

**Interview with composer Kevin Olson**  
**October 20, 2022**

**Ben:** Kevin, I'd like to ask that you give a short potted biography summarizing your music, your current activities, and what interests you as a musician.

**Kevin:** I'm happy to. My full-time job is that I'm a coordinator of piano at Utah State University. I'm a professor on the faculty here. I've been here at Utah State since 2010. Before that, I taught at a small liberal arts college near Chicago for about 13 years.

In an average day, I'm teaching courses in piano lit. I'm doing theory, oral skills, piano, accompanying, those kinds of things. And I have a pretty big studio of my own. So in addition to about eight or nine of the piano majors here at Utah State, I have maybe seventeen or eighteen pre-college students at a variety of different levels. There aren't very many beginners; they're mostly intermediate and beyond. And so most afternoons, I'm working with them.

In addition to that, of course, I do a lot of writing. I'm a freelancer right now. For a long time, I was writing for FJH Music, but in the last couple of years I've been working with Hal Leonard and other publishers that way. I've done some of my own self-publishing. I've also gone down the route of some smaller publishers as well. So that's it for the piano stuff.

Then there are the other types of things I do. There are local orchestras and choruses and things like that here that often ask me for special projects. I'll get a commission here and there for non-piano things. That keeps me busy. And all of that is in addition to some accompanying and chamber music performances.

So, it's a pretty fun and busy life. As musicians, we've learned the alternative to being busy is not great. The last couple of years, COVID wasn't super fun for musicians. I'll never complain about being busy again. I think it's a great problem to have when you get to make music all day.

**Ben:** Absolutely. I totally agree about that last comment, about wanting to stay busy and staying afloat, whether it's financially or creatively.

I checked out your website and I clicked on the tab for pieces you have that are published through FJH. I was kind of blown away by the sheer quantity of pieces that you have on there. I was scrolling through and I was like, "Oh, cool. It's got quite a few... how many pages is this?" And then, "oh, 31 pages." And I thought, "How on earth does this guy manage everything?" And so this became, as I was scrolling through your work, one of the things that stood out to me. You sort of hinted at it there: you're incredibly productive and prolific.

So how do you balance all of these different activities? How you manage to stay productive without burning out?

**Kevin:** In my defense, I guess I'm pretty old. I've had a lot of years to put those pages together.

I started writing for FJH when I was a sophomore in college. There was a competition, actually a flier. I was just walking down the hall at the music school and I saw a flier for submitting a couple of original compositions to the National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy. What I didn't know at the time was I had a bunch of those sitting around. I'd been writing since I was little. I thought, "Okay, I'll send these off."

The prize for winning those was a contract with a publisher. Honestly, I didn't even realize pedagogical composition really existed. My teacher didn't teach that stuff, so I didn't grow up playing Gillock or Dennis Alexander or Melody Bober or any of those composers. My teacher was giving me Clementi. I probably would have had a lot more fun if I had been exposed to some of that other stuff.

It exposed me to a whole new world of composition that I didn't even know existed. That was back in 1994. It was a great time to jump on board FJH. The *Piano Adventures* series had just launched. They were a young company, so I was a big fish in a small pond. Things I sent would just shoot through. I didn't have to go through a long editorial and production process. It's much more difficult today. I think the market really got saturated over the last 20 years with trying to break in, so it's more difficult to have the quantity than it used to be.

But back to your question: keeping a good regular routine for me is important. Even when I'm not in the mood to compose, I'll compose. It's like practicing. We're not always in the mood to practice either, but we must at least make attempts to block out the time. What I find is that if I let a couple of weeks go by and I don't do it, it's like jumping into a cold swimming pool. It's really hard to get that creative energy back, to get those pieces going.

You guys all know, because you're composers, that once you get in that routine you're composing in the back of your mind the rest of the day. Then the next day it's like, "Oh, yeah, I was working that out..." And the things that were a struggle yesterday are a little easier today, or I realize that what I was doing yesterday wasn't working so I can go back and do some of that again.

I teach a lot of younger students who are composing. For me, it's all about getting into that regular routine. It doesn't have to be a ton, but if they're doing some creative work every day they'll find that the process gets really quick.

