

Steven Stucky

An Overview of His Life and Compositional Style

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Steven Stucky received many awards for composition in his lifetime, including the Pulitzer Prize in 2005 and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1986. Though he primarily wrote for orchestra, his output included music for chamber ensembles, band, and choir. The duration of his association with the Los Angeles Philharmonic set a record that might stand for many years (Sakomoto, p. ii). Sadly, he passed away on February 14, 2016.

Mr. Stucky was born on November 7, 1949, in Hutchinson, Kansas and moved to Texas during his childhood (Sakomoto, p. 3). He claimed his parents did not overtly push music, but they had records of classical composers that became more of an inspiration to the young boy than the popular music of the day. “I gravitated to the two records of classical music my mother owned – Dvorak’s *New World Symphony* and Prokofiev’s *Peter and the Wolf*– and listened to them over and over again, wanting somehow to make the same kind of thing for myself,” (McCutchan, p. 133) he remembered. Additionally he recalled, “I certainly grew up hearing Hank Williams and Elvis Presley and so on, but it somehow didn’t get deeply into my soul” (Crockett, p. 52).

Composing entered Stucky’s mind at an early age. “I tried to make scores even before I could read music, sprinkling sharps and flats all over the page – complete nonsense.” He also started studying about composers during elementary school, keeping a notebook that included Wagner and Tchaikovsky (McCutchan, p. 133- 134). The love of orchestral music led to learning to play the viola, an instrument he continued playing through his undergraduate years at Baylor University. He recollected, “I wasn’t a terribly talented string player, but I kept it up through college and a little bit afterward, so I learned a lot of repertoire and got completely plugged into the orchestra as my home” (McCutchan, p. 134).

While at Baylor, he studied music composition. The current trends of the day heavily guided all of the students:

When I was a student we still felt, in our everyday work, the contest between Schoenberg and Stravinsky. We were encouraged to feel that the single most influential figure on the course of our music was Schoenberg. That turns out to have been wrong. It turns out that Stravinsky is a much more powerful force in present day music than Schoenberg (McCutchan, p. 134).

The pressure was strong first of all to write a certain kind of modernist-inspired music, and second, to be absolutely original in every piece – never to seem to be connected to anything that had come before (Crockett, p. 54).

The second step in his collegiate education was time spent at Cornell University studying with composers, including Karel Husa (Sakomoto, p. 5). Yet the advanced degree did not encourage the young Stucky, “When I got out of graduate school I wasn’t happy with any of my music... My music was pretty bad, and nobody was paying any attention to it, and I felt fairly hopeless” (McCutchan, p. 134). He felt the need to break away from the mold and training he received in college and turn toward his first influences. “I took a teaching job and I didn’t write very much, but eventually I wrote one piece that I sort of liked and somehow parlayed that into another one. In the early 1980s I began to write music that I still like” (McCutchan, p. 134). As he reviewed his own work he started to realize his progress:

I just noticed one day that I already had it. This is something I worried about when I was young. All I could see was that at a certain age I was writing bad Shostakovich, at a certain age I was writing bad Copland, and at a certain age I was writing bad Bartók, and at a certain age I was writing bad Lutosławski. At some point I realized that I was now writing pieces which all sounded like they were by the same guy. This guy was an amalgam of bad Lutosławski, bad Bartók and bad Ravel and so on, but filtered through my personality. There was one composer in these pieces. And I stopped thinking about it, stopped worrying about it (Spano, p. 11).

Stucky’s reputation as an outstanding composer grew in the 1980s. He has received commissions from major American orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra and the Los Angeles Philharmonic (Sakomoto, p.

6). His music also received notice from prize committees. Among his many distinctions and awards, he was a finalist in 1989 for the Pulitzer Prize in music for his *Concerto for Orchestra*. He won the prize outright in 2005, coincidentally for his *Second Concerto for Orchestra* (Sakomoto, p. 7).

Perhaps his association with the Los Angeles Philharmonic cemented his reputation beyond any other achievement. He spent 21 years, from 1988 to 2009, as Composer-in-Residence for that ensemble. This length of tenure is unequalled by any composer with an orchestra in modern times (Sakomoto, p. 6). During this time, he formed Ensemble X, a contemporary music group founded in 1997. He conducted premieres of works by many of his contemporaries, including Donald Crockett, Jacob Druckman, William Kraft, Witold Lutoslawski, Christopher Rouse, Joseph Phibbs, and Judith Weir (Sakomoto, p. 7).

One of the largest influences on Stucky's writing was Witold Lutoslawski. Stucky became an expert on Lutoslawski's music. He consulted to the Philharmonia Orchestra's 2013 centennial celebrations of Lutoslawski in London. Additionally, Stucky received the ASCAP Deems Taylor Prize for his 1981 book *Lutoslawski and His Music* (Sakomoto, p. 7). Other influences include Debussy, Stravinsky, Ravel, Dvorak's *New World Symphony*, and Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* (Sakomoto, p. 3 and p. 10).

By the end of his career, Stucky developed a process of composition that worked well for him. He spoke extensively to researchers and reporters about his compositional approach.

I try never to start a piece before I know a lot about its character, the kind of sound world it will exist in, what the piece will feel like (although there have been emergencies where I had to start before I was ready). In a way the "personality" of the piece is more important than any of the notes or technical details that I'll eventually work out (McCutchan, p. 135).

I need to work at the piano. I think it's really important to have some kind of living sound in the room. No matter how good your ear is, how experienced you are, and how strong

your imagination is, mental sound and physical sound always turn out to be different from one another. You need to keep going back and forth between imagination and reality (McCutchan, p. 137-138).

I don't amass bunches of sketches and then sort through them and decide which to use and which to throw away. I imagine passages in my head, then sketch just enough on the side to work out technical details, then go straight into the full score. If the essential layout – length, movement, character, emotional climate – are more or less known, I can start at the beginning and write the piece from beginning to end (McCutchan, p. 136).

In my music the ways the instruments or voices contribute to the texture are as important as the notes, so I orchestrate as I go. Orchestration can't be a separate phase, because of the specific nature of my music. It's often thickly textured – a lot of different things go on at once, and they have to be worked out at the same time (McCutchan, p. 136).

...I believe, that when color is useful it is achieved by some combination of timbre and pitch – that is, timbre and harmonic language. That is what makes colors memorable and structurally useful, rather than pure timbre (Crockett, p. 59).

Interestingly, Stucky references his own works and themes but does not keep sketches during the process. "I'll have a page on which I try things out, and when I've gotten what I want, I'll throw that page away and put what works in the score. There isn't a sketchbook left afterward for somebody to look at – nothing to see except the piece" (McCutchan, p. 136). "...I have recycled from successful pieces, the way an eighteenth-century composer would. I've actually borrowed chunks from myself for different purposes. I don't keep it a secret, either. There's nothing shameful about it (McCutchan, p. 135).

Many in the band world wished Stucky would have written more than the six pieces he penned for band. Of the six, the most performed is *Funeral Music for Queen Anne* (1992) (Sakamoto, p. 2). Other compositions include *Voyages for Cello and Wind Orchestra* (1983-84), *Threnos: for Wind Ensemble* (1988), *Fanfares and Arias* (1994), *Concerto for Percussion and Wind Orchestra* (2001) and *Hue and Cry* (2006).

Many people continue to appreciate the repertoire that Steven Stucky added to the musical canon. Let us hope his music will continue to be played far into the future.

References

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