

Where Are They Now?

Our area has produced many people with artistic talents. *A! Magazine for the Arts* recently spoke with three who grew up in this region and are now pursuing careers in the arts in other parts of the world.

Craig Combs Developing a Chamber Music Association

A conservatory-trained pianist now living in London, England, Craig W. Combs has not forgotten his roots in the Bristol area. Currently, he is developing a chamber music association in the Mountain Empire.

"The idea of a chamber music association," he says, "has drawn strong interest from faculty at both East Tennessee State University and Emory & Henry College, as well as from a variety of high profile musicians and administrators. However, the organization is very much in its first steps."

Harry Scanlan, executive director of the Paramount Center for the Arts, says, "I have known Craig for a number of years because of his wonderful performances at the Paramount. Chamber musicians would be a great addition to our stage, and there could be a home for them at this theatre."

Cyrus Ginwala, conductor of Symphony of the Mountains, says, "I'm always looking for the 'gaps' in the arts profile of our region, and chamber music is certainly one of those. When Craig contacted me with his ideas, I was thrilled. He will find full support from the symphony."

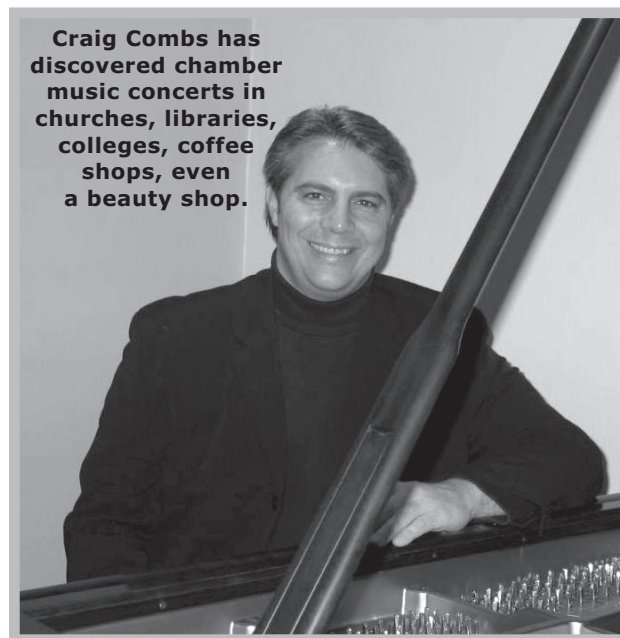
To solicit interest, Combs has started a Yahoo email group and planned face-to-face meetings. His strategy also involves two performances, the first a chamber music concert in June for the Tunes @ Noon Series at the Paramount Center for the Arts in Bristol. His goal for the fall of 2005 is to raise awareness and funding with a second chamber music concert by local musicians.

In London, Combs is rehearsing with two trio ensembles consisting of clarinet/piano/cello and flute/piano/cello. This mirrors the exact instrumentation of ensembles that he is planning to develop in the Tri-Cities area. His long-range goal is to have an artist exchange between our region and Europe.

Combs spent his first year in London establishing musical contacts and forming ensembles. "I have had a lifelong dream to live in Europe and experience its musical culture in person," he says. "The planning and the practical aspects for such a move

took years to put in place, but the move to Europe was an easy decision to make. It made sense as a way to advance my career objectives and to fulfill my dream. The decision to go back to performance and presenting full time was a much harder decision. It was less of a practical decision and more of a spiritual one, a deep conviction that music is ultimately an artistic expression of the human condition. The utterance of that expression is my life's goal."

Born and raised in Bristol, Combs



Craig Combs has discovered chamber music concerts in churches, libraries, colleges, coffee shops, even a beauty shop.

studied piano with Joanne Feazell and Dr. C.C. Loomis. In 1976 he won third place in the Boy Scouts of America's national music contest. In 1977 he tied for first place in the Virginia Bland Music Contest sponsored by the Bristol Host Lions Club and went on to win third place at the state level.

After receiving his bachelor of music degree in 1981 from the Shenandoah Conservatory, he worked for the conservatory as an administrator and developed non-musical skills that have helped him support his musical pursuits.

In 1988, Combs received the Doctorate of Musical Arts in Piano Performance and Literature from the Eastman School of Music. "I immediately started looking for a job and found that, in the field of music, it is easier to look for a job than to get hired for a job," he recalls with humor. In spite of the challenging job market,

Combs has been able to work for the past 20 years as a performer of classical solo and chamber music repertoire.

His New York performances at Merkin Hall, CAMI Hall, and the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater and Concert Hall have included the premieres of contemporary works. He has played as guest artist for the Virginia Federation of Music Clubs, Virginia Music Teachers Association, and the Music Educators National Association. He has returned to Bristol

a number of times. In 1986, he presented a recital at King College, which was recorded and broadcast by WETS-FM. He came back in the mid-1990s for a concert benefiting the Wellmont Foundation and for the 2002 Tunes @ Noon Series at the Paramount.

Combs has also successfully performed as a conductor, educator, and administrator. He has directed operas, musical theater and children's productions. His achievements in music education include leading children's choirs in elementary public schools

and teaching private piano in community music schools in Rochester, NY, Washington, DC and New York City. Known as "Dr. Craig" to his students, he has taught at the Shenandoah Conservatory and George Mason University. Combs also lectures on piano repertoire and pedagogy.

His arts administration experience reflects a balance of teamwork and solo activities ranging from consultancies to full-time positions. He was instrumental in developing the Guiding, Identifying and Fostering Talent Institute. He also founded and managed two nonprofit organizations: Shenandoah Conservatory Piano Camp and George Mason University Piano Pedagogy Workshops.

More recently, Combs has worked on the staffs of two significant nonprofit arts organizations. For three years, he served as a program director for the New York Foundation

for the Arts (NYFA), where he implemented the Artists and Audience Exchange program and the New York City Choral Music Initiative. He also arranged public events, conferences and artist grants panels. As the Membership Director for Chamber Music America (CMA) from 2001-2004, he toured the country observing the chamber music scene.

"Contrary to popular belief, there is a strong interest in the U.S. to hear high quality art music. Presenters around the country are ingeniously engaging their audiences with chamber music," Combs says. "Every place I visited, whether a large city or a rural community, I have found a core of interested folk who value chamber music enough to give their time, energy and money to ensure the availability of concerts in their areas. Often, these dedicated advocates have created chamber music series or programs in churches, libraries, college venues, coffee shops, even in one case, a beauty shop. It really is a grassroots movement!"

Combs continues, "Audience numbers fluctuate widely, but few series that I saw drew less than 200 and the average was close to 350. In some cases, the audience was quite large, nearing 1,000. But audiences over 500 tend to be too large for chamber music, which was originally meant to be performed in a salon, the equivalent of our modern living rooms. The good news is that everywhere that chamber music organizations have provided education, there has been a growing audience. Even in this day of technology, the best marketing for chamber music is word of mouth."

In his work at CMA, Combs concludes, "I witnessed the power and rewards of sharing chamber music with people around the country and slowly became aware that there was great potential in the Bristol area for a vibrant chamber music community. My dream is that there will eventually be a strong network of advocates in the Tri-Cities region and that the performance of chamber music will become a frequent and natural part of the landscape." *A!*