

CLASSICAL ANGST

By Karen Clem Fritz

WHEN BRIAN CONN WAS YET in elementary school, family friends told his parents, Bob and Marge, that if they didn't buy him a piano, they would regret it for the rest of their lives.

As it turned out, the used piano the family immediately bought for \$145 from Marge's hairdresser has indeed helped to launch what is promising to be a prolific and groundbreaking music career for the locally-raised composer/musician who now lives in Chicago.

Under his own label, Classical Angst Publishing and Records, Brian has recently released his third CD to some good critical reviews, *Making the Streets Safe for Classical Music, Again*.

Classical Angst was established to promote the works of other living composers, as well as Conn's material. The name of the company was chosen to reflect the nature of Brian's compositions. The firm's motto is "Dispelling the belief that the only good composer is a dead composer."

As anyone who has dreamed of (or attempted) a career in the arts knows, the path to success is usually frustrating and elusive, marked with feeble and sporadic financial compensation. An artist's most profound talents are sometimes not revealed until later in life, after decades of practice and enriching experiences.

But there was never any other course Brian could pursue.

The signs were there in early childhood.

"It all started in the fourth grade when I was chosen as one of the royal children in Pioneer High School's production of *The King and I*," Brian explains.

"That Christmas I got a guitar, mostly because I loved the *Partridge Family* (a television series), and I

wanted to be like David Cassidy."

In fifth grade Brian joined the school band and learned to play the alto saxophone. The next year he asked friends who played the piano to show him how to play the left hand "since I could decipher the right by relating it to the saxophone."

Brian was on his way.

The night his parents brought home the hairdresser's piano, Brian wrote his first song on homemade manuscript paper that he'd made out of notebook paper.

He first took piano lessons from next-door neighbor Martha Oeschle. But after six months, she told Brian he had learned everything she could teach.

She recommended he continue with Vera Singer Wickline.

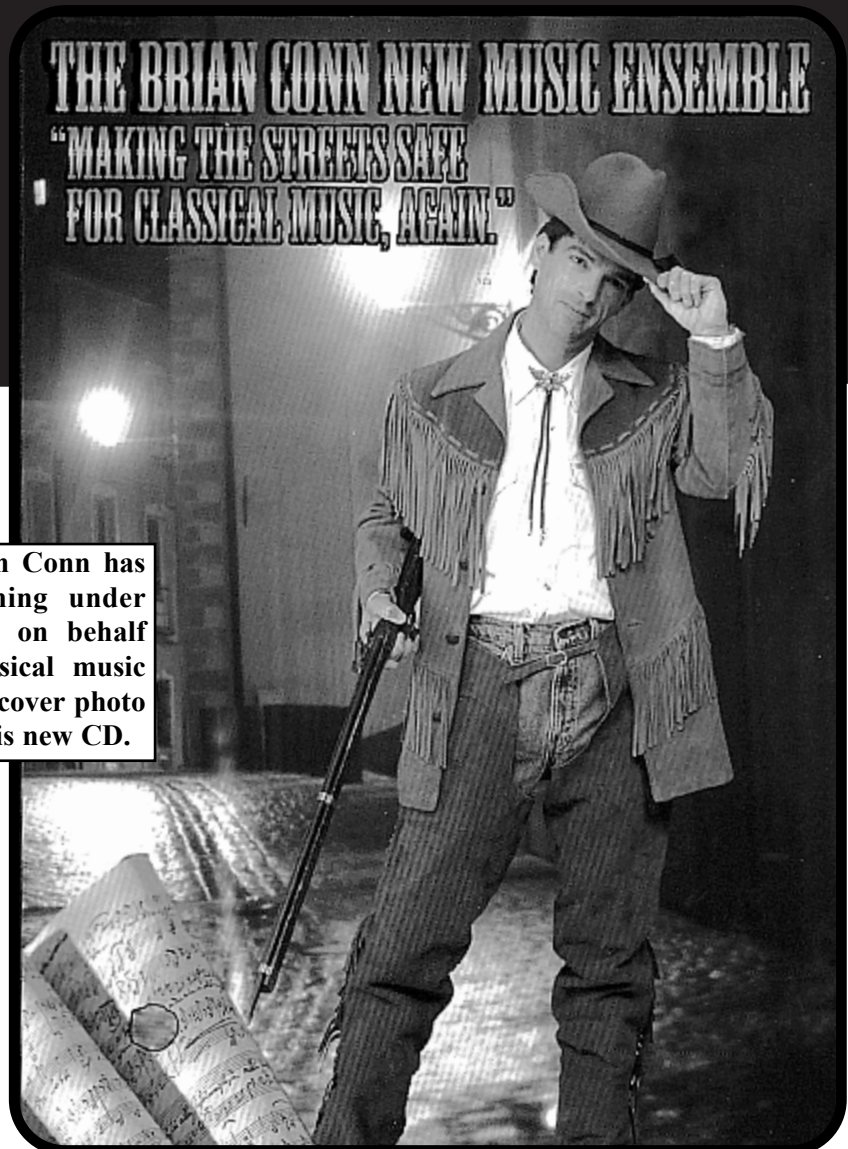
"Vera was tough, but committed to her students," Brian remembers. "She knew that I already wanted to go on in music after high school, so she went all out to help me cover the standard piano repertoire before I graduated.