**Ben:** I definitely want to talk to you about your routine and your process.

Before we get to that, though, I wanted to ask: you alluded to how you began composition at the beginning of your answer. I'd like to know what it was like for you writing as a child. I had a note here that you wrote your first piece very early. I think it was about five or six years old. I'm curious. Before you started winning awards and things for writing, what was it like to compose music as a little kid? (Obviously, I understand that we don't remember everything perfectly.)

**Kevin:** Well, I'll put "write" in quotation marks. I would say my mom was doing a lot of the "writing" when I was in kindergarten, first, and second grade. Luckily, she's a piano teacher, and so she encouraged it. It was really great.

I was one of those kids--you guys know, if you do any piano teaching--one of the kids who gets up and just wants to do *Chopsticks* and the “knuckle song” and all those things before he plays the real pieces. Luckily, I didn't have a teacher that quashed that kind of emotion.

I feel like that's really important for us as teachers to do. When students want to noodle around, improvise, or show you something original, it's important that we don't say, “Oh, no, let's get to our Hanon exercises.” Right? We need to celebrate that.

When I was doing that at home, my mom would say, “Oh, that's really neat,” and she would write it down for me. And then eventually, when I was in about second or third grade, I started to transition to where I was writing.

This was still pre-Finale days. I would have loved Finale. That's an amazing tool that kids have today. All these notation programs like NoteFlight, MuseScore, and Sibelius, or whatever you're all using--what an amazing thing for a kid to have, to make their music look professional.

Back in the day, I was taking apart cassette tapes and using them as straight edges for my bar lines and stems and all that stuff; and it still never looked as professional as I wanted it to.

But I had a mom who really supported it, and I had competitions in my area that gave me motivation. There was the PTA Reflections contest, which is still around today. Every year at our school kids would win awards for writing or composing or making art. I would submit something every year.

And because very few kids were writing music, these things would usually shoot through to the district and to the state and eventually to national, even when I was in 6th grade. So those kinds of things, I feel, are really important for students to get that kind of motivation. It forces them to get to a double bar line, to submit things, to have the discipline to finish something. Then it gives them the motivation of receiving feedback from judges, and every once in a while a cool award.

I was lucky that I had a lot of support, not only from my parents but from the community who were putting those competitions.

**Ben:** It sounds like you were encouraged to treat music as a form of play.

**Kevin:** Yes. I mean, for me it was always very natural. It was something that I wanted to do. I actually had to be more encouraged to get my Clementi out, to be honest. That was the harder thing for my teacher to do. I always loved to improvise. I still perform a lot of jazz; it's always been a natural thing.

I think we probably can think of students we've worked with that are more naturally that way, where this stuff becomes just a part of them. Then for other students, we have to give them a little bit more guidance, with prompts and other things to help them along the way. Kids are wired very differently.

I was always wired towards that kind of improvisation, and then I built the discipline to actually write down the best ideas.

**Ben:** Has that practice of improvising carried through into your adulthood? Do you still improvise when you compose?

**Kevin:** Yes. In fact, if you see my office here, this is my set up.

Here's where I teach at the university. This is a digital piano, right next to my desk. And then at a right angle is where all the writing happens. I have a swivel chair that's going straight from improvisation to the screen.

Honestly, I feel like whether I'm writing for piano or voice or some other instrument, there's this organic process. Whatever our native instrument is, I always feel like it's pretty obvious with my college students which ones are writing in a very organic, musical way and which ones are going to the library and academically trying to figure it out.

I know there are, of course, great composers who don't need to have an instrument to begin that process, but it's always been the way that I get my ideas.

**Ben:** Interesting. Yes, I'd like to hear about that in more detail. You've talked about how you got into composing as a child because you were improvising, and your mother would encourage this. She would write down the ideas, but she would do what she could to not quash this playful creative instinct that you had.

As an adult, how do you keep that instinct alive? You're in an academic environment. I'm sure there's a lot of left-brained music thinking going on in your environment, and you teach music theory and pedagogy, and you have to be in that mode a lot. I'd like to know how you keep your more intuitive side alive, whether it's through improvising or anything else that you do.

