

Sound Strategy



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PROCESS

PAUL GOLDSTAUB RUNS A LABORATORY OF SORTS

The Binghamton University professor does extensive reading and research, delves into the history of his field, jots down ideas in a journal, performs experiments and tests his theories with the help of sophisticated software. Then he watches as it all comes together in a live concert performance.

Goldstaub, an award-winning composer who joined the Music Department's faculty in 1998, sees numerous similarities between his work and that of the scientists whose labs are in the building next door.

"Although we all hope for the lightning bolt of inspiration, whether you are a scientist or an explorer or an artist, there is a lot of what I call pre-compositional thinking and research going on," he said. "A scientist might spend years studying the available literature, doing sample experiments, designing problems that lead up to the big question. He might spend weeks, months or years walking around the outside of the problem, deciding first of all: What is the question? That is a process similar to what I go through. Before writing a note comes years of general research on the topic."

Take Goldstaub's major project in 2008, for example. He spent much of the year composing a 25-minute piece inspired by a group of poems he first read three years earlier.

The poems, a series of Spanish folk lyrics translated into Russian by K.D. Balmont about a century ago, were translated into English by Martin Bidney, a professor emeritus of English at Binghamton. When Bidney first shared them with Goldstaub in 2005, there were more than 350 short poems addressing a variety of themes.

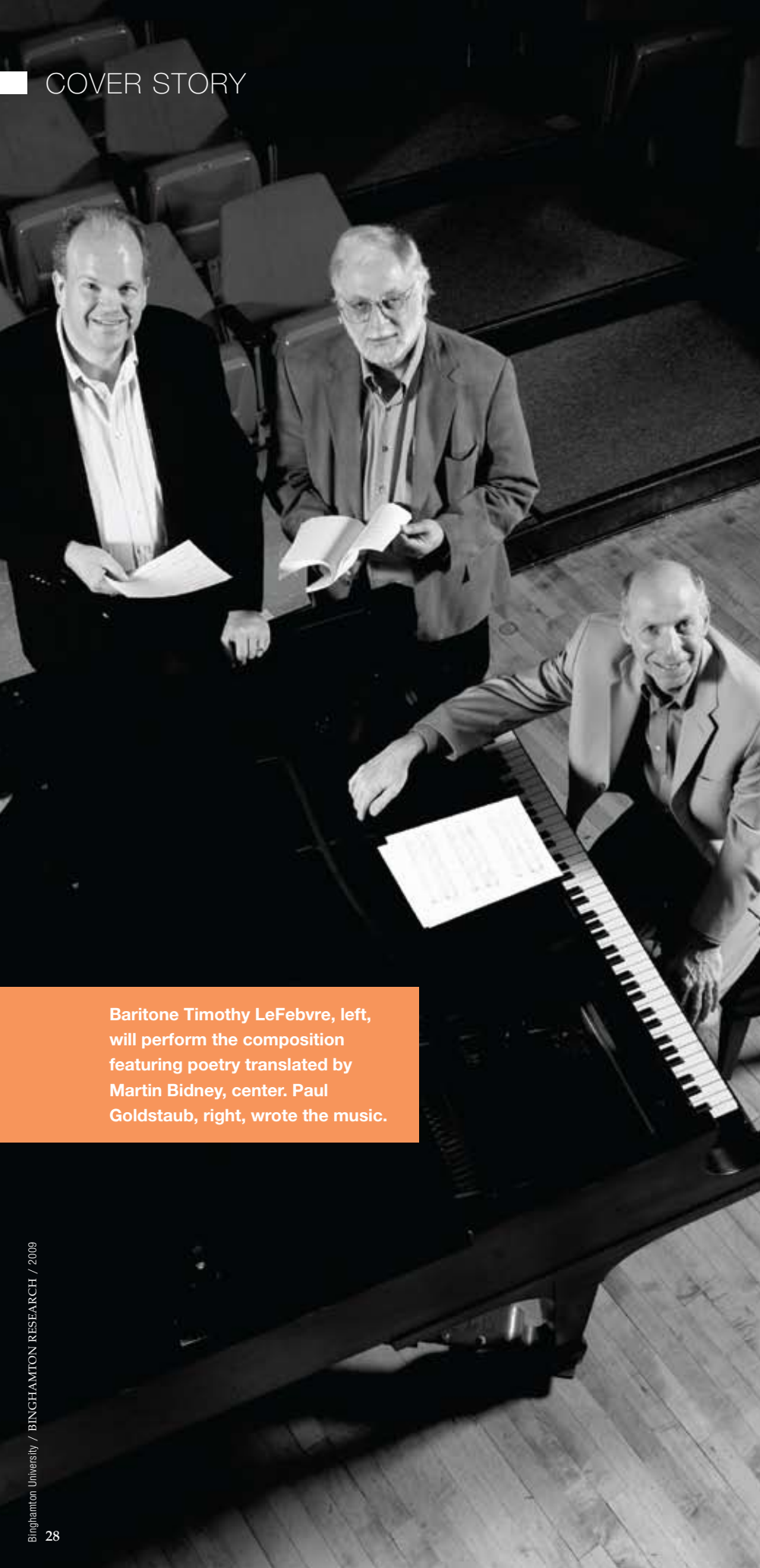
By May 2008, Goldstaub had committed to writing a piece inspired by this poetry in time for a premiere at the 2009 edition of Musica Nova, the annual concert of new music that he directs each February.

