

*At a Meeting of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences on May 1, 2007, the following Minute was placed upon the records.*

## DAVID BENJAMIN LEWIN

Born: July 2, 1933

Died: May 5, 2003

David Benjamin Lewin, Walter W. Naumburg Professor of Music, was born July 2, 1933 in New York City and died of heart disease on May 5, 2003 in Cambridge, Massachusetts—merely two months before reaching his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. He had studied piano and composition early on and by the age of twelve was taking instruction from Eduard Steuermann, the eminent Polish-American pianist, pedagogue, and composer. Lewin graduated from Harvard College in 1954 *summa cum laude*. A mathematics concentrator, he was actively involved in music performance throughout his college days. Serving for two years as music director of the Lowell House Music Society, he oversaw several opera productions there. After continuing his musical studies with Josef Polnauer in Vienna from 1954 to 1955 he entered the graduate program at Princeton University where he studied composition and music theory with Roger Sessions, Milton Babbitt, Edward T. Cone, and Earl Kim. He earned an MFA degree in 1958 and then returned to Cambridge for three years, joining the Harvard Society of Fellows as a Junior Fellow.

From 1961 to 1967 David Lewin taught at the University of California, Berkeley, afterwards for twelve years at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and then from 1979 to 1985 at Yale University. Having served as Visiting Professor at Harvard for two years in the early 1970s, he joined the Harvard Music Department in 1985 for the remaining 18 years of his academic career. An exemplary colleague, dedicated teacher, extraordinary musician and brilliant scholar, he single-handedly created and established at Harvard a special program in music theory designed for students with a strong background in either composition or musicology and a high potential for theoretical work.

He was an adored teacher, much sought after, and an openhanded adviser to a generation of music theorists now active in the United States and abroad. He introduced them to his method of transformational analysis which represented an innovative approach to the structure of music by examining mathematical coherence in musical space as determined by pitch intervals (“distance”) and rhythm (“time”). His work of demonstrating how musical compositions are constructed deeply affected—some say: revolutionized—the discipline of music theory. His writings cover a broad range of topics, with an emphasis on 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century music and with a strong focus on mathematical principles that forged links between tonal and atonal repertoires, styles, genres and periods, and helped break down traditional boundaries.

His two books, *Generalized Musical Intervals and Transformations* (1987) and the ASCAP–Deems Taylor Award-winning *Musical Form and Transformation* (1993), stand as prime examples of both his mathematically oriented work and his elegantly informal writing style which, as Allen Forte put it, “offers encouragement to the diffident reader.” In an essay on Lewin’s work in the *New York Times*, Edward Rothstein called him “a seeker of music’s poetry in the mathematical realm.” But Lewin dealt with non-mathematical issues and methods as well, especially in his teachings and writings on music and language. A posthumously published collection of essays, *Studies in Music with Text* (2006), documents this important area of theoretical discourse developed by Lewin, exemplified primarily on the basis of songs by Schubert and Schoenberg. He called the highly personal method applied there “musical analysis as

stage direction.”

Edward T. Cone of Princeton, who knew his former student well, once said about David Lewin that “his interest in theory has always been motivated by a desire to understand *music*.” As this is the primary concern and mission of any academic music program, David fulfilled it luminously. This was true not only of his classes and formal teaching but particularly of the informal exchanges in which he liked to engage. When he discovered something particularly noteworthy or puzzling, he would want to share it with others by, for example, putting a little note in your hand or your mailbox filled with musical notation outlining an unusual harmonic progression or containing a fascinating contrapuntal device, and always ending with a question. His desire to understand music was contagious. It affected all his students and colleagues, especially when he came up with funny examples.

His great sense of humor was deeply integrated in his discourse and empirical scholarly method. Generous with polyglot jokes about all kinds of musical phenomena and entertaining advice, he once helped a former student overcome his frustrations in facing a counterpoint class crowded with forty-five students. His email message suggested: “Teach three-part inventions, have 15 each write a top voice, 15 a middle voice, and 15 a bass voice. There will be 3,375 possible inventions, and a measure or so of one of ’em is bound to work after a fashion. The students can be assigned to check for the best measure. There should be random assignment to each voice composed, whether it is the first, second, or third part to enter, and what the time lag should be for each second-voice or third-voice. All inventions should be in E-double-flat minor, lugubre, to be performed on a theatre organ, fortissimo. (With a muffled ride, perhaps using the sleigh-bell stop.)”

A musical intellect of the highest order, David Lewin enjoyed playing the piano although, in his later years, he no longer performed in public solo, duo, or chamber music recitals. But first and foremost he pursued throughout his life the art of composition, writing works for solo piano, solo voice, chamber ensembles, chamber orchestra, and full orchestra. Forever the curious and adventurous mind, he was among the first to experiment with computer-generated music when working in 1961 at Bell Labs in Murray Hill, New Jersey.

Former students and colleagues presented Lewin, on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday, with a collection of essays, *Musical Transformation and Musical Intuition* (1994), which reflects his widespread influence. Five years later, the Harvard Music Department held a symposium in David’s honor on a subject close to his heart that resulted in the volume “*Music of My Future*”: *The Schoenberg Quartets and Trio* (2000).

Lewin was a Guggenheim Fellow in 1983–84, a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and from 1985 to 1987 served as the third president of the newly formed Society for Music Theory. He was awarded honorary degrees by the University of Chicago (1985), the New England Conservatory of Music (2000), and posthumously by the Université de Strasbourg (2004). This posthumous degree was presented to David’s wife, June Knight Lewin, and their son Alexander Julian Lewin.

Respectfully submitted,

Reinhold Brinkmann

Christopher Hasty  
Lewis Lockwood  
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