right now, you're teaching things from the past. You wouldn't do that in science. You wouldn't stop teaching at the 19th century," says Oman. "I saw there was room to teach the students a little bit more."

For more information about Composers and Schools in Concert, go to composersandschools.com.

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Concert Band. Thomas worked with the jazz group, and world musician and composer Christopher Caliendo worked with the concert band.

All three composers listened to recordings of their respective school bands and chatted with the teachers before beginning the composition process. They delivered the new music to Berkeley and Rio Americano high schools in early fall, then spent three days working with students in person before a joint concert in Davis in late October.

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Murray, for one, was pleased with Oman's invitation. "I'm always looking for something that can give my students a new opportunity. I