BEFORE HE COULD WRITE THE MUSIC, before he
could play the music, before he really could even
read the music, he could see the music. A stout wind-
up Victrola stood in his family’s Pennsylvania home,
and the boy would approach it often, record in hand,
to watch the spectacle unspool at 78 revolutions per
minute. Music would pour from the speaker — Fritz
Kreisler playing Felix Mendelssohn’s On Wings of
Song on his magical violin, singers performing Liza
Lehmann’s In a Persian Garden, orchestras playing
polkas and other folk dances. Even back then, at this
young age, the tones attracted him.

Yet this wasn’t even half the fun. The sensation that this
experience aroused most prominently wasn’t sound, but
sight. The record spun, the tone arm gradually hiked from
one edge of the oh-so-thin disc to another, and Thomas
Lawrence Read stared for hours at the whole mechanical
ballot, mesmerized. This, to him, was the essence of music,
a structured system that contained a logical progression, all
playing out before his eyes.

And that image endured. He’s 76 years old now, a
seasoned composer and violinist and pedagogue whose
latest work, the blisteringly swift Lightning Galop,
receives its world premiere at the Vermont Symphony
Orchestra’s Holiday Pops concerts on December 12,
13, and 14, standing alongside selections from Handel’s
Messiah and Tchaikovsky’s ballet The Nutcracker and
other seasonal masterworks. So many experiences have
appeared and flickered and moved on since those days
of phonograph-based entertainment. Still, the concept of
what he saw on that machine informs so much of what
music is for him today.

“I dare say that my present ability to keep a physical
concept of the total form of a piece in my mind as I work
out the details is at least partly the result of regularly
seeing as well as hearing a form unfold in time,” Read
states. “Isn’t it a bit like comparing a digital watch with
the former analog seconds-minutes-and-hours watches?
And so I have always especially enjoyed those pieces that
are at once so intricate, inevitable, and beautiful that you
want immediately to re-hear them, much as one enjoys an intricately designed mechanical toy, rewinding and restarting it again and again to watch it run out.”

He even invented a name for such pieces: automatic forms. It was that sense of clarity, certainty, and even unavoidability that drove him. The man whose first music theory lessons came from his grandmother, whose first real chamber music exposure came from his pianist mother, whose life was drenched in notes and rhythms practically since the cradle wanted that security. Architecture, and the foundational needs it demanded, became the backbone of his artistic thought.

He wanted that challenge, too, unraveling splendor within strictness. Johann Sebastian Bach had imposed compositional limitations on himself and left the world with a universe of wonderment. Generations of subsequent composers followed similar paths, unveiling their stunning creativity even while binding themselves to certain formal precepts. Read wanted to be like them, at least in terms of process.

Actually, it wasn’t merely a want. It was a need, a thirst for a center in a field that seemed to be spinning off its axis. Serialism, the compositional concept that tossed so many conventions out the window, was sweeping the musical world as Read came of age. The new normal involved creating works in which the notes all existed as part of a series or hierarchy applicable only to that piece. Traditional systems of intervals, chords, harmonies, and the like disappeared within these “serialized” compositions.

Read appreciated snatches of what the serialist composers were doing. After all, his years studying composition, conducting, and violin performance at places like the Peabody, Oberlin, and New England conservatories — the pupil of revered musicians from pianist Leon Fleisher to violinist Richard Burgin — had produced far more than just a hole-in-the-middle traditionalist. He enjoyed delving into the realm of atonal music. He experimented with plenty of contemporary techniques. He developed modern idioms that were distinctly his own.

But it wasn’t enough. Somewhere, that image of the functioning Victrola, the mechanical sense of music-making that inspired him to start writing short violin pieces back in his middle school days and full string quartets within his high school years, was lost in the shuffle. And the composer knew that he needed it back.

“In the 1970s, I found such mechanical, automatic pieces as the C minor Prelude of (Bach’s) Well-Tempered Clavier Book I, the G Major rondo of Mozart’s ‘Haffner’ Serenade, and some of Bruno Maderna’s instrumental music to be a kind of passport out of what I heard as the almost exclusively spiritual character of serialism,” Read explains. “I was then looking for ways of imagining a rationally motivated, non-tonal music that might have greater integrity than what serially generated textures seemed to offer.”

