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Life

Creating 'Sun Dogs'

By Liz Kohmanlkohman@stcloudtimes.com

Story Chat

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Composer David Wolff was driving to Duluth when he saw a sun dog for the first time.

The colorful, luminous lights sparkling on either side of the sun captivated Wolff for a few minutes.

"It was a spectacularly phenomenal view," said Wolff, who lives in St. Paul and is the director of the Minnesota chapter of the American Composers Forum. "It was just an amazing thing to see."

And then he drove around the bend, and the sun dog was gone. He looked up 'sun dog' on the Internet and found plenty of scientific explanations — a sun dog, also called parhelion, is an optical illusion created by sunlight passing through ice crystals — but he couldn't find anything that described his experience.

"It wasn't something you could describe using words," he said.

He ended up using music.

Wolff's composition, "Sun Dogs" will be performed for the first time this week during the orchestra's Classics for Kids concerts and next Sunday at the symphony's concert. The St. Cloud Symphony Orchestra commissioned Wolff to create the piece with money donated by Roger and Verna Rohlck of Rice.

"We wanted in some way to leave our mark in the art world and music world," said Roger Rohlck, who is a member of the symphony's board of directors.

Waiting for a song

Besides the couple's love of music, the piece also spoke to Roger Rohlck because it reminded him of growing up in southwestern Minnesota.

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Times photo by Dave Schwarz, dschwarz@stcloudtimes.com
Composer David Wolff holds a copy of his composition "Sun Dogs." The piece will be performed by the St. Cloud Symphony Orchestra.



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Every morning Roger Rohlck would wake up early and trail his father out to the barn to start the morning chores. His dad often whistled as they made the trip, but on some days Roger Rohlck's father would stop whistling.

Those were the mornings of the sun dogs, and chores always took longer because father and son took the time to watch the progress of the sun dog as it rose into the sky, Roger Rohlck said.

"The sun would appear as though you were viewing it through frosted glass, a fuzzy pale yellow ball flanked on either side by brighter yellow-orange crescents," Roger Rohlck wrote in a dedication for the piece. "It was a truly awesome sight giving the cold morning a beauty which mere words failed to describe."

As to whether the song "Sun Dogs" is as beautiful as the natural phenomena, the Rohlcks can't say for sure, but they have every confidence in the piece and the composer.

The couple is waiting to hear "Sun Dogs" for the first time when it is performed for local students Friday.

World premiere

As a general rule, the orchestra's conductor and music director William Schrickel likes to skip the world premieres and jump into second performances of new works.

"It's much safer to find the best piece last year and play it," he said. Buying the rights to perform music is much cheaper than paying to have it written, and there are no surprises as to what the piece sounds like.

That said, Schrickel, who programs at least one new piece for every concert, said commissioning this piece was a part of the orchestra's obligation.

"It's part of our mission to help foster the creation of new art and new music," Schrickel said. The symphony's executive director gets two to three cold submissions a month from composers looking for an

orchestra to perform their music.

"It's a risk, but it's an obligation," Schrickel said. "For every masterpiece, somebody had to say 'write a new piece of music.'"

The orchestra considered several composers before deciding to commission Wolff.

After selecting Wolff, Schrickel met with him to discuss the length of the piece and instruments and players the symphony had access to. When Wolff finished writing the piece, he and Schrickel met and discussed how it should be performed.

Wolff also attends some rehearsals and gives feedback.

"This is where it's great to have a composer around," Schrickel said. Instead of guessing which instruments should be emphasized or when to speed up or slow down, Schrickel can turn around and ask the composer.

Living composer

When the orchestra started looking for composers to commission, it was important to find someone who would be able to visit schools to talk about the piece.

"We wanted the kids to meet a real live composer," said Sandy Nadeau, executive director of the symphony. "Kids need to know there are composers who are still alive and composing."

In addition to visiting area schools, Wolff also spoke at workshops for educators, describing the piece and his process for writing.

If you go ...


What: St. Cloud Symphony Orchestra concert, featuring the world premiere of David Wolff's "Sun Dogs."

When: 3 p.m. May 1.

Where: Ritsche Auditorium, St. Cloud State University.

Tickets: \$20 for adults, \$15 for senior citizens and \$7 for students. Tickets are available at Al's Music, Schmitt Music, the Paramount Theatre box office or by calling 259-5463.

Information: www.stcloudsymphony.com.

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