

# MSU composer creates spiritual flute concerto

By Ken Glickman  
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Hidden away in a classroom in the Community Music School — run by Michigan State University's College of Music — you will see a modest, sincere and rather quiet Marjan Helms teaching piano and music theory.

It was at the CMS that she began to know Lansing Symphony Orchestra's principal flutist, Richard Sherman.

Her Floridian roots giving

her a gentle southern accent, Helms recalls how she came to write the spiritual concerto "Seven Ascents for Flute and Orchestra" to be performed in the Lansing Symphony's fifth masterworks concert Saturday, along with pieces by Edward Elgar and Mozart.

"I taught his (Sherman's) kids, and we started to talk about the possibility of me writing something for him. As it happens, Rick also plays in



COURTESY PHOTO

Lansing Symphony Orchestra's principal flutist, Richard Sherman, and Marjan Helms, composer in residence at the Community Music School.

## IF YOU GO

» **What:** The Lansing Symphony Orchestra, Timothy Muffitt, Conductor; Richard Sherman, flute soloist.

» **When:** 8 p.m. today

» **Performance lineup:** Master-Works 5, "Enigma Variations." Mozart, Overture to "Abduction from the Seraglio" Helms, "Seven Ascents for Flute & Orchestra" Elgar, "Enigma Variations."

» **Tickets:** \$15-\$50. Call (517) 487-5001 or purchase at the door.

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## Concerto

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the Jackson Symphony, and that orchestra ended up commissioning the flute concerto. It was premiered with the Jackson last season," she said.

Although Helms has written music for flute, she wanted to get a better idea of what the instrument can do. "It's like casting a drama," she said.

She wanted to understand the personality of the main character of the play she was about to write — in this case, the flute.

She also wanted to know what Sherman liked to play — high range, low range, lofty melodies, finger-flying technical things.

Sherman said, "I like to float above the orchestra and play melodies over and over."

Helms ended up writing a powerful and spiritual concerto that runs more than 40 minutes.

"I think it's one of the longest flute concertos ever written. I love to play it because I feel there is so much of my-

self in it. And Marjan captures the flute in its most danceable moments," Sherman said.

After Helms got to know the flute's unique voice, she read poetry for inspiration. "I love poetry and books, but words and our use of language sometimes fall short. Music extends us out."

But the ideas for her new work did not come. She then put everything aside and began meditating. "The piece came to me while I was meditating. It came to me, as clear as day."

"Seven Ascents for Flute and Orchestra" is about a spiritual quest.

LSO music director and conductor Timothy Muffitt says, "I love the piece. It seems to be a perfect match between Rick's personality and the music. It's got a broad range of styles — Celtic, lyrical, folksy and a very spiritual element that speaks clearly."

"This piece is about a journey. For starters, the audience will absolutely find the music approachable. But the listener must be patient and just allow being taken on this journey of self awareness," Muffitt said.

Sherman agrees. "There's a simplicity to the whole piece that's very captivating. But there's not a moment I am not fully engaged as a performer."

Helms said, "I wanted the flute to be heard as an integrated whole with the orchestra. I worked with colors and contrasts. I did most of the writing during the summer because it's difficult to write when you have a teaching schedule to contend with. When I had time to totally concentrate on the music, it was exhilarating. I was awestruck by the process."

"There is no idyll twittering in the music — I don't write showy music just for virtuosic sake. I want my music to be satisfying on many levels.

"One of the real joys of composing is handing over the work of art and letting the artist read between the notes, uniquely realizing his own feeling of the music. I watched Rick do that — and it was a joy."

Over the years Helms has written several works for choirs and small ensembles. Some may remember "Rip Van Winkle," a lovely and successful children's opera Helms composed for Lansing Community College in 1993.

She also wrote a moving homage to the Holocaust called "Voices of a Vanished World."

It was performed to a filled Wharton Center house by the MSU Children's Choir and a small instrumental group.

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