

# It's got that swing

The musical alchemy  
of Ned Corman and  
The Commission Project.

by Isobel Neuberger

**T**he Commission Project has brought the gift of music to about 30,000 students in Rochester and beyond. But its founder, Ned Corman, isn't about to take himself too seriously. In fact, "founder" sounds awfully formal to Corman. He prefers the title "The GHPB."

"The Grand High Pooh Bah," he says, smiling. "An outlandish and ridiculous character," referencing Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*.

The title written on grant applications is somewhat more staid: executive director. And despite rumors that one of the Muppet characters was modeled after him, somebody must be taking Corman seriously. The Commission Project brings professional composers into schools to guide students through the creation of original jazz and classical works. Since its inception in 1994, 360 pieces have been commissioned, 84 of which have been published and 32 commercially released. One hundred and twelve composers, including Max Roach and Eastman School of Music graduate Jeff Beal (who wrote music for television's *Monk* and *Rome*), have served in 84 schools nationwide.

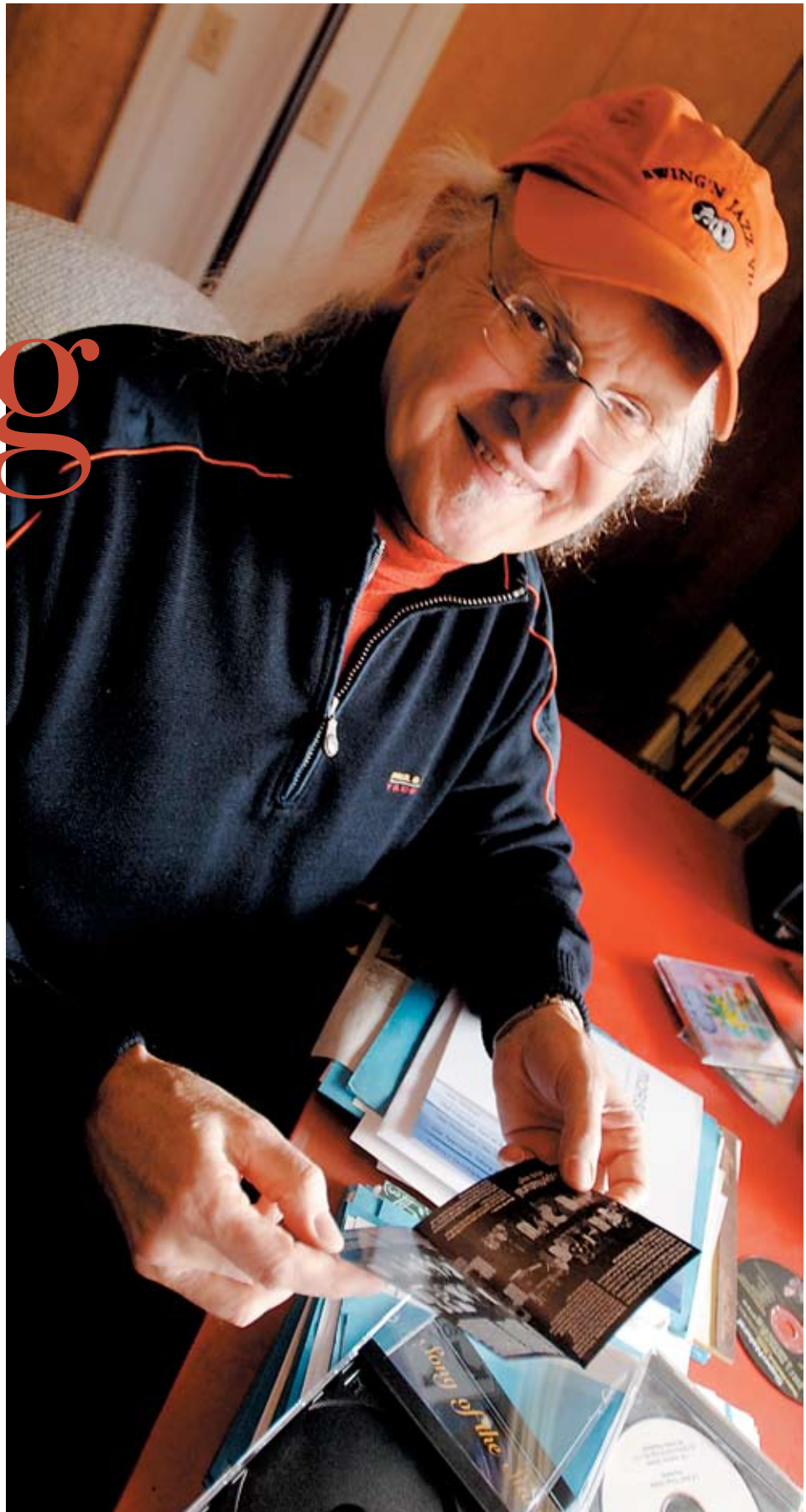


PHOTO BY LISA HUGHES

**COMMISSION MISSION.** Ned Corman brings musicians to schools to help keep young people creative.



PHOTO BY LISA HUGHES

**COMPOSER TO COMPOSER.** Libby Larsen, a world-renowned composer and founder of the American Composers Forum, worked recently with School of the Arts 10th-grader Erika Rosa-Santos as part of the Commission Project. Students shared their compositions with Larsen and received feedback from her.

The public supports these efforts—and benefits from them—as well, mostly through *Swing 'n Jazz*, the Project's annual fundraiser that finds a happy intersection between music and golf. This year's event, June 2-4, will feature a "Drummers' Night Out" session on Friday evening (Corman promises scintillating performances led by legendary percussionist John Beck), free educational workshops for students on Saturday, a gala concert at Hochstein Music School on Saturday evening, a golf tournament Sunday morning, and dinner and a concert on Sunday evening. All the events are open to the public—and the public has responded.

"Year one, the event grossed about \$25,000. Last year, a little over \$100,000," Corman says.

But perhaps the best measure of The Commission Project's success is that now, after 12 years, its participants have proven

a loyal and committed bunch. Trumpet player Paul Smoker, adjunct professor at Nazareth College, has served at School of The Arts for four years now, the same tenure as bassist Tim Sullivan, retired from the Nazareth music faculty, at School 42. Composer Howie Rowe, founder of the jazz ensemble at Rush-Henrietta School District, is in his eighth year in Greece schools. David Liptak, chair of the Eastman School of Music's Composition Department, has written not just one but four compositions for the project.

