How a computer program became classical music's hot, new composer

'Emily Howell' is a computer program that composes classical music by following rules of music its programmer taught it.

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By *Matt Rocheleau*, / Contributor / June 17, 2010

Earlier this year, 6-year-old musical prodigy Emily Howell released an 11-track debut album, resembling the work of history's most renowned classical composers. But instead of receiving the praise given to Beethoven, Mozart, or Bach, the California native has become a lightning rod for controversy within the musical community.

Why? Because Emily is not human.

Emily is a computer program, and "her" ability to write original compositions has called into question whether art is as uniquely human as many like to believe.

"Can computers be creative? In the sense that they are creating something that wasn't there before, yes," says David Cope, Emily's programmer and professor emeritus at the University of California, Santa Cruz. "But so can birds and insects and volcanoes. We have reserved this notion of creativity for humans for a long time, and we are enamored of it."

As he sees it, creativity has never been a human-defining trait. This feeling of his stretches back

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senior fellow at The Neurosciences Institute in San Diego.

Others have argued that Cope's invention and his claims that its work is truly creative is disrespectful to artists who put passion, emotion, and feelings into their work based on years of human experience – something a computer can't share.

But Cope says he welcomes such criticism. "I want people to have different ideas than me," he says. "My wife will tell you one of the strangest things about me is I enjoy the controversy.... As a teacher that's how you learn things."

Emily's album, "From Darkness, Light," is available in some music shops and through Apple's online iTunes Store. Cope says the young composer will follow up with a new album annually for the next five or six years.

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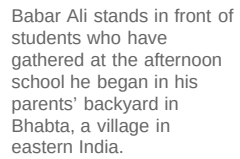

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Babar Ali, just a teenager himself, has started a free school in his parents' backyard for the poorest children in his village in India's West Bengal region.

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