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Rhapsody

Scholarship awakens a young composer's dream.

Story by Dale Smith + Photos by Nicholas Benner

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The scene,

on its face, was just one of local musicians concertizing on a Saturday afternoon in early spring. But that 2013 performance at Broadway Christian Church in Columbia contained a rare moment in the history of orchestral performance. The Columbia Civic Orchestra premiered “Appalachian Rhapsody” by Dustin Dunn, a talented composer, who was a mere 16 years old when he wrote the piece. That morning, Dunn and his parents, Richard and Raquel, made the three-hour drive from Annapolis, Missouri, population 468, a town whose major structures are a factory, a gas station, three churches and a railroad track.

Before the orchestra began, Stefan Freund, co-artistic director of the Mizzou New Music Initiative, invited Dunn to the stage and led a brief interview. Dunn, in his blue cardigan, stood with hands clasped before him. Freund in a tuxedo, with understatement as good-humored as it was monumental, said, “There aren’t a lot of high school students who get to hear their own orchestral music performed.” The audience chuckled, perhaps partly at an implied punch line that, indeed, performances of one’s orchestral works typically are honors doled out to dead men with names like Verdi and Tchaikovsky.

But the backstory is no joke. And it’s probably more extraordinary than Dunn’s youthful accomplishment. Against all odds, here was a youngster growing up in a faded railroad town (even loving friends call it a cultural desert) whose talent had been spotted and nurtured through MU’s new-music program. The Sinquefield Charitable Foundation funds the initiative, which is the brainchild of Jeanne Sinquefield, a lifelong amateur bass player. She has long had a fascination with the particular brand of creativity composers possess, and her goal is to make it part of Mizzou’s culture. Sinquefield’s mantra: “I want to make Missouri a mecca for new music.” (See the sidebar on Page 49 for more on Sinquefield’s vision and the initiative’s programs.)

Few of Dunn’s friends from South Iron High School went on to so much as junior college. But Dunn had a gift. And before long, the new-music program would change his life by granting him a full-tuition scholarship to MU in music composition.

“So,” Freund asked that spring afternoon, “what

have you learned from this experience today?”

Dunn paused and smiled, looking at Freund. “There aren’t enough words to describe how incredible this is. It’s wow!”

And a moment later the orchestra was unwinding the first fluttering strains of “Appalachian Rhapsody.” With its melodies inspired by folk tunes, the piece rang out as an homage to Dunn’s favorite composer, Aaron Copland.

“Copland invented that style,” Freund says. “It sounds ‘American.’ It’s an open, sprawling sound that, to many people, captures the hugeness of our nation, especially the West.”

He could have been talking about the miles of wilderness surrounding Dunn’s hometown.

Cartoons & Classics

A popular cinematic version of Mozart’s life depicts his childhood as a prodigy born into a family of fine-art musicians and performing for the powdered-wig royalty of Europe. Dunn, on the other hand, puts his first memorable contact with such music at about age 4, as he watched a *Tom and Jerry* cartoon on TV. “It was one of those orchestra episodes,” Dunn says. “I was just completely captivated because I had never heard anything like that.” He grew up with folk music and lots of church music, including traditional hymns, bluegrass gospel and the popular Christian music his mother loves. And there was the radio in his father’s truck. “You would hear Waylon Jennings and Hank Williams and things like that,” Dunn says. “And when I got older and started playing the piano and started discovering things like Mozart and Beethoven, I was like, ‘I like that sound. I remember that sound.’ So I think that’s always been there; I just had to get back to it.”

Grandma’s Eye for Talent

Dunn’s father, Richard, left school in eighth grade to help support his family as a logger. At the age most kids are planning their outfits for the junior prom, he was buying school clothes for his younger siblings. When Dunn was a child, his father was injured and unable to work much, so he stayed home with the kids. Dunn’s mother earned a nursing degree at a local junior college and supports the family.

“Dustin wouldn’t be able to attend Mizzou without this full-tuition scholarship; that’s for sure,” says his mother, Raquel. “Richard had a head injury, and we spent a lot of time in and out of the ICU. That ate up all the funds we had set back.”

The Dunn family lives on a gravel road near two other family homes on 12 acres about half a

mile off Main Street in Annapolis. Dunn's sister, Kassie Sprinkles, 26, lives in one of the houses, and his maternal grandmother, Linda Kelly, lives in the other.

Dunn passed many childhood days at Kelly's house, and it was she who spotted his talent. Eventually, years passed between the *Tom and Jerry* episode and the next big moment of family lore. "When Dustin was about 12," Kelly says, "he wanted to learn to play the piano, so I bought one of those electronic keyboards where the keys light up that play the melody. Pretty soon, I noticed that he played with the lights from memory, and then he would take off on his own. I thought he had some talent, so we took him for a few lessons to my sister-in-law, who plays the piano at church." Dunn's first music book was a hymnal they borrowed from the Church of the Nazarene in Annapolis.

