

# Eric Ewazen

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Eric Ewazen, born in 1954, is one of the leading U.S. composers of trumpet and brass music in the world. In 1994 Eric set out to compose a new sonata for trumpet and piano commissioned by the ITG (International Trumpet Guild). This sonata has excited the trumpet world with its unique musical style and writing. Mr. Ewazen has been guided by some of the best composers of the world. His unique style of neo-romanticism has captured the ears of trumpeters and all musicians alike.

Eric Ewazen was born in Cleveland, Ohio on March 1, 1954. Eric's parents are first generation Ukrainians. From the time Eric was very young, his family had always allowed him to study the various cultural styles of the United States—without, however, forgetting his Ukrainian heritage. His father was known to dance around the living room to the folk music of their country. Moreover, the ethnic food, music, and dance of Eric's childhood have stayed with him to this day. Eric's parents were not formally trained in music; however his father played the harmonica and his mother played baritone in her high school band. Most of Eric's musical influence came from attending concerts and joining the high school band and orchestra in Cleveland.

Eric's musical training was firmly rooted in four instruments: violin, cello, bass, and piano. He began playing the piano in kindergarten. Piano was the one instrument that Eric has never strayed from in his career. In addition to playing the piano, he started playing other instruments, such as the violin, an instrument he played until seventh grade when his teacher gave him a D on his report card. Eric then rethought about playing the violin and considered cello. He continued with cello through high school, while also playing bass in the high school band. It was here, in the band, that Eric was first introduced to the composers of wind literature. He was hearing for the first time composers such as Holst and Persichetti. These composers made a huge impression on Eric and on how he developed his sound for wind instrumentation composition. It was also during this time that Eric decided he wanted to start composing music. He started while a junior in high school, which, by most accounts, was a late start for composition.

Eric began taking composition lessons with Walter Winzenberger, a professor of composition at Baldwin-Wallace College in Cleveland, Ohio, while only a junior in high school. Walter introduced Eric to music that would shape his life forever. Hearing for the first time a string quartet by Bartok or listening to works by Messian and Cage, or listening to a student perform Barber's Piano Sonata, all made a permanent impression on Eric and his new love for composition. Some of Eric's first compositions include a *rock opera* that he wrote his junior year in high school while he was performing with a local band. In addition to this composition, he was also continually writing music for the piano. Although Eric's musical interests were varied in style, he always enjoyed performing and writing for the piano.

In addition to taking lessons in composition at Baldwin-Wallace, Eric was also studying piano with another faculty member, George Cherry. George had the unique pleasure of introducing Eric to some of the greatest literature ever composed for piano. George lit a spark in Eric to play and study some of these compositions. Thus began the long journey for Eric to find his own style

and passion for composition. Even though Eric had played piano practically all his life, upon graduating from high school he decided to attend the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, to pursue a degree in composition.

While in attendance at Eastman, Eric continued studying piano in addition to pursuing a professional career within the composition field. His piano teacher was Berry Snyder. Eric states, "One good reason for continuing with my piano study is that I can play my own music, so there is no quibble with my interpretation, plus I compose from the piano." In addition to his piano teacher, Eric's principle composition teachers were Samuel Adler, Warren Benson, and Joseph Schwantner. Each teacher in his own way had a huge impact on Eric and his development of compositional techniques. Schwantner propounded many compositional ideas to Eric about his music. For example, one of the most influential ideas was instrumentation for his and Eric's music. Schwantner was always taking chances with his instrumentation. He composed for ensembles of instruments that were not previously grouped together. Eric, too, went with this idea of taking chances. Works like Eric's *Trio for Trumpet, Violin, Piano* and *To Cast a Shadow Again* written for baritone (voice), trumpet, and piano, began to emerge. The idea of grouping solely a violin, piano and trumpet or low voice, piano and trumpet together in a composition was unheard of. Moreover, Eric's composition, *Quintet for Trumpet and Strings* continues with this idea. The possibility of mixing voices that have never been grouped before gave Eric the chance to continue the ideas of his teacher and find a new, unique foothold in composition for himself. These compositions have proven to be a great success. They are being programmed much more frequently on professional and student recitals, and are slowly becoming part of the standard trumpet repertoire. Samuel Adler also contributed to the advancement of Eric's compositions. Eric states, "Samuel had a pure love for the act of composition." Adler loved the whole compositional process, and was very enthusiastic about creating a new work of music. Adler was very dramatic and emotional about composing. "Samuel always had fun." Composition should be a beautiful act with raw emotion being entered into every score. Eric feels that this drama is what he drew from Adler the most. When Eric composes, he is always writing from the heart. His compositions are never composed without a purpose or to fill a deadline. In the truest sense, his music is music from the soul. The sure joy of creating a new work is what keeps Eric Ewazen fresh and open to new ideas. Upon graduation from the Eastman School of Music and receiving a B.M. in composition in 1976, Eric entered graduate school at the world-renowned Julliard School.

