

MUSIC

Fort Myers composer William Dawson Jr. has the pen, but the songs are already there



Harriet Howard Heithaus
Naples

Published 3:48 p.m. ET Aug. 9, 2017 | Updated 3:48 p.m. ET Aug. 9, 2017

[View Comments](#)



Concert pianist and composer William Dawson is photographed in Naples on Monday, July 31, 2017. *Dorothy Edwards/Naples Daily News*

William Dawson Jr. is fumbling toward nirvana. The concert pianist and music school teacher has found the career of his dreams — composing — at age 73.

William Dawson Jr. is fumbling toward nirvana. The concert pianist and music school teacher has found the career of his dreams — composing — at age 73.

"I'm getting married at age 73," the North Fort Myers resident said impishly. "I've finally found my true love."

That love gets a public ceremony Tuesday, Aug. 15, in a world premiere of Florida poet laureate Peter Meinke's poetry set to Dawson's music at Naples United Church of Christ (see information box). The audience will be hearing the first concert dominated by Dawson's songs; it is part of the Naples-based [Grand Piano Series](#) organized by Milana Strezeva.

"This is a really big step for me," Dawson asserted. That is despite the fact Dawson has already written a 20-minute orchestral score on the historic Mayan ruins of Chichen Itza. It was sponsored by the Mexican government and performed at the site by an international orchestra. His soaring 150th Psalm was commissioned and recorded by the Southwest Florida Symphonic Chorus in 2008.



Concert pianist and composer William Dawson at the piano in Naples on Monday, July 31, 2017. *Dorothy Edwards/Naples Daily News*

His ["River Suite,"](#) arrangements of tunes like "Suwanee River," is becoming a vocal concert staple.

"I'm doing this backwards," Dawson fretted. But happily. Artists he respects will give this intimate music its first public reading: concert pianist [Richard Bosworth](#), Gulfshore Opera founder and soprano [Steffanie Pearce](#), soprano [Nadia Marshall](#) and baritone [Christopher Holloway](#).

Meinke, who has written 18 books of poetry and short stories, will read from his works and Bosworth will play an additional solo, Ravel's "Ondine," based on poetry by Aloysius Bertrand.

Dawson admits, a bit sheepishly, that he has put more time into composing than into marketing his works.

He's still known as a pianist; as late as last year he performed around Florida with two Southwest Florida Symphony members as the Gulfshore Trio. He's also known as a veteran teacher who helped found the New World School of Music in Miami and served as music consultant to the University of Yucatan.

"I'm trying to set forth myself as a composer, trying to establish myself," Dawson said. Yet, he added, he needs to do more: "I don't even have a website."



Peter Meinke *Mark Wemple*

To add to that elusivity, Dawson chose as the lyrics to a set of his concert songs the poetry of poet laureate Meinke, who not only has no website — he has no TV or stereo.

Dawson recalled delivering a CD he'd made of his songs from Meinke's poetry to give the writer a hearing. He arrived, he recalled, at "a little corner of Saint Pete that's draped, heavily draped, in Spanish moss. His home looks just like a storybook cottage.

"So, I get to his house and I'm going to play this music for him to see if he likes it. He says, 'Well I don't have a stereo.' We had to go out to my car and listen to it on my player!"

He laughed at the picture of two slightly senior men sitting in his car, listening to music like teens checking out a new band.

The sense of peace in Meinke's poetry, steeped in his devotion to stillness, is what moved Dawson to choose his works, Dawson said.

Meinke's poetry, he continued, has a "kindness" about it: "It's warm. It's human. And it's very imaginative." He read from "Miss Arbuckle," a rumination on an archetypal drillmaster schoolmarm that offers her wings:

*She gave her students rigid tests
and when the school let out in June,
She painted rings around her breasts
and danced by the light of the moon.*

Dawson writes music of that nature, both lean and rich, according to Bosworth, who said has a Rachmaninoff approach.

"His accompaniments are so satisfying to play. I love the text painting, how he bolsters the text with his music."

That may be their drawback to further exposure, Dawson observed. Many publishing companies want accompaniment at the lowest common denominator, simple for a pianist. Dawson can't bring himself to do that.

"I've poured my heart and soul into it late in life," he said of his work.

Grand Piano Series

'Poetry & Music Unite'

When: 7 p.m. Tuesday, Aug. 15

Where: Naples United Church of Christ, 5200 Crayton Road, Naples

Admission: \$40

To buy: grandpianoseries.com

Information: 646-734-8179

[View Comments](#)

