



## **Steven E. Stucky**

November 7, 1949 – February 14, 2015

Steven Edward Stucky, MFA '73, DMA '78, Emeritus Professor of Composition, died February 14, 2015, the victim of an aggressive brain cancer. An acclaimed composer, conductor, scholar, and educator, he won the Pulitzer Prize for Composition (2005), among many other landmark accomplishments and honors. Born in Hutchinson, Kansas, he moved with his family to Abilene, Texas. As a teenager, he studied viola, composition and conducting, earning a bachelor degree from Baylor University, and completing his post-graduate education at Cornell under Professors Robert Palmer and Karel Husa. He joined the faculty in 1980, and made Cornell his academic home for 34 years (chairing the Music department from 1992 to 1997), and retired in 2014 from his position as the Given Foundation Professor of Composition at Cornell. At the time of his death he had recently begun a post-retirement position at the Juilliard School, although he was still active, as an emeritus professor, in advising his students at Cornell, and was composer-in-residence at the Aspen Music Festival and School.

A prolific and important composer who is also one of the country's most frequently performed, Professor Stucky's legacy includes orchestral, chamber, choral and solo instrumental works. Major orchestras commissioned and performed his compositions, including the New York

Philharmonic, the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony, the Eastman Woodwind Ensemble, and many others. The Pittsburgh Symphony named him Composer of the Year for its 2011-2012 season. He was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 1989, winning the award in 2005 for his Second Concerto for Orchestra (2004), commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic. In addition to the Pulitzer, Professor Stucky received the Medal of the Witold Lutoslawski Society in 2005; and Chamber Music America's "101 Great American Ensemble Works," announced in January 2005, included his 2000 composition "Nell'ombra, nella luce" ("In Shadow, in Light"). Other laurels include a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1986 and a Bogliasco Fellowship in 1997, and trusteeship of the American Academy in Rome. Honored by membership in the American Society of Arts and Letters and the American Society of Arts and Sciences, Professor Stucky gave a prestigious series of lectures as the Ernest Bloch Lecturer at the University of California at Berkeley in 2003.

Two recordings of his music won Grammy awards: a recording by the San Francisco-based vocal group Chanticleer in 1999 that included his *Cradle Songs* and, in 2008, a recording by pianist Gloria Cheng that included his solo piano pieces *Four Album Leaves* and *Three Little Variations for David*. Professor Stucky's 2012 oratorio *August 4, 1964* received a Grammy nomination for contemporary classical composition. Yet, his enduring relationship with the Los Angeles Philharmonic marked him most strongly as nationally influential.

Steve was a relatively unknown composer in 1988, when the Los Angeles Philharmonic named him composer-in-residence. He would remain associated with the "LA Phil" – as Composer-in-Residence, New Music Advisor, and Consulting Composer for New Music – for 21 years, the longest such association in American orchestra history. During his tenure there he advocated tirelessly for new music by emerging composers. The *Los Angeles Times* critic Mark Szwed recalls Steve's "alluring curatorial profile" at the LA Phil, despite his bashful, humble manner. "He programmed music that he might not care for but that he believed needed to be heard. He then looked for ways to care for it," wrote Szwed in an appreciation for the *Times*. The conductor Essa-Pekka Salonen, who directed the orchestra through Steve's Philharmonic years, echoed Szwed's viewpoint in an interview. "Rather than trying to push for a certain point of view," Salonen recalled,

“he was trying to find the interesting voices, even if they were aesthetically far from his.”

Steve’s approach to orchestral color was guided by his deep attentiveness to musicians. He made it a point to know the musical personalities, specialties, and limitations of the musicians he wrote for. To him, limitations aided creativity. “When you have every possibility available to you, it’s a little paralyzing,” he told the *New York Times*. “But if somebody says to you, ‘The piece should be seven minutes long and you can’t have a trombone,’ this is focusing right away. You say, alright, what can I do that makes a virtue of these limitations?” This orientation carried through his work for large ensembles and smaller chamber works, particularly his work – as composer, conductor, and musical director – with Ensemble X, a chamber ensemble of Cornell and Ithaca College faculty he formed in 1997 and led for nine seasons.

Steve’s scholarship was as lively and rigorous as his composing, and the two activities often informed each other. The American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) conferred the Deems Taylor Prize for his 1981 book *Lutoslawski and His Music*. *Silent Spring* (2011), a symphonic poem commissioned by the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra to commemorate the publication of Rachel Carson’s book fifty years earlier, reflects a deep engagement with Carson’s groundbreaking text and the ecological movement it inspired. In his program notes to that score, Professor Stucky wrote that “Rachel Carson’s trenchant writing gave us data, marching orders, the heart to do what is right; but, like all great writing, it also gave us the spiritual and psychological space to contemplate our own thoughts about the world around us, about our own place in that world, about our own hopes and fears.” Despite this, “Music cannot — should not attempt to — explain, preach, proselytize, comment on real life. Its domain is emotional life, not ‘real’ life. It is non-specific, non-semantic, non-representational. My *Silent Spring* is the same: a space in which to contemplate one’s own fears, hopes, and dreams.” And his oratorio *August 4, 1964*, a collaboration with librettist Gene Scheer, written for the Dallas Symphony Orchestra to commemorate the centennial of the birth of Lyndon B. Johnson, is based on diaries, news reports and historical documents concerning the events of the day that three young freedom riders were discovered murdered in Mississippi, and that the charge, later discredited, that North Vietnamese had attacked an American naval vessel gave Johnson impetus to escalate U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

“I was 14 years old in 1964, at the time of these events,” Steve recalled. “I was a junior high school student in Texas when John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas in 1963 and it was only a year later that the incidents in Mississippi and Vietnam occurred. I felt very close to and conflicted about these events. When Gene sent me his idea for the opening of the libretto – in which the mothers of Chaney and Goodman sing “It was the saddest moment of my life: August 4, 1964, the day they found my son’s body” – I knew not only that I could compose this piece but that I had to!”

Steve was a caring teacher and mentor, and a strong advocate for his students’ work. When news of his death surfaced, student praise and shared memories poured in. Many of them, who have gone on to accomplishment and acclaim of their own, related Steve’s multiple influences—musical, professional, personal—on their lives and careers in the most glowing terms: “...first and foremost a caring mentor...”; “...a deeply generous and thoughtful teacher...His ear—his way—was all elegance and warmth;” “His daily example of synergy between one’s walks of life—artist, musician, thinker, professor, mentor, colleague, parent, friend—is one that has affected me profoundly.”

Steve’s dedication to his colleagues and students was visible even as his illness was claiming him. His friend and colleague, Professor Xak Bjerken, had assumed directorship of Ensemble X. Days before he died, Steve attended a performance by the group. “He went out of his way to come to the Ensemble X concert last Sunday, and he was warm and generous with his students, who saw him for the first time after his surgery in early December,” Bjerken said. “He was such a gentle yet powerful influence on so many of us.”

Steven Stucky is survived by his wife, Kristen Frey Stucky, two children, Matthew and Maura, and his former wife Melissa Whitehead Stucky. An endowment in his name is being established by the Music Department, the Steven Stucky Residency, to bring top-level musicians to Cornell to workshop and perform with Cornell’s composers and musicians.

*Steven Pond, chair; with contributions from Xak Bjerken, professor; and former students  
James Mathison, Anna Weesner, Sean Shepherd, Jesse Jones and Christopher Stark*