



Society of Composers, Inc.

*... dedicated to the
promotion, composition,
performance, understanding
and dissemination of
new and contemporary
music ...*

NEWSLETTER CONTENTS

XLIV: 5, September–October 2014

Wilderness

*Michael Zapruder
describes his experience
with Composing in the
Wilderness program.*

Page 1**Submit**

*Contact information to
submit news, photos,
articles and more for
upcoming issues.*

Page 2**Resources**

*Learn about the
Newsletter, upcoming
SCI Events and our
many online resources.*

Page 2**Events**

*Upcoming student,
regional and national
conferences of the
Society.*

Page 2**About**

*Membership info,
members of the
National Council/
Executive Committee.*

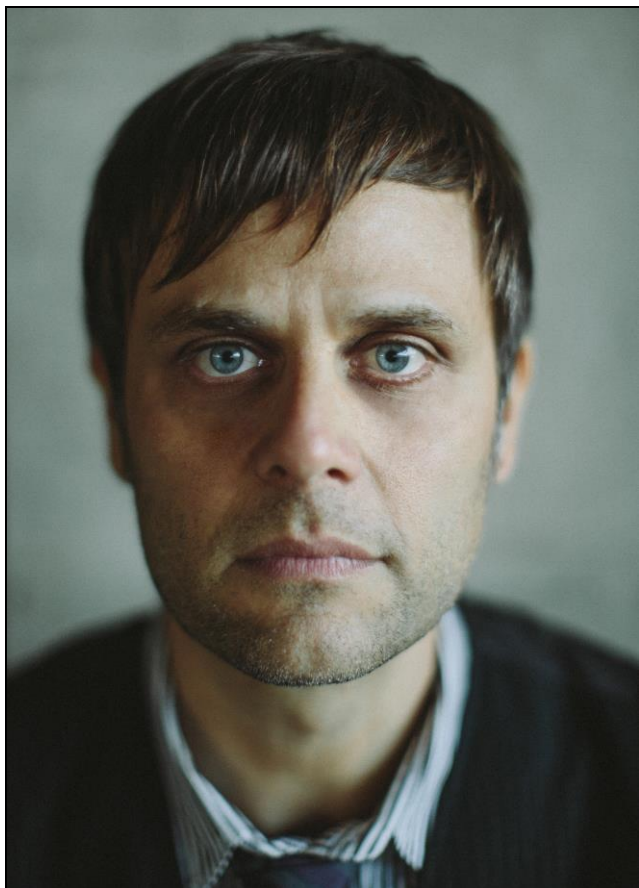
Page 3**Join SCI**

*SCI is an organization
for composers. Various
membership categories
are available.*

Page 3

Composing in the Wilderness

by Michael Zapruder



Most of us compose at a desk or piano, maybe looking at a screen, and we probably learned how to compose in a classroom or faculty office. We had the guidance of teachers and probably compared our work to one or more of the many thousands of already-existing musical standards set by other composers, too. This is all great and necessary, but it can obscure the fact that the best composing—not to mention music in general—is in some basic way, wild. This past summer, eight composers and I had the chance to explore that side of things as participants in the Composing in the Wilderness program.

Composing in the Wilderness (CitW) is a twelve-day summer program for nine composers. It takes place in Alaska and is the creation of composer and teacher, Stephen Lias, who runs the program with unflagging energy and good cheer. Entering its fourth year, CitW is offered as a field course through the Alaska Geographic organization and is also affiliated with the annual Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival. Participating composers spend the first eight days of the course in wilderness areas, planning and composing new

(Continued on Page 4)



About the Newsletter

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Articles: The Newsletter welcomes submissions of articles to run in future issues. Articles, if accepted, may be edited for length and content. Please include a photo with all submissions if possible (photo may be of author).

Member News + Photos: Please send all member news and activities with a photo. Submitted items may be edited.

Ideas/Suggestions: The Editors welcome any other ideas or suggestions.