"It was constant practice," he continues. "Vera was adamant about performing in recitals and going to contests. I went to NISBOVA and National Piano Guild competitions."

Brian adds that Mrs. Wickline also imparted some of the most valuable advice he ever received, "no matter what happens, keep playing."

"That adage has come in useful in more than just

Brian Conn has everything under control on behalf of classical music in this cover photo from his new CD.



musical situations," he reflects. "It taught me how to improvise and also made me a better sight-reader."

Early on, Brian began playing piano and organ at the Methodist Church in Winamac where his family attended services.

"The first few times playing organ, I had to have my friend Susan Kersey play the pedals while I played the keyboards until I had a chance to learn how to coordinate my hands and my feet," he laughs now.

Brian's high school band teacher at Winamac, Joe Vrabc, also provided extra encouragement and instruction - knowing Brian planned to pursue a music career - by teaching him to play additional instruments, including the clarinet, the baritone and marching xylophone. Brian also continued to compose music throughout high school, and his compositions received honorable mentions from the National Piano Guild contests.

"The Methodist church services provided an outlet for me to compose organ and piano preludes," Brian adds. "I also participated in the school drama club performing musicals. The high note was our production of *Godspell* in my senior year."

Please continue on next page

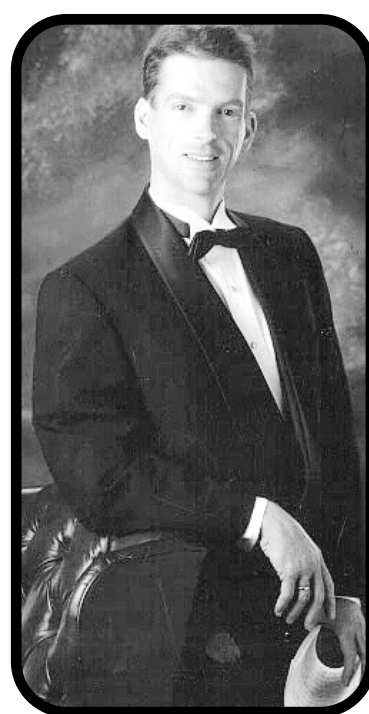
CLASSICAL ANGST...

After high school, Brian toured Europe with the "Sounds of Hope," a vocal ensemble which performs a goodwill music tour each summer.

Then he auditioned for placement at Butler University's music school and was accepted.

"During my audition I performed one of my original compositions," Brian notes. "Upon hearing it, the instructors suggested that I should seek a dual degree as a piano major with emphasis on composition, instead of only a piano performance degree.

Brian attended Butler for one year, but didn't like it. "I wanted to move to California to find fame and fortune," he smiles. "I moved to L.A. in 1982. I didn't find fame or fortune. Instead, I found retail."



