

The Memorial Service for Philip Gossett

University of Chicago, 8 February 2018

“When someone dies after a long illness, that continuing aura of life grows as the sad time of wasting away becomes more distant, allowing us to recover an image of the vibrant person we knew. What feeds the recovery—temporary, before the lingering glow of presence fades, as it one day will—is the sharing of our memories.” – *Elizabeth Helsing*



Photo by University of Chicago / Jason Smith

On February 8, 2018 several hundred gathered to celebrate the life of Philip Gossett. Held in the soaring spaces of the University of Chicago’s Rockefeller Chapel, the memorial service was lovingly curated by Philip’s colleagues from the Department of Music, led by Berthold Hoeckner, to reflect Philip’s manifold activities as scholar, editor, teacher, dean, advisor, vocal coach, and public figure. Reminiscences from family and friends rounded out the picture of this extraordinary polymath, who died on June 6, 2017.

The Speakers

As Patricia Brauner, Philip’s longtime managing editor of the Rossini edition, said when asked what struck her most about the service, she replied, “That big picture of Philip in front. It felt like he was smiling down on us.” Indeed, his presence was felt by many as speaker after speaker recounted their memories. We were welcomed by **Don Michael Randel**, former president of the University, who told of their days in Princeton when Philip, “a fearless pianist... would attack the old Chrysander edition, with its various clefs and transpositions” so that

they could do their own exploration of Handel in the days before today's wealth of resources. Citing Philip's passion, prodigious capacity for work, and "wicked" sense of humor, Randel also praised him as a "terrorist" who "applied a stick of dynamite to the canon of acceptable dissertation topics. He proved, against considerable resistance, that musicology's best tools could usefully be applied to music like that of Rossini, who wasn't even German...Thus did Phil open musicology to vast new territory. He did this, furthermore, in a way that was largely unfamiliar to musicology, for he placed contributions to performance at the top of his priorities. His editions, his study of performance practice, and his coaching of numerous performers transformed the way in which we hear this music today."

Hugo Sonnenschein, another former president of the University, and **Richard Franke**, a Lifetime Trustee of the University, especially praised Philip's contributions as a Dean of Humanities, a position he held for a decade. After praising Philip's cultivation and care for the faculty, Sonnenschein recollected how his colleagues gloried in his celebrity, which added luster to the University: "Philip brought 'his friends' to Mandel Hall for conversation: Renee Fleming, Bryn Tervel. And afterwards there were further dinners at the President's House. *Cenerentola* at the Metropolitan, where Philip had an advisory role in the production and worked with Cecilia Bartoli...and another dinner...so that our music friends in NYC could be assured that Chicago is not the second city." Franke expanded on the lifelong friendship that resulted from their work together on the Chicago Humanities Festival. "Phil was thoughtful and demanding, working to ensure that standards were kept extremely high, while finding creative ways to introduce an ever-broader audience to the arts and humanities." Franke also cited an example of Philip's extraordinary capacity for work: "I remember calling Phil in his office about 3 pm on a Tuesday and he sounded a bit tired. I asked if he had time to talk? 'No, I don't,' he said. He went on to explain that he was working on a report and swamped with paper work. He then said that he had been in the office since 7 AM on Monday and had worked all night at his desk. He is the only person that I have known who had the stamina to work for two days non-stop."

Composer **Shulamit Ran** praised his "abiding commitment to do that which needed to be done, to speak out, and to actively take responsibility for the world we live in, in every way that is within our reach. The Talmudic expression *tikkun olam*—repair, betterment, of the world—is relevant here." Speaking as a composer, she added that "Philip would never have thought of himself as a 'new music specialist'! Yet his life's work, at ALL times, centered around questions of *what did the composer actually mean; and how did a composer intend for those notes—sometimes sloppily notated or existing in fragments, or in various versions—to sound*. He always put himself in the time and place when the music was actually created, when it *was* 'new music.'"

