Anticipating the centennial of two of his favorite classical pianists, Steven Spooner trained in.  

Spooner conceived a project while on a hotel victory in the Rock Chalk Review, he says, “It’s kind of autobiographical.” In addition to classical pieces from each pianist’s repertoire, Spooner performs hymns like “Amazing Grace” and “How Great Thou Art,” popular tunes like “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” and traditional songs such as “Shenandoah,” an homage to his favorite jazz pianist, Keith Jarrett. “That’s just me,” Spooner says. “I’ve a kid from New Orleans who grew up playing in church, and I really love jazz, too.”  

Reviews have been positive, with major publications like International Piano and Fanfare praising “Dedications” after overcoming initial reluctance to review a soundtrack of my life,” he says. “It’s kind of autobiographical.”

Dr. Steven Spooner

New world view

Hindi study gives neurobiologist fresh insights—and debate prize

Fresh off his April victory in the prestigious Yale University Hindi debate and his KU graduation, Danish Theisen, CI’17, chose as his final field views on how far he has come in his four years on Mount Oread. “I’m a completely different person, and one of the key things getting involved in Hindi,” says Theisen, of Overland Park, who graduated this May with a degree in neurobiology. “I was a very objective, scientific, one-track, hardcore atheist type of kid freshman year. Then I got involved in Hindi and saw the world views drastically different from my own and suddenly I softened. I’m not about this flawless objective reality. I’m willing to let in some spirituality and explore these drastically different views.”

“I’m sure my freshman-year self would be scoffing at me now.” Spooner considered doing his own transcription of the 15th “Hungarian Rhapsody,” one of his favorites. “But I thought, ‘No, we already have Mr. Horowitz playing that. We don’t need to do it again.”

Instead, he decided to do something different: Figuring that if Horowitz were alive today he’d tackle a piece familiar to contemporary audiences, Spooner chose a song “almost universally known”: Queen’s “We Are the Champions.”

The result, which reflects Spooner’s own study of Horowitz’s transcription technique and suggested learning style, is a soaring, virtuoso reimagining of the rock anthem that Horowitz would appreciate. “Rubinstein said, ‘If you’re a second Rubinstein you’re a first nothing,” Spooner says of another lauded classical pianist, Arthur Rubinstein. “Every pianist dedicates this project to had their own unique arrangement—called transcriptions—of other composers’ works, including renditions of Franz Liszt’s “Hungarian Rhapsodies” and a lively reading of John Philip Sousa’s “Stars and Stripes Forever” that was a popular encore at his concerts.

“Without their legacies, I don’t know that I would be playing the piano professionally,” Steven Spooner says of the pianists he honors on “Dedications.” So I felt I owed them quite a lot.”

“As long as I was playing, my higher education was unintelligible to me. The longer I went on, but I didn’t know how to save the conversation,” she says. Kelly attended a weeklong workshop at KU’s Hall Center for the Humanities to learn how to translate her academic interests and explore potential careers. “I was a very objective, scientific, one-track, hardcore atheist type of kid freshman year. Then I got involved in Hindi and saw the world views drastically different from my own and suddenly I softened. I’m not about this flawless objective reality. I’m willing to let in some spirituality and explore these drastically different views.”

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“The biggest takeaway from the program was that I already had the skills that nonprofits were looking for; I just hadn’t developed the language to articulate them successfully as being useful to an organization;” Kelly says. “The way I was discussing my higher education was unintelligible to people outside of my field.”

Henry Fortunato, Hall Center visiting fellow, says the weeklong sessions the Applied Humanities Boot Camp, which completed its third year May 15-19. Funded through 2018 by the Hall Family Foundation, the initiative is the brainchild of Fortunato, a former Simons public humanities fellow at KU, Victor Bailey, director of the Hall Center and Charles W. Battey Distinguished Professor of Modern British History; and Sally Utech, associate director of the Hall Center. “The program is a response to the national conversation about what to do with a graduate degree in humanities, him far beyond his expectations.”

“We speak subject-verb-object, and in Hindi they go subject-object-verb, with the verb at the end of every sentence, and that changes the way you think. You don’t realize it at first, but when you change how you speak, it actually changes how you perceive and think about the world.”

“Being a neurobiologist and someone who is interested in the mind, it really fascinated me and drew me in.” — Chris Lazzarino

Campus life

Grad students explore careers beyond academe at ‘boot camp’

Meghan Kelly recalls her struggles to explain her graduate studies in English to outsiders. “It was like watching people who were watching a horror movie—I could see them physically wince the longer I went on, but I didn’t know how to save the conversation,” she says. Kelly attended a weeklong workshop at KU’s Hall Center for the Humanities to learn how to translate her academic interests and explore potential careers. “The biggest takeaway from the program was that I already had the skills that nonprofits were looking for; I just hadn’t developed the language to articulate them successfully as being useful to an organization;” Kelly says. “The way I was discussing my higher education was unintelligible to people outside of my field.”

