

William Weaver Austin

January 18, 1920 — March 15, 2000

William Weaver Austin was born in Lawton, Oklahoma. After preparatory education in Kansas City, Missouri, Great Falls, Montana, and Minneapolis, Minnesota, he entered Harvard at fifteen as a National Scholar and graduated four years later with honors in American history and literature. During his undergraduate years, he studied harmony with Walter Piston and served as accompanist for the Harvard Glee Club. Staying on for graduate study in music, he received his M.A. degree in 1940 and fulfilled the course requirements for a Doctorate during the next two academic years. He spent the summer of 1940 at the Berkshire Music Center (“Tanglewood”) in Lenox, Massachusetts, coaching in the opera department and studying counterpoint with Paul Hindemith, and then the subsequent summer at the MacDowell Colony in Petersborough, New Hampshire, where he composed a string trio. After serving in the U.S. Navy from July 1942 to March 1946, he taught at the University of Virginia for three semesters. Harvard awarded him the Ph.D. degree in 1951 for a dissertation entitled “Harmonic Rhythm in Twentieth-Century Music.”

Bill joined Cornell’s music faculty in 1947 as Assistant Professor and University Organist, rising to Associate Professor in 1950 and full Professor in 1959. He served as Chair of the Music Department from 1958 to 1963. He was elected Goldwin Smith Professor of Musicology in 1969, and then Given Foundation Professor of Musicology in 1983. The American Council of Learned Societies and the Guggenheim Foundation awarded him fellowships in 1952-53 and 1960-61 respectively. In addition, Bill was a member of the International Musicological Society, Royal Musical Association, Society for Ethnomusicology, Gesellschaft für Musikforschung, Australian Musicological Society, International Webern Society, International Berg Society, Centre de Documentation Claude Debussy, Music Library Association, Society for Music Theory; the College Music Society, of which he was president in 1961-62; and the American Musicological Society, of which he was elected an Honorary Member in 1996.

To say that Bill’s intellectual interests were broad can scarcely do him justice. Although he was an expert on twentieth-century music, his knowledge was far-reaching both in and outside of music. Almost every academic endeavor attracted him. His way of keeping up with developments in many fields was extraordinary: he not only read, or at least browsed, everything that came into the Music Library, but he regularly visited other libraries on campus to examine their latest acquisitions. When anything struck him as particularly thought provoking or potentially useful to his own work or that of a student or friend, he would note it on a 3 x 5 card. It was not

uncommon for members of the Music Department to find in their mailboxes cards in his hand on the subjects of their current research, often leading to sources that might otherwise have been overlooked. His card file made Bill a bibliographic court of last resort: after other means of investigation had failed to turn up some badly needed but obscure information, he frequently located it.

Bill's magnum opus, *Music in the 20th Century from Debussy through Stravinsky* (1966), received considerable acclaim, winning the Kinkeldey Prize of the American Musicological Society and the Dent Medal of the International Musicological Society. His "Susanna," "Jeanie," and "The Old Folks at Home": the Songs of Stephen C. Foster from His Time to Ours (1975)—a study that crossed boundaries between musicology, ethnomusicology, reception history, and American history—was much admired, and he was eventually asked to produce a second edition. His Norton Study Score of Debussy's, *Prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun"* (1970), remains in wide use. He was also the author of over 50 articles, which appeared in the *Musical Quarterly*, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, and other publications here and overseas.

Bill taught a wide range of graduate and undergraduate courses, but it was his legendary introductory course, called "The Art of Music" in the early years and "Bach, Rock and Folk" later on, that consistently attracted a large and enthusiastic following of undergraduates. He taught these young music lovers to broaden their views, to listen with discrimination, and to think critically. The following account from a former teaching assistant in the course nicely illustrates one side of Bill's distinct brand of pedagogy:

Mr. Austin entered from a door at the side of the stage. Without a word, he went to the piano, sat, and played the first page or so of the slow movement from Beethoven's "Pathétique" Sonata. The students were quiet and attentive; clearly this was going to be a course about great music...exactly what they expected. At the end of a passage, Mr. Austin stood and walked to the stereo and turned it on. The music absolutely exploded—it was dance-club loud. The selection was Prince's "1999," and the abrupt change electrified the room. He played a minute or so of the song, turned it off, and walked to the front of the stage. In his quiet voice he said, "The purpose of this class is to help you learn what those two things have in common." He had us all in the palm of his hand for the rest of the term.

Bill was a devoted teacher to graduate and undergraduate students alike. His office door was always open, and he seemed to have time to listen and discuss seriously and at length any subject a student brought up. Many of them felt they learned as much from him outside the classroom as in it. His friendship with numerous students continued for years after they left Cornell, and he generously offered encouragement and suggestions whenever they sought his advice.

Although he did not pursue a career as a professional performer, Bill was a prodigious keyboard player. Besides playing the organ at Sage Chapel, he performed regularly on the piano. His repertoire included such solo and chamber music works as Beethoven's "Diabelli" Variations, Copland's Variations and Sonata, Elliot Carter's Cello Sonata, and Fauré's Piano Quartet. As capable of realizing figured bass as the best professional harpsichordists, he enjoyed collaborating with colleagues in performances of Baroque music.

Bill's musicianship was towering. He had an almost supernatural ability to play accurately at first sight the most difficult pieces—not just piano works but also orchestral full scores—and to transpose music to any key. He also had absolute pitch, that is, the ability to identify (or sing) specific notes in the absence of any musical context. At one point, a colleague heard something unusual coming from Bill's office: it was the middle section of a movement of a piano sonata by Beethoven, played over and over, each time in a different key. Unable to contain his curiosity, the colleague knocked at the door to ask Bill what he was doing. Bill's characteristically iconoclastic explanation was this: he had decided that "true" understanding of modulations (changes of key) probably should occur by judging one key relative to the next. He feared that absolute pitch was getting in the way of this type of perception, so he had been experimenting with playing Beethoven's modulations transposed to all twelve keys, in the hope of disorienting his too-accurate ear so that he might hear in the way those without absolute pitch did.

Bill's modesty was combined with an extreme dislike of hyperbole, especially in the sphere of human relations. As his 70th birthday and retirement were approaching, he came into a colleague's office to beg that, were any plans for ceremonies, speeches or a Festschrift being mooted, they be squelched. When he was gently remonstrated by being told that a number of colleagues and former students would like to do something to express their affection and admiration for him, his face darkened and he responded that on such occasions people always exaggerated in embarrassing ways and he wanted none of it. If any individual wished to talk to him privately, that would be fine. His colleagues settled on a dinner with good food, drink, and camaraderie—no speeches.

What was left unsaid at his retirement should now be said. During forty-three years of teaching at Cornell, Bill Austin had an immense influence on his students, his colleagues, and his department. The breadth of his knowledge and the scope of his interests were a constant source of inspiration and encouragement to his students. Instilling in them a deeper love and a broader understanding of music, he led some of them to successful careers that they themselves had not envisioned. For his colleagues, his loyal friendship provided much of the warmth that pervaded the Cornell Music Department. His universal view of music, his uncompromising standard of

excellence, and his innate sense of fairness were constant guides in much of the department's deliberation and planning.

Bill is survived by his wife, Elizabeth; daughters, Ann Smock, of Berkeley, California, and Margery Turner, of Washington, D.C.; and three grandsons: Ned Smock, and James and Benjamin Turner.

Malcolm Bilson, Neal Zaslav, John Hsu