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## **Bringing Music to Life**

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# Bringing music to life



**M**ost days, Beth Kumbalek '05 has a song running through her head.

But rather than letting the tune slip away, Kumbalek is more likely to jot down the notes and turn them into a musical composition.

"I'll be walking down the street humming something and think, 'Oh, that would be a really cool piece.' And I work from that," she said.

As a composition major, Kumbalek's creativity and spirited sense of humor have shown up in a number of Linfield projects this spring. She created an hour of music for her senior recital, a score for a student film and a piece for the Linfield dance ensemble.

"It's incredible to hear pieces I've written performed by students here," she said. "The sounds seem to come alive and swell up around you. The reality of the performance makes it amazing."

Kumbalek composed 10 pieces of music for her senior recital, which seven student ensembles performed in May. Not only did Kumbalek write all the music, but weeks before the performance she enlisted performers, scheduled rehearsals, coordinated equipment and arranged stage management for the evening.

"It's a huge, huge undertaking," said Richard Bourassa, professor of music. "It requires the best care and organization."

After a January Term trip to Ireland this year, Kumbalek wrote a piece for voice, cello and percussion to accompany a short film about the country created by Niki Hunter '05. Kumbalek used thoughtful music to capture the character of Ireland. She then collaborated with choreographer Heather Williams '06, writing music for percussion, cello, violin and viola, which four members of the Linfield Dance Ensemble performed. This student collaboration has been important to Kumbalek.

"It's such an exciting experience to work with students in different artistic areas, such as dance or film," she said. "Collaborating with different departments helps in the growth process of my own music."

Kumbalek, who plays French horn, piano and guitar, began composition lessons with Bourassa as a junior. Her talent as a horn player makes her a successful composer, Bourassa said.

"It takes a strong performer to be a strong composer," he said. "You have to know the boundaries of instruments and musicians and she has a good sense of



Beth Kumbalek '05 enjoys composing music at a piano when possible, but she is likely to be found writing just about anywhere. She said she "just knows" when a piece is finished.

that."

Bourassa works with an average of five composition majors each year and said student collaboration across the curriculum is common thanks to Linfield's small class sizes.

"Students know what each other are doing," he said. "They have conversations and begin to make connections with other areas, and that's where the sharing comes along. The more you know, the more you see opportunities."

For Kumbalek, who plans to pursue a career in film scoring, Linfield's supportive environment has given her ample room to explore options related to composition.

"I feel very fortunate to be at Linfield where, if I need a performer, I just ask," she said. "If I want to put music to a dance, I can. If I want to put music to a video, I can. The possibilities are endless."

— Laura Davis

Kumbalek and Richard Bourassa, professor of music, critique a computerized version of one of Kumbalek's compositions, in the Renshaw Hall Music Media Lab.



In addition to composing the music for her senior recital, Kumbalek also performed on French horn.



Kumbalek conducts students during a rehearsal of "Gardez Votre Coeur," a piece performed live for the Linfield Dance Ensemble.

## Putting the music to paper

What does it take to put music to paper and bring it to life during a performance?

When Beth Kumbalek '05 begins a composition, she first decides on a basic style for the music, then considers the speed and mood of the piece, and the musicians who will play it.

"I think about what will be fun for them to play and also enjoyable for the listener to hear," she said. "I like slow, pensive music, where you can hear the harmonies change, rather than a bunch of fast notes going by, although it is fun to write that, too."

Harmonies are added next. Sometimes Kumbalek augments a melody, extending the length from five quarter notes to five half notes. All the while, she analyzes her music mathematically.

"I focus on the rhythms, tapping my fingers on the table, going through the piece as if it were playing in my head," she said. "I'm sure people look at me and wonder, 'What is she doing?'"

Though Kumbalek prefers to write at a piano, she can compose almost anywhere – in the silence of her apartment, in a bustling coffee house or outside on the grass.

"If I'm humming a major third, I know it's a major third because I've had that training," she said. "I don't need to have a piano to write it down."

Eventually, she transfers the music to the computer and works in the music media lab, where she can hear parts played electronically by the instruments she chooses.

"It's helpful to use playback in the composition process, but hearing it live is a completely different experience."

– Laura Davis

