

Jan Bach looks at his fingers a lot. These are elegant working hands, strong and precious, able to strike or caress keys, to operate valves and drive pencils across clean white music staves. In conversation he doesn't use his hands to gesticulate or punctuate. He examines his fingertips minutely to clarify his thoughts, as though words might lurking there, ready to be snatched up and presented to the listener to explain what must be, really, unexplainable: the creation of music.

Music has been at the core of Jan Bach's life from the beginning. He was born December 11, 1937 (sharing a birthday with French composer Hector Berlioz). Growing up in the central Illinois town of Forrest south of Pontiac, he began his musical studies on the violin at the age of four and added the piano two years after that. His mother Anne encouraged him to practice piano "so he could have fun at parties" like the ones of her youth near Memphis. His father, J. N., a more pragmatic and practical sort, didn't discourage Jan's practice but assumed he eventually would take over the family lumberyard and hardware store. By the age of seven he began composing his own piano pieces, because, as he said, "I thought I could improve on what the teacher was giving me to play." Perhaps then it is no surprise that he has devoted his years to the composition, playing and teaching of music, finding in those activities a way to make a living and a way to satisfy his soul at the same time.

Forrest wasn't exactly a hot spot for musicians. Most people from the northern part of the state, if they knew the town at all, knew it because in the days before fast food empires it used to be the last town where you could stop for a bite to eat on the way to a University of Illinois football game or the annual high school basketball state tournament. "On Saturdays in the fall when I was growing up," Jan said, "you couldn't even cross the town's main street – Route 47 -- because of the university-bound traffic."

But Jan Bach managed to surround himself with music nonetheless. "Very possibly the greatest thrill in my entire life I had when I was sixteen years old," he said. As a student at Forrest - Strawn Wing High School (now Prairie Central High School) he played with every musical group there was, but took special pleasure in a five-piece German band of his friends that found little gigs such as PTA meetings where they could display their talent. "In 1954 I arranged a setting of 'Jingle Bells' for the group and I can't describe my excitement at hearing that band play my arrangement. It was the most wonderful thing. I absolutely wanted to make that happen over and over in my life."



He wanted to hear his music played, and he would get that wish, but first he had some dues to pay. For instance there was education. He headed to the University of Illinois and immersed himself in composition. He was required to work for a year and a half in the serial discipline, meaning composition following strict, almost mathematical, rules about the order of notes. He flourished. "As a sophomore," he told the *Chicago Reader* in an interview, "a trio I wrote won the BMI [Student Composer's] competition. I got a weekend in New York and got \$1,000 which was a huge amount of money in 1957. There was a luncheon in my honor and I came away with quite a swelled head." He graduated from the University of Illinois in 1959 with a Bachelor of Music degree in Composition and an M. M. Composition degree two years later.

Then, for another instance of dues to pay, there was war. With the Viet Nam war just gearing up and his draft status changed to 1-A when the Berlin Wall went up, Jan decided, upon the advice of a recruiting officer in the area, to interrupt his studies for the doctorate by trying out for the U.S. Army Band in Washington, D. C. Jan and some friends piled into a car and headed east during Easter break, with the warmest good wishes of the recruiting officer who stood to get a \$500 bonus. The Army had notoriously high standards for its bands, but Jan auditioned successfully on French horn and shortly began the strangely footloose but disciplined life of a military music maker. "We never knew where we were going next," Jan said. "It was just rehearse and play, rehearse and play." In late 1963 Jan found himself standing with the band outside St. Matthew's Church in Washington, trying to play in weather so miserably cold the instruments could barely function. The occasion was John F. Kennedy's funeral, and Jan had a front-row view of some of the most memorable moments in American history, including John-John's childish salute to his father.

While serving in the band, stationed in Fort Myer in Arlington, Virginia, Jan managed to also play in the Richmond and Roanoke Symphonies, as well as teach horn and piano and accompany a class of opera singers. It was also a time for him to rub shoulders daily with talented musical teammates. Like 2002 Hall of Fame inductee Robert Olah, who played in Army bands during the 1940s, Jan learned about other instruments through this constant exposure. It was to affect his music permanently. He returned to a more tonal approach when composing, respecting the peculiarities and particularities of each musical instrument.

He was discharged from the Army in 1965 and returned to the University of Illinois where he resumed his work on a doctorate in music. His dissertation was the analysis of a complete Benjamin Britten opera. His years of education both before and after his Army service were enhanced with many music prizes and awards, and he studied with such great composers as Roberto Gerhard, Aaron Copland, Kenneth Gaburo, Robert Kelly and Thea Musgrave.



Following the completion of his doctorate, for just a year he taught at the University of Tampa in Florida and played with the Tampa Philharmonic before joining the Northern Illinois University faculty in DeKalb, Illinois, as a tenure-track instructor in the School of Music.

"Teaching French horn was my bread and butter for the first five or six years," Jan shared, "but eventually the composition and theory teaching became a larger part of my work." He also played first chair French horn with the Rockford Symphony. Teaching also introduced him

to Dalia Zakaras, an orchestration student of his. They were married in 1971, the same year he received his doctorate. Today their family is made up of two daughters, Dawn, an actor in Chicago, and Eva, a teacher of English in Japan, and two well-loved cats. Dalia, a mezzo-soprano, recently retired from teaching music at the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy in Aurora, but continued to teach private voice lessons at her home studio and the in the Elgin-Bartlett area.

