



IN MEMORIAM

Andrew Welsh Imbrie
Professor of Music, Emeritus
UC Berkeley
1921 – 2007

Professor Andrew Welsh Imbrie, one of the nation's most eminent composers and an outstanding teacher of music composition, theory and analysis, died Wednesday, December 5, 2007 at his home in Berkeley after a debilitating illness. He was 86.

Andrew Imbrie was born April 6, 1921 in New York City. He began playing the piano at age four, developed rapidly as a gifted pianist, and subsequently studied with a series of prominent pianists including Leo and Pauline Ornstein, Olga Samaroff, Rosalyn Turek and Robert Cassadeus. At age 16, he went to Fontainebleau, France, to study music composition with Nadia Boulanger, and in 1939 entered Princeton University as a freshman, becoming the fourth generation of the Imbrie family to attend Princeton. At Princeton, Imbrie studied composition with Roger Sessions, who became a lifelong mentor and major influence on his development as a creative composer and critical thinker about music. In 1942, he completed his undergraduate studies at Princeton. His senior thesis was his first string quartet, the first of five string quartets he would compose.

From 1942 until 1946, Imbrie served in the U.S. Army Signal Corps as a cryptanalytic translator of Japanese. Upon his discharge from the army, he entered graduate school at the University of California, Berkeley, where he joined his mentor, Roger Sessions, who had become a member of the Berkeley faculty of music. He completed his M.A. degree at Berkeley in 1947.

The year 1944 was of seminal importance in Imbrie's career. That year, his Princeton senior thesis, the first string quartet, became a stunning success that catapulted the young composer into the limelight of the music world. It not only received the prestigious New York Critics Circle Award, but it was recorded by the renowned Julliard String Quartet. An achievement of this magnitude by a 23- year old contemporary composer was then, and remains, exceedingly rare. Imbrie was also awarded the Prix de Rome in music composition in 1947 and spent two years at the American Academy in Rome as a fellow of the Academy.

Andrew Imbrie was appointed to the Department of Music faculty of UC Berkeley in 1947 and was given two years' leave to go to Rome. He began teaching at Berkeley in 1949 and served as a member of the faculty until his retirement in 1991. During that 42- year period of service, he played a pivotal role in the emergence of the UC Berkeley Department of Music as one of the premier departments of music in the world. As a distinguished composer, he attracted a large number of bright, gifted young composers to Berkeley for graduate study and was extraordinarily gracious in accepting both undergraduate and graduate students to work with him on independent study projects. A passionate teacher whose knowledge, intelligence and musicianship were formidable, he was legendary for the impact his composition, music theory and analysis classes made on several generations of Berkeley students' understanding of the nature of the musical

experience. His quick wit, sparkling sense of humor, encyclopedic knowledge of music literature, excellent musicality as a pianist, penetrating analysis and disdain for jargon and pretentiousness made his classes models of the highest ideals of music education in the University. Many of his former Ph.D. students currently hold prominent positions in major institutions of higher learning in this country.

Imbrie's compositions include an impressive and extraordinarily communicative and inspirational body of work across a wide array of genres. Among these are two operas: *Three Against Christmas* (1960), and his highly praised *Angle of Repose* (1976), based on the Pulitzer Prize winning novel of Wallace Stegner. *Angle of Repose* was commissioned and performed by the San Francisco Opera in celebration of the nation's bicentennial. This work explored the complexity of life during the settlement of California in the 1870s and expertly wove musical references of the period, including folk songs and banjo music, into the broad fabric of Imbrie's contemporary harmonic palette with dramatic efficacy and compelling musicality.

Imbrie also composed three symphonies, eight concertos, multiple songs for voice, many sonatas for various instruments, chamber works for diverse instrumental ensembles and a relatively large and exceptionally powerful catalogue of works for choral ensembles.

Robert Commanday, the former chief music critic of the San Francisco Chronicle, choral conductor and a close personal friend of Andrew Imbrie for 63 years, wrote the following about Imbrie's choral works:

[His choral compositions] revealed his unerring and sensitive ear for the chorus as a complex and human instrument — five that were major works with orchestra. Notable were *Drumtaps* (text by Whitman), *Prometheus Bound* (text by Green after Aeschylus) and *Adam* (text from medieval and Civil War sources), commissioned and performed in 1994 by Boston's Cantata Singers. It... was praised by Boston Globe music critic Richard Dyer as a "fully achieved and masterly work" and in a musical language "infinitely resourceful and responsive."

The grandest and most moving of these choral works was the *Requiem* (1984) in memory of his youngest son, John, which set elements of traditional liturgy reflected on in the poems of Blake, George Herbert, and Donne.

Imbrie's work as a composer stands as an exemplar of the best of American music in the latter half of the twentieth century. His five string quartets, three piano concertos, violin concerto, chamber works, remarkable choral works and *Angle of Repose*, all demonstrate a consummate mastery of twentieth century compositional technique, in which the underlying musical idea of a composition is communicated effectively and unobtrusively to the listener. The most salient quality of Imbrie's music is the pristine clarity with which his artistic vision is communicated to the listener on the large scale, as well as at the most minute level. This transparency of artistic intent and musical effect reflects at once his superb compositional skill and his artistic acumen.

In a 2001 interview published in the San Francisco Chronicle, Imbrie made the following observation:

A piece can be fairly complex, but I believe that there's a deal you make with your audience. You make the piece as clear as you can, and they have to give it their undivided attention. And if you both keep to the deal, then there's real communication going on.

Imbrie's work always possesses a fecundity of musical ideas and superior skill in shaping them. Specifically, his works demonstrate the exquisite usage of contrapuntal lines and textures as shaping forces of the musical discourse, particularly in the string quartets. Secondly, his compositions also reveal the primacy of the musical line as a means of directing attention to the various musical goals of a composition on an immediate as well as a long- term time horizon. Thirdly, Imbrie's work is always imbued with a rhythmic vitality that reflects not only his personal reinterpretation of the rhythmic innovations of Stravinsky, but also his sensitivity to, and understanding of, the rhythmic concepts of jazz and the popular music of his youth.

Finally, Imbrie is ultimately a composer of great lyric sensibility. His music, particularly his chamber works, most notably *Dandelion Wine* (1961), *To a Traveler* (1971), and *Sextet for Six Friends*, the last composition that was completed before his death, are all excellent examples of this endearing and eloquent quality of his unique expressive voice.

Imbrie's eminence as a composer is reflected in the numerous awards he received during his lifetime. The New York Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony, San Francisco Opera, Halle Orchestra of England, Pro Arte Quartet, Francesco Trio, and the Ford and Naumburg Foundations were among the many institutions to commission him to compose music. In addition, he received the Alice Ditson Award (1947), the National Institute of Arts and Letters Grant (1950), the Boston Symphony Merit Award (1957), the Brandeis Creative Arts Award (1957), two Guggenheim Fellowships (1953, 1959), the Walter Hinrichsen Award (1971), and the Berkeley Citation (1991), the highest honor the University of California, Berkeley, bestows upon its faculty. Imbrie was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1969 and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1980. He also served as a member of the board of directors of the Koussevitzky Foundation until his death.

Andrew Welsh Imbrie cared profoundly about the world in which he lived. A sensitive and compassionate individual, he demonstrated this in a myriad of ways throughout his life by his kindness, hospitality, generosity and graciousness to his students, colleagues, friends and the University of California. We are all better for having known him and his brilliant music.

Imbrie is survived by his wife Barbara, of Berkeley, and his son Andrew Philip, of Santa Clara, California.

Olly W. Wilson