

Steven Stucky: 1949–2016

The flutist, a collaborator and friend of the composer, remembers her colleague.

by Mimi Stillman

The music world mourns the loss of Steven Stucky, one of the most eminent composers of today and a distinguished teacher, writer, and conductor, who died February 14, 2016, of brain cancer at the age of 66. The winner of the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for his Second Concerto for Orchestra, Stucky has had his music commissioned and performed by major orchestras and ensembles internationally.

Stucky, who was born in Hutchinson, Kansas, on November 7, 1949, and grew up in Kansas and Texas, was associated with the Los Angeles Philharmonic for 21 years as composer-in-residence and consulting composer for new music, and held residency positions with the New York Philharmonic and Pittsburgh Symphony among numerous orchestras and conservatories. He was professor of composition at Cornell University from 1980 to 2014, when he joined the faculty of the Juilliard School, and headed the composition faculty at the Aspen Music Festival. He was one of the foremost experts on the music of Witold Lutosławski and is the author of an important biography of the Polish composer.

I feel the loss of Steven Stucky deeply, for he was my dear friend, colleague, and mentor. I first worked with him during my Dolce Suono Ensemble's "Mahler 100 / Schoenberg 60" project marking the anniversaries of the two titans with the commission of six new works and performances over two seasons in Philadelphia and New York.

We commissioned Steve to write a piece for voice and ensemble with bass-baritone Eric Owens. I asked him to choose a poem to set by Friedrich Rückert, Mahler's favorite poet, as a vehicle for reflection on Mahler and Schoenberg. The project and his choice of text, *Aus der Jugendzeit* (From Youthful Times), inspired him to think about his early years as composer.

Stucky said "the Mahler and Schoenberg circle was very important to me growing up. It's a kind of homecoming journey for me." The piece embraces the nostalgia of Rückert's text, with musical quotations from Mahler (*Das Lied von der Erde*) and Schoenberg (*Pierrot lunaire*). Stucky's music is often described as linked to the Franco-Russian tradition (Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky), so his acknowledgment of the importance of the German-Viennese tradition for him helps to enrich our understanding of his musical influences.

Like all his music, *Aus der Jugendzeit* is born of his profound knowledge of music and literature. I admired his erudition and, through working with him, I also came to know him as a tremendously supportive colleague. He joined us for rehearsals, talks, and performances over a two-year period, enthusiastically joining our team, supporting the performers and younger commissioned composers, and even jumping in to help put together a stubborn vibraphone right before a concert!

Among Stucky's works featuring the flute are his Concerto for Two Flutes and Orchestra (1995), *Varianti for Flute, Clarinet, and Piano* (1982), a concerto for recorder and orchestra (written for Michala Petri), and numerous works for chamber ensembles involving flute, including *Aus der Jugendzeit* (2011), *Cantus* (2015), *Boston Fancies* (1985), and *Take Him, Earth* (2012).



Steven Stucky and Mimi Stillman

The Concerto for Two Flutes and Orchestra was commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra under Esa-Pekka Salonen, Stucky's friend and frequent collaborator, and was premiered by the orchestra's co-principal flutists Anne Diener Giles and Janet Ferguson. Stucky wrote the first movement, *Elegy*, in memory of Lutosławski, who had recently died.

Stucky is known foremost for his orchestral music, and the flute plays a prominent role in many of his works. He wrote of his devotion to writing for symphony orchestra, describing "the unparalleled thrill that you can only get by hearing a hundred brilliant artists together, putting their brains and muscles and spirits into a united gesture of human communication." In *Rhapsodies* (2008), commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, one flute enters playing bird-like music and is joined by the entire section in a kaleidoscopic twittering effect. Compelling woodwind solos and section solos abound in Stucky's orchestral writing, with distinct characters given to each instrument within the context of the piece.

Steven Stucky's Symphony (2012), jointly commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the New York Philharmonic, opens with an extended oboe solo, free and with a sense of being suspended in time. The oboe line builds in intensity until one flute joins the very last note of the oboe's solo, shaded by first horn on a low B in a memorable blend of instrumental color.

The flute line, emerging from the lowest note on our instrument, animates quickly in three ascending phrases. Here, the composer's writing for flute evokes the arabesque-like lines of Debussy and Ravel's flute writing, which he greatly admired. At the close of the symphony, the flutes echo the solo line of the opening, before solo flute and horn intone one final motif before the work ends in shimmering E major.

These are just a few examples that illustrate Stucky's impeccable craft—mastery of structure, inventive timbres, brilliantly colored orchestration, and a striking sense of timing and drama—with the craft seamlessly connected to the emotional power of his work. He embodied his statement that "music needs both: emotion and calculation, intellect and sentiment, heart and brain."

Steven Stucky gave us so much more than his musical genius and towering intellect—his generosity of spirit, humor, humility, and all-encompassing love for music. The things I learned from my discussions with him, about music and his beloved literature and poetry, are without number. He will always be a beacon of light and inspiration for me and all the people whose lives he touched.

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