REMEMBERING

DAVID KRAEHENBUEHL

Charles Burkhart

On January 3, 1997, David Kraehenbuehl, founder and first editor of the *Journal of Music Theory*, and my onetime mentor and lifelong friend, died of a massive heart attack near his home in Trempealeau, Wisconsin, where he had lived with his family for the past twelve years. He was seventy-three.

Born September 15, 1923, in Champaign-Urbana, David was the son of Kathryn and John Otto Kraehenbuehl, the latter a distinguished professor of electrical engineering at the University of Illinois. David's extraordinary intellectual and musical gifts were given every opportunity for growth, and he early developed into a brilliant pianist and precocious composer. Entering the University at age sixteen, he graduated in 1943 with a double degree—a Mus.B. in piano and a B.A. in German and Mathematics—and also with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in command of the student Signal Corps of the ROTC. He then entered the Signal Corps officer training school, and in 1944 went on to military intelligence school at Camp Ritchie, Maryland, where he was trained as a cryptologist. While there, an army friend gave him the opportunity to hear a recording of Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler*, which sparked a desire to study with Hindemith after the war. In 1945 he saw duty in the Pacific, eventually becoming officer-in-charge of the Eighth Army Signal Center

in Yokohama. Mustered out as a captain in 1946, he entered Yale School of Music the following year. Also in 1947 he met Marie Marek, a cello student at the University of Illinois School of Music. They married in August and Marie accompanied David to Yale, where, as a cellist, she would participate in the rich musical life of the university and town.

At that time the many ex-GIs, who were older than the other students and eager to get on with their delayed education, made the Yale School of Music (like many other schools in this country) an exciting place. But the most exciting thing was the presence of the highly sought-after Paul Hindemith, who had been teaching both theory and composition there since 1940. To choose which students he would accept, Hindemith gave a competitive written exam each year to all who wanted to work with him. When David took it, there were twenty-odd applicants and only one remaining place in Hindemith's group. I recall David's telling me that one of the required problems on the exam was to write a tonal triple canon around a given plainchant. (Could today's theory majors do this?) Hindemith gave the place to David, and would later call him "the most gifted student I have ever had."

Hindemith's students majored in either theory or composition, depending on their strengths. David was originally a theory major, and was slated for a 1950 graduation. But in the spring of 1949 Hindemith was invited to give the Norton Lectures at Harvard the following school year, and what to do with his Yale students became a problem. In David's case the solution was to have him write, during the last month of the school year, a Scherzo, Variations, and Fugue for piano and winds—a very exciting piece whose premiere I heard—and graduate him with a Mus.M. in Composition.

At graduation David was also announced as that year's winner of the School's Ditson Fellowship for Foreign Study. Thanks to the Ditson money, he and Marie were able to spend the next year (1949–50) at the *Schola Cantorum* in Basel, where his studies included chant, performance practice, and harpsichord. He also sang in the Basel *Kammerchor* and played flute (his second instrument) with the Basel *Kammerorchester,* both groups under the direction of Paul Sacher.

On a recommendation from Hindemith, David was made assistant professor of music history and theory in 1950 at Colorado College in Colorado Springs. (The college was something of a pre-Aspen arts center then, and Hindemith had been an invited guest professor in the summer of 1949.) During David's three years there, in addition to teaching, he performed weekly as a chamber music pianist, founded and conducted concerts by the Colorado College Collegium Musicum, and served as music editor, critic, and essayist on music for the Colorado Springs Free Press. And, not least, he composed an impressive number of pieces, many of which were performed in Colorado Springs and elsewhere. Notable

among these was *Diptych,* written for the Yale Concert Band, and several ballets produced by the remarkable dance department of Colorado College, which was headed by Molly Lynn, a student of Hanya Holm.

By 1953 Hindemith's burgeoning international career as a conductor made it impossible for him to continue at Yale. At Hindemith's suggestion, David was appointed assistant professor at Yale School of Music, where he served as head of the Music Theory Department, taught a variety of graduate courses, and directed Master's thesis work in theory. He was very popular with the students, who found him a charismatic teacher, and was also highly esteemed by the School's dean, Luther Noss. Also, in 1955 he was appointed musical director of the New Haven Chorale, a position he held for the next five years.

In 1955 David conceived the idea of a journal devoted exclusively to the subject of music theory—the first of its kind. He took the idea to Dean Noss, who gave it his enthusiastic support and helped set up an editorial board. The myriad tasks required to make the idea a reality were all entrusted to David and his one assistant, Donald Loach, then a beginning instructor. Everyone—board, editorial staff, authors—worked for love.

