

At first glance, he doesn't look like a music composer. At least not like a man writing classical music and operas. At 6 foot 5 inches, and with his brown hair hanging down most of his back, Michael Kallstrom is a case of contrast. His looks imply Metallica, but his works more resemble Mozart.

electric BY MATTIAS KARÉN opera

Kallstrom, a music professor at Western for 13 years, is the creator of more than 100 compositions, ranging from five-minute pieces to a full-scale opera. His music is being played not only at Western, but also by some of the finest musicians from all over the country, and even by some performers in Europe.

The long hair is a remainder from his younger days, when Kallstrom played in rock bands, performing in clubs around the Miami area. Because he was tall, he was able to play in bars at age 15 by letting his hair hang down his face and putting on sunglasses. No one ever thought he was under age.

"I grew up as a rock'n'roller," Kallstrom said. "One of my students usually asks me every other year if I was a hippie, and I'll say 'What do you mean was?'"





PHOTO BY SHERYL A. HAGAN

Today, however, the 44-year-old's music has changed direction. His opera, "Sunday Pages," received rave reviews by both colleagues and students when it was performed at Western last year. The two-act score is about a family sitting around a table reading the Sunday New York Times. As they read, the stories, which range from humorous columns to serious topics like teen suicide, come alive. In the second act, the stories even start interacting with the family.

Kallstrom has also written several shorter one-man operas that he performs at universities and stages all over the country. Kallstrom has recorded the music he's composed for the pieces, which is played electronically while he performs the opera by himself on stage, with some help from large puppets he's built.

Composing music has been a part of life almost as long as Kallstrom can remember. As a 5-year-old, growing up in a small town in Florida, Kallstrom's music-loving family—which would always sing—would often go to dinner at a local family restaurant. After the meal, one of the adults would begin with a song everyone knew, and Kallstrom, along with his two brothers and sister, would join in.

"And we wouldn't just join in singing the melody, we'd join in and harmonize," Kallstrom said. "We had at least four parts, and sometimes five and six parts of harmony that we'd just improvise."

"What made it fun for us as children was that it was completely acceptable ... people would just stop eating and listen, because, actually, it was pretty good."

Today, Kallstrom is still a singer at heart, an operatic bass, and also teaches music theory and composition. But while music has been in his blood since childhood, being a teacher hasn't. It wasn't until he was working toward his master's degree from the University of North Carolina that the thought started sinking in.

He then got the opportunity to teach at Westminster Choir College in New Jersey. He took that job partly because it was close to New York City, and he thought he could "tap into the performance scene going on there."

Instead, he got hooked on teaching, which many Western students are grateful for today. Leitchfield senior Travis Miller is one of them. Miller took private lessons with Kallstrom for three semesters and also had him for an orchestration class. Kallstrom, Miller said, is not only very knowledgeable, but also very personable and "re-

ally, really good to work with.

"He's so unassuming about it, though," Miller said. "You know the saying about no question is a dumb question—he lives by that."

In fact, students' questions are a big part of why Kallstrom enjoys teaching.

"You always have those students who are very good at asking questions that make you, as a teacher, sometimes reevaluate what you think about some things," he said. "That happens all of the time. If you pay attention to those sorts of questions, I think it keeps you fresh as a teacher."

One could wonder, however, how Kallstrom stays fresh as a person. Between teaching classes, tutoring students, attending performances, working on his own creations and spending time with his wife and two children, it's sometimes hard to find time for everything.

"It's tough, I'll tell you," he said about the task to fit everything in. But he still tries to set aside two hours ev-

eryday to work on his compositions, and another hour to practice for whatever performance he will be in next.

Despite the heavy workload, or maybe because of it, he never seems to be fresh out of ideas for new creations.

"I'm never sure where the ideas come from," Kallstrom said, "But I think they come to me because I work at this on a regular basis. One of my favorite quotes is ... 'I may not be inspired every day, but at least inspiration knows where to find me.'"

He also gets help from the musical journal he keeps, where he jots down ideas and notes as they come to him.

"Sometimes when I'm beginning a new instrumental work," he said, "I'll go back and look through those ideas and I may find one that clicks with me, or that calls out to be used for this particular piece."

Wherever his ideas are coming from, chances are they will keep coming for quite some time, because Kallstrom has no thoughts of quitting composing.

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"I think composers compose because they must," he said. "It's just a part of who we are, and when we're not creating something, we feel out of balance. When we're creating, even if it's an agonizing process, we feel more in touch with ourselves, and the way things should be with the world. So for me, it's an inner compulsion, that if I try to ignore, it has bad consequences."

"When I'm working, there is a very physical and spiritual uplifting that I get from that process. When you're actually working and composing and putting the notes down on the page, there is very often a sense of timelessness. For me, I always talk about it in terms of entering a different dimension."

A dimension that Kallstrom will probably enter for years to come.

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