

Young pianist knows score on film soundtracks

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Music is a calling for film composer and pianist Michael Cravener. The 25-year-old virtuoso has created scores for 17 short films, one documentary, two audio books and an epic Christmas poem. He was selected as the Florida Young Soloist of the Year by Arts4All Florida and has released his own albums.

When he isn't in front of the piano, he's out in the yard keeping his hands busy. He's often at the keys though, whether he's playing the Blue Tavern at happy hour or performing for Canterfield Assisted Living every Sunday. Composing inside his home studio, Cravener finds peace at his keyboard.

"Music makes me feel very calm," says Cravener. "I have autism and Tourette's. For a very long time and in my adolescent years and it was hard for me to function. Playing piano used to calm the tics down. It relieves a lot of tension and makes my mind go to better places."

After experimenting with guitar and drums, Cravener was given a miniature piano at age 4. He often requested to hear Andy Griffith's music and would play along with gospel albums. His father walked by his room one day and was shocked to find Cravener playing "Amazing Grace," all from memory.

Cravener still plays by ear. His first piano teacher had him turn around while she played three keys on the piano and he recognized them without any trouble. His next teacher worked with him on scales, arpeggios, phrasing and dynamics, which Cravener says he still uses within his repertoire.

By age 9 he was regularly playing at Black Dog Cafe though his feet barely reached the pedals. He once held a conversation with someone while he continued to play the psalm "We Gather at the River," quite a feat given the coordination the piece requires.

Cravener was moved to make his first Christmas CD when a young church friend contracted cancer and was struggling to pay medical bills. In a big-hearted gesture for a young musician, Cravener produced "Matthew's Christmas for AJ," which sold 500 copies on its first day. All proceeds went towards his friend's family and "Angels We Have Heard on High" became his favorite



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song to play and record.

"It was a hard piece to play, but it was really rewarding when I learned it," says Cravener. "The tempo is uplifting and fast and I enjoy the complexity."

At age 14 he produced a gospel album, though shortly after, his Tourette syndrome worsened and inhibited his ability to perform live. During this time, he would watch television shows and movies on YouTube and became interested in the musical scores that would play behind the action.

Though he believed his performance days might be over, he was captivated by the promise of creating music behind the scenes for films. He attended TCC and was connected with aspiring film director JT Timmons, and began scoring films for Red Eye Productions.

Cravener ambitiously submitted his work to award-winning Los Angeles film composer, Christopher Young. Young called Cravener and sponsored him for an emerging artist residency at Tilden House in Culver City, California.

"I had a studio apartment and stayed there to see if I could get a leg up in the film composing industry," says Cravener, who returned to Tallahassee to continue creating and perfecting his craft.

Seated in his studio with an electronic keyboard to his left and an upright piano on his right side, he does the majority of his composing in Pro Tools, Komplete, Symphonica, Antares Auto Tune Evo and AIR plugin recording programs. Cravener will watch a film several times to understand the feeling for each scene before creating melodies and chord pro-

Learn more

For more information about Matthew Cravener please visit COCA's Artist Directory and www.scoresbymatthew.com.

gressions.

He finds it easier to work with visual information because the dialogue and interactions between the actors lend themselves to the instruments he chooses to convey their emotions. It takes him one hour to make 60 seconds of music, and he says the most challenging part is hunting for the right sounds from his library.

"If it's romantic I'll go with more violin, strings and pianos," says Cravener. "If it's a horror film it will be more synth, textures and sounds. If it's action there is a lot of drums and percussion, with quick staccato strings."

Cravener recently won best music for the Red Eye Productions' film "Front Burner," which debuted in Savannah, Georgia, at the 48 Hour Film Project. The premise of the project is to create a film in two days from scratch using the festival's prompts. The film was chosen to be screened at Filmapalooza in the Netherlands and Spain, and if awarded there, will move on to a screening at the Cannes Film Festival in France.

As the new decade rolls in, Cravener looks forward to new opportunities to perform and create in Tallahassee and beyond. He is working up to staying at his computer for longer periods of time to compose, and wants to eventually go back to Los Angeles to pursue a career in the film industry.

No matter what he creates, whether it is albums, jingles or film scores, he wants his listeners to be touched by his orchestrations.

"The arts are so important to me," says Cravener. "I have trouble thinking on my feet, but when I am doing something that's involved with music, I am totally distracted from logistics and can be creative."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).