I'd also love to hear more specifically what you do when you compose. You've got your swivel chair, you've got your setup. Can you walk me through what that's like, what you do in your rituals?

**Kevin:** To your first question, I feel like as composers we all have to watch out for our own comfort zones. In other words, maybe there are keys that we tend to gravitate toward. Maybe there are certain rhythms or certain textures, and we start feeling like, gosh, I've written this piece before. I certainly am guilty of this: settling into comfort zones and places where my mind already tends to go because it's gone there before.

I think that the older you get, the more you have to make a conscious effort to challenge yourself, to get outside of those places. Pick keys or harmonies or things that you're not as comfortable in. Maybe if you're writing a lot of triadic harmonies, for the next piece you write you say, "okay, I'm going to use a lot of fourths in my chords on this one."

It's like when you start to improvise and you realize it just sounds like more of the same. Most of the stuff I'm improvising on that piano does not see the light of day. It's just a way to get to that next step. I'll stop and say, "okay, nothing's really lighting me up with that. Let me try some different textures. What if I put the melody in the left hand?"

So there's a left brain analytical side, where you're saying, "I'm going to try this kind of texture, or I'd like to kind of channel Aaron Copland with this."

As you get older, you can start to use some of the terminology and your experiences with music to push yourself out of those comfort zones. That's the kind of thing that helps me.

The assignments keep me fresh as well. So, for example, let's say you're doing choral work--like what you're doing, Carol--and it's a text that really excites you. Sometimes that will take you down different paths. Or maybe it's the performing ensemble. You know the strength of a string trio that you're writing for, and you think, "Oh, man. These guys already do a lot of jazzy, contemporary stuff. They're not afraid to do extended techniques or sound effects on their instruments."

I like to get projects that way. I feel that external things, like knowing who I'm writing for or having a text I'm using, can generate a sense of play and excitement. It keeps me fresh.

...And now I've talked so long that I can't remember your second question, Ben. Can you remind me?

**Ben:** No problem. I snuck in two questions there. I wanted to pick your brain more specifically about what it's like to be you when you're composing. If I was a fly on the wall, what would I see from start to finish on a project?

**Kevin:** I would not invite any flies to watch my project because it's pretty embarrassing, to be honest. To improvise, I think you have to get a sense of expression where you're not afraid to sound really bad, I guess is what I'm trying to say. I would say--and I tell my students this, too--probably 98% of the stuff that I'm improvising on this piano here is junk. It's just not anything that I want. I'm not proud about it or anything, but I do know that that's a necessary process to get to something. That where I stumble upon something that has potential.

I think we have to be patient as composers to go through that weeding out process, where nothing is generating a lot of energy and excitement for us, because we're going to play a wrong note on accident or we're going to just try something a little bit out there and it might stick.

I would say that's a lot of the process: it's me here in my office, working things out, often going to dead ends and giving myself a little compositional latitude. "Okay, let me try something in E flat Lydian...and maybe I'll put it in a five four time, and let's just see what I could come up with..." or, "let me give myself a little ostinato in my left hand, and see what might come out with my right hand."

Sometimes I'll even play through other people's works. I might get out a book of Samuel Barber or Lowell Liebermann or one of these contemporary composers, just to get my mind in that kind of framework and get out of my own head.

Often, something will be generated from that. There certainly isn't anything illegal about stopping the creative process and playing through people we really like, to get different sounds in our head. It's amazing how, through our fingers (or however we're improvising), our brain starts to think a little bit differently when we get some external stimuli that way.

**Ben:** A couple of times you've alluded to beginning with a sound. You've said things like, "I'm going to try quartal harmonies instead of triadic harmonies," or "I'm going to start with a particular scale", or "I'm going to start by playing through some composer I admire."

So it sounds like you begin with something like a writing prompt. When you improvise, you allow your fingers, mind, heart, and instincts to go to places based on that initial prompt. And then you decide what sounds good out of that.