Personal anecdotes were Professor **Elizabeth Helsinger's** focus. Their two families enjoyed many occasions together over the years, including one dinner in Siena with their four sons. Her story reminds us of Philip's "fullest attention to detail but *con brio*, and with an inventiveness that few can match. The adolescent noise level was rapidly approaching bedlam when Philip had an inspired idea. Tonight, he announced, will be a SILENT meal. For the next two hours he led us in a lively pantomime that undoubtedly had our Italian neighbors either convinced we were mad—or ready to embrace Phil as one of their own, as of course they did."

In her remembrance, musicologist **Ellen T. Harris** also spoke of close ties between her family and the Gossetts, especially Suzanne, who had become her “dearest friend.” “We raised our families side by side,” she said. “When we were expecting our first child, Suzanne and Philip were expecting their second. Suzanne recommended her doctor, and we ended up going to all of our appointments together. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we both ended up giving birth the same day. This only became clear to John and me when we arrived at Michael Reese Hospital around 11 pm and were greeted by a somewhat disheveled and a little frantic Philip (Suzanne apparently having decided that Philip might not be a calming influence in the delivery room). He came running toward us, arms open, shouting, ‘Oh no, not you too!’ I like to think that when each of us meets up with Philip again, his greeting will be the same—unconventional, enthusiastic, and genuine. And we will know once again that we are not alone.”

In giving the valediction, son **David Gossett** rounded out the family picture with stories only a son could tell: playing hide-and-seek with his brother Jeffrey in the hallway and classrooms, hearing tales of the rats in the old Woodlawn building, and Philip’s “uniform in those days—a corduroy sports coat with leather patches on the sleeves, huge glasses, and hiking boots.” Then there was Philip’s pride in “his scheme to deal with department chairs who griped about resources by giving them control over their own budgets,” and the stacks of books written by faculty members, all of which Philip had read and could discuss in detail. “That enthusiasm, that passion, is what I remember most about my father.”

The Music



Photo Marta Tonegutti

Our chief concern in planning the music was to secure a world-class singer who would represent the legion of artists who had worked with Philip on their role preparation. We were fortunate to secure tenor Lawrence Brownlee, who had most recently worked with Philip on the 2013 production of *La donna del lago* at Santa Fe Opera. Although he had sung a performance of *I Puritani* the night before at Lyric Opera of Chicago, Brownlee sang with his signature brilliance and ease the arias “A te o cara” from *Puritani* and “O fiamma soave” from *La donna del lago* to organ accompaniment by Thomas Weisflog, University Organist.

In introducing Brownlee, Lyric’s CEO Anthony Freud recalled “Philip’s croaky voice coaching [singers] in the art of *bel canto* coloratura—a lost practice he recovered from the painstaking study of original manuscripts. Sight-reading from handwritten scores, Philip would teach singers how to embellish their melodic lines in ways that would fit their instrument like a glove. It was a true labor of love.” Concluding these musical selections were remarks from Riccardo Muti, read by former CSO President Henry Fogel, who acknowledged the “enormous support from him in the difficult task of fighting the good fight against the abuses and superficiality of many interpreters. For Philip, the intention of the author, of the composer, was sacred and had to be respected with humility but also with great erudition and profound scholarship. His work will remain, without a doubt, a beacon for musicians of today and tomorrow, who will be able to follow his example.”



Photo by Lawrence Brownlee, Santa Fe Festival 2013

The service opened with Weisflog's rousing rendition of the Triumphal March from *Aida* on the recently-restored chapel organ in celebration of Philip's self-proclaimed "operatic personality" and concluded with *tutti* singing "Va pensiero." The University's Motet Choir, led by James Kallembach, supplied a meditative moment with Verdi's "Pater noster."

After "Va pensiero" we condoled with the Gossett family, noshed a bit, drank a glass of wine too many, and swapped stories with friends and colleagues who had traveled to Hyde Park for the service. For me, who had only joined the enchanted Gossett world in 2011, it was a chance to meet in person many people with whom I had corresponded as Coordinator for the Center for Italian Opera Studies. The leadership of Rossini and Verdi editions were there, ready to continue the work already laid out for them over the decades. To quote Shulamit Ran again, "The important legacy he left, as scholar and public figure, will live on. The human being, the 'mensch' will be missed by so many of us, here and elsewhere, who were fortunate to know and to call Philip Gossett our friend."

By Beth Parker

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