

Denali Park Wilderness Inspires Composers

Music reflects time spent interacting with nature during summer program

By Kris Capps

Composer Stephen Lias describes the Composing in the Wilderness class through the Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival as “Iron Chef” for composers—but nobody gets voted off the show.

“Composers have an adventure experience, then they have to write about it,” says Stephen, who has a repertoire of his own music inspired by residencies in national parks around the country.

For the Denali program, participants fly to Alaska from around the world. They spend several days in the wilds of Denali National Park, hiking with researchers and scientists. Then they fly to Coal Creek in Yukon Charley River National Preserve, where they have a few days to compose their pieces on the spot.

Participants fly back to Fairbanks and hand over their scores to professional musicians, who have a few days to practice the new music before premiering the pieces at a concert.

There is no other program like this in the world, says Stephen. It is a special collaboration among the Festival, National Park Service and Alaska Geographic.

For the first time, at the Sounds of Nature concert, those new compositions debuted at Denali National Park’s Visitor Center in front of an audience of about 100



Above, a lone composer gathers inspiration from the Alaska Range.

Photo by Stephen Lias

Right, each composer displayed a photo as their piece was performed for the audience.

Photo courtesy of Claire Abendroth/Denali National Park



people.

“I like the word ‘wild,’” says Stephen. “Alaska is a wild place, so the music is wild. What they write is unpredictable and sometimes a little scary. Sometimes it’s funny and surprising, in all the ways that Alaska is.”

This year, for the first time, each composer selected an image displayed during the performance of their piece. That added an extra challenge, Stephen says. But it also helped the audience see the

inner workings of how composers turn experience into music.

Each of the nine composers focused on a different aspect of the wilderness.

David John Lang, of Australia, was drawn to the Teklanika River, especially

after spending time with park soundscape expert Davyd Betchkal.

“He asked us to really listen closely to the river,” says David. “We could always hear it, even when we were sleeping or brushing our teeth. It was always there.”



Denali Artist-in-Residence Program

Since 2002, dozens of artists, writers and composers have participated in Denali National Park's artist-in-residence program. Selected artists spend 10 days in the park, then provide either a public outreach activity or presentation, and donate one piece to the park. The challenge to artists is to create artwork and activities for visitors that offer a fresh and innovative perspective of the park, drawn from their own experience.

See www.nps.gov/dena/learn/historyculture/composition.htm.

Above, Denali National Park soundscape expert Davyd Betchkal, far left, spends time sharing his sound expertise with composers.

Left, Alan Chan, 2016 composer-in-residence for Denali National Park spends time with the composers at their remote camp talking about his experiences at Denali.

Photos by Stephen Lias

Composer Alondra Vega-Zaldiver focused on the mid-night sun.

"I never expected such amazing beauty," she says. "Even at the darkest hour, 2:30 a.m., it filled me with happiness and energy."

Composer Elizabeth Start used the braided river as the basis of her composition, with each braid becoming a different melodic line. All the braids/lines then joined together in a torrent of sound.

Her piece included a recording of rain drumming on the roof of her cabin.

A composition called "Refugium," by Paul Safer, portrayed connections in the natural world.

"In a beautiful meadow, I stumbled upon a little patch of monkshood and arnica," he says. "Poisonous and healing. The two were intertwined in the same spot. It was a metaphor for co-existing together in the world."

Shelley Washington incorporated a vocal component by the musicians to represent the telling of stories in her powerful composition.

She says the researchers she met were amazing storytellers.

"My favorite part is that everything you learn becomes a part of you," Shelley says.

Stephen expected the concert to be evocative. A second concert followed in Fairbanks the next night.

This year, there was a hint at what is to come in 2017.

Alan Chan, the 2016 composer in residence, gave a sneak peek of what he may create musically after

spending 10 days in the wilderness of Denali.

"To me, this place is very energetic," says Alan. "I want to capture that energy in this new piece."

He runs the Alan Chan Jazz Orchestra in Los Angeles, so the grandeur of Denali may be told, for the first time, through the sounds of big band and jazz.

The piece will premiere in 2017 on the 100th anniversary of Denali National Park. ■