**Kevin:** Absolutely. For me, composition is problem-solving, and I like to set myself up with a little problem.

I'm teaching a Zoom student right after this interview from New Jersey. He's probably 6th grade. He has settled into a style, and he plays a lot of classical music, so his music had a classical feel to it. He wanted to branch out and do some new things for MTNA this year. So we literally took the first five digits of his phone number and used that to make a little motive for the beginning of a piece. I showed him how, just like Bach, you can take that and turn it upside down. You can go backward. You can make it really long and short. That little five-note opening gesture really allowed him to build a complete piece from it. So that's about as non-musical as you can get, to give yourself some aspect of this approach.

We're talking about Schumann in piano literature. He was fascinated with letters and codes. He writes the *Abegg Variations* off of the last name, "Abegg", writing using just the letters of the alphabet. If it's good enough for Schumann, it's probably good enough for us. I feel like, even if it is kind of a silly external stimulus, that can be a way in which we set up a problem and work ourselves through it.

**Ben:** Some of the external stimuli that you've mentioned--a phone number, or a style of a composer, for example--are very separate from how we literally, physically play. But a lot of your music is pedagogical. It has this sense of wanting to teach the performer, or helping them practice a skill, like an étude.

Let's say you're commissioned to write a pedagogically minded piece. At what point does the technique enter the compositional process? Do you start by saying, "This is a cool melody. I'm going to fit that into the pedagogy..."? Or do you say, "I want to practice this particular thing with the hands. Let me work backwards from that technique..."?

**Kevin:** It's a good question.

All of us who compose know that there isn't just one way to always generate music. If there was, I could just start the assembly line. I would just know that I could follow this step, and then this step, and then this, to get to the finish line.

Every piece and collection is different, but I would say that, for pedagogical work, my students are a big inspiration. I can look at a student that I just taught the previous day who really struggled with right and left hand voicing, and thinking about how that technique might stimulate a new piece. It could as silly as something that one of my students said, or something that they're really into. My own kids really were into a lot of those titles. *Storm Chasers* is a good example. I've got some weather pieces

inspired by my son. He's now getting his master's degree in meteorology; he was always a weather nut, even as a little kid. He and I would watch storm chaser videos and things like that together. Sometimes things like that will start the process.

I have a whole drawer here of title ideas. Sometimes I'm just not really in the mood to write music, but I'll go down and do a bunch of titles that sound really interesting, trying to think through all the different things. I might even go online and look at titles of short stories or other thoughts that people have come up with, looking outside of the realm of music, hoping to stimulate some kind of imagery. Say you're writing a whole book of intermediate level piano solos. You know what intermediate students need, but if you channel something external, sometimes that's helpful. Maybe you've got a title like *Serengeti Sunset*. Now you're thinking, "Okay. How do I make something that has kind of an African folk vibe for this?"

You came at it from all these different angles. Then, with the pedagogical writing, once you get into that mode you're also thinking specifically about leveling. You're making sure that your piece is consistent, that you're teaching patterns that students can handle throughout.

One really good example of a piece that's not pedagogical is *Fur Elise*. Right? All the kids want to play the first page, but the second page is brutal. It's so much harder. Now, in Beethoven's defense, he wasn't thinking that way. He was trying to sell music. Sometimes it's useful to think of an example of what I don't want to have happen in a piece, like a middle section that's so daunting most kids give up before they can master it.

**Ben:** Yes. It's like they're ambushed.

**Kevin:** Exactly. And actually, it gets pretty easy after that. It's almost like, if anything, you should save that hard stuff to the very end, to keep their motivation going. That second page can be pretty demotivating for some students.

**Ben:** There's a Schubert *Sonata*, an A minor sonata, where in the third movement there's a relatively simple figure that sits nicely under the hands. And so you're playing through it without too much difficulty. And then in the last, I don't know, sixteen measures, he puts the thing in octaves. And it's just crazy hard and totally unexpected, a brick wall.

**Kevin:** Like, "Good luck, guys." Yes, Schubert's notorious for being uncomfortable to play. I think that might be why he doesn't get performed as much as other composers. Some of the sections are very awkward. I can think of several examples in other sonatas, too, that are very similar to that, where he just kind of said, "Deal with it. This is what I want to have happen; see if you can make it work."

