



02/26/2004

The sound of success

By: Dan Sergeant , Special Writer

Roosevelt composer, Mark Zuckerman, was recently awarded a fellowship from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

ROOSEVELT — When it comes to his music, composer Mark Zuckerman of Roosevelt is no stranger to praise. Critics in Fanfare Magazine have hailed his works as "a brilliant filtering ... of traditional themes and motifs through modernist devices."

But on Feb. 9, Mr. Zuckerman received praise of another kind — this time in the form of a fellowship from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts (NJSCA).

Mr. Zuckerman, who lives on Farm Lane, was awarded the fellowship based on his excellence in the field of music composition. In addition to the prestige, the fellowship entails a grant. In Mr. Zuckerman's case, he is set to receive \$8,200.

The fellowship program, sponsored by the NJSCA and co-sponsored by the Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation, is designed to help develop an aspiring artist's career.

The NJSCA awards grants to a select group of New Jersey artists based on excellence. Last year, the council awarded \$274,800 in grants to fellowship winners.

An applicant pool of 303 people in five artistic disciplines was initially considered for the fellowship this year. The contestants were judged solely on the basis of artistic excellence and in the end Mr. Zuckerman and 25 others were awarded the honor. Mr. Zuckerman was one of only two New Jersey composers to win the fellowship, most of the other winners being choreographers, painters and filmmakers.

Rather than feeling like he is breaking the mold, Mr. Zuckerman instead feels grateful that his field of expertise is being given its due consideration.

"I'm glad music deserves this recognition," Mr. Zuckerman said.

In order to be considered for a fellowship, an artist must submit a sample of his or her work to be judged. Mr. Zuckerman submitted two of his musical achievements, the first being "Menagerie," a collection of French children's poems by Robert Desnos set to music. His second submission also was a series of poems set to music, this time by Emily Dickinson. Titled "Two Emily Dickinson Settings," the work included the poems "I'll Tell You How the Sun Rose" and "To Make a Prairie."

Mr. Zuckerman first became interested in composing in grade school, with his first performance at age 11. He continued to write music in high school in New York, encouraged by his music teacher Joe Grecko.

"I didn't realize the special advantage I was receiving," he said of his lessons at the time.

After high school, Mr. Zuckerman studied at Juilliard, the University of Michigan, Bard College and Princeton University, where he finally earned a doctorate in music composition. During that time, he was instructed by many prominent music teachers, including Milton Babbitt, J.K. Randall and Peter Westergaard.

Mr. Zuckerman has written numerous musical pieces in several different categories. He has composed virtuoso solo pieces, many of which have been featured on various musical tours by other artists and performed in venues from New York to Taiwan. He has written music for large ensembles and chambers, works for high school string orchestras and also has extensive experience writing for chorus. Perhaps his most well-known works are his arrangements of Yiddish poems, several of which have won him international recognition.

"(Jewish music) makes up a good portion of my catalog," Mr. Zuckerman said. "I became interested in writing it as a way of connecting with my paternal grandparents."

Mr. Zuckerman, a resident of Roosevelt since 1973, has already dedicated one of his works, a song about labor struggles, to his grandfather, a man who helped to found the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union.

Despite his experience in writing Jewish songs, Mr. Zuckerman did not learn to speak Yiddish until later in his life. His knowledge of the language comes from his studies at various institutions, including Columbia University, the Workmen's Circle in New York and at the National Yiddish Book Center in Massachusetts.

"It speaks in a way that is unique," Mr. Zuckerman said of his fascination with the language.

Mr. Zuckerman is working on a suite for a wind ensemble, which he hopes will be picked up by the Rutgers University Wind Ensemble. In addition, he is working on a long-term opera project with poet and neighbor David Herrstrom.

In the meantime, Mr. Zuckerman simply wants to do what he loves — compose music. His hope is that the award will allow him to do more work on commission, as well as buy some time for composing.

"I'm hoping the fellowship will attract people's attention," he said.