He returned to college a year later. This time he pursued more composition, and in addition earned an associate's degree in interior architecture.

While in college, he again turned to a church for an outlet for his compositions, playing organ for First Congregational in Indianapolis.

Following graduation, he worked as an insurance agent for three years in Indianapolis. He moved to Chicago in 1989 and was immediately hired as an accompanist for a church choir.

"I was soon playing for masses all the time, and playing at parishes throughout the Chicago suburban area," Brian says.

As his writing continued, Brian found that his compositions were now "more involved and on a much larger scale.

"I didn't really use them for masses," he continues. "But St. James church offered me an opportunity to meet and work with some of the most talented musicians in the Chicago area. Inspired by these talented vocalists and instrumentalists, I wrote works especially for them."

In the meantime, Brian attempted to publish some of his music with well-known publishing houses, like Schirmer. But he was turned away.

"I had heard horror stories of musicians who had signed recording contracts and lost most of their royalty rights to the publishing and record companies. The big record companies also dictated what the artist recorded and what would be released - and sometimes would refuse to release certain CDs if they felt the market didn't want or need that particular genre," Brian explains.

Classical Angst

"That's why I decided to start Classical Angst so I could keep my publishing rights," he continues. Another important reason is to record and promote the music of other living composers.

"The difficult part, however, is the financing. In order to compete with large companies, you have to

be willing to do some sort of marketing, promotion, web sites, mailings and phone soliciting," Brian notes.

The company's first release was *Vocalnetics*.

"It's a collection of vocal works I've written, going back to 1991. The CD featured my St. James cronies, including fellow Butler graduate Marta Phillips who has sung with "Mostly Mozart" and other Chicago ensembles, Mary Seip who is a soloist with the Elgin Choral Union, and Kristi French who sang with Holy Name Cathedral and records for GIA (a Catholic publishing company). The string players on the CD are all members of the Grant Park Symphony, as well as Symphony of the North Shore. This CD and the following two releases were all engineered and mixed by John Tower, a St. James choir director and a talented composer in his own right who also runs a recording studio."

The second CD, *Intense Measures*, is a collection of instrumental works, several written especially for friends.

"The *Sonata for Flute and Piano* was written as a wedding gift to Susan Siciliano," Brian says. "Sue and Linda Camp performed it on the CD. Linda is an exceptional pianist who is a piano professor at Elmhurst College and concertizes quite a bit."

Brian is often asked why he doesn't play his own compositions on his records.

"As a composer, nothing can be more gratifying than to have someone else perform your works," he explains. "Every composer lives for that moment, and with such talented individuals interpreting your works, there's very little concern."



Streets, the most recent release, is a collection of both vocal and instrumental works. Joining some of the previous artists were Kim Schmidt, a well-known pianist in the U.S. and Europe, and Mary Ann Beatty, a soprano-section leader with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Chorus for 15 years.

This CD was recorded on Sept. 11, and proved to be a very emotional session.

"Mary (Seip) flew in from Pittsburgh to record two pieces I had written especially for her," Brian notes. "She has a son in the military, and both pieces have to do with being a child and returning to innocence. She was very emotional during the recording session."



John Towner (top, left) has engineered all the Classical Angst CDs. Among vocalists featured are Kristi French (above) and Marta Phillips (left).

Classical Angst CDs can be purchased at Cottage Door and the Methodist Church in Winamac, and on amazon.com

Brian is a member of ASCAP, the publishing rights association that distributes royalties for airplay and performances; the National Association of Composers; The Composers Forum; and NARAS, the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (Brian gets to vote on the Grammy's).

Brian says his love of music has always been with him.

"My parents aren't musical, but both of my grandmothers are," he observes. "I have a great-aunt who studied at Juillard. The musical genetic link apparently skipped a generation, because both my brother Brad and I are musicians.