It was March, 1957, when Volume 1, Number 1, clad in a Yale-blue cover, made its debut. Page 1 was devoted to a "Foreword" (signed "DK") whose noble opening paragraph deserves quoting in full:

> In centuries past the formulation of laws regarding the practice of music was regarded as the highest aim for a musician; and, in many instances, musical laws were the inspiration or the source for more general laws regarding material or spiritual experience. Music was the image of the universe, hence, a source of truth; and it was the music theorist who sought, discovered, and expressed both natural and divine law. But in our own time it is the rare musician who knows how his art offers a key to universal understanding. Music theory has become a discipline in stylistic definition or, still less, a system of nomenclature and classification that offers no valid laws even regarding music. It is to the restoration of music theory as more than a didactic convenience, more than a necessary discipline, as, in fact, a mode of creative thought that this journal is dedicated.

Noble but naive, some readers of today might think, but there was far more to Kraehenbuehl's stance than nostalgia for an unrecapturable past. The Foreword goes on to cite the "lack of an available forum" as the reason why "theoretical discovery has languished," and expresses the hope that this journal "will serve as a focal point for . . . an exchange of ideas, as a stimulant to those isolated creative theorists who have wondered who and where their brethren are, [and] as an encouragement to the student who is still unaware of the vast unexplored areas of musical thought that remain to excite his imagination." It then outlines the different types of contribution the editors plan to include—articles on analytical or peda-

gogical technique, studies in speculative areas, translations of primary documents—as well as various additional features such as book reviews and a "theory forum" for briefer contributions and direct discussion, and it ends with this gracious invitation:

> This . . . publication [is] born of the belief that the creations of the music theorist are in need of a stage. Here is the stage. We await your entrances with real anticipation.

Eight months later, Volume 1/2 (November 1957) again began with a one-page statement signed by "DK." Entitled "A Matter of Policy," it first spelled out in more detail the boundaries of the areas to be covered—a point many correspondents had questioned. But more significantly, the statement went on to express chagrin that, since the largest proportion by far of both subscribers and submitters of papers had been historical musicologists rather than theorists, the *Journal* had not yet been embraced by the group for which it was created. Again an earnest invitation is extended:

> We firmly believe that there are theorists, composers, and theory teachers throughout the country possessed of considerable originality. That they have not written down their ideas to date is understandable since there was little or no likelihood of publication. We stand ready to offer that opportunity. . . . As we said in our previous foreword: "Here is the stage." Unfortunately, we find ourselves still awaiting with anticipation the entrance of those that we hoped most would make use of it.

Volume 2/1 (April 1958) begins with the third and last of DK's one-page openers, this one entitled "What is Music Theory?" Here the friendly tone of the first two seems to give way to a certain acerbity, as though the writer is beginning to lose his patience (and on occasion David could royally lose it; I hear him enunciating this title with an emphasis on the "is"). One imagines that Editor Kraehenbuehl had been receiving papers that seemed to him inappropriate for the *Journal*. Clearly he felt the need to clear up the "confusion regarding the proper business of musical theory."

> Many seem to believe that acoustical theories, aesthetic theories, theories of perception, indeed, any theories whose validity may be tested in the realm of musical activity are musical theories. This is nonsense. The proper object of musical theory is music, that pattern of sounds in time that composers construct to transfer their experience as human beings to others. The object of musical theory is not sound, not time, not human experience, but that particular conjunction of these that we call musical experience.

He went on to emphasize that *theory* must be distinguished from *fact* (he would later pillory incompetent theorists who argued for the "facts of theory"), and that "facts should not be confused with knowledge."

> In music, sound is a fact, its measurement the business of the sound engineer, its pertinence to natural law the business of the acoustical theorist, its artistic organization for purposes of communication the business of the music theorist.

Kraehenbuehl later developed these and related ideas in a full-length paper which was read at the 1959 convention of the Music Teachers National Association in Kansas City, Missouri, and published in *JMT* 4/1 (April 1960) under the title "The Professional Music Theorist—His Habits and Training." His major statement on this subject, this essay outlines a broad and visionary agenda in vivid, eloquent language, and climaxes with a desciption of "what a professional music theorist must be":

> He is first and foremost a musician. His knowledge of music, through the first-hand experience of composing and performing music, should be greater than that of any other musician. Secondly, he is a skilled thinker, versed in the techniques of logical demonstration, rational proof, and verbal argument. Thirdly, he is a professional, that is, he spends the major portion of his time thinking about music, searching out the clues which will lead to the development of new and useful theoretical systems. As is always the case, the creation of new things requires thorough knowledge of the old. The professional theorist, then, is also an expert on theoretical systems of the past . . . With this summary definition, it becomes evident that a professional theorist is, of course, a rarity.