Submit to the newsletter via email at: newsletter@societyofcomposers.org



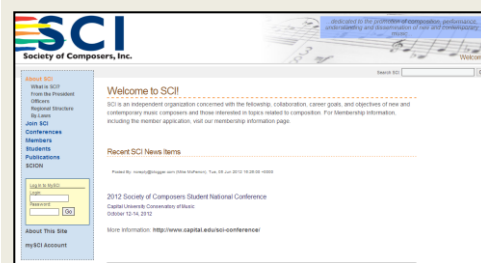
Upcoming SCI Events

2015 Region VI Conference March 6-8, 2015

Henderson State University
Phillip Schroeder, Host

2015 SCI National Conference Fall 2015

In collaboration with the
Florida Contemporary Music Festival
James Paul Sain, Co-host
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Internet & Email

www.societyofcomposers.org

- Conference dates and submission guidelines
- Contact information and links to member web-pages
- Student chapters and opportunities
- CDs and journals produced by SCI
- Details on SCI such as membership, contacts for officers, regional structure, by-laws, newsletter archives and more...

SCION

SCION is a listing of opportunities on our website exclusively for members. It is updated on a continual basis so that it may be checked at any time for the most current notices. In addition, members are emailed on the first Monday of each month to remind them to visit the site for new or recent postings. The large number of listings is easily managed by a table of contents with links to the individual notices. In-depth coverage; contest listings in full; all items listed until expiration; this is a valuable resource that you may print in its entirety or in part at any time.

John Bilotta, SCION Editor
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scimembers

scimembers is a member-driven e-mail mailing list that is intended to facilitate communication between members of the Society on topics of concern to composers of contemporary concert music. It conveys whatever notices or messages are sent by its members, including announcements of performances and professional opportunities, as well as discussions on a wide variety of topics. For more information, including how to join and participate in the listserv:

<http://www.societyofcomposers.org/publications/listserv.html>

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Full Membership (\$75/year): Eligible to submit scores to the National Conferences, regional conferences, SCI Recording Series, SCI Journal of Music Scores. Access to the SCI Newsletter in electronic form. Optional subscription to [scimembers], the SCI listserv and all other SCI publications. Eligible to vote on Society Matters and in elections for the National Council.

Joint Membership (\$100/year): Same benefits as full members

Senior Membership (\$35/year): Open to those 65 years of age or older, or retired. Same benefits as full members.

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Student Membership (\$35/year): Eligible to submit to national and regional conferences and to vote in society matters. Access to all SCI publications.

Student Chapter Membership (\$25/year): Same benefits as student members, but only available on campuses having Student Chapters.

Institutional Membership (\$40/year): Organizations receive hard copy of the SCI Newsletter and other mailings.

Lifetime Membership (\$1400 or \$150/year for 10 years): Benefits the same as full members, for life.

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Composing in the Wilderness

(Continued from Page 1)

chamber pieces, then spend the last four days in Fairbanks rehearsing them with musicians provided by the course. On the final day, the Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival presents the world premieres of all the CitW pieces in a special concert in Davis Hall on the campus of the University of Alaska, Fairbanks (UAF). Unlike many summer programs, CitW does not include a pre-program compositional phase. Instead, upon arriving in Denali Park on the first day, each composer is assigned the instrumentation for his or her piece, and begins the compositional process thereafter.

The course began at the Murie Science and Learning Center in Denali National Park. Most of us took the Alaska Railroad from Fairbanks, a four-hour train ride, mostly through eerily extensive forests of spruce and birch trees, which provided a good foretaste of the sheer scale and scope of the state of Alaska. After the inevitable awkwardness of

finding each other and, as a group of strangers, finding the Science Center, we met in a small conference room where we introduced ourselves, had a short orientation-type meeting, and received our assigned instrumentation along with mechanical pencils and spiral notebooks of staff paper. We then piled into a van and moved thirty miles up the road into Denali, to the Teklanika Camp, where we stayed in comfortable wood-framed, canvas-covered tent-cabins, doing day hikes or van trips each day, and convening by the camp's fire pit or in its communal yurt for dinners and short discussions in the

evenings. In Alaska in July, the sun never sets, so after dinners, some of us went to sleep, others went on short walks near the camp or stayed up working on their pieces.

