

Memorial Minute for Ronald Perera

Written and read by Don Wheelock

November 29, 2023

Ronald Christopher Perera, Elsie Irwin Sweeney Professor of Music at Smith College, died on the 4th of August, 2023, at the age of 82.

Born on December 25, 1941, Ron, as he was known to most of us, grew up in Boston, attended the Groton School, then Harvard University, where he earned a bachelor's degree, continuing the study of music composition with Randall Thompson and Leon Kirchner, and receiving a master's degree in music. After serving in the U.S. Navy, Ron began his career in teaching at Syracuse University and Dartmouth College before settling at Smith for the rest of his 30-year professional teaching career. He retired in 2002.

Ron composed music for piano, organ, string quartet, wind instruments, orchestra, and in his earlier years, instruments combined with electronic sound. His main preoccupation, however, was the combining of texts with music for voice: songs, choral works, and opera. His texts were nearly always taken from serious literary sources, many of them religious in nature (an early *Mass* 1967; *Psalm 126*, composed for the 100th anniversary of St. John's Church in Northampton; and *Music for the Anglican Service*, also composed for St. John's Church). Among the performances of his secular music, his *Children of the Sun*, *Shakespeare Songs*, *Five Summer Songs*, *Apollo Circling*, *Three Poems of Günther Grass*, *The White Whale*, *Crossing the Meridian*, and *The Outermost House* are particularly memorable.

One should keep in mind that the era in which Ron composed most of his music was one, in Academe, where the rigors of serial music often ruled the wider roost. Abstraction in the form

of tone rows and other systematic procedures was more insistently heard than those relating to classical tonality. Vocal music was therefore not the main preoccupation of many of the better-known academic composers of this era. This gave Ron's music, always stationed somewhere between the conservative fare of most religious music and the more severe syntax of academic offerings, a welcome air of freshness and accessibility. He was able, in addition to using the traditional voicing of the four-part chorus, and some of the less severe techniques of 20th century music, to fashion a personal language capable of being sung by the student and/or the amateur singer and chorus.

For anyone who has listened to the performances of his music over the years, two of his operas are apt to stand out among his most significant accomplishments. Although he did not conduct his works, he oversaw every other aspect of their performance, including fundraising, finding substitute singers during medical emergencies, and working around—in the case of the premieres of both of his full-scale operas—the sticky bailiwicks and politics of this our fair college. The premiere of *The Yellow Wallpaper* had to be planned around the renovation of Sage Hall, the stage consisting of a plywood platform constructed over what was then a smaller stage, soon to be removed in favor of the one we use today. *S.*, his next full scale opera, based on the novel of that title by John Updike, was premiered in Theatre 14, on a legitimate stage with an actual orchestra pit!

One cannot say it about many, but Ron was one of those faculty members who was regarded by his whole department as an ideal colleague. Although he served as department chair for only one year, he did it to perfection. The music department in those days was larger than it is now, which made the herding of cats more formidable. In one of the decades in which the department had to undergo a decennial self-evaluation, he chaired the meetings of the weekend

with no apparent defections, indeed, not a single serious argument. There should be champions' cups for such accomplishments.

He was fun to work with. Whether you were putting on a concert together, or driving to Boston or New York to attend concerts, or planning a revision of a theory course, he was always entertaining, generous and kind, often waiting until the end of the discussion to implant the perfect solution for the needs of that part of the curriculum. His students will always remember a straightforward, approachable teacher, helpful during compositional logjams, undogmatic as to style, but insistent on technical proficiency, and harmonic clarity.

Anyone who knew him well remembers his immediate family, his wife Jay and three daughters, Lisa, Katie and Rosie. We mourn with them the sudden departure of a remarkable composer, colleague and friend.

Read by Donald Wheelock on November 29, 2023 at a public memorial in the Smith College Conference Center

There will be a memorial event with performances of Ron's music on February 3rd, 2024, in Sweeney Hall.