

# The diary of a composer

Don Appert keeps journal of hours spent on piece

By **BRETT OPPEGAARD**  
for *The Columbian*

**T**he question inadvertently stung. Members of the Ashiya Chamber Orchestra had gathered for dinner in Nara City, Japan, around Don Appert, praising the composer's work, eager to play more of it. One of them simply asked what Appert had been writing lately.

To honestly answer that question, to the group of musicians supportive of his career like no other, Appert had to reply: "Not much."

This uncomfortable moment in January of last year served as a check on priorities — as

well as inspiration — for Appert. He serves as the music department chairman at Clark College, teaches three classes a quarter and directs the Clark College Orchestra, Oregon Sinfonietta and Camas United Methodist Church choir. The 55-year-old realized he hadn't written any new music since six years before, the last time he had worked with the Japanese orchestra.

In an effort to keep busy with better-paying gigs as a

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conductor, Appert had lost focus on one of the primary reasons he had become a musician. He knew he needed to get back in front of his piano and start writing.

On the day he was scheduled to leave Japan, he woke early and began frantically

scratching ideas on a little pad of paper he found in the hotel room. Melodies and layering combinations were swirling in his mind, inspired by a Japanese ritual called "Three-Beat Song," used to mark the beginning or the end of an event, such as that motivational dinner with the orchestra. It's a rhythm repeated five times, followed by a loud "Oh!"

Appert spent dozens of hours on the composition, "Nara Variations," over several months. It would become the longest work of his career.

At *The Columbian's* request, he kept a journal of that process, which culminated in a world premiere of the piece by the Ashiya Chamber Orchestra in Kobe, Japan, on Dec. 28, 2007. About 400 people attended the free concert, filling the Hyogo Performing Arts Center theater to capacity. The American premiere will be part of the free Clark College Orchestra concert June 15 at Vancouver School of Arts and Academics.

**H**ere are excerpts from Appert's journal, written in 2007, edited for clarity and context:

## Bombarded with ideas

**Jan. 16:** "At 7 a.m., in my hotel room in Nara City, I was unable to sleep. On Sunday, after the concert, the orchestra members had asked 'was I composing now?' My reply was, 'There never seemed to be the time.' Perhaps it triggered something in my creative side, because that morning I was bombarded with musical ideas."

**Jan. 17:** "We had a snow day, so there were no classes at the college. ... So I had the piano all to myself. I spent eight hours composing! The six pages of notes (from the hotel pad) generated about 60 measures of actual music. One of the melodies I dubbed 'The Nara Walking Song,' inspired by a full day of sight-seeing in Nara City. About six hours of walking! To my great excitement, I then discovered that my sketches for an abandoned string quartet work perfectly with what I had already composed. Suddenly, I had over 100 measures of music."

## Making small ideas grow

**Jan. 23:** "I'm old-fashioned in that my tools are pencil, paper, ruler and a grand piano. Or any piano will work. The challenge is to make my small ideas

## If you go

■ **What:** Clark College Orchestra presents its spring concert, featuring the American premiere of Don Appert's "Nara Variations," plus Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3 in d minor, Op. 30, and Maurice Ravel's "La Valse."

■ **When:** 7:30 p.m. June 15.

■ **Where:** Royal Durst Theatre inside Vancouver School of Arts and Academics, 3101 Main St., Vancouver.

■ **Cost:** Free.

■ **Information:** 360-992-2662 or [www.clark.edu](http://www.clark.edu).



Photos by STEVEN LANE/The Columbian photo illustration

Beyond teaching music at Clark College in Vancouver, Don Appert also is a composer and a conductor who has led orchestras throughout the world, including gigs in such places as Australia, Turkey, Italy, Russia and Portugal.

APPERT, Page D7



# Appert:

From Page D1

grow into longer ones. ... Composing can be terribly spontaneous. Today I had another (idea) while giving a ... quiz to my students. I was able to write another four measures of music, which will generate more when I can find the time."

**Feb. 3:** "Composing is rather like seeing a distant relative. It always takes a bit of time at the start to reacquaint yourself. On the one hand, I need to look back for material that I might reuse with some variation. New music must also flow from the music already there. So it's always a question of integration. I must avoid recycling merely meant to make it longer, yet there are recurring ideas. I take heart in hearing similarities in many composers. A major concern of mine is to be aware of how difficult it might be to play. I work mostly with amateur musicians, and the piece I write needs to be performable by those folks."

## Knowing when to stop

**Feb. 10:** "Last night, I worked 80 minutes to produce a rousing seven measures of music. However, something must have jump-started my creative juices because as I was waking up at 7:30 this morning, I began hearing music. I am in bed for about 30 to 40 minutes half-asleep working out my next musical ideas. Sadly, duty calls, and I must leave the muse in order to perform with the Pep Band."

**Feb. 24:** "I don't have the piece all sketched out or mapped out. I let it go where it will. As I approach the 300 measure mark, this may become my longest work to date. I've never cut anything after I composed it. Once it's on the paper, that's where it stays. Also, I usually know when a piece is complete, and this one hasn't reached the point where I've said everything. Perhaps not having composed anything for five or six years has produced a kind of musical backlog. I must be careful about wandering aimlessly."

## Heeding advice

**March 17:** "A new idea woke me up early on a Saturday morning. Composing in this manner feels a bit like being a thief. You have to steal the moments from other responsibilities. ... A composer writes music



Files/The Columbian

**Clark College music professor Don Appert conducts closer to home as well. Here, he conducts the Clark College Symphony at the Royal Durst Theater in 2006.**

because they have an inner need to do so. Being rather a pragmatist, the possibility of a group interested in performing my music has always been a fair source of inspiration."

**April 15:** "Today I complete my untitled string! It's almost exactly four months since I began this piece in a hotel room in Nara City. I don't know if I tire of the piece, given it's the longest of my career at 454 measures, or perhaps I'm heeding the advice of my good friend Julius Klein, director of the Slovak State Orchestra. He said, 'Don't make it too long!' I need to get it to my publisher by June so he can have the score and parts ready for the Ashiya Chamber Orchestra."

## Appert's post-mortem

"I'm very excited about the piece. The more I rehearse it, the more pleased I am. I really think it's my best to date. So I think it's going to be one the audience is going to respond very well to and enjoy. But at the same time, it's a bit scary."

"You put yourself out on a limb when you share personal expressions of musical ideas. This is a very personal expression of my ideas. An American audience doesn't have any background on what Nara City is."

"I didn't try to consciously make this a Japanese piece, but it's very Japanese. It's not so much that this piece is my picture of Japan, or Nara City even. It's more in response to this impetus of being there. More of an impression, my reaction."

"This is really, I think, a response to this wonderful orchestra saying, 'Do you have anything else for us to play?' From me, saying, 'No, I don't.' And then, suddenly, I did."