Learning piano fundamentals — which he did largely on his own — was Dunn's gateway to his own musical ideas. At first, he trained his ear by transcribing music he downloaded from the Internet. "After a while, it wasn't enough to transcribe a keyboard piece by Bach. I needed to do something on my own," he says. During his freshman year at South Iron, he began writing down his musical ideas in a notebook of music manuscript paper. "I would write this small piece and that small piece until finally, one weekend in November, I wrote a really long piano solo, and I played it for my band teacher, Amber Cuneio. She said, 'That's really neat. I like that,' because she was a pianist, too." When Cuneio received word of a Mizzou New Music Initiative competition, she encouraged Dunn to enter. "I didn't expect much because that's just what I was raised to believe," Dunn says. The following spring, results came out. "And I won. My band teacher was ecstatic. We had a party one day."

Dunn had won an honorable mention in the 2013 Creating Original Music Project, or COMP, a K-12 competition that is part of the Mizzou New Music Initiative.

It's a Long Way to Mecca

The spring of Dunn's freshman year in high school, he was riding high on the news of his COMP award. He thought his composition talents were about to take off. But about a month later, administrators cut the high school music program. "I was absolutely livid because I was just coming into music. It was the only outlet I had. I felt terrible for my teacher because she lost her job, and I was just beside myself because I didn't know what I was going to do and how I was going



to learn some of the things that I didn't know yet."

That spring, the New Music Initiative threw Dunn a lifeline. At the concert during which winning COMP scorers are performed, Sinquefield noticed Dunn in attendance. "He just showed up! He persuaded his parents to make the trip to the concert. Drive and ambition are as important as anything," she says. So, she suggested that he attend the initiative's weeklong summer composition program.

At summer camp, Dunn was an outlier. Most participants hailed from well-off schools in populous areas. But in the end, that didn't matter. Spending a week with composition faculty and other young composers was a turning point. "It was there I decided that composition is some-

† "I have transformed as a pianist," Dunn says of his weekly lessons with Peter Miyamoto, associate professor of piano. "I respect my teachers so much."

thing I was good at and something I could do,” he says. “And that’s when I started falling in love with campus.” In summer camps over the following years, Sinquefield saw Dunn grow into a mentor to younger students.

Was That Dustin Dunn?

A chance meeting that spring led to another key relationship in his development. But it almost misfired.

People around Annapolis had heard of Dunn’s COMP triumph, and he was invited to perform on piano at a dinner meeting of Community Betterment. “I went to church with most of the ladies on the board, so I played, and some local officials came,” Dunn says. One was Iron County prosecutor Brian Parker, A&S ’99, who introduced himself to Dunn after the performance. “He said his wife [Emily Parker, BS Ed ’02] had been a music student at Mizzou, and they loved helping people [prepare for] college. So, I took his number, and I said, ‘Well, thank you very much.’”

A few weeks later, Dunn placed the call to Emily, who was helping out in her husband’s law office as he launched his practice. “At that moment, I wasn’t teaching piano, so I told him I couldn’t help him. I could tell he was a little despondent.”

That he was. Dunn hung up the phone and went outside to walk off his disappointment.

In the meantime, Brian came running into the room.

“Was that Dustin Dunn?”

“Yes,” Emily replied, curious and confused.

“You must call him back!” Brian said. “I met this kid. He needs you.”

A week later, Dunn traveled the 20 miles north to Ironton and played for Parker. She knew he was largely untutored and wasn’t expecting much. “But there was a spark there that really took me aback,” she says. “I turned to his family and said, ‘Dustin really has potential. He could really be something and someone in music if he keeps working hard.’”

During the next three years, Dunn drove to Ironton for lessons with Parker, who holds a master’s degree in piano performance and pedagogy from Northwestern University. Now owner of the Arcadian Academy of Music in Ironton, Parker was by far the most accomplished teacher and performer Dunn had worked with. She taught him piano technique and music theory, and she introduced him to great composers who had written for piano. She was transforming a talented and passionate teenager into a musician who would be ready to audition for a college program.

And what a student. “He works much hard-

er, researches much more, throws himself into things so much more fully than anyone I’ve ever worked with,” Parker says. Although she didn’t profess to teach composition, she’d spend 15 or 20 minutes of each lesson listening to Dunn’s latest musical ideas and offering feedback. “Every now and then,” she says, “you would see something really exciting, a spark of brilliance.” For his part, Dunn says, “I got a really wonderful woman to guide me to the university.”

Fired Up on the Firebird

“My life changed drastically, especially as a musician and composer, my junior year of high school,” Dunn says. That spring he traveled to St. Louis with a composer-friend, Ben Colagiovanni, to hear the St. Louis Symphony perform Stravinsky’s “The Firebird,” an iconic work of modernism. “It was the first time I had ever been in Powell Hall.” What’s more, that spring was the first time Dunn ever had heard a live orchestra. “When you get to the climax of ‘The Firebird’ and that’s the first time you have ever heard some of these instruments live ... I was just sitting back going, ‘I have found my place. This is where I’m supposed to be.’”

