CMJ

Leland Smith (1925-2013)

Leland Smith, who died on December 17, 2013, at the age of 88, became seriously engaged with music at the age of 11. After four years of piano and wind lessons, he took advantage of proximity to study counterpoint, orchestration, and composition (1941-43) with Darius Milhaud, who had left Europe soon after the fall of France (1940) and now taught at nearby Mills College in Oakland, CA.

During three years of service to the US Navy (1943- 46) Leland was stationed in Bremerton, WA, where he played six instruments in the 13th Naval District Admiral’s Band.

Upon his discharge he matriculated at the University of California, Berkeley, where he completed both a baccalaureate and a master’s degree in composition in 2.5 years. The fabled harmony and composition seminars of Roger Sessions left lasting impressions not only of the teacher but also of the several later noted students. Among them were the composer Leon Kirchner and the cognitive musicologist Jeanne Bamberger (a lifelong friend of both Leland and his wife Edith).

With two degrees in hand, Leland studied composition with Olivier Messiaen at the Paris Conservatoire in 1948-49, but he soon returned to performance, mainly on the bassoon, occasionally on the clarinet. He was invited to join the San Francisco Opera Orchestra in 1950 and through the mid-Sixties accumulated engagements with several other orchestras (the San Francisco Symphony, the New York City Ballet, the Chicago Lyric Opera, and the Chicago Symphony). He taught at Mills College in 1951-52 but was then invited to teach at the University of Chicago, where the Smiths remained until Leland’s appointment at Stanford University in the autumn of 1958.

\*\*

Smith’s enduring contributions to the development of computer music and automated music typography stand as monuments to both serendipity and persistence. After six years of teaching at Stanford, Leland was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship (1964-65). Shortly before his departure, a graduate student name John Chowning announced his plans to spend time at the Bell Telephone Labs in Watchung, NJ, to learn more about the Music IV (mainframe) program for sound generation under development there by Max Mathews and John Pierce. Leland authorized the visit on condition Chowning share his future knowledge upon their mutual return to Stanford.

The results—not only Chowning’s insights into frequency-modulated sound synthesis but also Leland’s resulting inspiration to complement Mathews’s event-based unit-generator scheme (then requiring hand-punched cards) with a computer-driven input system for electronic music—both led to startling results.

By 1966 an input system to generate note-lists was under development at Stanford. Leland immersed himself in the world of code, in which he seems to have found himself instantly at home. “It was an extension of his love of music,” observed Gareth Loy, in one of several reminiscenses at a CCRMA memorial (January 18, 2014). By 1970 the computerized input system represented “a great advance” in electronic music, in the words of Chowning.

In 1972 the idea of establishing the Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics was conceived. Chowning, Chris Chafe, and Leland were its principal protagonists. Its original home was in Stanford’s artificial intelligence building, high on a hill off Arastradero Road. Its official founding is dated 1975.

But the power of the program we now know as SCORE had yet to be realized. ==

John quote:

In 1964, when I first told Leland Smith, my advisor in music composition, that I wanted to pursue computer synthesis of musical sound in the final two years of my graduate work, he was about to depart on a sabbatical leave. His response was “Absolutely, do it, but promise that you will teach me all that you learn when I return.” I did and he learned the DEC PDP-6 version of Mathews’ Music IV in a few days. I then showed him how a FORTRAN program worked and gave him a manual. He quickly became an effective programmer; complementing my work in sound synthesis with a music input language, SCORE. Leland Smith’s mind seemed preternaturally in synch with computer coding. Beginning in 1970 his vision extended SCORE to computerized music typography, which became, and remains, the benchmark by which all new publications are judged. Leland Smith led music publishing into the digital age.