

Edward M. Murray

April 5, 1938 — October 18, 2000

Edward M. Murray, Associate Professor in the Department of Music and musician, teacher, and scholar extraordinaire, died on October 18, 2000. Professor Murray's abilities in all areas of music were multifaceted. He received his Bachelor's degree in History from Harvard University and his Ph.D. degree in Music Theory from Yale University. He also held a graduate degree in Conducting from the Mannes College of Music and trained for the podium under such teachers as Pierre Monteux, Pierre Boulez, and Walter Siskind. A brilliant musical scholar, Murray's training in music theory included work with Carl Schachter and Allen Forte. He was appointed to the Cornell music faculty in 1975 as a music theorist and conductor. He was a superb music theory teacher who communicated with novice undergraduate and sophisticated graduate students with equal seriousness and enthusiasm. He taught, at one time or another, theory courses at all levels. His vast knowledge of music, both classical and non-classical, was always an amazement to his students and colleagues. One of his specialties was twentieth-century music.

He was Director of the Cornell Symphony Orchestra during his 25 years at Cornell, which amounted to a third of the orchestra's history. He was successful in maintaining a large symphonic orchestra of primarily undergraduate players throughout the entire period of his directorship. Among the memorable performances that he gave with the orchestra were Stravinsky's, "The Rite of Spring," "Petrouchka," and "The Firebird," and Webern's, "Six Pieces for Orchestra." In 1992, Murray led the Cornell Symphony Orchestra and Chorale in a performance at Lincoln Center for the Mozart Bicentennial Celebration.

Soon after Murray arrived at Cornell, it became clear that he was committed to the practical, physical side of making music. As a pianist, conductor, impresario, and (occasionally but to memorable effect) falsetto singer of the alto parts in Renaissance motets and madrigals, he made himself an indispensable fixture in our musical life, on campus and off.

Murray was also a champion of new music, and gave numerous premieres, both as conductor and pianist, of new works with Cornell and area ensembles. Among the ensembles Murray conducted are the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, the DaCapo Chamber Players, and the Cayuga Chamber Orchestra. Prior to arriving at Cornell, he served as Director of the Plainfield, New Jersey Symphony Orchestra. His work as a conductor and pianist is recorded on several labels, including Columbia, Nonesuch, and Spectrum. He served as Director of the Cornell

Musica Nova contemporary music series, and for more than twenty years was musical Director for the Ithaca Opera Association. He was also a regular performer with the Syracuse Society for New Music. As a pianist, he collaborated regularly with colleagues in song recitals and other chamber music performances. A 1995 classical cabaret concert in Barnes Hall with soprano Kathryn Fields was a typical example of Murray's musical tastes. It featured works by Kurt Weill, Leonard Bernstein, and William Bolcom, a Cole Porter rarity titled, "After You, Who?" as well as Murray's arrangement of Irving Berlin's, "Top Hat, White Tie, and Tails."

Murray's accomplishments as a jazz pianist were particularly well known and widely appreciated. His colleague, David Borden, has written about their musical collaboration:

"Working with Ed Murray, preparing two-piano concerts of American pop and jazz standards was one of the most fulfilling experiences of my musical life. This collaboration started when Ed gave me a tape to listen to on a long trip, of him playing some of his favorite tunes. He called his own arrangements 'meditations'. This allowed for unique interpretations of familiar tunes like George Gershwin's 'Strike Up the Band' as a dreamy fantasy or Cole Porter's 'Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye' as a Debussy Prelude. In fact, Ed would often quote from the classical repertoire in his arrangements, sometimes embedded so deeply that only he would know what was going on. When this happened, a smile of mischievous accomplishment would flash across his face while he played the passage."

David Borden, John Hsu, Steve Stucky, Martin Hatch