

Nikos Pappas: Not Just Fiddling Around

By Jeff Worley

Ask Nikos Pappas his favorite kind of music, and you're likely to get the look of a man who's just been asked the cube root of 3,837. Or, if he decided to answer the question, he might say something like, "classical, sacred, orchestral fiddle music."

Pappas, a doctoral candidate at UK in musicology, admits that when it comes to music his interests range far and wide. And he blames his family for this inclusive musical orientation.

"Yes, my family—going back to my great-great grandparents—is clearly to blame for this. Everybody in my family has been singing and playing music since the 1850s. My great-great grandparents met at a singing school at that time, and both branches of the family tree, in Indiana and New Mexico, have been musicians and singers since then."

A striking man with a robust physique and strong voice, Pappas sports a bushy, red beard and sometimes talks with his hands for accompaniment, almost as if they're busy on the keys or strings of an instrument.

"The Indiana side of the family were classical musicians, and my great-great aunt was the first woman to graduate with a degree in piano from Indiana University—class of 1906. On the New Mexico side, everybody was a traditional musician, singing and playing music passed down orally through the years. So clearly it's in my blood to be torn between the two. There's a longtime running joke on both sides," Pappas says, his face easing into a grin: "You have to *audition* to get into the family."

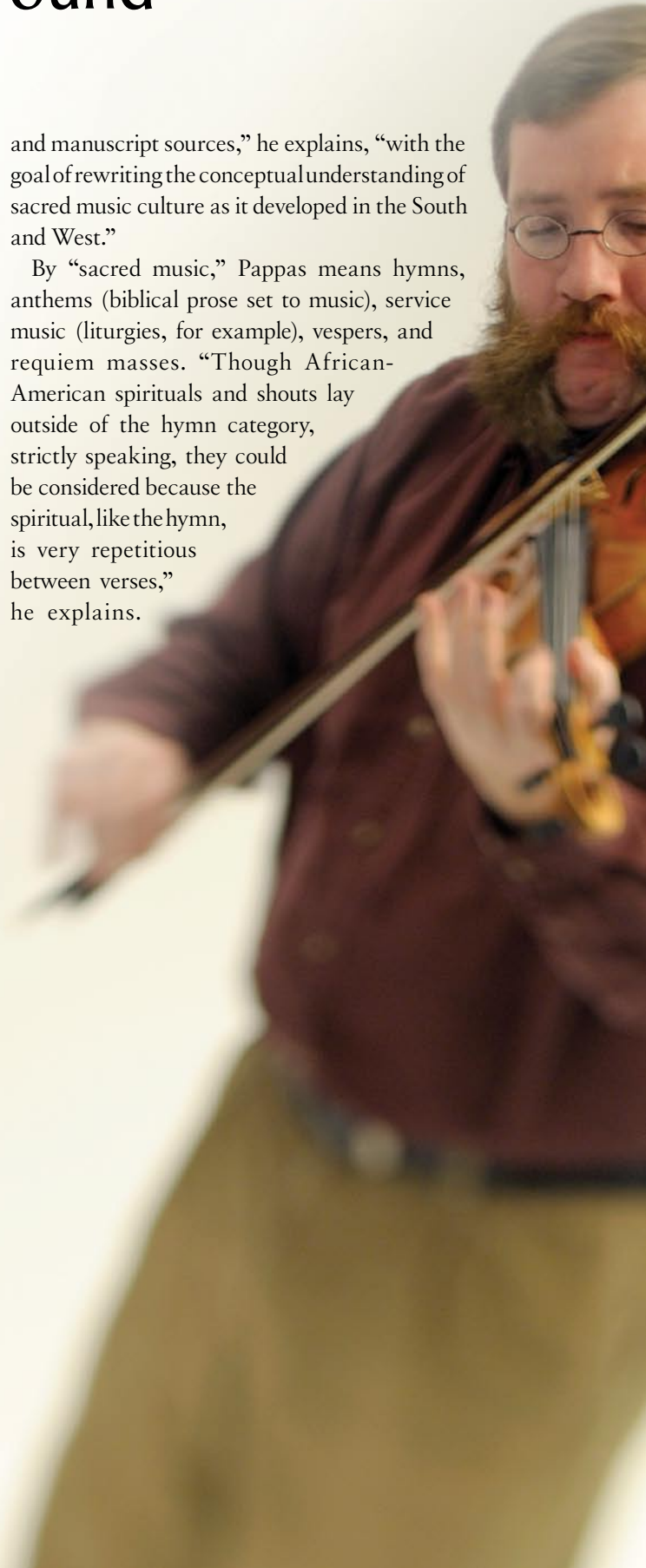
Working with Ron Pen, a professor in the School of Music at UK, Pappas is putting the finishing touches on his dissertation, titled "Patterns in the Sacred Music Culture of the American South and West (1760-1860)."

