

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on October 21, 2008,
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Donald James
Martino was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

DONALD JAMES MARTINO

BORN: May 16, 1931
DIED: December 8, 2005

Donald Martino was one of the leading American composers of the twentieth century. Born in Plainfield, New Jersey, he began lessons on the clarinet and other wind instruments at the age of nine, and he remained a clarinetist all his life, even as he grew to be a many-sided musician, teacher, and, above all, composer of significant instrumental and vocal works. After attending Syracuse University, he did his graduate work at Princeton in the 1950s, where he studied with Roger Sessions and Milton Babbitt. Thereafter he taught at Princeton, Yale, the New England Conservatory of Music (where he was chairman of the Composition Department from 1969 to 1980), Brandeis University, and finally at Harvard, where he was the Walter Bigelow Rosen Professor of Music from 1983 until his retirement ten years later. He was active as a guest lecturer, and was Composer-in-Residence at Tanglewood, the Composers Conference, the Yale Summer School of Music, the Pontino Festival in Italy, the Atlantic Center for the Arts, the Ernest Bloch Festival, and the Festival Internacional de Música de Morelia, Mexico. His many commissions came from, among others, the Paderewski Fund; the Fromm, Naumburg, Koussevitzky, and Coolidge Foundations; and from the Chicago, Boston and San Francisco Symphonies, along with other performing organizations.

In Florence, where he lived from 1954 to 1956 on a Fulbright scholarship, Martino studied with the eminent Italian composer Luigi Dallapiccola, and the blend of lyricism and rigor that Dallapiccola instilled into his own music may have formed a partial model for the direction of Martino's mature works, which blend these features in a musical language of high originality and expressivity. In an interview for his sixtieth birthday, Martino offered the view that, in utilizing the full resources of the chromatic scale, in his own highly personal adaptation of the so-called "twelve-tone system," he wanted to write music that "would sing and think, too." Despite frequent misunderstandings by critics and others of where he stood as a composer, he asked that if future listeners

"look and listen to my music, they will judge that it's really pretty old-fashioned and traditional stuff... I used to bridle at that realization but I've come to view it tenderly of late. When I listen to a Brahms Intermezzo or his C Minor Piano Quartet I don't

analyze it, I sit and weep. That's what I'd like my audience to do. . .”

Having established a significant profile through works such as *Pianississimo* and his piano masterpiece *Fantasies and Impromptus*, the *Concerto for Alto Saxophone and Orchestra*, *Paradiso Choruses* and the *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*, Martino composed *Notturmo* for an ensemble of six players for which he was awarded the 1974 Pulitzer Prize. One critic described the work as “nocturnal theater of the soul” and Martino expressed his pleasure “with that poetic description.”

Martino's musical appetite was voracious and democratic. In his early teens, he studied with the local bandmaster, an Italian immigrant, who awakened his love for Italian opera and bequeathed to the composer a large collection of Italian opera transcriptions from the late nineteenth century. Many decades later, these transcriptions fired Martino's imagination and he made his own arrangements of them, whose objective, in Martino's words, “has not been to stubbornly confirm the authenticity of the music as much as it has been to recreate the authenticity of my youthful experience.” Jazz also ran in his veins. One of his Plainfield, New Jersey, acquaintances was the great jazz pianist/composer Bill Evans; they occasionally played music together in the early 1950s. Recently-heard recordings of the fourteen-year-old Martino playing jazz clarinet caused his lifelong friend Gunther Schuller to remark “at fourteen he played better than Artie Shaw and I speak with authority.”

The list of Martino's students is long, and includes many of the most prominent names in American composition today. His teaching encompassed not only profound insights into the music of Schoenberg, Berg, Beethoven, and Brahms, but also a single-minded insistence on the same high levels of musical craftsmanship that he observed in his own composition. This craftsmanship had to start at the most basic level of harmony and instrumentation; one of the pedagogical tools he developed for his own students, a comparative edition of 178 chorale harmonizations by J. S. Bach, is still used by many today, as is his “Stringograph,” which he invented to help non-string players compose for the violin, viola, and cello.

Dissatisfied with the publishing world for new music, Martino, together with his wife, Lora, founded his own company, Dantalian, Inc., to produce, promote, and distribute his music. By the way, “Dantalian” has nothing to do with the words “Dante” or “Italian,” but refers to a medieval talisman that Martino came across in the 1960s. He was a major force in the world of new music for many years, a devoted teacher and colleague, and a wholly committed composer. His music is not easy listening because he would not give in to facile productivity, but rather reflects his need to go to deeper levels and to write music that was strong enough to last. His music stands, and will stand, for a very long time as among the most expressive and memorable of our time, and not only by American composers.

Martino was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His many awards include two Fulbright scholarships;

three Guggenheim awards; grants from the Massachusetts Arts Council, the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and the National Endowment for the Arts; the Brandeis Creative Arts Citation in Music; First Prize in the 1985 Kennedy Center Friedheim Competition for his String Quartet (1983), and most recently, the Boston Symphony's Mark M. Horblit Award. He died of cardiac arrest following an attack of hyperglycemia off the coast of Antigua while on a Caribbean cruise, and is survived by his wife, Lora Martino; a daughter, Anna Maria, of Branford, Connecticut; and a son, Christopher, of Boston.

Respectfully submitted,

Lewis Lockwood

John Stewart

Anne C. Shreffler, Chair