

The logo for UNCSA, consisting of the letters "UNCSA" in a white, serif font centered within a dark gray rectangular background.

THE ASSOCIATES

UNCSA Annual Concerto Competition

Anyone who has ever undertaken learning to play a musical instrument has at some point probably had the fantasy of being on stage with a symphony orchestra as the virtuoso soloist for a concerto. For the extraordinarily talented young musicians who are accepted into UNCSA's highly ranked School of Music, that goal is not just a fantasy, but an explicit ambition. Yet, even at that level, that goal is a long shot. In the past year over forty UNCSA music students achieved sufficient mastery of a chosen concerto that they were approved by their teacher to enter the school's Annual Concerto Competition. On Sunday, April 14th, nine – yes, nine – finalists competed for the privilege of performing a concerto with the UNCSA Orchestra in a concert next year.

Solo pieces and chamber works for one's chosen instrument generally range from diversions designed to be accessible to amateur performers to strenuously challenging works for professionals but, in both genres, the undertaking is collegial, with all participants on the same team, as it were. Since its beginnings, and especially since the early Romantic Era, the concerto has also often embodied an adversarial character, pitting the individual against the masses, the soloist against the mighty orchestra. Their respective musical materials generally reflect that contrast, and the soloist's challenge is to prevail over the hurdles, both technical and expressive, built into the medium and stand triumphant at the end. Like actors playing Macbeth and Macduff, offstage the performers are more likely respectful colleagues who wish each other the best but, in performance, their roles are cast to some degree in opposition.

While concertos and competitions are inherently adversarial, it bears noting that UNCSCA is known for its friendliness, as well as artistic excellence. By tradition going back to the school's earliest days, both the faculty and the student body are demonstratively supportive of each young artist's efforts. When this day's winner performs in actual concert next year, the whole school will be rooting for him or her. But on this day the contestants' audience in Watson Recital Hall is limited to a handful of hardcore music lovers and three distinguished Guest Jurors: Nathalie Joachim, co-Artistic Director and flutist with the Grammy-winning ensemble Eighth Blackbird, Barbara Lister-Sink, Distinguished Professor of Piano and Director of the Salem College School of Music, and Matthew Troy, Music Director and Conductor of the Piedmont Wind Symphony.

This nine-course concerto feast began with UNCSCA Music Dean Brian Cole, welcoming the audience and expressing appreciation to the judges for their participation. Cole says that the judges for this competition are not given any criteria, but just asked to choose the performance they think will best represent the school. He also reports that they are never told what year in college or high school each musician is currently in, and that when he asks them to guess, they are invariably wrong. The performances followed in quick succession, each soloist accompanied by a UNCSCA staff or faculty pianist, serving as the “orchestra.”

Serving first this day was third year college student Adithya Muralidharan, playing Dvorak's Cello Concerto with pianist Polina Khatsko. Dvorak, himself a string player, knew how to make full idiomatic use of the instrument's capabilities for this large-scale work.

While the Dvorak concerto conveys the sense of the orchestra and soloist embarking together on a heroic enterprise, Andre Jolivet's Concertino for Trumpet, dating from 1948, sounds more contentious and adversarial. This work was performed in stentorian fashion by first year masters candidate Mikeal Swanhart, with pianist Ashley Clasen.

The sunny nature of the Oboe Concerto by Richard Strauss does not betray the fact that it was composed in Germany in 1945. The composer's wife and

muse was a prominent operatic soprano, and this music sang eloquently through the instrument of first year college student Evan LaVack, performing with pianist Allison Gagnon.

Edward Elgar's Cello Concerto, composed at the conclusion of World War I is a much more brooding and somber work than the Dvorak. With pianist Nancy Johnston, second year masters student Ben Therrell gave a plangent performance on his prized reproduction of a Stradivarius cello.

Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto is one of the great bravura works for any instrument. Its pyrotechnics encourage showmanship, and Brazilian first year college student Luca Kevorkian, with pianist Nancy Johnston back on stage, appeared to relish the chance to perform for us.

Another rousing display piece, Camille Saint-Saëns' G Minor Piano Concerto, the second of five by the composer, was performed by third year college student Peter Smith, joined by his teacher, pianist Dmitry Shteinberg to serve as eighty-eight-keyed orchestra.