So yes, I think that's something to consider as a composer. And honestly, I respect composers that write things that are crazy difficult, but you can't complain that nothing gets performed or that people aren't up to the challenge for it if you are pushing it that hard. You have to decide, as a composer. Are you going to just say, "deal with it", like Schubert and Schumann? Or are you going to try to be like the composers that actually sound harder than they really are? For example, Grieg's *Piano Concerto* is full of patterns. A good high school student can pull it off and sound like a virtuoso.

**Ben:** That's something that I actually had a note here to say to you, by the way, as a compliment. It's not so much as a question but an observation. Graham, you and Carl were performing Kevin's *Concerto Bravo* the other day. I was struck by two things that it did well, which can sometimes be in conflict. The first was that each movement had many sections that were ergonomic, clearly fitting underneath the hands. They fit even a young person's a small set of hands. But they also felt like they were expressing some real emotional depth. That piece has a lot of humor and lightness, yes, but the second movement actually is quite sweeping and beautiful. That's a nice thing if you're a young pianist, to feel that you're on the inside of music like that, even though it's only intermediate. It's a nice balance between those two poles.

**Kevin:** Well, that's probably one of the nicest things you can say to a pedagogical composer. I think that's what we're always going for, is music that actually resonates, that can teach a student to love and appreciate and interpret music, but to do that in an accessible way. And yes, it's a big learning curve. There are pieces that are still living in my file cabinet that have potential, but I feel like they don't do one or the other of those things you're talking about.

If a piece is just vanilla, not really saying anything, I'm not very interested in submitting that. And if it does just the opposite, which is to say it has all that emotion but I would never give it to any of my students, then I also don't feel like submitting that. There are lots of misfit toy compositions in my file. Sometimes I'll pull a piece out and give it another try.

**Ben:** There's another thing that I wanted to ask about. The genesis of your improvisations and creativity is often external. You referenced interacting with your son who's interested in weather patterns and other external stimuli.

As I was preparing to talk to you today I was going through your website. I came across a piece that was inspired by different colors. I think it was called *Impressions*. You described some very specific attributes of different colors: you said that red was energetic; I remember that blue was intuitive, and there were a couple of others. The description of this piece stood out to me.

I was wondering what your thoughts were on the associations between music and colors, if there were any for you in general. I can't help but start thinking about synesthesia and the relationships for different people between the senses, about how our experiences of the world influence our creativity. I'm wondering what thoughts that prompts for you.

**Kevin:** That's a good example of me revealing my compositional stimulus in a piece. Sometimes I won't share that with the public. It'll just be a means to an end. But I thought, in this case, this was a good chance for me to show the performer what I was thinking about when I wrote those pieces, and maybe to allow them to channel their interpretation in the same way.

My wife reads lots of different types of things. She'd shared an article with me that she found on color therapy at the time. It was about ways that people were using colors to increase blood pressure, work on emotions, and slow breathing down.



I was reading the article and found it really fascinating. The researchers had found that people associated various adjectives with colors. It seemed to be a perfect stimulus for me to start the composition process, with red being passionate and energetic and so on. Those were perfect left brain adjectives for me to say, "okay, those are my four or five keywords that I'm going to be using." And those pieces ended up being very improvisational, almost from the piano right to the screen. They wrote themselves once I started to think about what these adjectives said to me.

I'm fascinated as well with synesthesia. I think it's amazing to think about the way that the senses can be combined, where with a trumpet, say, you can actually have a yellow shooting across your visual field. That doesn't happen to me, but I do have perfect pitch. So that's one of those weird qualities that you can't explain to anybody else. I have always explained perfect pitch with a color analogy. It's like if you try to explain to everybody that you see green. Everybody says, "wow, that's amazing!" Well, to me, it's just green.

But to actually have a literal color, I think is a pretty cool quality. And with composers like Scriabin and Messiaen and others that claim to have had that, certainly their music has a vibrancy and a sense of color that probably came from those moments of inspiration.

**Ben:** On one hand, a perceptual condition or experience like that could be very powerful, because it could allow you to segment your inspiration. You can say, "I'm going to compose in C sharp minor...and that's clearly purple." And you can really be very clear with yourself--I imagine, anyway, since I don't have synesthesia--regarding what kind of tools and materials you're working with when you're creating.

