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Brandi Smith - Sep. 30, 2024

'Future of music': Rice's Shepherd School celebrates 50 years with new commissions

"Birds Are Real; Ambushed From Ten Directions," a composition by Shih-Hui Chen, will make its world premiere Oct. 16 as part of the 50th anniversary celebration for Rice University's Shepherd School of Music. This 20-minute performance commissioned by the Office of Research and the Shepherd School will merge music, light and



"Nocturnal
Marathon of Birds"
by Cin-Ty Lee, the
Harry Carothers
Wiess Professor of
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planetary sciences

shadow puppetry into a theatrical exploration of modern cognitive warfare and the surreal world of misinformation. It will be preceded by a guided birdwatching tour outside Brockman Hall for Opera.

“With only 50 years of history, the Shepherd School has built an incredible national reputation for producing outstanding alumni,” said Chen, a professor of composition and theory. “I have taught here for almost 25 years, and I’m very honored to have been commissioned to write a piece for the celebration of the 50th anniversary.”

The premiere of “Birds Are Real” is the first of seven commissions planned over the course of the school’s 50th and 51st seasons. These commissions by Shepherd School composition faculty members are designed to reflect the institution’s dynamic engagement with contemporary music.

“The Shepherd School’s 50th anniversary is not only a celebration of our past accomplishments but also provides a moment for us to map a compelling future of music and creative expression,” said Shepherd School Dean Matthew Loden. “These commissions, starting



Professor of composition and theory Shih-Hui Chen

with Shih-Hui Chen's 'Birds Are Real; Ambushed From Ten Directions,' embody the spirit of innovation that defines our school."

Over the course of the next two years, works by six other faculty composers will be premiered, each contributing to the evolving narrative of contemporary music. The composers involved include [Richard Lavenda](#), [Karim Al-Zand](#), [Anthony Brandt](#), [Arthur Gottschalk](#), [Pierre Jalbert](#) and [Kurt Stallmann](#). Lavenda's work is scheduled to debut in January 2025 with the remaining premieres following in the 2025-26 season.

"Each piece in this series reflects the unique voices of our composition faculty and demonstrates our commitment to fostering new works that resonate with audiences today and for generations to come," Loden said. "This anniversary is an opportunity to highlight the exceptional talent and creativity that continues to flourish here at the Shepherd School."

The Oct. 16 event promises to be more than just a musical premiere. It's an immersive evening combining visual and auditory art forms, showcasing the collaborative spirit that makes the Shepherd School a hub for interdisciplinary exploration. In addition to the music,

there will be shadow puppetry — a collaboration between director Ding-Yun Huang, artist Chia-Wei Chen and the Tung-Hua Shadow Puppet Theater.

“Birds Are Real” brings together Shepherd School faculty members [Brian Connelly](#) on piano and [Matthew Strauss](#) on percussion, blending their live performance with the theatrical elements of puppetry. The piece draws from two seemingly disparate inspirations: the satirical “Birds Aren’t Real” conspiracy theory in which birds are portrayed as government surveillance drones, and “Ambush From Ten Directions,” a traditional Chinese pipa piece about an ancient battle.

“‘Birds Are Real’ combines music and theatrical elements,” Chen said. “It’s wonderful to see all of these elements come together to create a work that, I hope, will resonate deeply with those who experience it.”

Chen said the composition “delves into modern digital-era cognitive warfare in which we are ambushed not by battle weapons but by misinformation from many directions.” By juxtaposing these two sources, the composer explores the fine line between reality and fiction in today’s world. The intricate interaction between live

music and shadow puppetry serves as an artistic commentary on the overwhelming flood of information and disinformation we encounter in our daily lives.

“Like most modern people, I often feel disconnected from nature and overwhelmed by daily bad news,” said Chen, who added that she became deeply inspired by birds, their songs and their presence while composing this work. “I hope this piece will foster greater awareness and connection to nature, as it has for me.”

The connection to nature is further reinforced by [Cin-Ty Lee](#), the Harry Carothers Wiess Professor of Geology and professor of Earth, environmental and planetary sciences.

“I’m especially honored to work with Professor Cin-Ty Lee, who provided bird song recordings, images and texts for the piece,” Chen said. “This university-wide collaboration exemplifies what makes Rice University and the Shepherd School of Music a 21st century institution.”

This prelude to the performance will offer a unique perspective on nature’s role in the work. Following the birdwatching tour and the premiere, Chen and the other artists involved will hold a discussion,

offering the audience insight into the creative process behind “Birds Are Real.”

Students from Chen’s Cross-Cultural Asia Contemporary Music course, which includes music majors and other disciplines, will present their projects during the evening, contributing to a second concert after the premiere. This collaboration, bringing together the Shepherd School, the Department of Transnational Asian Studies and the Department of Earth, Environmental and Planetary Sciences, exemplifies Rice’s commitment to fostering creative dialogue across academic disciplines.

“I greatly enjoy working with the Shepherd School of Music students,” Chen said. “They are talented, curious, hard-working. They inspire me, and I am honored to be part of their life during their formative years.”

In addition to the university’s support, the commission has received funding from the Taiwan Academy of Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Houston, reinforcing the international ties that make this project so distinctive.

No tickets are needed for the free event at Wortham Theatre in Alice Pratt Brown Hall. For more information about “Birds Are Real,” [click here](#).



ABOUT BRANDI SMITH

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