Jan became a successful teacher, demanding but well-liked, and to this day, despite a long list of honors and awards, his favorite recognition is the Excellence in Undergraduate Education award he received from Northern Illinois in 1978. "Because it was an award given on the basis of student recommendations," Jan explained, "it really means a lot to me." He was also named, in 1983, one of the first eight Presidential Research Professors, sharing that honor with other NIU faculty members

who also had received wide recognition outside the university in such fields as printmaking, chemistry, physics, psychology, history, and cancer research.

Education today, in Jan's opinion, has abandoned the universals, like classical music and the other arts, in favor of the specifics. These specifics are meant to prepare the student for the future, but because of the fast pace of change in every field, they do not. Young people receiving educations today, he implies, are being shortchanged.

Nonetheless, some of his students have achieved professional recognition as composers themselves, with perhaps the most successful being Dr. Shih-Hui Chen, now a professor of composition at the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University. She is a winner of the ultra-prestigious Prix de Rome as well as many other awards and is an often-performed composer.

Bach has written music for every conceivable instrument and his compositions are highly varied. They range in style from light and/or downright humorous (*Steelpan Concerto*, Music for a Low-Budget Epic) to opera (*The System*, produced in 1994 by the Mannes College of Music in New York City, and *The Student from Salamanca*, first produced by Beverly Sills and the New York City Opera in 1980) to unique (*Woodwork* for wooden percussion instruments only, *Fanfare* and *Fugue* for five trumpets), through standard chamber music ensembles (string quartet, woodwind quintet, brass quintet) to full-fledged orchestral works (including eight solo concertos).

*Eisteddfod*, variations on an old Welsh folk tune for flute, viola and harp, was Jan's first big success in 1972, eliciting comments like Alan Artner's for the *Chicago Tribune*: "A splendid conception" and Robert Sherman's for the *New York Times*: "A fascinating set of variations." The work has been recorded commercially three times, and had an international success at England's Aldeburgh Festival (founded by Benjamin Britten).

**The French Horn** from *People of Note*  
(BBS Edition)  
Poem by LAURENCE MCKINNEY Music by JAN BACH  
With Gentle Motion (♩ = c. 56)

The image shows a musical score for 'The French Horn' from 'People of Note'. It is a vocal and horn piece. The lyrics are: 'Let us live like night owls in the light of dawn. Let us live like night owls in the light of dawn.' The score is in 3/4 time and features a horn part with a 'mf' dynamic marking.

Some of Jan's personal favorites were commissioned for very specific purposes. *Dear God*, a vocal work for children's chorus was written as a memorial to a former student, Janel Bray Woodruff, the founder of the Community Choral Arts Club Children's Choir of Palos Park, Illinois. "I remember asking myself 'How in the world am I going to write a work about death for little children?' Jan said. "And then my eye just happened to fall on my bookshelf and a copy of *Children's Letters to God* by Eric Marshall and Stuart Hample. "Inspiration! There was the authentic voice of children." Another favorite is *Anachronisms*, his second string quartet, which was commissioned and broadcast by Chicago radio station WFMT-FM and the Vermeer String Quartet in 1991. The venerable Robert C. Marsh of the *Chicago Sun-Times* said at the time, "Bach has the gift of being thoroughly contemporary and relevant and still being thoroughly accessible."

Over the years, six of his compositions have been nominated by their performers or commissioners for the Pulitzer Prize. Over thirty works have been published, and twenty have been commercially recorded.

Retired since 2002, Jan continues to compose at his home studio which is replete with three keyboards (there are two pianos elsewhere in the house), a drafting table and copier, as well as

filled-up bookshelves and cabinets neatly but completely packed with things entirely too precious to give up, like his collection of five thousand tapes of old radio programs.

The experience of composing is still pretty traditional for Jan, even though he is a technically savvy university professor. “After all these years,” he wrote, “I still find a pencil and a piece of music paper the best way to write.... Like Stravinsky, I like to write while at a keyboard instrument....” For Jan that instrument is his Wurlitzer electric piano which sounds not at all like a piano or anything else, really, but helps him to hear the orchestral sounds that abound in his imagination.



The computer has a role in composing, though. Jan uses his computer to check transpositions and prepare works for publication. Most music publishers today, Jan observes, cannot afford to have music engraved in Europe or Korea, so composers who can turn in camera-ready copy prepared on a music-engraving program like Finale have an advantage.

Jan has no set pattern of composing. Any hour of the day or night, on deadline or not, he writes when the inspiration comes, and hopes that he will be alone in the house when it does, as complete isolation is his favorite creative state. He looks for inspiration in places like the

visual arts, poetry, and drama, leading a thoughtful observer of the Hall of Fame to want to lock Jan Bach in a room with fellow-inductee Stan Jorstad’s richly spiritual photographs of America’s sacred natural places, just to see what would come out.

All talk of inspiration aside, composing is a lot of work, and Jan commented “I’m often overwhelmed at the beginning of a project when I know I have to come up with a fifteen-minute orchestra work and realize there are months and months of work ahead of me (particularly in the preparation of the score and extraction of parts, one grunt aspect of the composing process that is never featured in the movies about great composers.) But I am helped by a statement that John Steinbeck wrote in *Travels with Charlie*, that he doesn’t begin to write a full-length novel, but to write a single sentence, which is then preceded or followed by other sentences to make a paragraph ....”

The symphony of Jan Bach’s life began with the short and tentative phrases of the seven-year-old who thought he could improve on his own piano lessons. Those phrases were followed by the passages of the adolescent composer who wowed his friends in the German band and won prestigious competitions by the handful, and those passages were enlarged upon through his long and creative career as teacher and composer. More beauty will follow, for certain, and the Fox Valley and the world will be listening.