On the other hand, I can imagine it also being constraining for those very same reasons. It might be very hard to imagine C sharp minor as anything else than purple or whatever. That might be a liability too.

Do you think that way about perfect pitch? Are there conditions or situations where you find that you're grateful that you have it, that it helps you? Does it hinder you in some way?

**Kevin:** That's fascinating. You bring up really interesting points. I've never thought about synesthesia as possibly being a hindrance, but I can see what you're saying.

It goes back to Baroque days, and the doctrine of affections, that certain keys had certain moods and personalities. If you look at all of Bach's pieces in F major, they have a similar personality. To me, that is limiting.

A major key can be sad or nostalgic or wistful, or a major key can be energetic and exciting. In a way, we have to be careful of not stereotyping the harmonies, along with other aspects of music that we're thinking about.

For me, however, I would say the perfect pitch has only been a help. I can do a lot of composing away from the piano. If I'm on an airplane or if I'm walking, I know exactly the pitch that I'm kind of working with, and I can jot those things down. It's an advantage in those kind of situations.

But I think the problems that people might have with synesthesia, or with keys having a specific mood,

are things that we all wrestle with. When I was talking earlier about settling into routines and expectations, that's what I mean. We have to consciously say, "you know what? I always want to start my improvisations in D minor. It just feels really nice in my hands. Now I need to do something completely different." I think regardless of any kind of little mental quirk that any of us might have, that's just something we all have to be careful of.

I think it's a compliment to say that you've got a compositional "sound", but I always find it a little bit of a mixed compliment. I never want to have *too* much of a sound. I always want to make sure my piece is original and unique, and that it doesn't completely settle in.

And that's tricky. I mean, after thirty years of doing this, there are times when I feel like "I swear, I've written something like this before." You need a conscious compass, and to always be asking yourself if you're settling into things that feel too comfortable.

**Ben:** I agree. One of the most (accidentally) underhanded compliments that you can give to a composer is to say that their music sounds just like x-y-z. It may well sound just like that other composer--I mean, there are only so many notes, right? And only so many instruments, and combinations of instruments, and it's inevitable--but there's something that makes us cringe when we hear that. We hate to think that we're just like somebody else, or that it's been done before, or that we're ripping somebody off.

**Kevin:** Or even ripping off ourselves. I don't want someone to say, "well, you've got a real sound with everything you do."

My feeling is, alright, that's nice, but that kind of means I've got only five colors in my crayon box. When I get a compliment like that, I think, "That probably means my next piece needs to be a little more adventurous."

**Ben:** Yes. However, if you had no sound, you would also have no commissions. You have to have some kind of balance between novelty and a sense of your own personality. There is a certain tension there.

**Kevin:** Absolutely.

**Ben:** Your work often has a lightness to it, a humorous quality. I don't mean to say that it sounds slapstick. It's not like PDQ Bach or something like that, but there is a sense that you're not always taking your music too seriously. I'm wondering at what point humor enters the process for you. Do you begin composing a piece by saying it's going to have a particular emotional valence, or does it evolve as you go along?

**Kevin:** It's all about knowing your audience. If you are writing for kids, for example, there's a moment when you're thinking, "man, we better keep these kids entertained, and help them love piano," and so on.

A lot of the things that you've probably seen in the pedagogical world has that quality, because that humor and energy is important for our students to keep their motivation. Some of the best messages I get each week are emails from kids around the country. Their teachers or parents will track me down, and the kids will write me emails saying, "I love this piece, it's so fun," or "your music is so funny!". I respond to all of those. That, to me, is such a confirmation of what I'm doing. It makes me really happy to get those emails.

Of course, if I want to write something really serious, I can. Right now, our students are working at the university toward a new music recital. I direct the new music club here, as well as the composition seminar. We're getting stuff ready. It's important, I think, for them to see their faculty writing as well.

