

Music-enhanced poetry

George Maurer's latest musical and theatrical composition has been 10 years in the making. A decade ago the musician and composer started setting the works of German poet Rainer Maria Rilke to music. At the time, he wasn't sure of what the outcome would be.

At least he didn't until he met a director who had the vision to turn the songs into a theatrical composition that would parse out not only the meaning of Rilke's work, but its influence on one of America's most well-known playwrights, Tennessee Williams.

So Maurer, along with theatrical director Jef Hall-Flavin, created "Autumn Song," a theatrical that incorporates Rilke's and Williams' work put to music and performed as a sort of conversation between the writers who worked decades apart.

The show was performed in Minneapolis in July and will head to Massachusetts in September.

The Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theatre Festival picked music as its theme this year. Williams, writer of "A Streetcar Named Desire" and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" also wrote poetry. He was inspired by Rilke's works, so the play seemed like a natural fit for the festival.

Maurer had first encountered Rilke on the

advice of the monks at St. John's University. Maurer was struggling with his decision on whether to fully commit to writing music, when he was handed "Letters to a Young Poet," one of Rilke's most well-known works.

"It's quoted everywhere," Maurer said.

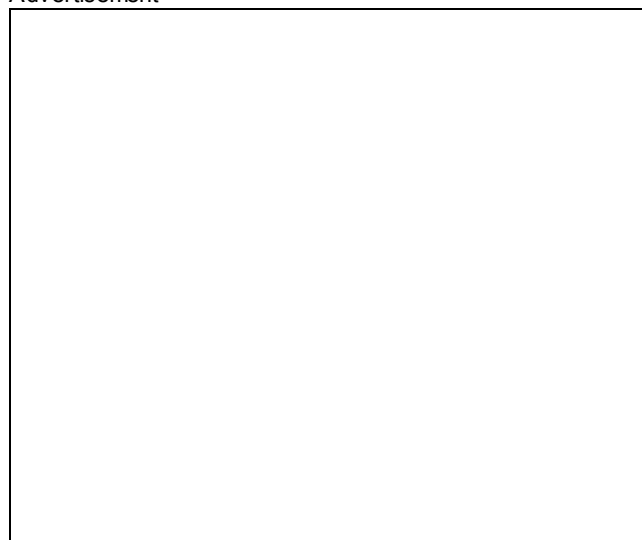
According to Rilke, one is supposed to live the questions and live the answers, in writing about life, relationships, love and God.

"That's why that book was handed to me," he said. "I never saw any poetry until 2003."

The challenge in putting Rilke's works to music is that he wrote in German and French. His original work was meant to rhyme, but that gets lost in the translations. So the poetry posed some challenges, and that's why it's taken 10 years, Maurer said.

He also traveled to Rilke's own haunts in some cases, taking trips to Prague where

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Rilke did some of his work.

“That helps me write music sometimes,” he said.

Maurer wrote in what he knows — jazz and gospel — but the show also has tinges of folk, country-western and a little rock and roll.

The music had been performed in concerts, but it wasn’t until he met theatrical director Hall-Flavin that he conceived what would eventually be “Autumn Song.”

Hall-Flavin told Maurer that the poetry was dense on its own, and that the music lifts it up, he said. The theatrical production could further lift the music.

Williams and Rikle sing the poetry to each other, as if it’s a conversation.

In the play, Williams conjures up Rilke in his mind, and they speak to each other using parts of the other person’s poetry. Williams asks the questions already written into Rilke’s poetry. And Rilke answers with more questions.

Throughout the performance, Williams gradually develops from forlorn beach bum to an established playwright.

At one point, inspiration hits and Williams’ poetry enters the show.

“You can see the influence of Rilke,” Maurer said.

The reception to the first full performance in front of an audience in July surprised Maurer. Central Minnesota musician Jeff Engholm also performed with the show on bass. He also sang a part in the show.

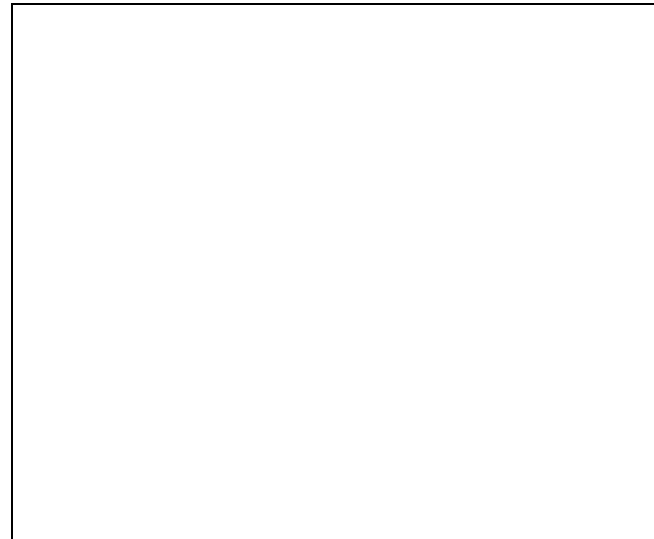
Maurer recently started a Kickstarter campaign to help pay the salaries of the entire cast that will fly to Massachusetts to perform at the festival. He wants to raise \$5,000.

Maurer looks forward to the reception at the Williams festival, where audience members will be much more familiar with Williams than Rilke.

He thinks they’ll get something different out of the piece than someone less familiar with his work.


“The music just enhances it all,” he said.

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George Mauer is pictured on Friday on the campus of the College of St. Benedict in St. Joseph. Mauer's first theatrical composition will be performed at the Tennessee Williams Theater Festival in September in Massachusetts. / Times photos by Stacy Thacker, sthacker@stcloudtim

FUTURE PRODUCTIONS

Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, Sept. 20-23, in Provincetown, Mass. For more, visit www.twptown.org .

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To watch a video from the July 23 performance at St. Joan of Arc Church in Minneapolis, visit bit.ly/Qgob8t. For a video of George Maurer discussing his work, visit www.sctimes.com .



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