

EVENTS: National Young Composer's Challenge Composium

DATES/TIMES: Sunday, October 18. Ensemble performances, from 1 - 2:15 p.m.; full-orchestra performances, from 2:30 - 5 p.m.

VENUE: Walt Disney Theater

NOTES: Winning works by student composers are rehearsed and performed.

TICKETS: Free, no tickets required.

FANTASY CAMP FOR COMPOSERS

**WINNERS OF THIS YEAR'S MUSICAL
CHALLENGE GET TO HEAR THEIR WORKS
PLAYED BY PROS. AND SO DO YOU.**

BY MICHAEL MCLEOD

Most people go to the movies to see actors breathe life into a story. When Sterling Maffi heads for the nearest multiplex, he's listening to how background music can do much the same thing.

Movie scores have a stronger hold than movie stars on the 18-year-old college freshman, a budding composer who lives in Artesia, California. "I love the sweeping melodies and frantic action motifs I can use in this genre," he says. "There's such a lushness of texture in this type of music."

Maffi, who plans on studying composition and film scoring at a California conservatory next year, has been composing music on his own in the meantime, sometimes hum-

Steve Goldman, creator of the Young Composer's Challenge, calls the contest "a dragnet for talent."

ming the melodies that come to mind, sometimes using a software program that simulates the sound of musical instruments.

But there's nothing like the real thing: hearing your composition played by an orchestra, with a flesh-and-blood conductor and a full complement of professional musicians.

That's the experience that awaits Maffi and seven other composers ages 13 to 18 at the ninth annual National Young Composer's Challenge Composium, set for Sunday, October 18 at the Walt Disney Theater. The event is free and open to the public.

Created in 2007 by Winter Park resident Steve Goldman, once a software executive and now a philanthropist, the composium's goal is to discover — and nurture — the next generation of composers. (Goldman, who holds a degree in physics, also invented and bankrolled a series of animated videos, whyu.org, designed to assist students with mathematics courses on the K-12 and college levels.)

"What it really amounts to is a dragnet for talent," says Goldman, who was himself a young composer, as a student at Maitland Middle School and Winter Park High School. Recognizing his potential, music teachers at both schools agreed to lead the school bands in playing his compositions.

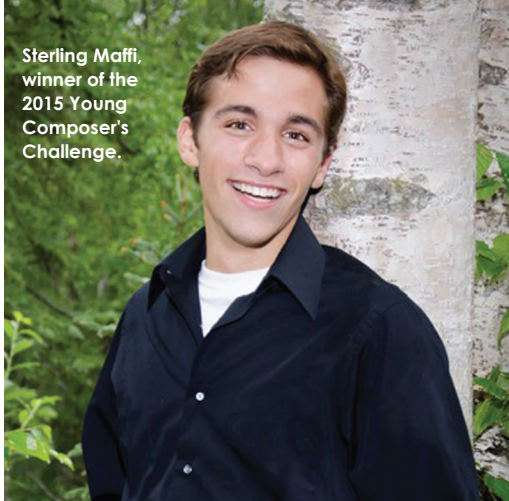
The composium offers a similar experience on a much grander scale. There's no other event quite like it in the country — or, for that matter, the world.

Here's how it works: Every year, novice composers are invited to create a composition of five minutes or less and submit a score and an electronically created sound file, to be judged by a four-member panel of musical experts. The judges listen to every piece and send every entrant a recorded critique.

Composers of the top three orchestral pieces get \$1,000 each, while composers of the top three chamber ensembles get \$500 each. At least, that's how it usually works. This year, due the generally high caliber of the record-shattering 117 entries — a more typical number is 40 to 50 entries — five ensemble winners were selected.

But the stipend, while nice, is the least important part of the prize package. All of the winners are invited to Orlando for the composium, where they'll work individually with world-renowned conductor Christopher Wilkens, previously musical director of

**Sterling Maffi,
winner of the
2015 Young
Composer's
Challenge.**



the Orlando Philharmonic Orchestra. He's now musical director of the Boston Landmarks Orchestra and the Akron Symphony.

