

Remembering Richard Hervig

By Laird Addis

Richard Hervig, as I knew him, would probably agree that, if he is to be memorialized at all in death, the best way is to play his music and not to talk too much about him. Still, something should be said, and I am honored to be asked to do so, having known him in ways that allow me to speak of him that are not obvious from various biographical accounts.

When I entered college as a music major in 1955, Dick was for me just another person around the School of Music. But because I spent nearly all my waking hours in the rather small quarters of the old Music building on the corner of Gilbert and Jefferson streets where everyone saw everyone else, we would soon have recognized each other and exchanged friendly greetings. It was only a year or two later, when I had Dick (then Professor Hervig to me, of course) for my required music history course, that I really got to know him, although only as my teacher. Dick, as a musician, thought of himself primarily as a composer, as indeed he was; but I did not know that at the time, and instead just assumed that music history was his specialty. When, many years later, I told Dick that his course was one of the best I had in any field as an undergraduate, he professed astonishment, saying that he had no serious training in music history. Now, anyone can do names and dates, I suppose, but as I remember the course after all these years, it was in fact his knowledge of music theory that allowed him to understand and to describe the course of Western classical music as he could. In any case, Dick was easily the best classroom teacher I had—and I had them all—in the School of Music. His knowledge of the subject, perhaps despite himself, and his obvious desire that we learn it well, made the class, even when delivered in his soft voice, a joy to attend.

My next stage of knowing Dick, and feeling free to call him by his first name, came when, in the early 1960's, I got to know and then to marry Pat, the daughter of Chris and Bea Peterson; for the Petersons were among the best friends of Dick and Verna, playing frequent bridge together, spending holidays in one another's home, and even doing some vacation trips together. They had got to know each other when Chris, who had a dance band for many years, hired Dick as a trombonist, something that Dick said many times "saved my life", meaning that it gave him the money he needed to continue school. I learned eventually, as I came to know the Hervigs better, often seeing them at the Petersons, that the common Norwegian ancestry of all of them was also a source not only of their mutual affection but also of much hilarity, somewhat anticipating the style of Garrison Keillor. Naturally, I came to see Dick's personality in a rather fuller light—especially seeing his funny side—and it only added to my admiration and affection for him.

Probably Dick's crowning achievement as a professional was his success in getting a large grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to establish the Center for New Music in 1965, and becoming its first director. The Center, now approaching a half century of the performance of music of the 20th and 21st centuries, was among the earliest of such ensembles; and by providing an inspiration for such projects elsewhere, brought well-deserved national attention to Iowa and to Dick himself. The School of Music had a history, beginning in the 1950's, of bringing leading composers to campus and performing their music; but the performances of the Center, combined with the attention given to new music by James Dixon as conductor the University Symphony Orchestra, made Iowa one of the leading institutions for the advocacy of new music, especially in roughly the two decades of the mid-60's to the mid-80's. And Dick Hervig was the leading figure in this achievement. The cost of his work for the Center was in his diminished output as a composer for many of these years; and this no doubt contributed to one of the greatest regrets of his life.

The late 80's were times of turbulence in Dick's life, despite many formal recognitions of his achievements in service to music including an Outstanding Achievement Award presented by then governor Terry Branstad. In August of 1987, Dick's wife of nearly fifty years, Verna, died of lung cancer. This profound disruption to his existence was compounded by his retirement—then compulsory at age 70—the next year. But these circumstances were at least partly mitigated by an offer from the Juilliard School of Music in New York City for Dick to teach in their Literature and Musical Materials department. And it was during these years, as more and more performances of his compositions took place, that Dick finally gained some measure of national recognition as a composer. His great regret, mentioned above, was that Verna had not lived to know of this recognition that was, perhaps, most visibly or, rather, audibly expressed in a concert of his works in New York City on the occasion of his 80th birthday in 1997. Dick spoke of this regret to me more than once. And despite his unassuming manner, he was proud, and rightly so, of his achievements as a composer.

The kind of position Dick had at Juilliard was connected not only with his life as musician, but also with his knowledge and love of literature. His undergraduate degree at Augustana College in South Dakota had been in English, and before he came to Iowa for his graduate study in music, he had taught high school English for a year. He spoke to me especially of his attraction to the novels of John Irving, but his general knowledge and training served him well in his literature courses at Juilliard as well as in the team-taught Literature, Science, and the Arts courses in which he participated here at Iowa. His knowledge of the world of music—historical and theoretical as well as personal and anecdotal—made Dick an extremely interesting person to talk with, but his knowledge of literature made him, in addition, unusual among musicians.

But speaking of conversations with Dick brings me to those that were, in the end, the most enjoyable for me. After Dick returned to Iowa City from Juilliard in 2002, he, Himie Voxman, Charlie Eble, occasionally Jim Dixon, and I began having luncheons every once in a while. As the youngster of the group, I learned a great deal about their earlier years. Dick was the one who talked the most. Partly this was because of his recent years in New York City where he was very much involved with the music scene, giving him much of interest to tell. Partly it was because of the retiring personalities of Himie and Charlie and my deference to my elders, and partly because Dick simply liked to talk. I was often astonished at his knowledge of the many people—students and faculty—who had gone through the School of Music over his many years of association with it. And even when Dick’s short-term memory began to fail, his memory of the past remained sharp. And while, as I remember, the conversations were mostly about persons, they were often also about music. During these years, Dick was also regularly going to San Francisco to visit family; and I was always interested in his reports on the operas he had seen there. I remember especially his enthusiasm for the performance he had seen of Messian’s *St. Francis of Assisi*. How we all enjoyed those luncheons; and when declining health and death of some of its members brought the gatherings to an end, I missed them terribly, as did Dick.

Iowa has produced a notable number of distinguished composers, some of them Dick’s own students. But one can reasonably say that Dick himself is Iowa’s most important composer, as one who trained, taught, and composed here. Moreover, many of his pieces are Iowa-related in various ways—as commissioned for Iowa events or written for specific Iowa musicians. This is one special side of many of his compositions. Another, and often involving the same works, is his interest in writing music for student and amateur performers, a trait he shared with such composers as Aaron Copland and Benjamin Britten among a few others. The last work on this memorial concert, with its nostalgic title of “In Summer Season” and its dedication of the slow section to the memory of his wife, captures both of these aspects of Dick’s work as a composer, but also of my friend, the gentle man we will miss so much.