

# A Musical MIND

BY CARL SCHROEDER '05

PHOTOGRAPHED BY BILL KELLEY

FOR ST. OLAF BAND CONDUCTOR TIMOTHY MAHR '78, a musical performance begins long before its first downbeat.

“You have this glimmer of what can be,” says Mahr, describing the woodwind, brass and percussion sounds he will later guide from the podium, as well as the creative spark that inspires him to write music. That “ideal version you’re chasing in your head” is at the core of his work as a conductor and composer.

Since he took the helm of the college’s oldest performing ensemble in 1994, Mahr has led the St. Olaf Band in acclaimed performances throughout the United States as well as on tours to Norway, England, Ireland and Mexico. He has bolstered the ensemble’s reputation as a champion of contemporary music and earned international accolades for several of the band’s CD recordings. Concurrently, he has become known as one of America’s leading composers of concert band music — all while raising two daughters with his wife, Jill, who also teaches music and conducts the handbell choir at St. Olaf.

“Tim is a truly gifted composer-conductor and a highly valued colleague in the wind band profession,” says Mark Camphouse, a professor of music at George Mason University and editor of the multi-volume anthology *Composers on Composing for Band*, to which Mahr was a contributor in 2002.

Born in 1956, Mahr spent most of his childhood in La Crosse, Wisconsin, where he took piano lessons from his mother, Jeneane, and in second grade inherited his uncle’s trombone. In high school he seized several conducting opportunities and began to write and arrange tunes for a church brass ensemble and other groups.

Halfway through high school, a turning point occurred when Mahr attended a summer performance of the Symphony School of America in La Crosse and left awestruck after hearing a performance of Ottorino Respighi’s *Pines of Rome*. “It was an incredible, visceral experience,” Mahr says — one that inspired him to take up music as a profession.

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TIMOTHY MAHR '78



“My life is full of blessings,” says St. Olaf Band Conductor Timothy Mahr '78, who names a lifelong love of music, the support of mentors and faith as foundations of his success.

FINDS HARMONY IN A LIFE OF CONDUCTING AND COMPOSING.



In 1974, Mahr enrolled at St. Olaf and spent three of the next four years playing trombone in the St. Olaf Band. Conductor Miles “Mity” Johnson, whom Mahr calls his “musical father,” was then in the midst of his 37-year tenure. From Johnson, Mahr “discovered the beauty in the band sound, whereas before I found primarily excitement.”

Mahr also learned valuable lessons from his trombone and composition professors, Derald DeYoung and Arthur Campbell, and has fond memories of friendships that balanced the long days of studies and rehearsals. In 1977 he earned a bachelor of music degree in music theory/composition, and the following year he completed a bachelor of arts in music education.

For the next 16 years Mahr juggled conducting jobs and graduate music studies. He spent three years heading the Milaca High School band program in central Minnesota, a decade as director of bands at the University of Minnesota–Duluth and several years pursuing master’s and doctorate degrees at the University of Iowa.

Amid studying and conducting, Mahr continued to compose. His concert band music, characterized by introspective interludes, frequently shifting rhythms and colorful employment of piano and the human voice, began to gain a national following. His growing professional prestige was recognized in 1991 with the American Band Association’s highest composition honor, the Ostwald Award, for his work *The Soaring Hawk*.

Through the years, Mahr maintained strong ties with the St. Olaf Band and his mentor, Mity Johnson, who frequently invited him to the college as a guest conductor. The band premiered Mahr’s first two published pieces in the early 1980s, and in the following decade he wrote three commissioned works for the ensemble, including the multi-movement *Festivals*, which honored the St. Olaf Band’s 1991 centennial anniversary. As Johnson neared retirement, he appeared to be grooming his former student as a successor.

Mahr’s appointment in September 1994 as conductor of the St. Olaf Band was the start of a new era accompanied by an air of familiarity. “I’d been in front of that band enough that I did feel at home,” he says. “My hope at the onset was to make sure I could maintain what Mity had well in place.”

Mahr incorporated many of his mentor’s hallmarks into his operation of the band, including Johnson’s system of inter-

nal student leadership, regular guest-conducting invitations to alumni and an annual Cathedral Concert. He remained in close contact with his predecessor until Johnson passed away in 2004 after a six-year battle with Alzheimer’s disease.

Under Mahr’s leadership, the ensemble also has explored more contemporary music. His programs often include pieces by current composers such as David Maslanka, Philip Sparke and Eric Whitacre. With support from the Miles Johnson Endowment Fund, Mahr has commissioned and premiered works from three of Minnesota’s best-known composers — Libby Larsen, Stephen Paulus and Mary Ellen Childs — and from Jocelyn Hagen ’03, Assistant Professor of Music Justin Merritt and former St. Olaf Professor of Music Peter Hamlin.

As a composer himself, Mahr has fulfilled several of his most high-profile commissions during his St. Olaf tenure, writing music for organizations such as the American School Band Directors Association and the United States Air Force Band. He regularly travels nationally and internationally as a guest conductor, and the waiting list of ensembles contracting him to write new works routinely approaches double

digits. “I look to the future with a bit of trepidation,” he says, “and I just have to have faith that there’s still going to be some music left in me.”

Mahr also teaches composition, conducting and music education at St. Olaf. His former students, now numbering more than a thousand, include success stories like Jayce Ogren ’01, assistant conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra, and Travis Cross ’99, a published composer and doctoral conducting student at Northwestern University. “Tim’s eagerness to support and promote his students has resulted in important growth opportunities we would not otherwise have experienced,” Cross says.

Although Mahr’s complementary professions require months of preparation for brief moments of harmony, he says that his work as a composer-conductor brings ample rewards in performance. “When the music finally comes out and you feel good about it, it’s a tremendously gratifying experience,” he says. “Nothing beats being on that podium and making fine music happen, especially if it’s your own.” 🐉

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