

Vista composer fashions works of genius, compassion

By Lyn Berry
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Visions of orchestral music have danced in the head of modern classical composer Matthew Tommasini for most of his life.

Having started composing for full orchestra in the mid-1990s, while still a student at Vista High School, Tommasini, now 30, continues to draw on his life experiences.

"I've discovered the purpose of composers is to give audiences a sense of community," Tommasini said recently in Vista, which serves as home base when his work takes him around the country.

The nationally recognized composer is working on a new CD, "American Perspectives," which includes pieces whose inspirational roots come from the music of Appalachia and New Orleans jazz, as well as from experiences here. The section "Passage," commissioned by the Milwaukee Ballet, deals with the experiences of U.S.-Mexico border crossers.

"I worked with the ballet choreographer Diego Carrasco, who came up with the thematic idea," Tommasini said of the score for violin and piano. "We talked about the experience of coming across the border as a form of redemption and renewal, which is reflected in the music.

"I tried to communicate the entire process of trying to cross, the hallucinations that might occur when struggling in the desert without water and ultimately the symbolic new life. A recurring hymn comes back as a chorus throughout the work."

Tommasini intends the work as a humanitarian piece, not a political one. He hopes it will invite audiences to understand border-crossing experience with an open mind.

Another section, "The Procession," was inspired by Tommasini's visit to Mission San Antonio de Pala Indian Reservation. Commissioned as a work for violin and piano by violinist Martha Walvoord, a fellow graduate student at



Nationally recognized modern classical composer Matthew Tommasini was a trombonist in Vista High's band. Courtesy photo

the Musical Arts program at University of Michigan, "The Procession" interprets Pala's Corpus Christi Fiesta.

"After an outdoor Mass, parishioners proceed past several tribute posts that have pictures of their loved ones on them," Tommasini said. "Led by a fiddler and a troupe of dancers, the participants say a prayer at each post. They go all around the parish and then come back to the mission.

"In my music, the fiddler character is created by violin, which is the leader in the piece. It also includes impressionistic music reflecting the bell that rings at the end of mass to start the procession."

Tommasini was particularly impressed by the procession because he had not attended anything like it before, and it came shortly after the death

of his father in 2005, the same year Tommasini completed his doctorate.

Since that time, life has taken him many places, many of which he weaves — sometimes subtly — into his compositions of contemporary classical music.

Tommasini moved to Vista with his family at 7 and already had traveled the world, having been born in Brussels, Belgium. He has lived in Turkey and Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, where his sister, Alexandra, was born.

Their mother, Lucette, teaches in Escondido. She translated the text for her son's "Three Spanish Songs," which is based on poems by Latin American poets Leopoldo Lugones, Rubén Darío and José Martí. The composition won the

Composer
Matthew Tommasini

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2006 Frederick Fennell Prize, presented by the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers to gifted young U.S. composers.

His work "Torn Threads Rewoven," commissioned by New York Youth Symphony and reflecting on 9/11, was premiered at Carnegie Hall in 2003.

Tommasini's genius has not gone unnoticed by local musicians who have watched his progress over the years.

Elan McMahan, resident musical director of Moonlight Stage Productions in Vista, worked with Tommasini during some summer seasons when he was piano accompanist for Moonlight Amphitheatre shows.

"He is an exceptional musician, an incredible composer; his work is very sophisticated," McMahan said. "He is fascinating because his music is forward-looking, but at the same time reflective, honoring the musical heritage of some of our great American composers."

Ken Gammie, band director at Roosevelt Middle School in Vista, saw Tommasini grow up as a trombonist in the Vista High School band and worked with him at Moonlight Amphitheatre.

"He has great intelligence and a strong work ethic," Gammie said. "He's so bright that he can access his creativity through his intelligence, and it is a strong combination."

Although Tommasini is making his way steadily in what he describes as a "small genre of music, but also a hothouse for creativity," he readily admits that many composers reach their mid-40s before they "become a household name."

In the meantime, he explores with zeal the future of modern classical music and the ways it can impact the culture of a community.

Lyn Berry is a freelance writer who lives in Vista.