

The Last Flower

JAN BACH COMPOSITION WILL DEBUT IN INDY

Charles Staff, Music Critic, Indianapolis Star, March 10, 1996

With a name like Bach, surely Jan Bach was born to be a composer.

Not necessarily, the Illinois native reports.

Bach, whose *The Last Flower* will be given its world premiere by the Ronen Chamber Ensemble Tuesday night in the Circle Theatre's Wood Room, says that art, engineering and physics were also in his deck of cards.

"I honestly don't know why I chose music," said the Northern Illinois University faculty member who lives in St. Charles, a western suburb of Chicago. "I was just as interested in graphic art. In fact, my folks thought I'd become a commercial artist. And I was always making little inventions and considered physics and engineering. "But you need other people to be with you in music and that appealed to me. Art you can do alone, and I still draw."

He began composing when he was 7 years old. I'd do what I considered improvements on the piano pieces I was learning. The old lady I studied with didn't like that so I decided to do originals, but she didn't like those either. Just think what I might have done with a little encouragement," he added with an easy laugh. Bach is a horn player and pianist whose teachers included composers Aaron Copland and Thea Musgrave and pianist Soulima Stravinsky, son of the illustrious Igor. He also is an avid reader. Often oddly named, his works reflect his literary interests. Bach has regularly titled pieces, such as his *Harp Concerto*, written for Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra principal Diane Evans and given its world premiere by Evans and the orchestra in 1988. His list also includes *Skizzen* for wind quintet, *Eisteddfod* for flute, viola and harp, *Concerto for Steelpan and Orchestra* and *Four Two-Bit Contraptions* for flute and horn, which Ronen performed last season. "Skizzen is German for sketches. It's in nine short movements and the music is derived from Heinrich Kley, a German cartoonist before World War I who was ahead of his time dealing with things like air pollution and railroad safety. They put him in a mental institution to keep him quiet," Bach explained.

Purposely written for the combination Debussy used in his 1916 trio-sonata, *Eisteddfod* is Welsh for "sitting down" Bach said, and is the name of a Welsh choral festival. He calls the premiere of the work at the 1979 Aldeburgh Festival, founded by the late Benjamin Britten, the highlight of his life. It was there while doing research for his doctoral dissertation on Britten in 1968 that he met ISO music director Raymond Leppard. "I just sent Leppard a tape of the Steelpan Concerto (for possible ISO performance) which received a three-minute ovation at its premiere in Chicago last November," Bach said, adding, "It's full of Trinidad rhythms -- and there's a point where the strings settle down to a repeated figure and the steel-drum soloist (Liam Teague in the premiere) is free to do what he likes."

Cadenzas improvised by the soloists hark back to Mozart and even further, to the baroque period. Bach says that most of his works have a baroque passage, almost like a "signature" similar, he remarked, to the late director Alfred Hitchcock always appearing briefly in his own films.

His opera *The System* is based on *The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether* by Poe, all of whose tales Bach says he's read, and his 1979 *The Happy Prince*, a narrative-and-music version of Wilde's children's story, was recorded in 1980 by the Nebraska Sinfonia under Thomas Briccetti, former ISO associate conductor. Bach describes *The Last Flower*, based on a story with pictures by the late humorist-cartoonist James Thurber, as a "fable in music."

"I wanted to use It 20 years ago but I wasn't allowed because of a revival of the show, *Thurber Carnival*, which included *The Last Flower* as a dance-pantomime. I thought of it again when I received the Ronen commission and Thurber's daughter, Rosemary, who lives in Michigan, consented after considering it for about six months. If it's published or recorded, I'll have to renegotiate the deal with her.

"The fable, one of Thurber's most touching, deals with the human race's ability to destroy and renew itself," he said. "Everybody's down and out after a nuclear war. All these poor souls are wandering around and great rabbits pounce on them. That's Thurber."