"I'm very fortunate in that almost everything I write gets performed," said Goldstaub, whose work has been played at Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall and as far away as Japan. "Sometimes I'm writing for a specific occasion or situation and that in some ways helps me decide the style. Here at Binghamton with the Musica Nova concerts, it's an atmosphere that seems to invite experimentation. People have trusted me to make interesting concerts and I'm delighted to say, 'We're going on a musical journey. Come along.'"

Harold Reynolds, a trombonist and professor at Ithaca College, has worked with Goldstaub for more than 20 years. He has commissioned works from Goldstaub, both as a soloist and for an ensemble.

"It's really exciting to get a piece that's written for you because it's something brand new that no one else has," Reynolds said. "It's an organic process





Baritone Timothy LeFebvre, left, will perform the composition featuring poetry translated by Martin Bidney, center. Paul Goldstaub, right, wrote the music.

when you work with a composer. I find it exhilarating.”

He said Goldstaub has attended early rehearsals and worked with the performers, occasionally making changes in the piece. “Paul is so close to the work that he does,” Reynolds said. It’s so integral to his being that he feels like part of the piece itself. He has a built-in interest in being right in the middle of it.”

Reynolds said he appreciates the personal, even spiritual quality of Goldstaub’s compositions.

“Paul’s works are always introspective. Often they reflect deep-seated emotions he’s going through at the time. I like that because it’s really genuine. He gives a lot of thought to what he wants to say.”

In 2008, that process brought Goldstaub to western New York, where he sought inspiration on a working vacation near a lake. “Several hours were spent just reading the poems over and over and deciding which ones spoke to me,” he said. While there, Goldstaub whittled down the number of poems he was considering for the piece to about 50.

He also kept a journal about the process. “It’s filled with my thoughts about structure, questions I wanted to ask myself and references to music from other composers,” he said, citing Schumann, Britten and Berlioz as well as some contemporary composers.

During the summer, Goldstaub recorded Bidney reading many of the poems aloud and thought about how the poetry would interact with the music. “That’s a great miracle,” Goldstaub said. “Music expands the emotion of the text.”

By June, Goldstaub was seeing recurring themes in the poems and they were beginning to coalesce into groups. After one breakthrough, he made a diagram in his journal. “I drew a picture of how I wanted the overall piece to sound,” he said. “Usually I go with a more intuitive



approach. I decided in this case to do as much pre-compositional planning and structuring as possible.

“For some other compositions I’ve worked differently, which is to say, I’ll start building the front porch and maybe there’ll be a dining room and oh, maybe the wallpaper will have stripes. That’s more intuitive, and very valid, but for this new piece I decided to take a more architectural approach. It means that I spent time asking myself a lot of quiet questions. I feel I know where I’m going. I have a beginning, a middle and an end.

“Now that I have my blueprint, the intuition kicks in.”

Goldstaub may have a plan as he works, but he also strives to remain open to new ideas. A sketch that initially doesn’t seem to work may find its way back into the composition later. “The piece is constantly changing, even though I know where I’m going,” he said.

One way he tests out ideas is through a computer program called Sibelius. The music-notation software allows Goldstaub to generate sheet music that can easily be read by performers. It also enables him to save his work as an audio file and play it back with any of several realistic-sounding instruments.

“Part of a composer’s training before the digital age was to be able to hear these things in one’s head,” said Goldstaub, who holds a bachelor’s degree from Ithaca College as well as master’s

and doctoral degrees from the Eastman School of Music at the University of Rochester. “But now I can share the sketches I’m hearing in my head with others during the process, even before working with the actual performers. It also means I can somehow be more objective. I can listen to the music as an audience member more easily and efficiently.”

The software also makes it relatively simple to experiment with various tempos and with the ways different instruments might sound together.

By October, Goldstaub had narrowed the selection of poems even further. It was clear that the still-untitled composition would have 10 sections divided into two parts, and that portions of the piece would be sung by a man and three women. Goldstaub had also settled on a pianist and two or three percussionists who would play several different instruments. Baritone Timothy LeFebvre, also a professor of music at Binghamton, will be the featured performer.

As portions of the composition came into focus, Goldstaub said he relied on the five elements of music — sound, melody, harmony, rhythm and growth — to inform his decisions about the piece.

“I ask myself, What’s the best way to use each of the five elements to serve the impression I’m getting from the lyrics? If it’s a quiet, mellow, reflective thing, I’m thinking, What sound world is that? Is it piccolo? Probably not. Is it a male voice,

perhaps in a quiet register? Maybe yes. That’s sound. Does the melody consist of notes that are close together? Does the melody jump around? Are the harmonies stable? Are they restful? Do they move from dissonance to consonance? Is it the reverse? Do I want to obliterate harmony? The same with rhythm. Some meters will fit the poetry exactly, some will not. How about that conflict? Does it even have to be a conflict? And there finally comes the question of growth, which is: What is this piece as a whole going to mean? What is the shape of the entire piece?”

Goldstaub came to see Bidney’s poetic translations as a sort of dialogue between individuals in a relationship, from the earliest stages of attraction — in love with the loving, if you will — to darker themes of envy and scorn and then a resolution and brightness.

“One of the mysteries of music is how it can open the door to various interpretations,” he said. “Martin and I are looking forward to what the experience of hearing the poetry and music together will do for our listeners.” ■

— Rachel Coker

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