Even the very first composer-in-residence placement continues to flourish. Back in 1994, Corman offered Fairport High School Jazz Ensemble director Bill Tiberio a composer for a year. On May 6, that ensemble joins forces with the Cornell University Jazz Ensemble (which includes four Fairport High School graduates) for a 7:30 p.m. concert at Fairport's school auditorium. Corman says music

commissioned by The Commission Project is integral to the concert.

Such loyalty and staying power start from the top, and Corman's commitment to his original idea has surely been the project's backbone. Corman, who plays saxophone, flute and clarinet, ran the Penfield Music Commission Project as co-chair of the school's music department (he began teaching at Penfield in 1968). When Corman retired in 1994, he founded The Commission Project so other districts could benefit. He and his wife, artist Linda Q. Corman, put up money and made a commitment to support the Project for the first seven years, which eventually turned into nine.

This year the Project will touch about 3,000 students in the city and suburbs, but it also has expanded into Canada, New York City and five other states.

"We try to give away money without restrictions. It's pretty random," Corman

says cheerfully. So too is his management style. "I urge all composers-in-residence to seek out student composers and involve the students the best way they see. Some composers are good at incorporating student ideas, some are good at coaching. Libby Larsen worked with seven student composers at her SOTA session on March 3. At Pittsford Sutherland a few years ago, two students wrote four-to-five-minute works for band. Both were better pieces than the composer-in-residence created. Creation is a fickle mistress."

Corman makes it clear that the professionals do this "more as a labor of love than a source of income. They could do better selling shoes."

For the students, it's a chance to become immersed in the creative process, after they've been to the music store and become immersed in the songs.

"What happened before it got to the store is something that doesn't get dealt with," Corman explains. "But if a composer happens to play and goes in and sits down with that jazz ensemble or makes some music with them, in the middle of them, the relationship's different."

## Drum it up

The Commission Project will hold a public drummers circle at noon on Thursday, June 1, on Gibbs Street downtown (weather permitting) to drum up excitement for the Swing 'n Jazz music and golf fundraiser, which runs June 2-4. Some of Rochester's finest drummers, including Kristen Shiner McGuire and John Beck, will perform.