And what does the professional theorist actually do for the musical world? Of course he would make a good theory teacher, but that is "the least of his contributions. His main efforts are bent toward the continuing development of theoretical knowledge." And his constant concern is to "reduce the area of unavoidable misunderstanding" between the contemporary composer and the performer. . . . [T]he theorist operates as a go-between, an agent, whose function is to keep the performer as close behind the composer as possible."

As we read Kraehenbuehl's words today, they seem prescient, for the revival of music theory as a serious discipline has become, as everyone knows, a reality, and a genuine profession has developed exactly along the lines he proposed, and even in the amount of time he estimated it would take—"at least thirty years." True, the groundswell of this development was already under way when he wrote. But his clarion call, and above all the journal he created, were powerful catalysts.[1]

In the late 50s, Kraehenbuehl also published (with Edgar Coons, a musician and psychologist) two highly original articles on the application of information theory to musical analysis.[2] A few years later he also published (with Christopher Schmidt) "On the Development of Musical Systems,"[3] a speculative article on microtonal theory. (This subject had been an abiding interest since his student days, and he returned to it late in life in an article co-authored with Christopher Light that is as yet unpublished.) Also, his compositional career really took off during his Yale teaching years (1953–60) with the writing of over twenty works, four publications by Associated Music Publishers, and performances by notable artists and groups including Ralph Kirkpatrick, the Margaret Hillis Chorale, and the Basel *Kammerorchester.*

David continued as editor of the Journal until 1960, when he suddenly resigned from Yale. (The editorship was then taken over by Allen Forte.) Except for a one-year stint at Westminster Choir College in 1967-68, he would never again hold a college position. Since he was so well launched on a brilliant academic career, and since, in 1959, Yale had appointed him associate professor with tenure, many wondered why he left. His reason sprang from a very deep and lifelong conviction of the need for improving American music education at the *grass-roots level*, and a deep desire to do something about it. As he himself wrote in a personal communication just one year ago, "I realized that, fulfilling as work with a dozen or so outstanding graduate theory students was, much needed to be done for young music students," meaning, in his case, young piano students. So he left Yale to join with Frances Clark and Louise Goss in founding The New School for Music Study in Princeton, New Jersey. With them he helped design the structure of the School, and as its Music Director wrote a large body of teaching pieces and other pedagogical material for the *Frances Clark Library for Piano Students*, published by Summy-Birchard (now taken over by Warner Brothers Publications). This included a six-volume theory program, a six-volume piano technique series, and a six-volume graded set of compositions called *Jazz and Blues.* (Is it possible some present readers of *JMT* have encountered his name only as that of the composer of these attractive and witty pieces?)

An essential part of the School's mission was teacher training, offered both at the School itself and at short "seminars" held on college campuses throughout the country. A regular feature of these seminars was a piano recital, and David frequently performed in them. I recall hearing him about 1965 in such a recital held at the Baldwin Studios in New York City, where he, together with Richard Chronister, a fellow teacher at the School, gave a breathtaking performance of a four-hand work of Schubert, a performance especially notable for the expressive rubato in the slower sections, where, in spite of the metrical freedom, the two played absolutely as one. (I should add that David played the piano with the

utmost freedom and grace, and looked so natural doing it that, as one friend put it, "he seemed just to grow out of the piano bench.")

In 1950 Kraehenbuehl had begun to develop a "general theory of music," a topic that not only provided the background to his more technical work in information theory, but that would inform his work in many ways for the rest of his life. Over the years it frequently entered into both his writing and speaking, adapted to the capacity and concerns of his audience of the moment. It also deeply informed his conception of his work as a composer, concerned as that conception was with communication between composer and listener.

The longest and most developed statement of this theory was a paper, "Toward a General Theory of Music," which had grown out of extended discussions with Edgar Coons, and is related in its broad concerns, though different from, earlier work by Meyer, Zuckerkandl, and Langer. This paper reveals Kraehenbuehl's deep conviction that composer and listener must share a large body of experience in order for "meaning" to exist. Though it remained unpublished, its main ideas are repeated at the beginning of the article referred to above on the professional theorist (*JMT* 4/1, 62). Here Kraehenbuehl proposes that the musical composition arises via a three-stage process of abstraction, the first being the composer's (probably unconscious) conceptualization of his experience of reality "in all its levels of complexity—simple sensation, physical reality, emotional reality, spiritual reality." Next the composer seeks to construct out of sound "similarly structured abstractions that will represent for him—and, he believes, for others—his concepts of reality." In the final stage he attempts to represent his imagined acoustical structure in visual terms—musical notation—"very likely . . . the least exact account of [his] initial artistic conception." Next the notated music is taken up by the performer, "its first and most important listener, . . . who translates it again into sound." It is this entire process of artistic communication, from the composer's translation of his concept of reality to the performer's retranslation of it back into sound, that is the concern of the music theorist. The theorist's specific responsibility is the "problem of how composers, past and present, succeed in representing the world of concept in the world of sound." First, he must describe meticulously the manner in which musical materials are organized. "He must then demonstrate the relationship between these organizations and the world of non-musical realities," that is, he must answer the question[s]: . . . "'To what do the organized sounds refer?' [and] 'How does the organized pattern of sound represent what it does?' It is in the nature of 'theory' that each new body of musical literature, indeed, each significant new composition, will require a revised or altogether new answer to this question."