Alexander Arutunian's Trumpet Concerto was composed about a year after Jolivet's. Its harmonic language is tinged with modality, reflecting the composer's Armenian heritage. Second year master student Julio Jeri, who hails from Peru, performed, joined by iron woman Nancy Johnston, in her third assignment for the day.

After generous servings of late Romanticism and early modernity, Beethoven's Second Piano Concerto reminds us that his revolutionary work was rooted in classicism. Second year college student Morgan Hunkele gave us finely gauged phrasing and delicate dynamic contrasts in a performance with her teacher, Dmitry Shteinberg, again serving as orchestra.

For the final course of this potential surfeit of concerted works we were served a gratifying dessert course: the popular Concierto de Aranjuez of Joaquin Rodrigo, in Nicanor Zabaleta's composer-authorized transcription for harp. Pianist Robert Rocco collaborated with soloist Morgan Short, a second year college student.

With the conclusion of the competition Brian Cole returned to invite us to reconvene in the hall lobby and await the decision of the competition judges. This gave audience members a good opportunity to meet the day's soloists. Each was friendly, gracious, and appreciative of our interest, which is to say, a typical UNCSA student.

Peter Smith, when congratulated on his thunderously authoritative performance of Saint-Saëns' Second Piano Concerto was self effacing, saying "You just play the piece" - as if all the credit went to the composer and the music sold itself. After due deliberation the judges had a higher estimation of his accomplishment and judged him the winner of the competition. Next year he will perform this concerto with the UNCSA Orchestra.

Congratulations to each of the 2019 UNCSA Concerto Competition finalists, including this year's runners-up, oboist Evan LaVack and harpist Morgan Short.

We Have More Power Than People Know

With his silvery full beard and shoulder-length hair, broad-brimmed hat, and aura of soft-spoken authority, Julian Semilian has something of Gandalf about him, which is perhaps fitting for someone who takes tiny snippets of moving images and creates a world from them.

It began with still images - the photography bug bit Semilian as a student at the University of Minnesota. Formal photography study led to classes in dance, mime, acting, and film history. A bit of money left over from a student loan to buy a still camera led to the acquisition of a Super 8 movie camera, and a portal to the world of images in motion.

It would be difficult for a young person with a laptop computer and today's powerful movie-making software to imagine the artisanal process of that pre-digital era: shooting film footage, splicing off of the projector, recording

music on a separate device, and trying to sync the two, but struggling to overcome technical limitations focused Semilian on the ultimate goal of doing whatever it takes to tell a story effectively.

In the next scene, he got a job working for a psychology lab that was training monkeys to smoke marijuana - presumably to study its effects - and he started making films about the monkey training process. Fast forward to Hollywood, where he was taken under the wing of veteran film editor Bernard Gribble who taught him how to make the most of the material he had to work with. In a tribute written in memory of his mentor, Semilian described Gribble as “a master at fixing substandard performances.” He assisted the veteran editor on seven films. “Working with him taught me how to become a professional.” Gribble's tutelage led to Semilian's own twenty-four year career in Hollywood, editing sixteen feature films and movies-of-the-week. Segue again to Winston-Salem in 1998, and the new UNCSA School of Filmmaking, where he is credited as “a seminal developer of the school's editing department.”

It is not difficult to engage Julian Semilian in a conversation about film editing. Most moviegoers have some conception of how directors, cinematographers, and designers try to control the raw material from which movies will be made, but fewer give much thought to the person whose task is to shape those miles of footage into something coherent. Semilian says that best practice is for the director to communicate his vision to the editor, but this doesn't always happen. In fact, what the director has in mind is often at odds with what's on the film. “You discover [what the film will be] in the editing. You don't think so much about the flow to start with. You're trying to make sense of the material, and get a sense of the spirit of the film. Generally speaking, you're letting the film tell you what to do. The film, itself, has a spirit. I've always believed in grasping what the film is about, and doing your first cut interpretively.”

That first cut embodies the editor's vision for what the project can be. Consider the hundreds of camera shots that go into a film, each of which may have required several takes, as the director tries to coax actual results into alignment with his or her preconception. The permutations that could be made from that raw footage are virtually infinite. “If you had ten editors and

one film, you'd get ten different films. We have more power than people know.”

How then to avoid seeming to step on the director's toes? “Most directors will largely go along with the editor's cut, but you have to become a very good diplomat. Unless the director will call and really insist on something, I'll try to make it work the way I see it.”

