

# SF composer brings Lowell High group new work that goes 'berserk'

By Jesse Hamlin | March 28, 2017

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**Charles Boone**, the veteran San Francisco composer whose music has been commissioned and/or performed over the years by the San Francisco and Chicago symphonies, the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, and many other ensembles, was thinking of calling his new piece for the Lowell High School string orchestra “To Quicken, Verb.”

But he came across an even better title while doing research for the new work



Photo: Trey Houston

S.F. composer Charles Boone rehearses his new commissioned piece with the Lowell High School string orchestra.

commissioned by alumni and friends of the famed San Francisco public high school to celebrate 100 years of music there: “The Quickening Pollen.”

The phrase was written by the 19th century poet and diplomat **James Russell Lowell**, for whom the prestigious school was named: “Books are the bees that carry the quickening pollen from one to another mind.”

That struck a chord with Boone, who built this meter-less piece — which he won’t conduct but rather “coordinate and shape,” he says — on a four-tone dissonant chord that provides the DNA.

“Changing ‘Books are’ to ‘Music is’ gives a clue to the hopes behind this work,” Boone wrote in his composer’s note for “The Quickening Pollen,” which will be premiered by Lowell’s 50-member string orchestra, violin and viola soloists, piano and three triangles on April 6 in the Carol Channing Theater (named for one of the school’s many accomplished alumni).

The work was created in part to introduce these young musicians to advanced 20th century notation and compositional methods, says the composer, who will cue the players with gestures but not provide a beat.

“There’s no improvisation, but there are places where they start off and go their merry way,” says Boone, on the phone after a rehearsal at Lowell, where good progress was made.

“They were not just playing notes today — they were *sounding* the music,” says the composer, who praises the musicianship and openness of the players, taught by Lowell’s “exceptional” orchestra conductor, **Michele Winter**, to whom the piece is dedicated.

“They can play. And they’re willing to go along with my stuff, which is not like anything they’ve done before.”

Boone, who thinks of “quickenning” as “communicating something, the vivification of ideas,” is a modernist who came of age in the 1960s and ’70s, and often used electronics in his music (at 77, he’s too old for electronics now, he says dryly).

He taught for years at the San Francisco Art Institute, where he explored the visual arts and film through the prism of music. After retiring in 2009, Boone found he missed working with young people. He gave some lectures at Lowell High School last year that led to this commission, coordinated with the nonprofit Composers and Schools in Concert.

Boone figures “The Quickening Pollen” will run about six minutes, but he won’t know until it’s sounded.

“If something sounds really great, you let it go for a while,” explains the composer, who advised the string players that even though they may share the same notes and phrases, “as you’re playing your part, you’re on your own. If you’re doing the same thing as the next guy, you’re doing it wrong.”

As for the three triangles, they chime in near the end when the music goes “totally berserk.”

“The piano is banging away, the celesta is banging away, and the triangles are banging away,” he says. “They ring like crazy.”

Boone wouldn’t exactly call the musical moment mayhem, but if so, “it’s very beautiful mayhem.”

For more information, go to [www.composersandschools.com/pr-lowell-boone](http://www.composersandschools.com/pr-lowell-boone)

## **Jokes and swords**

The celebrated Egyptian TV satirist **Bassem Youssef**, a brave and funny man who ran afoul of the powers that be in Egypt for making fun of them, brings his “The Joke Is Mightier Than the Sword” show to Cal Performances on Tuesday, April 4.

He arrives with his just-published book, “Revolutions for Dummies,” two weeks after the release of the film about his life and the pursuit of free speech, “Tickling Giants.” He’ll show clips and talk about how the Egyptian Revolution and Arab Spring turned him from a cardiothoracic surgeon into the region’s satirical voice.

For more information, go to [www.calperformances.org](http://www.calperformances.org)

## **Yang’s guitar**

The dazzling Beijing-born classical guitarist **Xuefei Yang** performs solo at Herbst Theatre on April 8, brought to you by the Omni Foundation with San Francisco Performances. She plays everything from works by **Bach** and **Francisco Tárrega** to Brazilian and Chinese music.

For more information, go to [www.omniconcerts.com](http://www.omniconcerts.com)

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