



**JOE
TRAPANESE**

**GEORGE
LAM**

**ELIZABETH
LIM**

**HERMES
CAMACHO**

**GREG
SIMON**

MUSIC CHIEFS

Quick inspiration can whip up a winning score
at the 'Iron Composer Omaha' competition

BY JOHN PITCHER

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Lights flash, smoke rises and the hyper-dramatic choral music begins.

Ken Bales, a mild-mannered music professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, suddenly morphs into a nimble, kung fu-twirling master of ceremonies. Before him stands a pantheon of compositional giants. And all are vying to become the next — cut to drum roll and echo effects — Iron . . . Composer . . . OMAHA!

Well, that is a colorful image.

But unlike its inspiration, the popular Food Network show “Iron Chef America,” the real “Iron Composer Omaha” won’t feature strobe lights, smoke machines or choruses.

There also won’t be any karate-kick-

ing hosts at the Sept. 4 show. And the contestants won’t wield pots, pans or meat cleavers. Iron Composers use pianos and laptops loaded with music software.

Yet “Iron Composer” will feature a kind of musical kung fu — speed composing.

“In its own way, it’s as dramatic as the TV show,” Bales said.

That’s because composers of steel are different from other music writers. They work on breathtaking deadlines.

Opera and symphony composers may spend years working on a single piece. Commercial composers — those writing jingles or TV themes, for instance — will spend a few days or even weeks crafting a tune. Iron composers get only a fraction of that time.

Here’s how the competition, part of

the ARTSaha! Festival of contemporary music that runs Sept. 3 through 13, works.

At 10 a.m. on the day of the contest, five top young composers will meet for battle at UNO’s Strauss Performing Arts Center.

The five will learn what instruments they’ll write for — piano trio, string quartet, woodwind quintet, whatever.

And like the iron chefs, the iron composers will also receive a secret ingredient — a musical one, such as a lyric, chord progression or familiar melody.

Then they’ll have five hours to complete a score — including all the instrumental parts — for performance.

Musicians from ANALOG, the ARTSaha! Festival’s ensemble-in-residence, will rehearse the music in the

See Composers: Page 2

ON PAGE 2E

Biographies of the five composers pictured above.

A complete schedule of ARTSaha! Festival

Find out what it’s like to be an “iron composer.”

**ON
OMAHA.COM**

Audio clips from all five iron composer candidates

Three iron composers write scores based on a secret musical ingredient.

Composers: They must use 'secret ingredient'

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late afternoon and perform it in concert. A panel of judges will award three prizes, with the winner getting \$500 and the coveted title "Iron Composer Omaha."

Bales, whose endowed Robert M. Spire composing chair at UNO funds "Iron Composer," says he and ANALOG founder Joseph Drew started the contest to accomplish two things.

First, it provides a valuable twist to the typical composing face-off.

"Most competitions emphasize style and technique only," Bales said. "But the ability to write on a tight schedule is also important, at least if you plan to make a living as a composer."

Bales says he's not aware of any other composing events emphasizing speed.

But a reputation for fast — and skilled — writing may help up-and-coming and unknown composers find work.

"Iron Composer Omaha's" second purpose is to soften the image of dissonant and complex contemporary classical music.

"What better way to deal with the intimidation factor of new music than a TV-show parody," Bales said. "We've turned the experience of listening to new music into a fun and family-friendly event."

A committee of Omaha composers and musicians selected this year's "Iron Composer" finalists earlier this summer from a national pool of 50 hopefuls.

Most became composers because they hated practicing instruments. Most are fiercely competitive. All of them are big fans of "Iron Chef America." And all are, well, really fast.

Elizabeth Lim, a 22-year-old San Francisco native who will attend New York City's Juilliard School in the fall, is grateful for "Iron Composer Omaha." She can be herself.

"My professors always complained that I composed too fast," she said in a recent phone interview. "But what's wrong with being passionate and unrestrained?"

For Joe Trapanese, a 24-year-old New Jersey native, "Iron Composer" will seem like another day at the office. He's a film and television composer in Los Angeles.

"Everyone composing music in the movie business has to write fast," Trapanese said. "Otherwise you're fired."

Composer Greg Simon knows he can dash off a score. A 22-year-old grad student at the

University of Colorado at Boulder, Simon recently composed a multimedia dance piece in 20 minutes.

"I like the idea of turning off the filter and composing whatever comes to mind," he said.

Contestant George Lam, meanwhile, is a serious composer working on a music doctorate at Duke University. Serious composers of the past, like Beethoven, often spent months or years scratching out scores with quill and ink. But Lam, 26, has a digital advantage.

"I'm a child of the computer age," Lam said. "I grew up with computer-assisted music notation, and I know how to bang out a score."

Just about the only thing Hermes Camacho takes seriously is composing. The 26-year-old doctoral student at the University of Texas in Austin often composes in three- and four-hour blocks. He jokes that he's coming to Omaha out of pure ego.

