

# Rock Chalk Review



## Grand piano

### Professor records 'monumental' tribute to classical greats

Anticipating the centennial of two of his favorite classical pianists, Steven Spooner conceived a project while on sabbatical in 2014 that would pay tribute to his musical heroes.

Soviets Sviatoslav Richter, born in 1915, and Emil Gilels, born in 1916, “were leading figures in the art of the piano and two of the best pianists who ever lived,” says Spooner, professor of music.

The idea started small—Spooner originally planned a five-disc collection—but soon grew into something much larger: the 16-disc set “Dedications.”

“When I reflected on their legacies, especially Richter, who played more repertoire than any pianist before or since, I thought, ‘This has to be larger. If I’m going to dedicate something that encapsulates his art form, I need to do something grand.’ So I just challenged myself to see how monumental the set could be.”

With eight volumes dedicated to

Richter, three to Russian-born Vladimir Horowitz, and one each to Gilels and American virtuoso Van Cliburn, Spooner put together a tribute that’s “monumental” in more ways than one: It’s an exceptional achievement of colossal size and scope and a memorial to the pianists who shaped Spooner’s own piano performance career.

Two additional CDs titled “Memories and Dedications” and a special DVD of a recital Spooner gave in Swarthout Recital Hall round out the 16-disc set, which also includes Spooner’s spoken thoughts on many of the pieces he tackles.

Born and reared in Louisiana (also the birthplace of Cliburn), Spooner moved to Tbilisi and Moscow at 20 to study with pianist and composer Nodar Gabunia, whose work is also among the dedications in the set. The Russian school of piano that dominates the recording is the school Spooner trained in.

“Listening to these records is like a

“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.”

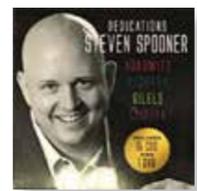
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 soundtrack of my life,” he says. “It’s kind of autobiographical.”

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’m 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 17-hour recording. “Such a breadth and variety of difficult pieces by a pianist I never heard of made me wonder at first if this was a hoax,” wrote a reviewer for *American Record Guide*. “But, no, the DVD proves that Steven Spooner is the real deal, a pianist of apparently limitless raw technique that’s almost note-perfect.”

A highlight is Spooner’s tribute to Horowitz, who was known for playing his own unique arrangements—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



“Dedications”  
 by Steven Spooner  
 A Life of Music Records  
[alifeofmusic.com/records](http://alifeofmusic.com/records)  
 \$29.95

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Stripes Forever” that was a popular encore at his concerts.

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 be doing 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 suggestions made by a critic who is an expert on the great pianist, 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 I dedicate this project to had their own individual voice. So I wanted to do something individual and at the same time tip my hat to Horowitz.”

—Steven Hill

## 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, Danny Theisen, c’17, chuckles as he reflects 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 was 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 there are world views drastically different from my own and suddenly I softened. I’m not about this flawless objective reality. I’m willing to let

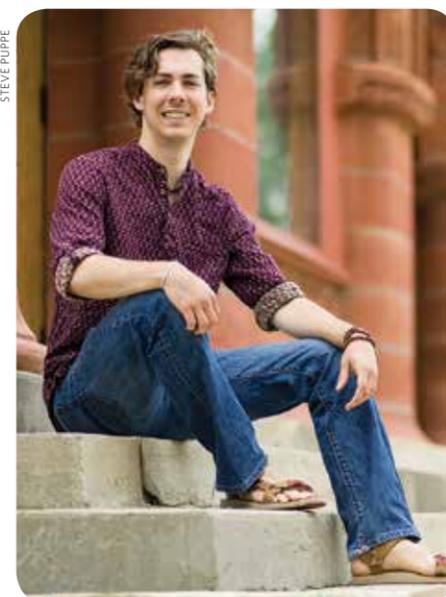
in some spirituality and explore these drastically different views.

“I’m sure my freshman-year self would be scoffing at me now.”

Seeking something a bit more adventurous than Spanish, Theisen decided to try Hindi for his required language study.

