

LEWIS SPRATLAN, MEMORIAL MINUTE

Meriwether Lewis Spratlan, Jr., composer, conductor, oboist, master teacher, and inspirational mentor taught at Amherst College for 36 years from 1970 to 2006. Named as the first Peter Pouncey Professor of Music, he was handpicked by the late Amherst President to inaugurate that chair. In receiving that position, Lew wrote: "This appointment prompts me to recall the line from Virgil, given me by Peter, which I set to music for his inauguration: 'Happy the man who has come to know the causes of things...'"

At Amherst, Lew was the cause and spearhead of a music program that integrated intellectual inquiry and creative pursuit. When called upon, Lew spoke with erudition and precision. Yet many of us will recall most vividly his wild exuberance, infectious raucous laughter, and rapier wit.

Lew grew up in Florida. His mother, Wilma, was his first piano teacher. At Yale University, Lew earned Bachelors and Masters degrees but was by all accounts an odd fit for Yale's music program in the 1960's, with its structural separation between musical practice and scholarly inquiry. According to Melinda Kessler Spratlan, Lew's wife and life-long muse, "Rumor has it that a member of the degree jury almost put the kibosh on passing this upstart." Jenny Kallick, who overlapped briefly with Lew at Yale and was later his colleague at Amherst College, recalls, "Lew was an exuberant musician, so intellectually knowledgeable and curious. You couldn't put him in a simple category, and that made people at Yale nervous." His primary compositional mentors, Gunther Schuller, Mel Powell, and Yehudi Wyner, however, enthusiastically nurtured this major talent. Lew also made his mark at Yale as an oboist and conductor, noted for his extraordinary sense of rhythmic precision and his glorious, round oboe sound.

Amherst College in 1970 maintained a long tradition of choral performance, but The Singing College lacked opportunities for instrumentalists. Leading by example, Lew founded and conducted the Amherst-Mount Holyoke orchestra, creating a much-needed community for instrumental music on campus that was the foundation for today's thriving Amherst Symphony Orchestra. The Asparagus Valley Ensemble, a new music group again founded and directed by Lew, tackled premieres and challenging recent music with five-college faculty musicians joining forces with students. The Ensemble memorably recorded the complete vocal works of Anton Webern, sung by Melinda, with sessions beginning at midnight to minimize the interference of passing trucks on Route 9.

In 1975, Lew received a commission from the New Haven Opera requesting an operatic version of *Life Is A Dream* by the Spanish Golden-Age playwright Pedro Calderón de la Barca. The play required reshaping into an English-language libretto, and Lew and Melinda happened to share a college rental with Spanish literature scholar Jim Maraniss. This friendship became a collaboration stretching thirty-five years from conception to full fruition. The opera's libretto and score quickly took shape, but New Haven Opera abruptly folded and no company could be found to pick up the new work.

Lew's creative adventures took different directions, including the invention of a musical instrument, the terpsiptomaton. An Amherst Magazine article describes this keyboard

instrument as “a Rube Goldberg-like device that releases any number of 100 steel balls over trap doors onto metal coils.” The instrument was deployed in a commissioned work, *Coils*, performed by Boston Musica Viva.

Lew built a wide-ranging body of chamber compositions that would make up the core of his first commercial recording, *When Crows Gather*. Musical inspirations ranged from autobiographical to literary – as an avid reader of poetry Lew set a wide range of texts including those by living poet friends – and to current political events. His musical vocabulary was similarly wide-ranging: the *New York Times* described his chamber concerto *Zoom* as “between slidey modernist textures and fleeting hints of big-band jazz.” Such polarities were held together under the force of Lew’s compositional technique and personality.

A part of Lew’s personality that set him apart from many of his modernist composer colleagues was his irrepressible sense of humor. *Vocalise with Duck*, a setting of a “woman-walks-into-a-bar” joke for two sopranos and chamber ensemble exhibits Lew’s sense of humor in unusually concentrated form.

Lew thrived on collaboration not only in the concert hall, but also in the classroom, attracting a remarkable range of curious students to departmental courses and activities. In 1991 Lew co-taught a course marking the bicentenary of Mozart's death with prominent Mozart performers and scholars joining students in bi-weekly seminars. Lew would sit at the piano, delivering Mozart’s music on the keyboard and with his distinctive singing voice, while his colleagues sketched out diagrams with long lists of insights offered from students and visitors alike.

In 2000, unable to wait any longer to hear his opera score, Lew drew on the generosity of Amherst College’s research support, arranging to have Act 2 of *Life Is A Dream* performed in Amherst and at Harvard by a dedicated cast and small orchestra. The performances became national news when this single act of an unstaged opera was awarded the 2000 Pulitzer Prize in Music. In a measure of the hurdles facing new opera, ten more years and a drumbeat of advocacy from critics were required before his prize-winning work at last received its premiere by Santa Fe Opera, with scores of his friends, colleagues, and students making the pilgrimage for the occasion.

The range and intensity of Lew’s interests is reflected in his collaborations. *Earthrise*, a science fiction chamber opera from 2006 about a geneticist and her AI companion, written with Amherst faculty playwright Constance Congdon, received a sparkling workshop performance by the San Francisco Opera before the ground shifted and the company abandoned the project. Says Connie, “It was a great collaboration, hyper-ironic and sarcastic. He was such a funny, silly man.” In 2013 *Architect*, a meditation on creativity and a sound portrait of Louis Kahn’s buildings drew together Amherst colleagues and alumni as co-composers, librettist, visual artist, and performers. Lew relished the research visits to multiple Kahn buildings, revealing that architecture was the profession he thought himself best suited for after composition.

When Lew retired from the College in 2006, he entered the most productive years of his compositional career, with several new works each year introduced by world-class artists and ensembles. Besides the Pulitzer, Lew's music garnered the Charles Ives Opera Prize in 2016 and an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Composition. Much of this music is collected on four additional CDs, with a fifth containing Lew's two late symphonies still in progress. The most recent release, *Invasion*, features a chamber piano concerto for Lew's close friend Nadia Shpachenko, an impassioned musical response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The album also contains six piano rags based on locations in New England's mountains where Lew loved to roam.

Lew's collegiality extended especially to his fellow composers. He delighted in listening sessions where he and one of his students or colleagues could offer up their latest work for frank, supportive mutual feedback. Lew's memorial at Grace Church in May drew many of his composition students and Valley friends and colleagues. As reflected in the strength of the shared memories, his creative spirit lives on in the hearts of the many who loved him.

In addition to Melinda, Lew is survived by his sons Jacob and Daniel, his daughter, Lydia, and granddaughter, Amelia.

President Elliott, I move that this memorial minute be adopted by the faculty in a rising vote of silence, that it be entered in the permanent record of the faculty, and that a copy be sent to Professor Spratlan's family.

Respectfully submitted, Constance Congdon, Jenny Kallick, Eric Sawyer, David Schneider.