Until this point, Dunn had written pieces for solo piano and for four or five instruments. And so Sinquefield now chuckles at the audacity of what Dunn did next. “With no training in orchestration,” she says, “he goes home and writes a piece for full orchestra. Who does that!”

The result was “Appalachian Rhapsody,” which was selected by the Missouri Composers Orchestra Project and which landed Dunn in Columbia that Saturday afternoon a year later to hear the Columbia Civic Orchestra perform his work. And that was the second time he heard a live orchestra.

A year later, MU responded to Dunn’s application for admission and financial aid. He had applied for one of the two Sinquefield scholarships given each year through the initiative. “I was a senior in high school. My future changed with a letter that said, ‘Congratulations! You have a full-tuition scholarship to the University of Missouri for the next four years.’ That’s when I knew that I was going to get an undergraduate experience that no one in my family had ever gotten before.”

Modern at Mizzou

Dunn is now midway through his sophomore year at MU. Although he still writes pieces that Aaron Copland would recognize as his musical descendants, new sounds are entering his work. He is increasingly among the modern composers who



↑ Dunn and Thomas McKenney, professor of composition and music theory, study subtle differences in two pieces of sheet music.

have set themselves a difficult task, says Michael Budds, one of Dunn's music-history teachers. "Over the past century, the stylistic uniformity we expect from Mozart and Chopin doesn't exist for many modern composers. They define the world of each composition, whether it's the pitches they are going to use or the nature of the sounds. They are trying not to be the same composer with each piece but instead to be a-stylistic. I would think that would make them crazy. But composers don't compose because they want to; they do it because they have to."

Freund, now Dunn's composition teacher, encourages him to keep his American sound and integrate modern approaches. "He needs to create his own voice. He's different than Copland and the others. He's living in a different time, has a different personality, comes from very a different place. His music should reflect these things."

It's happening. Dunn's recent piece for solo alto saxophone tells the story of one of his favorite spots on the Black River near his home. "Black River Iron Sun" includes a recurring section of "key clicks," in which the soloist fingers the keys but does not give the horn its traditional voice by vibrating the reed. The result is a series of muted, hollow-sounding pops. The pitch changes, but only subtly, and the percussive key clicks take prominence. Very modern.

Freund likes the trend. He appreciates Dunn's talent in part because he knows how easily it could have been missed. "Composition is a private act. Breaking the cycle and finding people like Dustin in isolated rural areas is quite difficult. Without the New Music Initiative, I would have to drive all over Missouri looking for these kids. With Dustin, his musical mind popped up out of nowhere. There's no reason someone with his background should have his interests, his talent. He will always come from that small place in rural southeast Missouri, and that's a good thing, too." **M**

Sinquefield's Signature

A composer once told Jeanne Sinquefield that anyone could be taught to write fine-art music.

"No," replied the philanthropist and lifelong acoustic bass player. "You have to hear music in your head."

To which the composer replied. "Everyone does that."

But Sinquefield knows better, and she's awed by the mystery of it. "A very small number of us have that talent. It's one that will get better with training, like anything else.

"Think about writing a symphony. With all the strings and horns, you are talking about thousands of notes. Imagine there's a piece that only you hear, and you write it all down, and it's performed. Just think of it!"

Sinquefield has done a lot more than think about it. The philanthropist has funded the Mizzou New Music Initiative. To help structure the program, she interviewed dozens of students, faculty and administrators. She wanted to make sure the initiative would not only find young composers across Missouri and develop their abilities but also train musicians to play the new music and cultivate audiences who respond to it.

All of Sinquefield's work plays into the joy she experiences when hearing music, especially something never heard before. "Sure, I can go to a concert and listen to Beethoven or Ravel, and that's great. But I'll be unsatisfied if I don't hear a new piece, too."

Sinquefield shares her passion, in part, for the benefit of fellow listeners. But it's also for composers. She knows they grow by being in the room to watch audiences respond to their work.

"I'm an optimist," she says, "I always hope the music I hear will be the next great piece."

Sinquefield's Mizzou New Music Initiative, unique in the United States, offers a range of programs that find and develop composers as young as kindergartners. Here are the initiative's main components:

- Creating Original Music Project, or COMP, a statewide K-12 composition competition
- The Missouri Summer Composition Institute, a weeklong camp for high-school-age composers
- Two full-tuition composition undergraduate scholarships to Mizzou each year. Ten have been given so far.
- The Mizzou New Music Ensemble, seven graduate-student musicians on full scholarships who perform new works by students, visiting composers, and others
- Mizzou International Composers Festival, where seasoned professionals and emerging composers converge on campus every July and share their work