A recent thing I've done is a serious work about the Sara Teasdale poem, *There Will Come Soft Rains*. She wrote this about a hundred years ago in World War I. It's about the human race and how, if we all blow each other up and kill each other off, nature isn't going to care. It's going to keep going, and just grow back over all of this. There will still come soft rains, and birds chirping...there just won't be us. It's got a powerful message, and for me that served as a real inspiration. We see what's happening in the Ukraine and Russia, and the problems we have with the climate, and so on. That message resonated powerfully with me.

Again, it comes back to what you're writing for, and the stimulus you're using. If it's to be fun and funny, I'm all into that; that's great. And if there's something that's deeply meaningful to me, I'm excited about that as well.

**Brittney:** I'd like to quickly jump in here. I recently started using the *Perfect Start* series. My kids are in love with it. One of their favorites is *I Love Broccoli*. We just turned the page and she goes, "oh, my God. I love broccoli!" And she was so excited to resonate with the song about that.

**Kevin:** Thank you, Brittney! Here's another great thing: having your own kids; most of those songs in there are autobiographical. There's songs about dirty socks, and "why do we think that dandelions are weeds?" Those are things that kids ask. I think dandelions are pretty flowers. All of those are moments of inspiration. If any of you guys are writing for kids, if you have them in your own house or you're teaching them each week, jot down those fun ideas. Each one could be the thing that resonates with some kids. We wanted to make sure that all those lyrics felt real and funny. Thank you for that, Brittney.

**Brittney:** Definitely. You're welcome.

**Ben:** That's an amazing breadth, from the war in Ukraine to broccoli.

**Kevin:** While I do think composers have to kind of choose their lane...man, I like to have about eight lanes. I love to have the newest piece that I'm doing be something that really resonates with me, something I'm excited about. It's important that we don't burn ourselves out by constricting what we do. Some composers can write serious piece after serious piece, and I respect that, but for me it would get old pretty quickly.

**Ben:** There's another thing I hadn't thought to ask, but your response to this is prompting me. Please don't feel obligated to name any names, but I'm wondering if there are any trends in music or musical styles that you ever feel like you're reacting against. Are there things when you're composing where you think, "I really don't want it to do that thing, because I've heard too much of it, or it goes against some deeper message that's important to me?"

**Kevin:** I like that question because I think about it a lot. I'll answer in two different ways, because I think they're two different areas.

First, in the very serious art composition area, I'm really encouraged that in the last 20 years there's been a movement back toward a more accessible--maybe we'll call it "neotonal"--kind of art composition that is so needed.

When I was in school in the '90s, my professors were still into the Schoenberg, Berio, Boulez, Webern, and all the hyper-serialist things happening. If you were doing anything tonal as a young composer back then in a serious way, you just got kind of a side eye. They wouldn't take you seriously. Even when I signed my first pedagogical contract and I was so excited to show my composition teacher at the university, he said, "Oh, you're writing music to sell lots of copies to kids." I realized very quickly that he wasn't going to be a real, valuable mentor in that area. So I did that on the side while keeping my serious side, but knowing that I couldn't even be tonal. I was writing twelve-tone piano suites and things. Those taught me a lot, but I would never, ever want to have them performed.

For me, if there's any kind of reaction, it's to support what's going on right now in the art music world, which is a return to things that really engage the audience in accessible ways. I'm not talking major and minor. There are tonal centers, and there are things that sound familiar. I think composers started to realize that maybe alienating the audience is not a great idea to pay your bills, so they're finding things that engage an audience. I'm excited about the new music scene today.

In the pedagogical world, though, I would just say just the opposite. A lot of the stuff that I avoid as a piano teacher myself are the things that don't feel very inspired or that feel a little old-fashioned. They're things that probably won't resonate with kids today. If titles, for example, feel like they're from the '50s or '60s or something like that, I prefer the things that feel a little bit more current and contemporary with my own students and musicality. If there are a lot of pieces that use I and V7 chords back and forth, well, we've got plenty of John Thompson pieces and other old music that I had to play when I was a kid that are available for that. I'm much more interested in the composers who are pushing those envelopes and getting our students' ears to stretch a little bit.

