

A Place of Discovery

Regents' Professor of Music Christopher Shultis is committed to creating unique musical compositions.

By Ellen Ashcraft



Photo by Michael Mouchette

Musicians sometimes live through their instruments. And when it was no longer possible for me to do that, I was confronted with an emptiness that had to do with not really ever having paid much attention to who I am," says Christopher Shultis, Regents' professor of music and composer at the University of New Mexico. Since herniated disks affected his right arm and ended his percussion career 13 years ago, Shultis has been redefining himself. In composing, he's found that being true to that self is the root of innovation.

Since 1988, Shultis has written 15 compositions influenced by what is called "New Music." "What was exciting to me about the New Music tradition was the idea of experimentation," the energetic Shultis explains. "You didn't have to necessarily inherit a musical tradition. You could be a musical explorer. Instead of inheriting a scale, you could create a scale. Instead of just inheriting a set of instruments, you could build your own instruments." In his pieces, Shultis has used conventional instruments and sometimes introduced electronic attributes ranging from recorded materials to alterations of sound.

His most recent composition, *a little light, in great darkness-for soprano saxophone and woodwind quintet*, required an unusually long creation time—five-years—because of his commitment to creating something unique and meaningful. "When I wrote the piece, I wanted everything to come from a place of discovery. I mean, there's so much music already in the world, why just add something else?" he asks, laughing. "I really wanted to feel like I was writing

something that needed to be heard. I wanted it to be something that I felt afterwards needed to be done—that I needed to have done. And it took me a long time to come up with a piece in which every one of its aspects seemed necessary."

The piece was inspired by Ezra Pound's Canto CXVI, and a picture taken in 1995 of a large, lush bush growing at the poet's grave site. "What I had in mind was having the plant's growth pattern structure the form of the piece," Shultis says. However, upon revisiting the site, he realized that he would have to change his plans because the original plant had died. "Instead of finding this heroic plant, I found this replacement that's just barely had a chance to live. So only a very small part of the piece ends up being a musical photograph of that remaining plant."

A chance walk through a woods in Germany also contributed to the piece. "I heard this melody, in here," he says, pointing to his head, "and it was the opening phrase in the horn solo." That phrase, except for the middle which came later, furnished all of the pitches for the piece. "I was interested

in the idea of change, as opposed to development," Shultis clarifies. "So I tried to find ways in which musical ideas would change, but not develop.

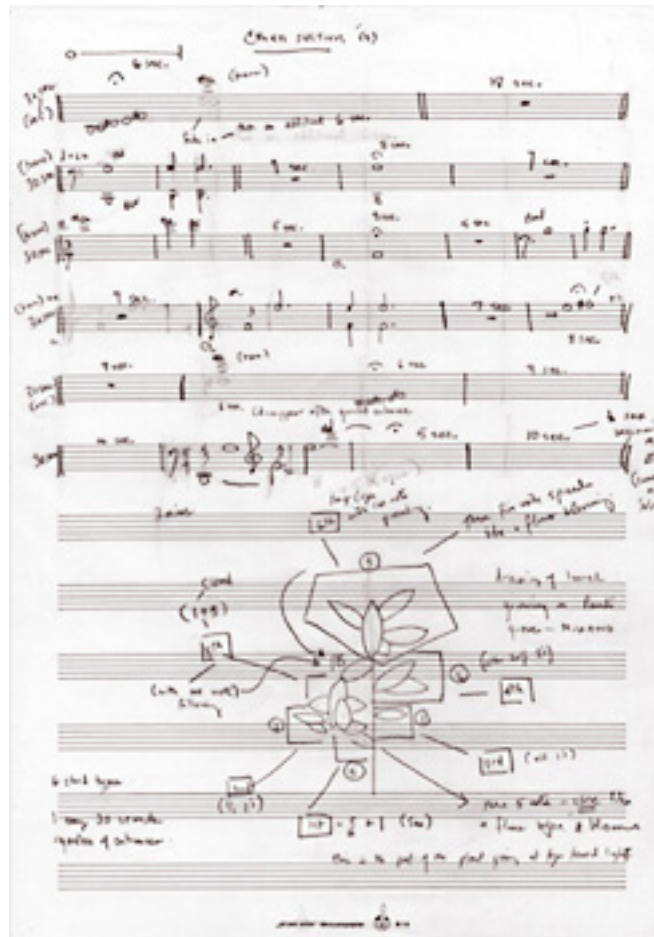
"The very last note of the piece is an F sharp in the soprano sax, and I didn't know it at the time, but an F sharp is exactly one-half step out of the range of that instrument. The highest note is an F natural. In a piece that's really about change rather than growth, how appropriate for that last note to be something that only a human being can do. The instrument isn't capable of producing that note naturally, but the musician can push that note. There's this sense of struggle in that, and the sense of possible failure, which is really a big part of this poem of Ezra Pound. So when the musician goes to hit that last note, it's like being human," Shultis says passionately. "We're good at that. And it's OK to fail. This is aiming at saying something about the human condition. That's what is different between a plant and that note. Because a plant is just going to do what it does, but that note tries to do something other than what nature says we can do."

The middle of the piece came last. Shultis visited Lama, New Mexico, near Taos, where the Hondo wildfire destroyed the village and many acres of trees in 1996. "When I walked in, I found burnt, dead, tall trees in the midst of new growth-the antithesis of that tall bush I saw five years before in the graveyard. Instead of a tall living thing growing among the dead, I saw tall dead things standing in a field of newborn plant life. As soon as I felt the reality of that, I wrote as fast as I could; the music came to me immediately."

Now that the piece is finished, Shultis spends much of his time listening to music and playing the piano. And this year, he became the first faculty member in the music department to receive a Regents' Professorship, which has enabled him to purchase a new piano to assist his composing.

"My playing the piano is definitely research. A piece is going to come out of it-that's the obvious thing. But there's something about my sitting down at the piano and exploring what happens to me as an artist by being able to do that," Shultis comments. "It would be difficult to get a grant for that purpose. And yet, there's no question there are going to be great benefits for me as a scholar and an artist as a result of my sitting down at that piano."

The professorship also enables Shultis to continue a project he began last year while teaching at the University of Heidelberg, Germany, as a Senior Fulbright Scholar. He discovered similarities and differences between what Germans and Americans call New Music. In summer 2001, he



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returned to Germany to continue studying these comparisons and has taught a course on the subject titled "New Music o(de)r Neue Musik" in Fall 2001.

Of course, he'll keep composing. "I'm compelled to write music. I don't do it because I want to; I do it because I must. I think I'm lucky to be able to act on impulses that come to me and that I'm able to follow through in an environment that doesn't just allow it, but rewards it," says Shultis thoughtfully. "What I try to do as an artist is be uniquely myself. And that is innovative, because nobody else can do it but me."