Thrilled with the immersive style of his first Hindi instructor, Geetanjali Tiwari, coordinator for South Asian Studies, Theisen soaked up culture, mythology and spirituality. He first visited India on a summer trip with KU Study Abroad, then returned for an immersive stay.

Before reporting for work as a researcher in a bio-materials lab in Bangalore, Theisen lived with the family



Theisen

of a KU friend. His hosts took him on the Vaishno Devi pilgrimage and introduced him to their food and customs.

“It was a life-changing experience. There’s a lot of things I learned about my own culture by going to a culture that’s completely different than mine.”

At the April 14 Yale debate, which is in its 10th year, Theisen competed in the “Non-Native, Non-Heritage” category against students from across the Ivy League and other elite institutions.

His triumph was a thrill, Theisen says, but his studies of Hindi language and Indian culture had already rewarded

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

## Camp counsel

### Grad students explore careers beyond academe at ‘boot camp’

Meaghan 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 programming 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, calls 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,

## Rock Chalk Review



Humanities Boot Camp for graduate students included tours and discussions with senior staff members at Kansas City nonprofits such as the American Jazz Museum at 18th and Vine.

particularly a Ph.D.," says Utech, g'05, PhD'11. Full-time, tenure-track positions are declining, and Bailey estimates that fewer than half of Ph.D. students will find full-time teaching positions.

Conversely, most graduate students intend to pursue tenured teaching positions, at least when they begin their studies. If they decide to look elsewhere, they often don't know where to start. KU's boot camp offers a guide.

Kelly, g'16, g'16, originally planned a college-level teaching career. "But that's just not how you survive in the academic world. Publish or perish, right? I decided to make sure I would be doing something with my life that was contributing to a larger cause," she says. "I needed to see the practical implications of my work."

Her boot camp experience led to her role in grants and development for The Rabbit hOle, a startup nonprofit in Kansas City committed to building an immersive museum to celebrate children's literature.

Fortunato, g'07, who previously directed public affairs for the Kansas City Public Library and led the creation of KUHistory.com for the KU Memorial Unions as a graduate student, says he often employed Hall Center interns at the library. He thought there must be a way to connect academia and the public sphere. "In conversations with Victor and Sally, it

became clear that we needed to do a better job of helping graduate students imagine possibilities beyond the university. Because of my background, I knew that public humanities organizations value humanities degrees," he says.

The boot camp is part of the Hall Center's Applied Humanities Initiative, which won the 2016 Award for Excellence and Innovation in Graduate Education from the Midwestern Association of Graduate Schools. In addition to the boot camp, the initiative includes panel discussions led by directors and managers of arts and cultural organizations and other nonprofits, along with six to 10 paid summer fellowships in such organizations. Each 10-week fellowship focuses on a specific project.

The camp offers 12 graduate students in humanities or social sciences a week to immerse themselves in possibilities. For four days, morning sessions feature talks by professionals on subjects that include

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 their take on how to succeed as one's own boss. Other panels focused on arts, historical and cultural nonprofits.



Bailey, Utech and Fortunato

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 experiences in academia for 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, PhD'96, is a Lawrence freelance writer.

## Transformer

**Gunn ends trilogy with classic tropes and tributes to a genre he helped define**

**T**ransformation, 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 Milky Way galaxy, fall silent, gradually alerting the federation's central bureaucracy that some malign force is wiping out alien races one by one.



Gunn

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, j'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 Adastral 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.

"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. There's a high-literature aspect to Jim's work that other science fiction writers don't necessarily incorporate."

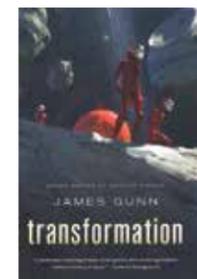
Page was among the guests at KU's Gunn Center for the Study of Science Fiction's annual Campbell Conference and Awards, which celebrated Gunn's 80 years in science fiction in June. Reflecting on the completed trilogy, Gunn noted his satisfaction in seeing through his big idea.

"It feels good," he says. "I can sort of sit back and relax because I'm sort of cleaning up loose ends of other projects now."

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 reworked and expanded the personal tales each of the pilgrims tell during their long journey, and Asimov's Science Fiction magazine is serializing the nine 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