One composer I really like who does this a lot--and you should totally have her on this for an interview--is Wynn-Anne Rossi. She's doing a lot of great stuff with unusual harmonies, but still accessible. She's one of the composers I really respect in the pedagogical world for the way that her pieces always have freshness, ingenuity, and humor. She and I have collaborated on a few things. We've got a composition method that we've put together, a five-book method that she and I collaborated on just because I've always respected her so much. She's one of the most creative people I know.

**Ben:** Awesome. We'll look her up.

Yes, I think a lot of people who had a style that didn't gel with their professors in college probably had that experience, almost of being in the closet as one genre or one musical philosophy or another. I remember when I was in college I had a professor who didn't think very highly of Vaughan Williams because his music was very triadic and diatonic. And I was just listening to *The Lark Ascending* the other day, and it's just gorgeous. It's such a shame that I always thought this guy was kind of cheesy. It wasn't really an opinion I formed for myself. It was something that somebody told me.

**Kevin:** We have to be really careful as educators for that very reason. First, to be enthusiastic mentors, it might not even be the music we really like but if our students are writing music we need to embrace what they're excited about at the moment. Yes, challenge them to stretch those ideas, but also celebrate what they're already doing. I think that's very important.

You mentioned Vaughan Williams. We're doing a whole concert of his music next week. I've been rehearsing a lot of his choral music with an ensemble I accompany here and falling in love with it. I mean, it really is just incredible stuff.

**Carol:** Yes, I completely agree. That is such a common thing, the Vaughn Williams trap. I loved it in my high school choirs, and then in college I heard *Lark Ascending* for the first time and thought, "This is totally different." It transports you.

**Kevin:** It does. It's fantastic. There were composers that really knew who they were at the time. I think a lot of conservative composers like him were denigrated. We know Rachmaninoff, for example, lived in a time when everybody thought he should be writing crazy atonal music. He stuck to his guns and got really reviled for it. Originally, the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* has a really scathing article about Rachmaninoff during his lifetime about being trite and whatever else. I remember my music history teacher saying all Liszt is just showy, with "no substance"...that kind of thing. And we're all writing these down as notes that we're going to be taking on our final exams. It's just ignorant stuff. We've got to be careful to not let our own opinions infect our students' opinions. They have to find out on their own, like you guys did.

**Ben:** I have one final comment and question, so as to not end on a negative note. I would like to ask you what you're excited about in the future.

Feel free to take that as meaning what you're excited about that you're working on now--you've already mentioned some projects--or you can speak more generally, if you wish. You're a person who has many irons in the fire; you are impressively ambitious, prolific, and productive. What do you have coming up, and what about the future excites you? What gets you up in the morning?

**Kevin:** That's a great question. My answer will just shows how many lanes are in my freeway.

I'm getting really excited about doing a lot of arranging. I've done several books for Hal Leonard recently, and Hal Leonard, of course, has access to so much material. They just licenses to everything, pop and rock. Right now, I'm working on a book of medleys of different artists. For example, I just

finished a Michael Jackson medley for piano duet. That's going to be so much fun. And I'm moving on to Elton John and Nirvana medley. It's going to be a really crazy, fun project.

Then I've got some commissions that are getting me excited as well. I always love commissions, because you get to find out a little bit about either the area that the piece is being written for or a person or something. This one is a tribute to a teacher legend that's in the Wisconsin area. She just passed away, and she had a real impact in that community. That's going to be a fun challenge.

There are other projects in the works as well; I've got this new art song that may turn into more of a song cycle. The nice thing is that when you have several projects going on, if something kind of hits a dead end you can just pivot quickly and have other things happening. I would recommend to all young composers to have a couple of projects, and maybe a couple of exciting competitions you can enter or maybe some live performances for school or something like that, where you can get your music out to the world. Nothing sounds more depressing to me than to just sit and compose, get a double bar line, put it away and then do another one. The public manifestation of this is the thing that lights my fire. I think most composers feel the same way. Getting something out of your head and hearing it in a real space...that's my drug of choice. Right? I love that feeling of the public manifestation of my music; I think that's probably what lights me up the most.

**Ben:** Cool. Well, I'll let you go. I think we're all very happy to have gotten the chance to talk to you today. Thank you very much.

**Kevin:** This was fun! Great questions, Ben. I love the way you think. I had a great time.