

Pianist providing soundtrack to Longfellow poetry reading

By Cathalena E. Burch

Arizona Daily Star
 Tucson, Arizona

Composer/pianist Michael Hoppé writes volumes of music, but he's not known for actually putting much of it down in black and white.

He's a studio guy, he says, his faint English accent slipping in. He writes music as his muse dictates and records it when it feels right. Once recorded, it's down for posterity. No need for a written score.

Normally that's not a problem, he says, because he rarely performs his music live. In fact, the 62-year-old Grammy-nominated pianist played his first-ever live concert in Seoul, South Korea, in 2000.

"It was unbeknownst to the promoter that it was the first time I ever performed live," Hoppé recalled Tuesday during a call from his Oregon home. "It was nerve-racking."



Layne Longfellow

You will notice on Sunday — his second Tucson appearance — that his nerves are a bit calmer. But you'll also notice that he won't be following a score for a concert that he will perform with a handful of local musicians and author/lecturer Layne

Longfellow, whose great-great-grandfather Michael was a cousin of the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

"I can hardly wait," Longfellow said with a chuckle.

The concert will feature Longfellow reciting H.W.'s poetry while Hoppé and company — local musicians Devin Kim on cello, Sandy Schwoebel on flute, Bernadette Allbaugh on clarinet and soprano Heidi Fielding — perform the soundtrack.

It's the first time Hoppé and Longfellow have ever performed together. The pair made a record, "Longfellow Reads Longfellow: Dreams That Cannot Die," in 2003, but they did it in two parts: Longfellow recited the poetry in the Longfellow homes back East; Hoppé recorded the music in Los Angeles.

In a phone interview from his home in Prescott, Longfellow recalled how he had first heard Hoppé's music a decade ago in Asheville, N.C. He and some friends began reciting the poetry that informed Hoppé's album "Poet: Romances for Cello" with the cellist Martin Tillmann — miniatures based on poetry by Robert Frost, Sara Teasdale, Carl Sandburg and others.

"I read the poem aloud in front of the music. There were five of us gathered and we were absolutely in tears," Longfellow said. "The music fit the poems so beautifully."

In Los Angeles not long afterward, Longfellow popped the CD into a friend's player, and the friend immediately identified the composer as her friend Hoppé.

Long story short, Longfellow found himself in Hoppé's living room sipping

tea and hatching a plan for their album together.

Hoppé said he composed the music after listening to the readings. He has done four similar albums including "Poet."

But this is the first time Hoppé has taken this music out of the studio to a live audience. Which presents a dilemma: He has no written score and no desire to commit to memory the soundtrack from the Longfellow album.



Michael Hoppé

So he'll wing it. What you will hear will likely be similar to, yet entirely different from, the album.

"I want to put the music at the time he is reading," Hoppé noted. "When you've got something done on the fly like this, then you'll have all the excitement of improvisation. I have got to get into the headspace of making music that reflects the poem."

"I love poetry, and I certainly think the combination of poetry and music is not an uncommon stretch," he added.

"In my opinion, Michael's music is enhanced by the poetry, and the poetry is enhanced by Michael's music," Longfellow added.