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William Campbell can't recall *why* he became a composer, but he does remember his piano lessons as a youth in Tucson, Arizona.

In an interview last week, Campbell recounted the questions he asked of his Julliard-trained teacher: “‘Why didn’t Beethoven do *this?*’ And I’d play a little something. And he’d be like, ‘Well, that’s not what this piece is. Did you learn this passage?’ And I’d play the passage, and I’d say, ‘Yes, but why didn’t he do *this?*’ ... I’d ask about motives and things.”

That instructor was good at many things, Campbell said – “He instilled in me a sense of how to emote on the instrument ... , technique, and also to try your best no matter what” – but he didn’t do much to encourage his pupil’s creativity. The student brought in a piece that he’d composed, and his mentor played a Rachmaninoff prelude as a response.

Out of His Own Way: William Campbell, April 28 at St. Paul Lutheran Church

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Wednesday, 23 March 2011 08:09

The 41-year-old Campbell said that he never presented another original composition to that teacher, but three decades later, he is certainly getting more affirmation. An associate professor of music theory and composition at St. Ambrose University, he's releasing his first solo-piano album, *Piano Songs* – an event that will be marked by a March 26 concert at the Galvin Fine Arts Center. On April 28, he'll debut his *Piano Quintet* with the Maia String Quartet at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Davenport. And in its 2011-12 season, the Quad City Symphony Orchestra will perform Campbell's *Coyote Dances* in one of its Masterworks concerts.

His body of work includes orchestral and chamber-music pieces, works for concert bands, film scores, and liturgical songs. Beyond his own output, he's working to guide young composers in the Quad Cities outside of St. Ambrose. He suggested and helped judge the Bettendorf Public Library's Civil Rights Songwriting Competition, and he held three workshops for composers as part of the Quad City Symphony's "Mi-Do-Ri" Young Composer Competition.

"I'm hoping that we can build on that," Campbell said. "My hope is that creativity through music is really fostered in the Quad Cities." He dreams, for example, that in the next few years the Quad City Symphony or another ensemble performs pieces written by young composers and orchestrated by college students.



For those intimidated by classical music, *Piano Songs* is a welcoming introduction to Campbell's work. The 11 pieces are straightforward, accessible, and easily digestible. As a composer and player, Campbell sketches his moods expertly, and while not all the pieces are bright, they have an undeniable warmth. As their titles suggest, "Cold & Beautiful" and "Dancing with Shadows" acknowledge darkness without dwelling on it.

Campbell's father listened to the great symphonists of the 18th and 19th centuries and bought his teenage son books on electronic music. Campbell knew of John Cage in high school and began writing music in the minimalist vein through self-discovery rather than exposure.

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In our interview, Campbell listed composers he admires and those he's met, and it's a *who's who* of avant-garde and minimalism: Cage, John Adams, Philip Glass, George Crumb, Terry Riley. He said he studied composition during the transition from "this very cranial music to music that's more of the body. ... What I mean by that is music that resonates with more than just the thought process of the body."

Piano Songs

is certainly rooted in emotion, and it has none of the alienating techniques that for many people define minimalist and avant-garde classical music.

Despite the album's title, there are no vocals, and the "songs" are not meant to be sung over. But Campbell said it's still an appropriate name. "The form of them is strophic," he explained. "Some of them it's like verse-chorus almost, some of them are through-composed. But they're classic song forms. ... These are songs. They're just songs without words."

He emphasized, however, that *Piano Songs* doesn't imply that vocals are necessary. "I didn't want anybody to think they were without," he said. "Because they're not. They're complete statements in themselves."

The pieces in *Piano Songs* were composed over five years and represent a shift in the way Campbell handles his inspirations.

"For years what I did was: If it was coming out, I'd look at it and judge whether it worked within whatever I was working on," he said. If it didn't fit, he discarded it.

Piano Songs resulted from being less self-censoring. "The more important the piece is I feel ... to my *'overall output as a composer,'* sometimes the more difficult it is to write, because I'm weighing each note or passage," Campbell said. "Other pieces I'm going for a feel, and there's a freedom to it." This album's songs, he said, fall in the latter category. "Some pieces to me sound very much like the morning during which I actually wrote the piece," he said. "They're little pieces that I just accepted as they came out. ... These pieces have taught me to love everything as it comes out. ..."

"I really tried to get out of my own way with a lot of these pieces," he added. "Winter's Thaw,"

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for instance. That is really soft, really quiet. It gets out of its own way, almost. It's very bare."

In his full body of work, *Piano Songs* might be relatively minor, but Campbell said the collection "does capture a part of me that is very real that is present to most people when they meet me. Those songs I think are who I am in many moments with people, whether there's a piano in front of me or not. ... I think that there's a positive, reflective nature about those pieces that is always sort of with me. I'm an optimist – I hope cautiously so – and I try to understand what's going on around me at any given moment. And I think that that clarity comes through in each of those pieces."

William Campbell will perform on Saturday, March 26, at St. Ambrose University's Galvin Fine Arts Center (on Gaines Street, between Locust and Lombard streets, in Davenport). The performance begins at 7:30 p.m., and admission is free.

Campbell will also perform with the Maia String Quartet for the debut of his Piano Quintet on Thursday, April 28, at St. Paul Lutheran Church (2136 Brady Street in Davenport). The performance begins at 7 p.m.

Piano Songs will be available at the March 26 event and through iTunes and CDBaby.com.

For more information on Campbell, visit WilliamCampbellMusic.com.