

I am sorry to announce the death of my friend and teacher, Lukas Foss, who passed away yesterday, February 1st, 2009, at the age of 86. Anyone who knows anything about music already knows about Foss' career as a composer, conductor, pianist, and educator. I feel very fortunate and blessed that I got to know him personally, and thought I'd share some thoughts and experiences I had with this man.

Lukas was the greatest musician I have ever encountered. He was endlessly creative, restless, searching, and challenging. The many recordings of his music will attest to this. While he was very close to composers such as Bernstein (whom he called his big brother), and Copland, he chose a different path for himself. Lukas had no set "school" that he adhered to. He always spoke of having no recipe for composing. He would sometimes refer to his work as "naughty", because he liked to be revolutionary, and to surprise the listener. And he certainly never compromised his art in any way. He became my favorite living composer shortly after I began to research him. His music sounded so fresh to me (and continues to). I first heard a Foss piece when I attended a concert of Lukas conducting the Curtis Orchestra. They performed his left hand piano concerto, with Leon Fleisher as the soloist. Once again, the best adjective I can think to describe the music is "fresh." The mark it made on me never left. Lukas became the single biggest influence in my life as a composer. His catalog of compositions runs an incredible gamut stylistically, yet he always had a way to make his influences his own. He always had something to say, and he did it with a very natural musicality that seemed to be there from day one. It was in his genetic makeup, and beyond explanation. His output consists of amazingly daring vocal writing (*Time Cycle*), orchestral song cycles as good as any written (*Song of Songs*); minimalism reinvented (*Solo for Piano*); charming operas (*Griffelkin* and *The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*); exhilarating chamber music (*Tashi*); an avante-garde quartet considered one of the hardest pieces ever written (*Echoi*); pieces that hypnotically fade in and out of audibility (*Geod*); pieces with mesmerizing flirtations with the past (*Renaissance Flute Concerto* and *Baroque Variations*); one of the funniest nine-minute operas you'll ever hear (*Introductions and Goodbyes*); great concertos for several instruments (piano, clarinet, guitar, oboe, percussion, cello), huge Americana landscapes (*The Prairie*)... And the list goes on. These are some of my favorite twentieth century pieces.

Lukas gave me a way into the world of modern music. To me, his music was inviting. It wasn't academic for its own sake. It bubbled over with life. And it was all done with such refined taste and musicality that I found it endlessly inspiring. There wasn't another living composer with whom I would rather have studied. I began to wonder if I would ever get the chance to talk to him.

In 1997 I miraculously ended up with Lukas' phone number. I was in graduate school at the time. I told a girl in my class that I was thinking of calling Lukas Foss and asking him for a lesson. She looked at me like I was crazy. "You're just going to call Lukas Foss up out of the blue and ask him for a lesson?!?" and started laughing at me. So, I didn't call him. Almost a year later I finally called him. He told me that he was very busy, and that he only taught at Boston University, and that if I was ever

in Boston, perhaps we could meet there. I hung up the phone discouraged. A few minutes later I called him back and said "I will come to Boston to meet with you for an hour." He then said "Why don't you just send me some of your music in the mail?" Now I thought that I was being brushed-off for sure. I sent him an orchestral score and recording, certain that I would never hear from him again. A few days later I came home to find a blinking light on my answering machine. It was that voice! He invited me to New York for a visit at his place. I remember that first lesson like it was yesterday. It was my first trip to the city by myself, and I was quite frightened, having grown up in suburbia. I thought everyone who went to NYC ended up getting shot at, or at least stabbed. I found my way to his place at 95th Street and 5th Avenue. He was very encouraging and kind to me. What struck me most profoundly was that he treated me as a peer, and not like a student. In all of the years I knew him, he never treated me like I was less than him. He was always courteous and respectful, and he always returned my phone calls. This was a real gentleman. I was so excited after that first lesson that I wandered the streets of New York for hours, buzzing! I walked across Central Park and found myself at Tower Records. Then I walked south on Broadway and was completely shocked when I found myself in Times Square. I walked and walked, and ended up miles away in Greenwich Village, at The Village Vanguard, and heard an amazing jazz concert. That was a day to remember.

Over the years, Lukas and I worked on some projects together, including an interview that was published. I went to see him on many Sundays in New York, and in the summer I went to his place out in the Hamptons to be part of his annual festival, and to swim in his pool. We went to concerts together at Carnegie Hall. He would attend performances of my pieces. He came to my apartment in West Chester, PA, for a lunch, and met my parents and friends. I can remember being in the city once for a visit, and he invited me to have dinner with his family. Before the dinner he said "You are now officially part of the family". There was no other living composer from whom I wanted to hear that more. I couldn't help but think back to grad school, when I was laughed at for saying that I might call him. As I drove home, I again realized that God's good blessings continue to go far beyond my expectations.

Lukas was the kind of guy who would say certain things, in a very identifiable accent, and I knew that I would never forget them. What he praised or criticized in my music is forever etched in my memory. Things that I couldn't understand at the time made sense years later, after I had some distance from them. He was a very quiet man, although his music is often ferocious. I learned so much from his reactions to what I was writing. If he said something was good, then it was really good. And if he was cool towards something, in time I would usually come to realize that he was right!

I remember him taking the score of the fourth movement of his *Time Cycle* to the piano and singing the vocal part while playing the piano reduction. I felt like I was witnessing one of the most historic events that I would ever be privy to. In our

lessons, the word that he used more than any other was "Love". He always spoke about doing what you love, and not following the crowd out of duty. He would say "If you love what you are writing, then it doesn't matter what anyone has to say about it." Writing for your self was everything. Actually, it was the only thing.

The last time I saw Lukas I could see that his health was failing. I asked him if I could take him out to lunch, and he agreed. As we walked to the restaurant, he said "Thank you for taking time out of your schedule for me." I held onto his arm as we walked, because he appeared weak, and while in the restaurant I helped him with his food. As we walked back, and approached his door on 95th Street, I said to him "Do you know that you are my favorite living composer?" He responded very quietly "You're good for my ego." I took him up the elevator to his door, to get my bag and say goodbye. As I left, I went to give him a hug. He kissed me on the cheek and said "Goodbye, my friend."

I'll miss him.

David Bennett Thomas
February 2, 2009