

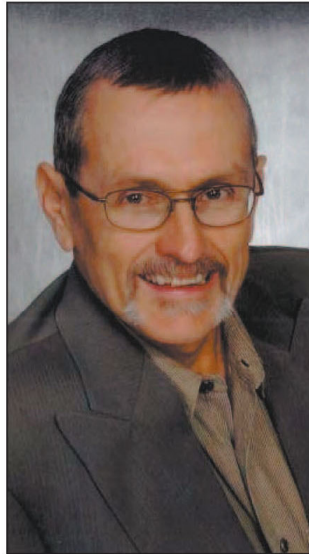
(Re)composing the composer

By Jerry L. Wheeler

Art and life.

Everyone knows that art reflects life, but how many people take time to reflect on the healing properties of art and how it can repair a broken spirit? Local composer Rodney Bake has some firsthand knowledge of those powers.

In 2003, Bake was attending the University of Missouri Kansas City Conservatory of Music, studying music composition. However, he ran into financial difficulties as well as health problems due to Missouri's inability to cover his HIV treatments. "During those months without treatment – thank you, Missouri Republicans – and moving, my health took a dive, mentally and physically," Bake states. "I spent a year hardly leaving my home here in Denver. Last spring, as I began to improve, I noticed



Rodney Bake

the public service announcement in *OutFront Colorado* for the Colorado Composers Competition Contest and Concert, nicknamed CoCoCo, and sponsored by an intercollegiate association, The Playground." He submitted one of his pieces, called *Unredeemed*.

Conrad Kehn, director of The Playground Ensemble, was impressed by what he heard. "In many ways," Kehn says, "Rodney's piece was the most adventurous of the lot. It called for a soprano in chains, which I thought would be pretty impressive visually. We get a lot of very well-crafted classical compositions, but not as many risky pieces like this. When I first saw the score, I said, 'This is the kind of thing that we as an ensemble should be doing.'"

"Risky" would be an apt word for a composition inspired by Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca and written for a soprano in chains, sledgehammer on pickaxe, anvil and a small instrumental ensemble. Not only was it risky, it was also a logistical nightmare.

"The Playground was having trouble finding an anvil," Bake recalls. "A friend from Kansas City stepped up to buy a new one and had it shipped to me. UPS delivered it in the next block. After a number of days of tracers, I found out the address numbers had been switched. I took a two-wheeler down the street and picked it up from this young Latino family – I'm sure they had no idea what they were supposed to do with it – and I wheeled it home."

But Bake's health problems continued. "I had a great deal of work still to check the store and produce the parts that would be necessary at a level beyond what was adequate for school. I was hit by a hospital-

based respiratory staph infection, making it very difficult to continue. So many times, I didn't think I would make it, but some very special friends stood up to encourage and help me complete the work on time."

Bake wasn't just fine-tuning the piece, however. "We asked Rodney to conduct," Kehn says, "as our conductor was in England. He was reluctant, but he did it and he did a pretty good job. You could tell he hadn't conducted in a while, but something else was happening. He lit up a little. This diminutive guy that wrote a cool piece of music became very active and excited. I felt something special was happening."

"Of course I was a bit intimidated," Bake admits. "I set to organizing the arrangement of the instruments and started the rehearsal. It was euphoric as I directed through difficult passages that were coming together. I was beat after an hour and

ready to quit, but Conrad and the group wanted to continue. After a break, I continued. The piece is not long but has tremendous intensity in the four minutes. I was exhausted but was tremendously satisfied."

What about the night of the performance? "I was nervous like the first time you enter a gay bar," Bake says, "uncertain whether to go in or stay out. As they started to play, my nervousness and fears calmed. I couldn't have been more pleased. The most difficult passages were accomplished. I knew that the special nature and setting of the text had a depth that was strong, and that only the better of ensembles would be able to manage it. This part of me was ready to be exposed."

"Crowd turnout was awesome," director Kehn recalls. "Things went off very smoothly. All pieces were played really well. I did feel that concert was the highlight of our season."

It was also a highlight for Rodney Bake, and the aftermath was positive as well. "I gained physical and mental strength as I began to accomplish more and participated more in the lives of others, which set up one of the better summers of my life. It has been a long process to bring myself back to feeling I still have value, and the opportunity presented by the Playground tapped into my spirit, renewed my energy and the joy of music."

Art and life – now *that's* a duo worthy of attention. ■

Submissions are now being accepted for the 3rd Annual Colorado Composers Concert. For more details and a submission form, visit www.playgroundensemble.org.