

# BSC's Charles Norman Mason wins prestigious Rome Prize

Charles Norman Mason has captured one of the world's most prestigious composition prizes.

The Birmingham-Southern College faculty member is one of two composers to win the 2005-06 Rome Prize, awarded annually by the American Academy in Rome, Italy. In winning the prize, he joins 15 scholars and 13 other artists in various arts and humanities disciplines. It carries a cash stipend of \$20,000 and an 11-month residency at the academy, located on the Janiculum, Rome's highest hill.

Mason follows in the footsteps of composers such as Howard Hanson, John Harbison, Elliott Carter, Aaron Jay Kernis and Randall Thompson. Its French equivalent, the Prix de Rome, counted Hector Berlioz, Georges Bizet and Claude Debussy among its recipients.

The 50-year-old Mason believes the prize will give his career a boost.

"It gives me a certain legitimacy if I'm trying to get a commission from an ensemble," he says. "If I can say 'I'm a Rome Prize winner,' they're going to listen more than if I say 'I'm a good composer.'"

He places the prize's prestige level slightly below the Pulitzer but above the Grawemeyer, the University of Louisville award which gives \$200,000 to a composer each year.



**Michael Huebner**

"The Grawemeyer has a lot more money, but it doesn't have the name value of the Rome Prize," he says.

Mason will move to Rome in September with his wife, Dorothy Hindman, also a BSC faculty composer, and their sons Jacob, 6, and Willy, 3. It will give him a chance to complete several projects, including works for the Corona Guitar Quartet in Denmark, the Pennsylvania-based Four Horizons Quartet and a piece for electronic violin and cello for Karen Bentley Pollick and Craig Hultgren.

"Having eight hours a day to compose is really a dream," he says. "I'll do that for five days a week, with two days to explore Italy and the rest of Europe."

He was awarded an early sabbatical for the project, for which BSC President David Pollick has given his support.

"My peers are envious, not because I have a Rome Prize but because I have a president who

knows what it is," says Mason.

## Ara excels at BSC

One of Mason's compositions ended a concert by the Ara Saxophone Quartet Tuesday at BSC. "All Four One" pivots between restful landscapes of sustained pitches and unsettling rhythms that veer toward the edge of playability. The Birmingham-based quartet tackled the difficult score admirably, at times heroically, capping a evening of demanding yet entertaining music by several local composers.

Dorothy Hindman's clever, smile-inducing "Drift" is a rhythmic minefield that explores various harmonies in quick succession. Mary Elizabeth Neal shows the influence of Hindman, her teacher at BSC, in "Don't Move," a short exercise in syncopation. Samford University composer James Jensen's coherent and satisfying "Three Strategems for Saxophone Quartet" alternates between acidic harmonies, vigorous rhythms and lyrical, Celtic-inspired melodies.

Even if the minimalist Philip Glass isn't your cup of tea, you had to like the quartet's energetic rendition of "Quartet," characterized by thoughtful attention to balance, nicely tapered dynamics and dizzying



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scale patterns. This virtuoso ensemble, comprised of Meredith Warren (soprano), Jonathan Bergeron (alto), Allen Warren (tenor) and Aaron Pirl (baritone), nicely fills another niche in Birmingham's burgeoning new music scene.

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Charles Norman Mason usually composes music at his studio piano at Birmingham-Southern College, but for 11 months he'll draw inspiration at the American Academy in Rome, Italy.