



Mini-Lesson: Meet the Composer of *Charm*

OVERVIEW

Students will read, discuss, and share information about the composer who created the music in order to understand the context of the music and to support their performance of *Charm*.

RESOURCES & MATERIALS

Student copies of:

- [“Meet the Composer of *Charm*”](#) article
- [“Composer Portrait”](#) worksheet

PROCESS

Decide if you wish to use the “Composer Portrait” as a group assessment or to assess individuals.

1. Divide students into small groups and direct them to read the article. They can read silently or out loud, sharing the reader’s role within their group.
2. Direct them to discuss what they’ve read and then reflect on some of the events, experiences, and details of Kevin Puts’ life that they find important. Use this information to complete the “Composer Portrait” form. Every student can complete a worksheet or one student can act as the scribe for the group.

ASSESSMENT

Use the “Composer Portrait” worksheet to assess student knowledge about the composer Kevin Puts.

MEET THE COMPOSER OF *CHARM*



Kevin Puts was born St. Louis, Missouri in 1972. At the age of seven, the Puts family got a piano from Kevin's grandma and grandpa. Kevin was excited and eager to play. He was soon making up music and playing by ear. "I started lessons, but I found that so frustrating... I was

more interested in playing music that hadn't been written yet, improvising on the keyboard." ¹

The family moved to Alma, Michigan when Puts was ten years old. His father taught math at Alma College; his mother was an English teacher. They both loved classical music and played recordings such as Beethoven Symphonies and Grofe's *Grand Canyon Suite*. Kevin loved the music. He thought it sounded very exciting. He remembers being eager at his birthday parties to have kids come to his room to hear the music. He also recalls that "They didn't like it much."

Puts played clarinet in the middle school band but the piano was his favorite instrument. His accomplishments as a pianist took him to the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, NY, where he received a Bachelor of Music degree. He continued musical studies and earned a Master's Degree from Yale University and a Doctor of Musical Arts at the Eastman School of Music. He is an outstanding pianist but was more strongly drawn to the life of a composer, not a career as a performer. Since 2005, Puts has made his living mainly as a composer.

THE BEST THINGS ABOUT BEING A COMPOSER

Students at Scarsdale Middle School asked Puts' to tell them the best things about living and working as a composer. He said that while he can't play what they can play on their instruments, he can compose music for them. He is thrilled when he hears his music comes to life. He went on to say

that he likes to write "...things that I'm not sure are possible. The first time I heard you play (*Charm*)... was so exciting. It's very different than what you hear in your head. It becomes something different. *I love that moment.*"²

THE STUDENTS ALSO ASKED HOW HE WENT ABOUT BECOMING A COMPOSER.

Puts started by working hard to become the best performer possible. He explains that the only way he could come to know and understand what performers need in the music and know what they can do is to have the same experiences. As good performers, young composers see and play many



kinds of music. This helps them to imagine and understand how music works and how it should look on the page, a good foundation for composition.

INFLUENCES, INSPIRATIONS AND SOURCE FOR IDEAS

Puts summarized some of the many influences that shaped his musical style. As a teen, he really enjoyed sci-fi movie scores ("I think that had a huge impact on me"), popular music, and rock. His *Third Symphony* was inspired by Bjork's album "Vespertine." The music on his iPod "...is all over the map." He listens to Mozart, Benjamin Britten, Rouse, Adams, Reich, and Lutoslawski. But he also

¹ "His Early Love for Music," Kevin Puts Interview, American Composers Forum, <http://composersforum.org/programs/education/kevin-puts>

² Kevin Puts video interview, American Composers Forum, <http://composersforum.org/programs/education/kevin-puts>



has Sarah McLachlan, Radiohead, and some Michael Jackson. "And I love Van Halen."³

"I am...fascinated by a wide array of styles and voices, from Mozart's to Ligeti's to Steely Dan's. But above all, I suppose it is 'beautiful' music which speaks to me most powerfully. I know 'beauty' means something different to everyone...This doesn't mean it has to be strictly tonal, and it doesn't mean it has to be slow, soft and lush. I need the music to be expertly crafted. I also love the orchestra."⁴

COMPOSITIONS

Puts has written four symphonies and several **concertos** for some of the world's top soloists. In 2005, he was **commissioned** to write a piece to celebrate conductor David Zinman's 70th birthday. The result was "Vision," a cello concerto premiered by Yo-Yo Ma and the Aspen Music Festival Orchestra. During the same year, his Percussion Concerto was premiered by Evelyn Glennie with the Pacific and Utah Symphonies.

He also created concertos for marimbist Makoto Nakura, violinist Michael Shih, clarinetist Bil Jackson, and a piano concerto commissioned by the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and premiered in 2008 by pianist and conductor Jeffrey Kahane.



ADVICE FOR STUDENTS WHO WANT TO COMPOSE

Puts advice is to "Continue learning your instrument and work to achieve the highest level of performance possible. This is how you will learn music; how it is made and how performers approach it. You can't write for the best performers unless you have been in their shoes, have experience with the dynamics of the performing environment, and met your own challenges in interpreting music.

Learn to love musical scores. And most importantly, DO NOT undervalue what you really love in music. You cannot write your best music unless you embrace it, no matter what reaction you fear from your peers, critics, and even from the audience."⁵

AWARDS & RECOGNITION

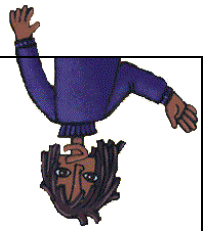
In addition to the 2012 **Pulitzer Prize** in Music, Puts has received awards and grants from the American Academy in Rome, the Guggenheim Foundation, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, BMI and ASCAP. He has served as composer-in-residence of Young Concerts Artists, the California Symphony, the Fort Worth Symphony, the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, Bravo!, the Vail Valley Music Festival, Music from Angel Fire, and the Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society.



³ "BSO to play symphony by Peabody Institute's Pulitzer winner," by Tim Smith, The Baltimore Sun, June 02, 2012

⁴ WQXR Radio Program, "All Ears," 10/16/12
www.wqxr.org/series/q2/2/

⁵ "Why Composers Should Be Good Performers," Interview with Kevin Puts, American Composers Forum,
<http://composersforum.org/programs/education/kevin-puts>



A PORTRAIT OF KEVIN PUTS

If you were going to introduce Kevin Puts to someone who knows nothing about him, what would you say to paint a short picture of his life and accomplishments? Reflect on some of the events, facts, and/or interesting details you've read about or heard from you teacher. Summarize five of them in the circles.

(You can write inside AND outside the circles.)

5. _____

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Your name(s) _____