"Not many people in this world have the distinction of being called 'Iron Composer,'" Camacho said by phone. "How cool is that?"

To win that coveted title, though, Camacho and the other contestants will need more than speed. They'll need imagination.

The secret musical ingredient at last year's "Iron Composer" contest was the theme to "The Jetsons" — the 1960s cartoon about a futuristic family. Judges were looking for more than simple transcriptions of the tune. They were looking for art.

Luke Furman, the winner, inverted the famous four-note motif — that is, he wrote it backward — in his sparkling piece, "Propeller Z."

Mark Diischer, meanwhile, used fragments of the theme to create a sophisticated counterpoint in "Jetting Atmospheres." He took second.

To hear all of last year's "Iron Composer" entries, go to www.artsaha.org and click on the iron composer icon.

The first "Iron Composer" featured only Nebraskans. This year it's a national event.

"It's more competitive this year," Bales said, "and we expect the music will be even more exciting."

That said, there's only thing left for this year's "Iron Composer" candidates to do.

As they say on "Iron Chef," go and cook...uh, compose.

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ARTSaha! Festival 2008 Schedule

Set Sail for the Sun

7 p.m. Sept. 3

Strauss Performing Arts Center, University of Nebraska at Omaha campus, 60th and Dodge Streets

Admission: Free

Concert of contemporary flute music featuring Marcia Kamper of the Baltimore Symphony.

Iron Composer Omaha

7:30 p.m. Sept. 4

Strauss Performing Arts Center

Admission: \$10; \$15 with

reception

Five composers debut pieces written earlier in the day based on a secret musical ingredient.

Walls Come Tumbling Down

7:30 p.m. Sept. 5

Strauss Performing Arts Center

Admission: \$10

Trumpet choir concert featuring music of Elliott Carter, Joan Tower, Prince and others.

Music for a House

7:30 p.m. Sept. 6

First Central Congregational Church, 421 S. 36th St., Omaha

Admission: Free

Monument Piano Trio and other performers play simultaneously in different rooms.

"Iron Composer Omaha" participants

Hermes Camacho. The 26-year-old composer was born in the Philippines and raised in California. When he's not listening to Beethoven, Tchaikovsky or Stravinsky, Camacho spends his time following his favorite San Francisco-area sports teams. He says he also enjoys harassing his tabby cat, Mango. Currently, he's working on a doctorate in music at the University of Texas in Austin. His goal is to compose and teach college music.

George Lam. The 26-year-old composer was born in Hong Kong and raised in Massachusetts. His favorite composer is Stephen Sondheim, and his favorite pastime is watching other people cook. Not surprisingly, his favorite TV show is "Iron Chef America." Lam is working on his doctorate in music at Duke University. His goal is to be a college teacher.

Elizabeth Lim. A 22-year-old San Francisco native, Lim recently graduated with a bachelor's degree in music from Harvard University. She loves the music of Maurice Ravel, Benjamin Britten and Toru Takemitsu. She's also passionate about international

Dance Revolution

3 p.m. Sept. 7

Presbyterian Church of the Cross, 1517 S. 114th St.

Admission: Free

Omaha Symphony clarinetist John Klinghammer joins Baltimore's Monument Piano Trio to play music inspired by dance forms. The concert is part of the Organ Vesper Series.

Microscore Project

7:30 p.m. Sept. 11

Strauss Performing Arts Center

Admission: \$10

Violinist Johnny Chang and cellist Jessica Catron explore music lasting 30 seconds or less.

Cosmic Pulses

7 p.m. Sept. 12

Strauss Performing Arts Center

Admission: \$10

A tribute to Karlheinz Stockhausen, featuring the U.S. premiere of his electronic piece "Cosmic Pulses."

In a Large Open Space

7:30 p.m. Sept. 13

Strauss Performing Arts Center

Admission: Free

ANALOG arts ensemble performs spatial music and collaborative compositions with advanced UNO students.

cuisine — yeah, she's another "Iron Chef America" junkie. This fall she'll attend the Juilliard School in New York City.

Greg Simon. The 22-year-old California native is a serious jazz trumpeter and plays regular club dates in Colorado, where he now lives. Simon doesn't cook, but he's addicted to "Iron Chef America." He also spends his free time watching "The Office," reading Kurt Vonnegut and listening to the music of jazz composer Maria Schneider and classical composer Charles Ives. He's currently a graduate teaching fellow at the University of Colorado in Boulder.

Joe Trapanese. The 24-year-old New Jersey native wants to be the next John Williams. He recently earned a master's degree from the University of California at Los Angeles, where he studied film composing. Now he keeps busy as an L.A.-based composer, contributing music for "Oprah" and "The Guiding Light," among others. Trapanese's favorite composers are Igor Stravinsky, Steve Reich and, of course, Williams. He also loves cooking big breakfasts.