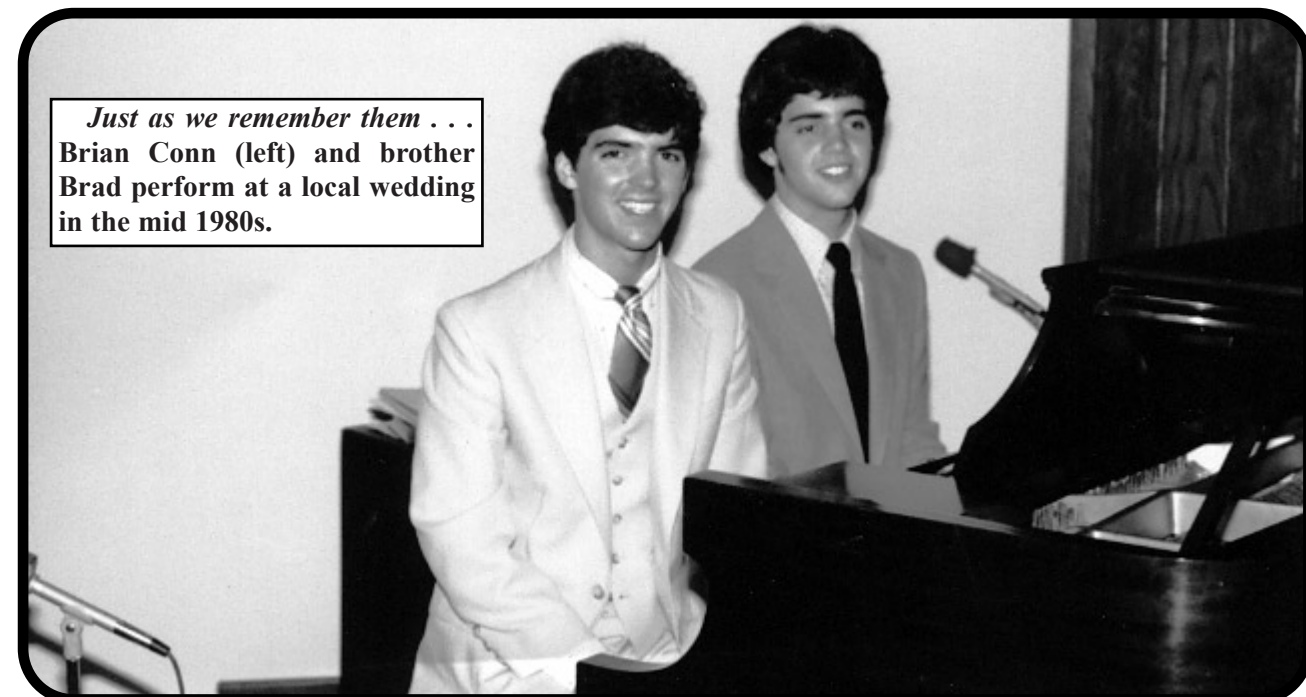
"I listen mostly to hard rock and alternative music, even though I write strictly classical music," he continues. "I think I prefer the classical genre to compose in because it allows me a greater palette to work from."

The *Streets* CD has generated some interest in the music industry, getting some radio airplay and industry press reviews.

On the horizon, Brian plans to organize some concert series and recordings of two large projects he has finished in the last few years - a requiem for chorus and orchestra, and a work for chorus, orchestra and handbell choir. He is also working on his first symphony, plus an opera and a piano concerto.

"I'd also like to score music for films," he adds. "Too bad I have to take time to sleep and eat."

And back home in Winamac, Mom and Dad have no regrets about buying the hairdresser's piano.



Just as we remember them . . . Brian Conn (left) and brother Brad perform at a local wedding in the mid 1980s.

Our Full Service Salon makes HEAD LINES

Monday - Thursday 8 - 7;
Friday 8 - 5; Saturday 8 - 2

116 N. Market, Winamac • 946-6412

Betty-Christi-Amy-Brenda-Julie-Charlotte-Becky-Sadona

FREE ESTIMATES

"THE STENCIL QUEEN"

**Wallpaper Jobs
Painted Stenciling**

Sharon Cotner
3720 W 200 S, Winamac
946-6877