"Nikos, a voracious scholar, is doing extremely important work in this field," says Pen, who also serves as director of the John Jacob Niles Center at UK. "Because he is not limited to thinking *about* music but, rather, thinking *through* music, Nikos's dissertation presents a new vision of American cultural diffusion."

In this study, Pappas is reexamining sacred music, based upon the primary sources. "Many scholars who have worked to characterize sacred music at this time looked only at what was in print. I'm looking at both printed

and manuscript sources," he explains, "with the goal of rewriting the conceptual understanding of sacred music culture as it developed in the South and West."

By "sacred music," Pappas means hymns, anthems (biblical prose set to music), service music (liturgies, for example), vespers, and requiem masses. "Though African-American spirituals and shouts lay outside of the hymn category, strictly speaking, they could be considered because the spiritual, like the hymn, is very repetitious between verses," he explains.





“It’s a wide range of material I’m studying.”

The traditional body of scholarship following, Pappas says, “a pretty outdated” line of reasoning, has asserted that 19th-century Southern and Western sacred music descended from the intellectual and religious tenets of New England.

“I’ve found that the Middle Atlantic actually initiated this expression, because of the unique cultural and religious pluralism that existed only in this area. Philadelphia was the primary point of departure for settlers going South and West, and, as a result, it filtered musical and cultural trends to the Southern back country, the Ohio River Valley, the original Southwest (Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee), and many points in between.”

His dissertation project is a huge undertaking. When he’s finished in May of this year, Pappas will have prepared a database of approximately 45,000 pieces of sacred music. He’s hoping this work will result in two publications: a version of the database and a book from the narrative of the dissertation.

Pappas is not only a music scholar, but also a musician. He started playing classical music on violin and viola at the ripe young age of 3, and this interest evolved over the years to playing the fiddle.

And play the fiddle he does: In just the last three years Pappas has won several prestigious fiddle championships—at the Morehead Oldtime Fiddlers Convention, the Ed Haley fiddle competition, and the Uncle Dave Macon Days traditional fiddle competition. “I don’t enter these contests so much to win as to honor the namesakes by playing their music,” he says, modestly. “I just love to play these tunes, especially Ed Haley’s music.” Haley, a blind fiddle player from West Virginia

who lived in Ashland, Kentucky, and played during the first half of the 20th century, was widely regarded as the best fiddle player in the area. Pappas also plays fiddle with the Red State Ramblers, UK’s award-winning old-time string band.

So what’s the difference between a violin and a fiddle?

“Well, someone told me once that a violin has strings, and a fiddle has *strangs*,” Pappas laughs. “But there are clear stylistic differences. Certain fiddle styles use chording and double-stops, or bends and slides. And some players like to improvise on the fiddle.” He adds that fiddle music is more “functional” than classical, that fiddlers play tunes to dance to.

Pappas has contributed this knowledge of local traditional music to Kentucky performances and celebrations. Since he’s been in Lexington, he has tapped into the community as a Kentucky Humanities Council scholar for the Lexington Philharmonic Orchestra and as an arranger for the Lincoln Bicentennial.

“I was commissioned by the humanities council to prepare a set of pieces, ballroom dances, that were composed in Kentucky in the 1840s, when Lincoln was courting Mary Todd,” Pappas says. “For the past year the philharmonic has been performing that set of pieces with period dancers—it’s really an exciting and colorful thing to see. And the orchestra has also performed some early 19th-century Kentucky pieces that I reconstructed.”

How does Pappas think about these diverse interests? “I like to consider myself a well-rounded person—researching, playing, arranging, preparing editions, and making music available for people to play. Life’s too short not to make the most of all of these opportunities.”

“Nikos has a wide-ranging and intensely inquisitive intellect,” says Pen. “In his time at UK, he has essentially won the triple crown of fellowships: the prestigious Alvin H. Johnson AMS 50 Dissertation Fellowship, the Andrew Mellon Foundation Fellowship, and the American Bibliographic Society Reese Fellowship.” ■

To hear Nikos at the recent Ed Haley competition, search “Nikos Pappas” at www.youtube.com.