A Symphonic Storm

As David Feurzeig recalls Tropical Storm Irene, its onset was milder than the warnings—from where he sat, a bullet dodged. And so begins his symphony: “stillness, intermittently broken by quick, isolated note-snippets.” But then. “They become more and more frequent until there is a full deluge of sound.” Those are the words of Vermont Symphony Orchestra conductor Anthony Princiotti who is preparing for rehearsal of High Water. “David’s piece is highly descriptive, and I think it accurately evokes what Irene felt like,” he says. “Retrospectively the warnings seem abstract in comparison to how destructive the storm was. The beginning of the piece depicts this well.”

The VSO annually commissions one piece for their “Made in Vermont” fall tour. It’s a privilege, says Feurzeig, associate professor of music theory and composition, particularly because orchestras generally choose safe, well-loved works. He usually writes for chamber groups or soloists, so to have a full symphony perform his work, not once but in eight performances, is a rarity except for the most elite composers whose names aren’t Beethoven, Bach, and the like.

Feurzeig, though, is hardly unknown. He was twice a featured guest at the International Composers Festival in Bangkok. His “Songs of Love and Protest” were selected by the Dresden Chamber Chorus for the city’s 800th jubilee and premiered in the fabled Semper Opera House, and his work has won many notable awards including the Silver Medal of the London Royal Academy of Arts.

When he was approached by the VSO, Feurzeig says they asked for something
cheerful, most of the new works for “Made in Vermont” being picturesque or historical. “They said, ‘your piece should be a little chipper,’” he laughs, “then I accidently wrote this.”

But Feurzeig did not take this project lightly. Though he and his family did some hardcore volunteer work in ravaged areas, the composer acknowledges persistent misgivings about his moral authority as a relative bystander to make art from others’ tragedy.

“It’s still pretty fresh and sensitive for a lot of people. It’s not historical yet,” he says. “And, I don’t know if this matters to anybody else, but since I wasn’t personally, materially harmed, who am I to be the person writing a piece about this? But this is the piece that wanted to happen.”

Just after he finished the score, Feurzeig got a call from a woman he had helped, building emergency lean-tos around her foundation. “She looked like she was moving through a fog when we were there, and I was amazed that she knew who we were and had tracked us down,” he says. She told Feurzeig that it was amazing what people had done and that she has more positive memories than otherwise from that time. “I can’t say that everybody feels the same way that she does,” he says, “but that felt encouraging to me that mine wasn’t an unusual reaction, that maybe other people are feeling that way.”