On our day-excursions in Denali, CitW arranged for scientists (in our case, a botanist and a geologist) to lead us on hikes and teach us about their areas of expertise. These guides were leaders in their fields, and it was extraordinary to have the chance to see Alaska's natural processes through their eyes. During our hikes, which were moderately strenuous, we would always have an hour or so in the middle of the day to sit, plan, envision, think, feel, and generate ideas for

our compositions. On our second day, for example, we stopped at Denali's Polychrome Pass, where, after a fascinating description of the area's geography, we all spread out across a field of sphagnum (springy, spongy moss), many of us finding spots for what our guides called "tundra



Michael Zapruder, composing at Coal Creek.

nap," in which you settle in a depression between tussocks (little hills) of moss, where you will be dry and surprisingly warm in spite of the brisk wind above and the permafrost a few inches below you.

To do this with composers all around you, making notes on staff paper about the gradual transformations of braided rivers, or of geologic accretion, or the effect of the Alaskan summer's permanent sunlight, is to compose in the wilderness, and these creative hours represent the heart of the CitW experience.

I should mention here that, whether it was the lack of technology, the shared adventuring, or the unusual combination of intense compositional activity and constant companionship, this was a fantastic social experience for all nine composers. We were four undergraduates, three masters of music and two doctors of music, with the age-range that implies, six men and three women; and we bonded with each other quickly. We laughed constantly, everyone ended up with a nickname or two, and over the twelve days of the course we developed friendships that feel like they were formed over a much longer period. I think I can speak for all of us in saying that the company of the other composers on the trip ended up being just as important to the experience as the natural settings and experiences were.

After our four days in Denali, we flew in a small bush plane from Fairbanks to Coal Creek Historic Mining District, in the Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve of Alaska. We landed on a runway made of gravel, deposited there by the gold dredge that worked up and down Coal Creek for several decades in the last century, and began what was essentially a four-day writing residency. There was a warmth and coziness to this part of the course, somewhere between study hall and weekend getaway, like we were composing in the world's most remote library. We had almost no scheduled activities, and we spread out across a number of the camp's historic mining cabins and began to compose in earnest, most working on their computers, a few

continuing on paper. We were fed constantly, deliciously, by wonderful people from the Park Service, and we each faced the challenge of forming our ideas or sketches into real pieces of music. We made use of the unbroken time (made even more unbroken by the lack of cell phone service and the constant sunlight) to work on our pieces, and over the many impromptu short breaks for cups of coffee or cocoa, or snacks, we solidified the strong bonds we had begun to form in Denali. A few of us even swam in the Yukon River, which was cold but amazing and well worth it.



From left to right: Madeleine Negro, Josh Coe, Stephen Wood (back row), Stephen Lias, Michael Zapruder, Emily Korzeniewski, Marc Evans, Dawn Sonntag, Scott Perkins, Michael Fleming

After Coal Creek, we flew back to Fairbanks, where we stayed in dormitories on the UAF campus, and where we had a few much-too-short days to finish our pieces, engrave them, and make parts. On the penultimate day of the course, with our scores and parts in hand, we met our musicians, then had two one-hour rehearsals: one

that morning and one that afternoon. The next day—concert day—we all convened for a dress rehearsal (which was recorded) of all the pieces, which was followed by the concert.

