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Christopher Cresswell: Stone Seeking Warmth



When Christopher Cresswell was in the third grade, his teacher asked his class to write about what they wanted to be when they grew up. Ten-year-old Cresswell had two aspirations: to be country singer and a baseball player. Sadly, we'll never get to witness Cresswell's induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame due to his self-confessed athletic ineptitude. We are however, extremely fortunate that what Cresswell lacks on the baseball field he more than makes up for in the concert hall. His career in composition has only just begun but already the young composer has an impressive list of accolades, one of the most recent being selected as one of only a handful of artists to receive the 2012 [JFund](http://composersforum.org/program/fund) award.

The resultant work *Stone Seeking Warmth* is a song cycle based on selected works by poet Stephen Dunn, whose work Cresswell had set previously. "The idea for a piece originally came from singer Jon English, who asked me to write him a work for voice and chamber orchestra," explains Cresswell. "I immediately wanted to return to the poetry of Stephen Dunn, who I had previously set for my song cycle, *The Kiss*. In *Stone Seeking Warmth*, I was interested in treating the singer as a character who develops over the course of the piece. The order and arrangement of the poems is done in a semi- autobiographical way, capturing a moment in time in my life. I had just moved to New York City, gotten out of a relationship, and was feeling quite lost. I had to rediscover who I was in this new context. The character in *Stone Seeking Warmth* goes on a similar journey."

Stone Seeking Warmth was long-slated to premiere in November 2013 at the Syracuse University, performed by Jon English and the university's resident symphony orchestra, and aside from writing to Dunn to ask his permission to set his poems, Cresswell hadn't had any direct contact with the poet. Then, a little unexpectedly, SU offered both him and Dunn residencies for the week leading up to the premiere.

"During this time I was able to speak with him a great deal about my music, his poetry, and the new work," Cresswell recalls. "We taught a masterclass together about text setting from a poet and composer's perspective. He mentioned how he didn't always like what composers did with his words, which needless to say made me quite anxious. After the concert I stood backstage and nervously waited to see him. He came back, gave me a big hug, and told me he loved the piece. It was a great thrill to have his approval on my work."

For Cresswell, composition is more than just writing notes on a page. "For me," he says, "being a composer means writing acoustic, electro-acoustic, and electronic works, but it also means building a sound installation out of field recordings, working as an educator, and advocating for other great artists I love. It means signing up to do something I have no idea how to do and then going and doing it. That freedom to wander, to explore, to seek, is the most exciting aspect of being a composer."

Since premiering *Stone Seeking Warmth* Cresswell has not been resting on his laurels. He is in the midst of working on a variety of different projects, from sound installations to concert works, the latest being a work commissioned by the Society for New Music for bassoon and piano entitled *the memory evokes, forget what time*, which significantly will premiere in his home town of Cazenovia, NY. But by far one of the most exciting new projects for Cresswell is a new music program he is launching at a summer camp in Michigan. "I'm teaching songwriting, recording, and beat production alongside guitar, keyboard, and vocal lessons," he enthuses. "The program is only a couple of weeks old, but already the campers have written some amazing songs. Being alongside and working to shape their unadulterated creativity has been incredibly rewarding."

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