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Perfecting His Music

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A day in the life

Perfecting his music

Jim Welch '08 is lanky, his slender frame bending gracefully as he directs the Linfield Concert Choir. His narrow face is intense, almost grim with concentration, occasionally breaking into a smile when one section sounds perfect.

Just five weeks before his senior composition recital, he's facing 12-hour days on campus filled with meetings, lessons, classes, tests, practices and rehearsals of the 15 pieces he's written. His recital involves some 40 students performing in the largest senior recital ever presented. It's a grueling pace, requiring stellar organization, patience and commitment.

Once he graduates, Welch intends to launch a career composing music for films and multimedia.

Welch's passion for writing music began in high school, where he first collaborated on songs for a rock band, before beginning to write on his own. He says his music is about telling a story and touching the listener.

"What I am presenting isn't virtuoso music," he says. "I write it for the listeners. I create it for expressing some kind of message or concept. It would be the perfect marriage if I could tell a story (in a film) through my music."



After an hour in the library to catch up on reading, Welch heads to the composition room in the Miller Fine Arts Center to squeeze in some practice on the French horn. In his brass class, he is learning trumpet, trombone, French horn, euphonium and tuba to help him write better compositions for the instruments. With about two weeks per instrument, finding the time to practice is a challenge.

"I should practice every day," he admits, "but this week I've only practiced once."

He meets with Jon Newton, his composition instructor, to discuss scheduling and logistics, and review his program. Newton, a professional musician, advises Welch on how to script the program for the stage manager and how to keep stage hands and musicians in sync.

Newton describes Welch's music as eclectic, touching on styles from traditional to experimental.

"This (recital) will serve him well. If he works in film, he will have a large palette of styles to draw from," Newton says. "As much as music composition requires inspiration and talent – and Jim has lots of both – it's mainly a clerical job. Jim's attention to detail and his organizational abilities are what will allow him to create a large volume of work on the deadline that is required of a contemporary composer."

Welch heads to the Vivian A. Bull Music Center to conduct the Concert Choir rehearsing his composition, "Coelastia Canimus (We Sing of Heavenly Things)." While the choir warms up, he practices conducting, arms floating gracefully above the music. He's still learning the art but is gaining confidence. He admits he sometimes still flies by the seat of his pants.

By 1:15, Welch is running slightly behind schedule. He hunkers down in the lobby to take a written test on the French horn under the eye of Professor Joan Paddock. The final portion of the test is performing several short pieces.

Jim Welch '08 practices the guitar, which he says is his strongest instrument. He takes lessons from Pamela Goldsmith, adjunct music professor and classical guitarist. Welch carried 18 credits and endured grueling days to present one of the largest senior composition recitals ever performed at Linfield.



10 a.m.: Studies in
Nicholson Library

11 a.m.: Practices the
French horn and meets
with Jon Newton,
composition instructor

12:50 p.m.: Conducts
the Concert Choir in
"Coelestia Carimus
(We Sing of
Heavenly Things)"

1:15 p.m.: Takes written
and performance
exam on the French
horn with Professor
Joan Paddock

2:15 p.m.: Meets
with technical crew
for his recital

3 p.m.: Drives to
Jo-Ann Fabrics for supplies
to build a stringraphy,
made of silk threads
attached to paper cups

4:15 p.m.: Takes
guitar lesson with
Pamela Goldsmith

5 p.m.: Prepares for
four back-to-back
rehearsals

6:15 p.m.: Rehearses
"Annie Needs the Knife,"
a jazzy, bluesy piece
about a troubled woman,
featuring four singers,
a saxophone, three
trumpets and the piano

7 p.m.: Rehearses
"G&G Calibre," a
"cool jazz" piece
accompanying a single
episode from a
series of short films

8 p.m.: Rehearses
"Nightmare - Voice
of the Fawn,"
a rock piece

9 p.m.: Rehearses
"Under the Fear of Deafening
Eyes," Welch's favorite
which he describes as "an
escapism...that should make
you feel a bit uncomfortable...."

10:20 p.m.: Leaves
music center
and heads home



Jim Welch '08 conducts "G&G Calibre," a "cool jazz" piece accompanying a single episode from a series of short films produced by filmmaker Jeff Burke. Welch's goal is to compose music for film and various forms of multimedia.

"I don't want you to compose just for the horn in your current playing range, because a professional player will have a more extended range," she tells him. "You don't have to limit what you can do, but you need an understanding for how many notes are available on an instrument."

One hour later, still running late, he races across campus to Ice Auditorium for a meeting with the lighting crew. Welch has programmed 17 light changes throughout his recital but discovers there are a number of technical challenges.

After the meeting, Welch and Jesse Hughey '10 head across town to Jo-Ann Fabrics in search of buttons to build a stringraphy, a sound installation that utilizes a multitude of "string telephones" made of silk threads attached to paper cups. They manage to squeak out some sound, but it will take some work to have it ready for the recital.

By 4:15 Welch crosses campus again for his guitar lesson with Pamela Goldsmith. With one member of their trio missing, he and Mike Fahy face a difficult rehearsal. Goldsmith promises to bring some of her music for duets to the next lesson.

By 5, Welch has only one hour before a marathon of four back-to-back rehearsals begins. He runs through a piano piece he will need to perform and works on music and lyrics. He's not worried about getting the compositions finished. His biggest challenge is depending on his fellow student musicians.

"What worries me is getting musicians to show up on time or at all, and making sure they are prepared," he says. "It's a challenge to walk that fine line of being appreciative of their help, yet being firm with them about sticking to their commitment."

He spends four hours running through four very different pieces ranging from the jazzy "Annie Needs the Knife," to "Nightmare – Voice of the Fawn," which he calls a "throwback to my former life as a rock musician."

Sometimes rehearsals are a cacophony of sound as if everyone is playing something different. There's a tense moment when Welch realizes he's missing the bass music for one piece, but he fires up the laptop and sets it in front of the bass player.

For "Annie Needs the Knife," he has the trumpet players grab the plungers for a gravelly "waa waa" sound. In "G&G Calibre," he tries to cue a film, while simultaneously cueing the musicians and conducting. Finally, a volunteer steps in to help with the film, freeing him to conduct.

In another piece he plays guitar and sings. He stops the rehearsal and starts it again, sometimes playing the same section over and over until he is satisfied. Even when he is blocked by the singers, he is undaunted and he leaps in the air to cue the brass players. He patiently answers questions, explains his compositions, helps a singer with her cue and smiles encouragement.

Through it all, Welch remains calm and alternates between laughter and quiet intensity.

Eventually in each rehearsal it starts to come together and the music begins to flow.

At 10:10 p.m. the final rehearsal ends. Looking tired, Welch says it is adrenaline that keeps him going throughout the day. By 10:20, he heads out the door on a cold April night that will bring an unusual covering of snow to the valley floor by morning. Once home, he may grab some dinner, having missed all meals since breakfast, and collapse. He has 35 days before his recital.



Top, Jim Welch '08 practices the French horn, one of five instruments he was learning in a semester-long brass class. Bottom, he conducts the concert choir performing his piece "Coelastia Canimus (We Sing of Heavenly Things)."

Editor's note: On May 24, Jim Welch presented his senior recital in Ice Auditorium to an audience of students, faculty, friends, family and local residents. He is currently in negotiations with filmmaker Jeff Burke, who created G&G Calibre, to write scores for a full series of short films.

- Mardi Mileham