After arriving in New York and being enrolled at Julliard, Eric began composition lessons with Milton Babbitt. Like his other teachers, Babbitt contributed his own style of composition to Eric. At this time, Milton Babbitt was very much into serialism and twelve-tone techniques. Eric composed nothing but this type of music for two and one-half years. Babbitt also was a lover of Brahms. He loved the ideas of structure that Brahms brought to his music. The idea of chords appearing and disappearing is one of the things about Brahms's music that fascinated Babbitt. He shared this love with Eric in his teachings. Many of these techniques can be heard in Eric's music. For example, Eric's Sonata for Trumpet is based primarily in the tonal realm. However, study of the score reveals that the key center is open and constantly appearing to establish a tonic through the use of pedal points. The piano gives the listener the idea of temporary tonal center before moving on to a new, expanded idea. Eric states, "Milton's music was very complex to understand theoretically." What Eric took from his study with Babbitt other than his techniques was the contrast of compositional approaches that he had had in the past. Teachers brought something new to Eric in their own way. Each technique came along with a different personality and approach that molded Eric into the composer that he is today. Moreover, furthering his studies in composition, Eric participated in the Tanglewood Music Festival where he studied composition

with Gunther Schuller, who had been a French horn player in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra for many years, in addition to composing. The main idea that Eric learned from Schuller was the technique of orchestration. He learned how to better understand a symphony orchestra and the colors that ensembles of varying instruments were able to produce. Understanding specific symphonic orchestration ideas was important to Eric. Understanding the range and sound of the instruments gave him a better understanding of how to compose for mixed ensembles or solo instruments in general. It can be best said that Eric Ewazen had many teachers that influenced and inspired him in many directions. However, it was up to Eric to decide the direction that his music would take. Eric continued at Julliard, finishing his Master's degree in 1978 and his Doctorate of Music Arts in 1980. Upon completion of his D.M.A., the world-renowned Julliard School employed him as a professor.

At Julliard, he is the professor of theory and analysis. In addition to teaching at the college, Eric also teaches composition in the school's pre-college program. While teaching at his alma mater, Eric also taught at a local Hebrew Arts College for a few years. In addition to that, Eric was asked to give pre-concert lectures to prepare students for attending the New York Philharmonic Orchestra concerts. This "Musical Encounter Series" was a job that Eric performed for approximately eight years.

As a composer, Eric is very pleased with the way his compositions have been received. He likes to keep the performer and audience members in mind while composing his compositions. He currently receives five to six commissions a year for many different genres of music. His compositions range from brass compositions, string quartets, and piano trios, to woodwind compositions and wind ensemble. Eric says that he likes communicating feeling in his compositions, drawing on many things and ideas for inspiration and emotion—for example, art. Eric states, "Like all humans, compositions too take on a life and role of their own. I want to convey emotion and feelings in all my compositions." Eric's music can be best classified as neo-romantic. Even in this neo-romantic style of writing, one can hear the efforts and influence of his prior teachers and mentors, such as Babbitt and others. As an avid composer living in New York City, Eric Ewazen's music is now more popular than ever, especially his *Sonata for Trumpet and Piano* that can be heard on Eric's new CD, entitled Music for the Soloists of the American Brass Quintet and Friends.