By 1967 David had developed new piano-pedagogical approaches which, in my view, ultimately stemmed from his theories on conceptual-

ization and communication. He felt that the teacher, rather than attempting to draw from the young student a polished performance for which he was often not yet ready, should instead teach him (among other things) to "compose" at the keyboard. Unable to carry out his new methods at the School, he left (though all the materials he wrote for the Clark Library remained and continue in print to the present), and, together with Richard Chronister and Thomas McBeth, founded National Keyboard Arts Associates (NKAA), which developed and marketed a completely new piano study program that was again promoted via innumerable seminars, workshops, and recitals throughout the U.S. and Canada.[4]

NKAA also put out a magazine, *Keyboard Arts*, devoted to intermediate and advanced teaching, for which David wrote innumerable articles, some on historical performance practice, an important issue in the teacher training program, and some on theoretical and analytic topics. Among the latter, two of the best are "The Rhetoric of Music," and "Communication—Process and Purpose" (in issues of 1982 and 1983), in which he again presents ideas derived from his general theory, now couched in terms relevant to piano teaching, and illustrated with amusing musical and verbal examples, e.g., an Arab trying to communicate the idea of "desert" to an Eskimo.

David's life and work cannot be summarized without mention of its religious aspect. Born into a nominally Lutheran but nonobservant family, in 1956 he became a convert to Roman Catholicism, and after that time many of his compositions have a religious inspiration. Notable among these are *The Betrayal* (1957), a motet cycle for Tenebrae, which was widely performed and also recorded by the Richmond University Chorus; *Sermons for the Blessed* (1958), text from James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones*, for soloists and orchestra, performed by the New Haven Symphony; and *A Nuptial Triptych* (1957), text from the Psalms, performed by the New Haven Chorale at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and also by the Westminster Choir in several cities. Another is a musical commentary for cello and piano on T.S. Eliot's "Ash Wednesday," written in 1966, and performed the next year in Washington D.C. by Joel Krosnick and Samuel Sanders. In 1967 his *Mass of the People of God* won a competition sponsored by the J.S. Paluch Company of Chicago, a Catholic publishing house, and this led the next year to an association with Paluch that lasted until 1996 (and which for a time he pursued simultaneously with his work for National Keyboard Arts Associates). As managing editor and later educational director of Paluch, he composed and edited much music for use in the then new liturgy. But his output of concert works of religious inspiration by no means ceased—witness among many the *Seven Archaic Images* (1974), an orchestral interpretation of poems of Thomas Merton.

David Kraehenbuehl was actually more composer than theorist. He never stopped composing, and by the end of his life had written more than 150 works (not including his pedagogical pieces) that traverse a stylistic path from Hindemithian tonality, through Stravinskian "polyfunctionality," to—from about 1958 on—composing with twelve-tone sets and their subsets. Yet he always maintained his distinctive voice—not only in his composition, but in everything he did. A profoundly creative musician who used all his many gifts, he made a unique contribution to American musical life that has yet to be fully assessed.[5]

NOTES

1. After writing this memoir, I was delighted to discover an appreciation of Kraehenbuehl in Patrick McCreless's excellent essay, "Rethinking Contemporary Music Theory," *Keeping Score: Music, Disciplinarity, Culture*, ed. Schwarz, Kassabian, and Siegel, 13–53: University of Virginia, 1997: "[Kraehenbuehl's] ability to galvanize the energies of the new discipline and to articulate its goals clearly was indispensable in establishing it on secure footing and making a place for it in the university and conservatory . . . The intellectual program [he] outlines in the foreword [to *JMT* 1(1)] is almost precisely the program that has been carried out by music theory since 1957" (23).
2. "Information as a Measure of Structure in Music," *Journal of Music Theory* 2(2): 127–61 (1958); "Information as a Measure of the Experience of Music," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 17(4): 510–22 (1959).
3. *Journal of Music Theory* 6(1): 32–65.
4. NKAA ceased operations in 1996. It is unfortunate that no publisher has been found to take over and market its superb teaching materials.
5. My thanks to Martha Braden, Richard Chronister, Edgar Coons, Marie Kraehenbuehl, Donald Loach, Osea Noss, and Joseph Straus for their generous help in the preparation of this memoir.