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Stephen Wood is a painter by trade, and a composer - by heart

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BY JIM REEVES
Special to Star-Telegram

In the world of fine arts, Stephen Wood is your basic switch hitter, an artist by trade, a music composer by avocation.

He hits home runs from both sides of the arts spectrum.

Sunday night, he will take the biggest swing of his 39-year-old life when he hears one of his classical music compositions played in public for the first time by the Youth Orchestra of Greater Fort Worth, with a piano solo by 2005 Cliburn semifinalist Gabriela Martinez.

About a year ago, when he heard his music played for the first time in a mostly private recording session, Wood was so nervous that he broke out in hives.

"When the conductor lifted his baton," Wood said recently, "I had to remember to breathe once the music started."

Sunday's 7 p.m. event at Arborlawn United Methodist Church is the Harmony for Humanity 10th Annual Daniel Pearl World Music Days Concert.

It is a moment that Wood has dreamed about since he was a teenager, when he would spend hours listening to his dad's collection of great symphonies.

Wood, a graduate of Arlington High School whose official residence is Washington, D.C., but who travels the world extensively as a portrait and landscape artist, is the son of longtime Arlington obstetrician Dr. John Paul Wood, who supplied his children with a mixed-bag education, taking them to concerts one night, baseball games the next.

"Dad had an epic collection of classical music that probably had more of an impact on me than either of us realized," Wood said. "As I musically matured, I wanted to know the works of Bach and Beethoven and Mozart. I was particularly interested in what the great masters did with music.



View photos

Harmony for Humanity 10th Annual Daniel Pearl World Music Days Concert

Featuring pianist Gabriela Martinez and the Youth Orchestra of Greater Fort Worth. (Program note: Stephen Wood wrote the program's middle piece, Piano Concerto in B-Flat. It is being performed for the first time in public.)

7 p.m. Sunday
Arborlawn United Methodist Church, 5001 Briarhaven Road, Fort Worth
\$10
www.yofw.org

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"The next step was, 'How do they do that? How can I learn to express myself like that?' It was life-changing. I realized when I was 15 or 16 that I was different that way, that music affected me more powerfully than it did other people."

At the same time, Wood felt the pull of his other love, painting, and understood, even at that young age, that it could provide a more tangible living.

"I was interested in all the creative things, in music and art, and it all sort of dovetailed," he said. "I would look at paintings and study them. I was trying to educate myself in all these things at once."

He often persuaded his mother to drop him off at the Amon Carter or Kimbell Art Museum in the mornings and pick him up when the museums closed.

"That kind of became my hub of learning and creativity, the Amon Carter and the Kimbell. I started to paint very seriously.

"The music took longer to cultivate. There are a lot of components to music, and I wasn't ready to start writing symphonies at 15, especially being self-taught."

Over the years, though, Wood would hear a melody in his head and write it down. Notes became extensive files. Finally, he knew he had to draw it all together and let it spill out.

He found an apartment in Seville, Spain, and, over a six- to eight-month period, wrote his concerto.

"I just holed myself up in a room with a piano and just stayed there for hours and hours until the concerto came together," he said. "I finally rolled up my sleeves and more or less willed it into existence."

He could do that, spend six to eight months writing music, because he had become such a success with another talent: painting.

"I love telling people that I support my music career with my art career," Wood said.

He attended the Pennsylvania Academy for the Fine Arts and obtained his degree in art from the University of Pennsylvania. Almost immediately he began building a reputation as a portrait artist, which makes up about 80 percent of his work. His paintings normally sell for between \$5,000 and \$10,000.

Although Wood loves to paint in Europe and lives part of the time in Russia, he spent the summer doing landscapes for a client in Montana.

"My art has supported my music habit," said Wood, who spent close to \$20,000 last year to hire an orchestra, a conductor and sound engineers for the recording sessions. Plus, he paid for the printing of all his music scores, which he writes by hand.

"It's not a lot of fun to write something and think you may never hear it," Wood conceded. "This gives me a lot of hope, that they're playing one of my pieces, and I hope the audiences will like it."

What will the audience hear?

"The concerto is very melodic," Wood said. "It's dramatic and somewhat theatrical. I tried to make it continuously interesting. Boredom, to me, is the bane of music; that's the unforgiveable sin, to bore someone.

"I don't write unless something really seizes my imagination, and really I have something to say. And I try to say it with the utmost clarity. I think the people who listen to the music will be taken on kind of a journey and will be engaged all through the piece."

Where this will take him next, Wood isn't sure. All he knows is that he will continue to paint, because he loves it and because it allows him to do what he loves even more.

"I've been able to live and support myself with my art," he said, "and then go even further and indulge this great love and passion that I have, which is music."

Some people are fortunate enough to have a dream and follow it. Wood has doubled his pleasure. He has had two dreams, and made them both come true.

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