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Donald Martin Jenni (1937-2006): A Remembrance

By David Lang

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Two weeks ago I received a sad email, telling me that the composer Donald Martin Jenni had died, from a long and painful cancer. My first thought was that I was sorry I had not kept in closer contact, my second was that I was surprised to read in his obituary that he had ended up in New Orleans, with a new life and an adopted family. His life had changed so much since I had known him. I had been a masters student of Martin's from 1978 to 1980 at the University of Iowa, and although we had stayed in touch after I left Iowa—we would send each other music and he would come visit whenever he was in New York—the second that he retired he vanished. I lost track of where he was. For a while I had an email address that worked and we would write each other from time to time. Then one day the emails became undeliverable, and I never heard from him again.

Jenni was always something of a man of mystery. I could never figure out where he was really from, and when pressed he would tell amazing stories of traveling in Morocco or Eastern Europe or India. He had a strange and vaguely unrecognizable accent, the result of the backgrounds of his immigrant parents and a lifetime of speaking other languages. Even his name was mysterious—at Stanford when I had met him he was called Donald Jenni, with the accent on the "Jen." The next year when I went to Iowa everyone called him Martin Jenni, with the accent on the "ni." It seemed that people knew him differently in different worlds and places. It also seemed that changing his location was a part of changing himself.

I met him in 1976, when I was an undergraduate at Stanford University. I had already heard about him from my former and future teacher Martin Bresnick, so when he came to Stanford as a semester leave replacement I wanted to get to know him. At Stanford, Jenni taught a seminar

called French Music. It began with Charlemagne and ended with Boulez. Each week we would look in depth at one piece or composer: the Messe de Notre Dame, La Mer, Leonin's Magnus Liber, the Berlioz Requiem, Solage, Faure, Messiaen. I was a snotty undergraduate and had no interest in this music, I thought, and I went into this class with great reservation, really only because Bresnick had essentially ordered me to. Nothing in my education had prepared me to enjoy a class so much.

The level of erudition was something I had never experienced before. Jenni's deep knowledge of the music and the history behind the music was mindblowingly persuasive. Most of all, his ability to subject even the most seemingly obvious musical materials to a laser-like microscopic analysis was miraculous. It was by far the best course I had as an undergraduate.

In Jenni's class at Stanford was another student, composer Heinrich Taube, now at the University of Illinois. Without consulting each other, Rick and I both decided that we would follow Jenni to the University of Iowa for our masters degrees, and by some strange coincidence and a great shortage of office space we ended up sharing an office with Jenni. Iowa in those years was a great school, with a brilliant, diverse and active composition faculty of Jenni, Richard Hervig, William Hibbard and Peter Todd Lewis. Hervig was the chair of the composition department and he fostered a noble atmosphere among the composers, leading the weekly seminars with a probing gentility. The students were intense, ambitious and very talented. It was said that Iowa at that time had more BMI Student Awards winners than any other school in the nation. One could ask BMI's Ralph Jackson if it's true. He was a student (and an award winner) at Iowa then as well.

I felt that I had dropped into some oasis of enlightenment, and the teachers seemed to try to outdo each other with uniquely revelatory courses. I took a semester-long analysis course with Hibbard on *Pierrot lunaire*, for example. But the classes of Jenni's were the most wide-ranging, and by far the most amazing: a semester on the 114 songs of Charles Ives; a semester on William Byrd's *My Ladye Nevell's Booke*; a semester on the piano music of Brahms. This is what education is supposed to be and almost never is. Ultimately it did not matter to me what subject he was teaching. If he taught the class I took it, because I knew it would be deep.

Jenni was a musician of rare gifts. As both composer and pianist he had been a prodigy, championed at the age of fifteen by the composer Henry Cowell. He was a great keyboard player and had superhuman ears—he had only to listen to a piece of music to know it inside and out.

His ability to play orchestral music at the piano after hearing it only once was part powerful analytical tool and part astounding parlor game, especially when applied to the dense music favored by James Dixon, the university orchestra's conductor. I remember going with Jenni to hear an obscure and overwritten romantic piano concerto one evening. Rick and Martin and I went back to our office and started talking about a particular section of the piece. Martin immediately sat down and played the solo part from memory, perfectly and flashily. I mentioned something about the accompaniment at that moment in the piece and he responded by playing the accompaniment, pointing out what was interesting in the voicings of the clarinets and horns. He had the ears for this kind of thing, and he had the mind to go along with them.

In his own music his mind and ears both shine. His best known piece is probably a chamber work called *Cucumber Music*, an attractive and witty and colorful pattern-based piece, a kind of organic, whole grain, California-style reaction to *Le Marteau Sans Maitre*. It is delicate and sparkling and very smart. He wrote a great piece for the percussionist Steve Schick, another fellow Iowan, called *Ballfall*, in which all the rhythms come from charting the decaying courses of bouncing balls. All his work is smart and delicate and full of invention. It is also subtle,

oblique and brainy, a bit reticent about proclaiming its own virtues. Jenni loved music not for the career of it but because he loved thinking about it. I always had the feeling that what he loved about his own work was the possibility of thinking about it, putting in the details and inventions and subtle internal surprises that he enjoyed so much in the music of the masters.

One of the things you found out immediately about Martin was that he was fluent in many, many languages. More than fluent, actually. His point was not to learn how to speak another language but to imagine how other people think, as reflected in how they speak. While I was his student he was studying the written grammar of ancient Tibetan, for his own amusement. A few years later he represented America at a UNESCO composers' conference, where by default he translated for the delegate from Vietnam. A passion for other languages, as a window into other cultures, was part of his general makeup.

He was also an expert in the arcane languages of medieval Christians. Of course, the language of the official and spiritual lives of all medieval Christians was Latin, but each monastic community or region had its own local peculiarities, and these peculiarities changed over time. Martin was an expert in these monastic differences and he was consulted regularly by scholars in such subjects from all around the world.

Martin knew the monastic life from the inside. He had been a monk himself, for several years in a monastery with a vow of silence. That is a strange place to find a nice Jewish boy—his mother was Jewish, his father was a devout Protestant (Lutheran, I think). Something of the monk stayed with him in his post-monastic life. He was intensely quiet, restrained and private, generous and moral. I have to say that his quiet scared me at first, because I had trouble reading the subtlety of what emotional cues he gave out. But he was gentle and could be very funny, and he had a kind of glow about him when he spoke of something he believed in.

Martin gave me what was one of the two best lessons I ever had from a teacher, and it was done with a devastatingly dramatic flair. I was just beginning to experiment with making music out of repetitive patterns, and I brought in the beginnings of a piece of music to my lesson, something schematic and very mathematically composed. Martin spent about 30 seconds looking at it and then moved over to another chair, picked up *The New York Times* and started reading. I didn't know what to do, but I didn't want to fall into any trap he was setting for me, so I just sat there, fuming patiently, waiting for the next student to arrive, one hour later. And so we sat. When the next student finally came Martin looked up and said "You know, sometimes something makes so much sense that you have to ask yourself, why do it?"

I have such a great memory of Martin, sitting in front of a harpsichord, a cigarette-length of ashes dangling from his lip, with his bright eyes and a slight smirk on his face, playing Bach and seeing something in it that amused him, something that I would never see if I looked at it forever. Whatever it was that he saw that day that amused him so I never found out. And I never will.