That relationship, he believes, can help preserve creativity in schools—something that clearly stirs his passions. "These days I'm interested in screwing up the No Child Left Behind Act, which increasingly saps joy out of going to school. Creative thinking is less valued. Teachers and kids are increasingly more anxious."

And that's where The Commission Project comes in. "Composers and performers help kids not lose interest in being creative," he says. "Recess, I think, is the most important part of little kids' lives—just messin' around."

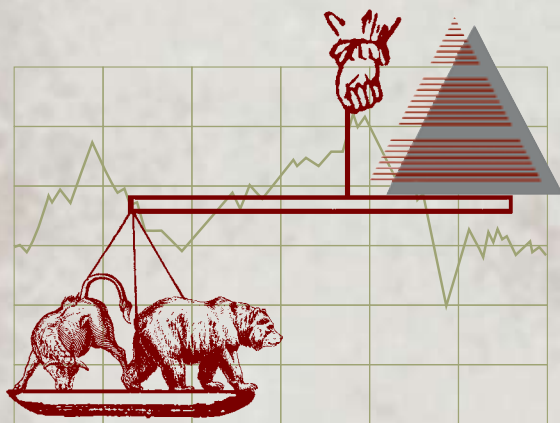
Corman's fondness for recess helps explain the appeal of Swing 'n Jazz.

Corman credits the event's origins to avid golfer and board member Steve Gates, who a decade ago said, "I know some good musicians who like to play golf. Let's have a golf tournament."

Corman met with Rick Williams, then vice president of Dolomite (which owns Shadow Lake, Shadow Pines and Greystone Golf Clubs), who set up the golf side; Corman worked on the musician side. It turned out that jazz greats wield their golf clubs with the same enthusiasm they bring to their musical instruments. Corman says musicians who come for the rollicking nonstop weekend say, "Bring me back."

The public pays for playing with the stars in the golf tournament and for attending concerts and jam sessions, with proceeds going to the Project. Trumpeter Marvin Stamm, who has recorded with Quincy Jones and many others, serves as music director for this year's event (Corman, who will do whatever it takes, once bribed Stamm to come here using a bottle of vintage wine as bait). Other Swingin' musicians include saxophonist Bill Evans (a 2006 Grammy nominee) and brothers Bob Sneider

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**“ZOOT” CORMAN?** Rumor has it that the Muppet was modeled after Rochester’s own Ned Corman.

(guitar) and John Sneider (trumpet).

The event’s Saturday workshops give students a chance to play with the kind of talent they normally can only dream about. And one exceptionally

talented student a year is given a chance to get on stage and jam with the pros that evening at Hochstein, as well.

“I take great pride in making possible opportunities for kids and adults that, otherwise, mostly, would not exist,” Corman says. “Bringing people together always has been fun for me.”

Fun for him, and inspirational for others. People who have been touched by Corman’s creative spark are making waves in the arts. Consider some of the graduates of Penfield High School music programs (Corman co-chaired the school’s music department from 1984 to 1991). Rick Lyon created and made puppets for *Avenue Q*, the Tony-Award-winning Broadway musical. Channing Philbrick plays trumpet in the Chicago Lyric Opera Orchestra. Jeff Penney founded Sons of Sound, a leading independent recording label. David Evan Thomas recently produced a concert of his music in Minneapolis. Steven Gates became a publicist for RCA Victor and Columbia Artists Management Agency and now heads his own management company.

Still, as distinctions go, what could compare to serving as model for a

Muppets character? Corman sounds pleased when responding to the rumor: “The character was Zoot, and he played the saxophone,” Corman explains.

“The instrument looked like an alto saxophone, but the sound was a baritone saxophone. Most of the work that I did in Rochester was as a baritone player.”

That’s hardly iron-clad evidence. So years ago, Corman asked Rick Lyon, who was working then for Jim Henson, the late creator of the Muppets, about the rumor. Lyon took the question to Henson, who wouldn’t answer how he came up with Zoot. “But he wouldn’t disclaim it,” notes Corman.

So the mystery lives on. At least nobody is denying Corman his title as Grand High Pooh Bah of The Commission Project. Not surprisingly, his goal for the organization is to grow and keep growing—and to try to have fun.

*For more information on Swing ’n Jazz events or The Commission Project, visit [www.tcp-music.org](http://www.tcp-music.org) or call 586-3050.*

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