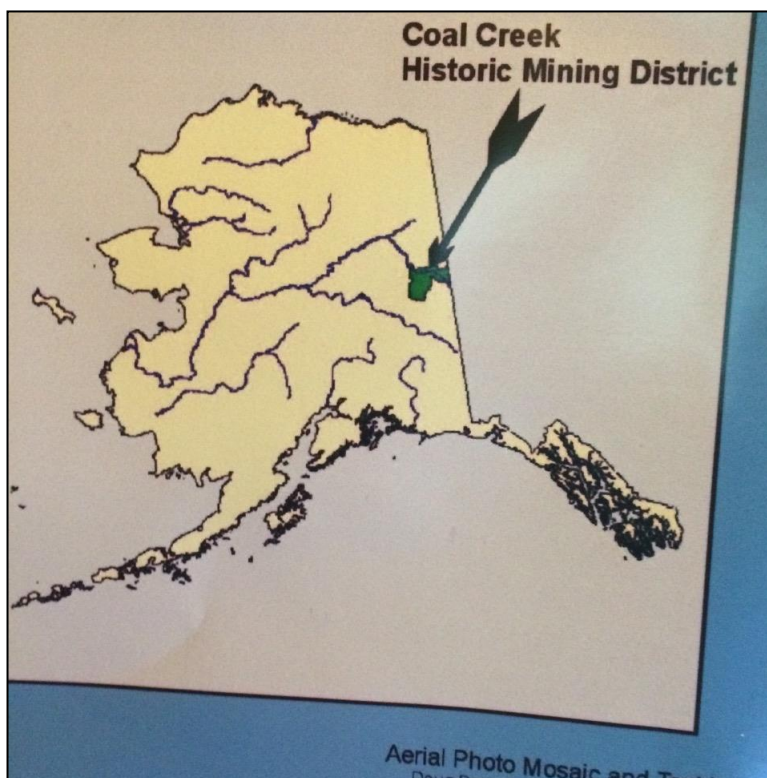
As for the concert, it was really interesting to finally hear my fellow composers' pieces, and I think most of the others felt satisfied with the performances of their pieces. There was certainly no lack of effort on the part of the musicians, anyway. However, it must be said that the sensibility, and to some degree the quality, of the players and ensembles did vary. That is, all of the players were very good, but not all were equally so, especially in terms of their appetite and apti-

tude for playing new music. In my opinion, this is ultimately unimportant in comparison to the strengths of the program (after all, you can get another performance of your piece later), but it is something worth considering. Perhaps more problematic is the fact that CitW sets no limits on the durations of the pieces. This is something it might do well to change. The final concert includes at minimum nine world premieres (in our case, that was just the first half of the concert), and so, even if each composer limits her piece to a fairly lean six minutes, that comes to a solid hour of music, not counting time between movements or pieces. We had no time limits, and though most of us kept things somewhat short, the first half of the concert was extremely long and seemed to wear the audience out somewhat. This was exacerbated by the fact that, in some cases, the newness of the music caused the performers to play pieces much more slowly than the composers intended. A six-to-eight minute time limit on pieces would probably be to everyone's benefit.

Interested composers should also know that, depending on how much outdoor gear you have, this program may require you to buy, rent or borrow a considerable amount of equipment. Dr. Lias lets you know exactly what you need, but this is definitely not a trip where you just throw some things in your suitcase the night before you go. That said, with the right equipment, the course is overall remarkably comfortable. In terms of physical fitness, the Denali portion was somewhat strenuous at times, but was not really difficult. Anyone who is generally healthy will be able to participate. Also, for various reasons, the twenty-four-hour sunlight made the camping experience considerably less demanding

than it might have been. CitW is also a fantastic travel experience, especially in Denali, which draws nearly half a million visitors a year. We were lucky to see "the mountain" (aka Denali or Mt. McKinley) on several successive days (it is usually hidden in the clouds and most people who visit Denali never see it). We also saw several bears and moose, many caribou, and various other animals, mostly from the van as we were driving from one place to another.

Ultimately, while there are certain aspects of the course that can and will improve, CitW is a major success, not as an



adventure (though it is that) or even as some kind of curiosity in the world of composing (it probably shouldn't be), but as a singular learning experience of rare value. CitW presents you with the challenge of writing a piece in the wilderness. The piece you write does not have to be about the wilderness, or about natural things; it just has to be written in the wild. By setting itself in the wilderness, CitW requires you to be self-reliant, adventurous, and decisive. In

the process, you will have to rely on - and perhaps discover - the things you really do know about composing. Meanwhile, Alaska will be vast, the constant daylight will be expansive, the solid week or so of freedom from electronic communication will be priceless, the community of other composers will be fun, the water of the Yukon River will be cold and grainy, and you will find music in all of it. I encourage interested composers at any level to find out just what that music is for yourselves.