And with surprising suddenness, a solution arose. The mind of the boy who had scrutinized that old phonograph and its complete mechanical systems. There’s plenty of lyricism and living emotion inside his music, perhaps because the pieces resonate with the steady repeating march of everyday existence. A single sentence from Read’s article describing his compositional methods sums it up nicely: “I like to think that serial textures imitate intersecting time cycles that we experience in everyday life.”

Still, the most inherent concepts can be the hardest to describe. Read admits that his compositional approach can be difficult to illustrate in words rather than notes. Which brings everything back to the upcoming Holiday Pops concerts, where audiences can hear a brief but largely characteristic example of Read at work. His creation for these concerts is, at its core, a type of brisk country dance known as a “galop.” While it’s based on a non-traditional scale of notes and cast in an isochronal harmonic cycle, with pitches repeating at evenly spaced intervals of time, the work is nevertheless designed to be free-sounding and joyful.

“I tried to keep the orchestra involved through most of the short time length,” Read says of Lightning Galop, “and I’m counting on the fact that they are all virtuosos and enjoy playing fast. The music uses common triadic chords, but it is not tonal in a functional-harmonic sense.” In other words, it’s exactly what Read wants, a blend of fresh and familiar, regular and unexpected, all held together with a concept that is as programmed as it is perceptive.

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It’s a blend that appears in varying guises throughout his catalog: his Pulitzer Prize-nominated Piano Partita; his nimble Light After Light for clarinet, violin, cello, and piano; his atmospheric orchestral work On October Ground; and multiple other examples amid his vast output. It’s a moral that he imparts to his theory and composition students at the University of Vermont, too. “The importance of ‘knowing the tradition,’” Read declares when asked to define the most important lesson for his pupils. “It is a truism that we build on the past even while seeming to depart from it.”

"I'm counting on the fact that they are all virtuosos and enjoy playing fast."

He continues to subsist on that tension among the ages. Listen to him talk about the dilemmas of what he calls “universal archetypes” and “inherited memes.” For instance, he points out, the Egyptian hieroglyph for water—a rippling set of lines—looks an awful lot like the way musical symbols for renewal or eternity sound. From the beginning of Mozart’s Symphony in G minor to the very end of Anton Webern’s opera Wozzeck, he identifies examples of oscillating musical figures, slow-motion trills that composers used to represent manifestations of life, much like those flowing visual lines depicted the source of life in Egyptian times.

It’s a defensible precedent. Such symbolic patterns endure subconsciously because they consistently inspire a desired response. Yet using such engrained customs without rendering them dull or obvious is Read’s constant quest. “The problem for me,” he explains, “is to revitalize these things without mannered, self-conscious incorporation. And using the approach of assigning different time cycles to different notes) seemed to offer a plausible gateway.”

So he keeps passing through that gateway again and again. He keeps coupling an adult’s maturity and advanced emotions with the eagerness of that Pennsylvania boy who just loved watching music physically unfold in front of him. He keeps balancing at that ledge between unknown and needed, taking material that is simultaneously expected and fresh, always trying to drive himself a little closer to that precipice. And he keeps at its heart something beautifully reliable, cycling unfailingly, as steady as watching a pendulum swing.

The Vermont Symphony Orchestra premieres Read’s “Lightning Galop,” along with excerpts from Handel’s “Messiah,” Tchaikovsky’s “The Nutcracker,” and multiple holiday songs and carols, on December 12 in Barre Opera House at 7:30 p.m., December 13 in Burlington’s Flynn Center for the Performing Arts at 7:30 p.m., and December 14 in Rutland’s Paramount Theatre at 3 p.m. For tickets and more information, call (802) 476-8188 for Barre, (802) 863-596 for Burlington, or (802) 775-0903 for Rutland, or visit www.vso.org.

Lightning Galop, a work by composer Thomas Lawrence Read, receives its world premiere performances at the VSO’s Holiday Pops concerts.

Photo: Benjamin Read.