In a perfect world, every component of making a film would proceed in perfect harmony, as if controlled by some sort of hive mind. In the real world, of course, results tend to range from less-than-perfect to a perfect mess. Semilian emphasizes that “the editing process provides an opportunity to fix the script problems, the acting problems.” He recalls a situation in which an actor messed up and created a continuity flaw. It was up to Semilian, as the editor, to find footage that placed the character where she needed to be. On another project “the main actor was all over the place and I had to figure out how to make a performance out of it. What I finally did, because the character, himself, was a bit crazy, I ended up using different performances so that it looked like he changed his behavior constantly.” What if the job has already been done, and it just doesn't work? “I got hired once to fix a movie that already had been edited very badly. I asked that they shoot two more scenes and some inserts [for which the screenwriter had to return to the project] - and they did.”

The School of Filmmaking at UNCSCA is the university's largest, by a substantial margin. Regardless of where in the cinematic ecosystem they may think their specific interests lie, all First Year film students take an editing course. At the end of year one each student must select two disciplines, which are then the courses they take in the Second Year. The most frequent choices are Editing and Screenwriting. According to Semilian “Most unsuccessful films will fail in writing [rather than in their technical work] but sometimes you can take a film that was mediocre in terms of writing, and if it has good actors, and the casting is good, and the coverage is good you can fix things tremendously. In fact, it's common that this happens.”

Asked about his First Year Editing class, Semilian explains that “I hang it all

on a history of cinema through the eye of the editor.” Beginning with the pioneering work *The Horse in Motion*, filmed by Eadweard Muybridge in 1878, students are asked to separate the individual frames and assemble them into a movie. For the 1894 Edison/Lumiere film *Barber Shop*, they must identify each “bit,” then cut it as if it was *The Bourne Ultimatum* (the shots of which averaged about two seconds long). The class then analyzes *The Life of an American Fireman* (1903) - the first film that was actually edited. That film demonstrated that the audience could put cuts together, spatially and temporally, and understand it as a coherent story.

Cut to a UNCSA screening room, where the final projects of fifty-five First Year students are being subjected to a year-end critique. Each student has their project on a laptop that can be connected with the room's A-V system.



In the first film, a guy is so intent upon outdoing his sister's senior prank on their highschool that he tries to make a pact with The Devil. The project is met with lots of comments – candid criticism, mixed with encouragement and complements. The next mini film is a surreal piece in which a character sees his own death and the events leading up to it. Characteristically, Semilian offers “My best advice is to keep at it until it works.” In the third, a quarrel between husband and wife is not exactly what it appears to be. Semilian

reminds the class “Make sure the story is served.” The fourth, a class favorite, depicts an expedition to observe a dangerous wild creature that turns out to be a bit more pedestrian than billed. Semilian: “Remarkably well done.” Next is a stream of consciousness piece “based on a true story” which combines live action and animation in a piece involving babies and a banana.

Each of these very-different projects shares the clear ambition to push the envelope of what might be expected in a freshman film class, but they are reminded daily that they are first year professional film makers. In Third Year each student will become part of a team formed to create a complete film for public screening.

Reflecting upon his two decades of teaching at UNCSA, Semilian says “When I began working here ... I resolved to make our school the best picture editing and sound design school in the world.” In 2016 three undergraduate UNCSA film students, Chris Dold, Aneesa Mahboob, and Emily Rayl, competing with hundreds of film students from across the nation, swept the American Cinema Editors student editing competition in Los Angeles.

While Semilian is obviously attuned to the pace and rhythm of images, he is also a lover of language. He has published poetry, novels, and translations of Romanian poetry and literature. His poems, translations, and essays have appeared in prestigious literary journals. Unfortunately, space limitations here dictate that that material be left on the cutting room floor. Perhaps a sequel...

Getting Ahead at UNCSA



In April members of The Associates were invited to serve as models for a project assigned to a class in the UNCSA Wig & Makeup Design Program, taught by Christal Schanes. Pictured above from left: Ken Davis, Thorns Craven, David Valentino, Howard Skillington, and Dillon Robertson.

General Information - Important Links

The Associates Website: <http://www.uncsa.edu/Associates>

For membership forms, a list of our Board members, and other general information.

Email Address: uncsaassociates@gmail.com

The Performance Calendar Website: <http://www.uncsa.edu/performances/>

Our Facebook page: <http://www.facebook.com/uncsaassociates>

Newsletter: uncsaassociates.news@gmail.com