Wilkens and a team of professional musicians hired by the composium's organizers rehearse the winning compositions, which are then performed and recorded before a live audience. For rookie composers, it's the musical equivalent of a fantasy baseball camp.

All of this happens in one dizzying afternoon. During the first hour, the winning chamber ensemble compositions are performed. Each composer is then interviewed by Wilkens, and comments are offered by the judges and musicians.

After a brief intermission, the full-orchestra session gets underway. Each performance begins with an audio excerpt from the young composer's computer-generated score. Next, the composition is rehearsed, discussed then performed and recorded — all while an audience watches.

"I remember, one year, there was a winner who really got carried away as his piece was performed," says Goldman. "I guess it put him into a trance of some sort. When the conductor turned to him and asked him how he liked it at the end, he just sat there in a daze."

Well, who wouldn't?

"I've never had a professional orchestra play my music," says Maffi, whose winning submission, *The Water Phoenix*, is a full-orchestra score written to accompany a story he envisioned about a creature that rises from the sea to save a harbor town from a tempest. "Most of my time writing is spent

At Goldman's Lake Maitland home, judges listened to entries and recorded feedback for composers.



locked alone in my room. The outside world has a habit of disappearing on me."

Other winners this year include:

In the ensemble category, *Fantasy for String Quintet*, by Justin Zeitlinger, 14, of Dumont, New Jersey; *Ignis Fatuus*, by Emil Ernststrom, 18, of Palo Alto, California; *String Quartet in G Minor*, by Daniel Aretskin, 18, of Irvine, California; *Polarity for String Quartet*, by Avik Sarkar, 14, of Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts; and *Sextet*, by Evan Kauffmann, 15, of New York City. In the full-orchestra category, *Fractured Night/Blue Stars*, by Paul Novak, 16, of Reno, Nevada; and *Outbursts of Joy*, by Robert Tindle, 18, of Miami.

Wilkins, who has been involved with the composium from its beginnings, will again be working with musicians that include many of his former Orlando Philharmonic colleagues. "It takes somebody with the right personality to do this," says Goldman. "Chris is very engaging. Now and then he'll turn around to the audience and ask: 'What do you think?'"

The young composers sit on stage during rehearsal of the orchestral pieces and have the opportunity to become critics themselves, making technical suggestions about how their music should be played. Last year, during one particularly meticulous critique, a droll Wilkins turned to the audience and noted: "This is the problem working with living composers."

The composium and the Dr. Phillips Center are a perfect match, sharing a mission to educate young artists. The event is support-

ed by grants and in-kind donations from the arts center as well as the University of Central Florida, Rollins College, Full Sail University and the Goldman Charitable Foundation.

This year, as usual, entries were judged by Goldman; Jeff Rupert, director of jazz studies at the University of Central Florida; Keith Lay, department chair of music technology at Full Sail University; and Dan Crozier, associate professor of music theory and composition at Rollins College.

The four met earlier this year over the course of several evenings to listen to the submissions in a glass-walled, second-story office in Goldman's 10,000-square-foot modern minimalist home on Lake Maitland.

There, surrounded by Goldman's collection of luminous Chihuly Persians and other priceless art-glass sculptures, the judges squinted at the printed scores and took notes while listening intently to each piece, weighing everything from modern abstract compositions to traditional, "Blue Danube"-type waltzes.

Then they passed a microphone back and forth to record feedback — meticulous and technical, but always encouraging — for each bedroom-based novice.

As they listened, reactions from the judges ran the gamut, from bemused to inspired. On one occasion, after hearing an uneven but wildly inventive whirlwind of a composition, Lay grabbed the microphone and spoke. The first words out of his mouth were both high praise and, appropriately, a challenge:

"You have to be a composer!" ■