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In conversations with Victor and Sally, it connect academia and the public sphere. He thought there must be a way to employed Hall Center interns at the of KUHistory.com for the KU Memorial City Public Library and led the creation Rabbit Hole, a startup nonprofit in Kansas role in grants and development for The with my life that was contributing to a just not how you survive in the academic boot camp offers a guide. I intend to pursue tenured teaching PhD'11. Full-time, tenure-track positions the value of a humanities degree in the public sphere and the nuts and bolts of running an arts or nonprofit organization. In the afternoons, students work in small groups to plan public celebrations of historical anniversaries. This year’s choices included the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther’s 95 Theses and the beginning of the Protestant Reformation the 125th anniversary of the Treaty of Medicine Lodge the 125th anniversary of Frank Lloyd Wright’s birth the 50th anniversary of Thurgood Marshall’s appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court Students must work within budgets and consider ways to stir public interest in learning about the original event and its impact. On the final day of camp, students present 15-minute pitches to a panel of judges, just as they might try to sway a group of potential sponsors. Judges weigh each program’s likelihood of generating participation and media exposure, then offer their critiques. No one “wins,” but all camp participants receive $500 stipends. Three afternoons also include “speed dating”—panels of professionals share their work, then move from table to table, answering students’ questions. This year, one panel included four freelancers who each gave a talk on how to succeed as one’s own boss. Other panels focused on arts, historical and cultural nonprofits. Kelly’s boot camp experience led to her finding a position within the humanities field, especially one that is so close to my heart,” she says. “I love that my work is to make literature more present in the lives of others.” —Jennifer Lawler Lawler, c’88, g’94, Ph.D’96, is a Lawrence freelance writer. Hearing from Mary McMurray, PhD’17, now director of learning and engagement for the Truman Library Institute, made all the difference for Kelly. “She basically gave us a how-to manual for speaking practically and coherently about our expertise in academe to the people outside of it,” Kelly says. “In fact, I reviewed the notes from her presentation when I went on my first non-academic job interview, to help me remember some of the keywords and connections she made. I ended up landing that job!” The fifth day of each camp features a field trip to Kansas City for tours of nonprofit entities and discussions with senior staff members. This year, students visited the American Jazz Museum, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, KCPT public television and Nonprofit Connect, an association of nearly 500 nonprofits that offers networking opportunities. Kelly says the experience helped her accomplish her goals as a graduate student. “I’m kind of astounded that I found a position within the humanities field, especially one that is so close to my heart,” she says. “I love that my work is to make literature more present in the lives of others.” —Jennifer Lawler Lawler, c’88, g’94, Ph.D’96, is a Lawrence freelance writer.

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Asha and Riley, heroes of the trilogy’s first two books, Transcendental (2014) and Transgalactic (2016), volunteer to find the source of the invasion and stop it. Gunn, c’47, g’51, who began writing science fiction in 1948, delights in sly literary references. Transcendental riffed on Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales and Transgalactic borrowed its structure from the Odyssey. Transformation plays with the classical myth of Jason and the Golden Fleece, as the argonaut-like crew of the spaceship Adatau encounters a succession of strange creatures while crossing space to investigate the conquered worlds. The book also takes up ideas about artificial intelligence that Gunn’s late friend Isaac Asimov explored in his robot novels. “All these references are a kind of tribute to the fact that I’m writing in a tradition that has been built over the generations,” Gunn says. “All of these other writers I wanted to give credit to, very subtly perhaps, who have contributed not only to my own understanding and reading of science fiction, but also the kind of concepts they’ve contributed to the genre. “I don’t know if people will pick up on it, but it amuses me. It’s the way that I found interesting to sort of deal with my origins.” Michael Page, who recently published the first full-length biography of Gunn, Saving The World Through Science Fiction, says Gunn’s role as a teacher and scholar stands out in his latest novel.

“Transformation, the final book in science fiction Grand Master James Gunn’s Transcendental trilogy, entertains a central theme of the genre: invasion by an alien species. The most distant planets in the Galactic Federation, a sprawling association of civilizations in the Galaxy Way, fall silent, gradually alerting the federation’s central bureaucracy that some malign force is wiping out alien races one by one. The result, remarkably, is a dozen books scheduled to publish over the next few years, starting with his memoir, Star—Begotten, this fall; new Chinese translations of his illustrated history of science fiction, Alternate Worlds, and his six-volume anthology The Road to Science Fiction, and his KU master’s thesis from 1951, Modern Science Fiction, which Page is editing and annotating. Even Transcendental is getting new life: Gunn rewrote and expanded the 12 stories he wrote for the pilgrims telling during their long journey, and Asimov’s Science Fiction magazine is seriously considering publishing three or four stories and an essay starting this summer. “It’s rather odd that in my 93rd year all this is happening,” says Gunn. “But I’m honored and humbled by the notion that people think it’s worth discussing for a day.” —Steven Hill

“Transformation” by James Gunn

Tor Books, $26.99

“The things he’s been teaching so many of us for so many years get worked into the story?” Page says. “It’s not just science fiction references, he works in classic literary references which are really indicative of his career as an English professor. That’s the high-literature aspect to Jim’s work that other science fiction writers don’t necessarily incorporate.” Page was among the guests at KU’s Gunn Center for the Study of Science Fiction’s annual Campbell Conference and Awards, which celebrated Gunn’s 80 years in science fiction in June. Reflecting on the completed trilogy, Gunn noted his satisfaction in seeing through his big idea. “It feels good,” he says. “I can sort of sit back and relax because I’m sort of cleaning up those ends of other projects now.”