



IN MEMORIAM

Joaquín Nin- Culmell
Professor of Music, Emeritus
Berkeley
1908—2004

Joaquín Nin- Culmell, composer, pianist and longtime professor at the University of California, Berkeley, died in Berkeley on January 14, 2004, at the age of 95. He was born in Berlin on September 5, 1908, the youngest child of an artistic family. His father, Joaquín Nin y Castellanos, was a well-known composer and pianist, and his mother, Rosa Culmell, was a singer. His sister, Anais Nin, became a distinguished writer. (Joaquín contributed prefaces to the four volumes of her “Early Diaries”.) Only his older brother, Thorvald, broke the mold and became a businessman.

Because Joaquín’s father was born in Cuba, the family members were considered Cuban nationals. Nevertheless, for professional reasons, the Nins lived in various European centers — Berlin, Barcelona, and Paris. Joaquín spent most of his early years in Barcelona, where he studied piano with Conchita Badia, a former student of Granados. Subsequently he moved to Paris for piano studies at the Schola Cantorum, where in 1930 he received the “Diplôme de fin d’Etudes Supérieures.” He then went to the Paris Conservatory to continue piano studies with Alfred Cortot and Ricardo Viñes and to study composition with Paul Dukas. In that class were fellow composers Jehan Alain, Jean Langlais and Olivier Messiaen. In 1934, he was awarded the “Premier Accessit de Composition Musicale” from the Conservatory. In the summers of 1930, 1932, and 1934, he returned to Spain to study composition with Manuel de Falla in Granada. In homage to his composition teachers he gave the premiere performance of de Falla’s *Le Tombeau de Paul Dukas* in Paris in 1936.

In the same year (1936), he made his New York debut as a pianist, championing works by Spanish composers, especially those by de Falla. In the summers of 1938-40, he taught at the Middlebury College Summer School in Vermont, and in 1940 he was appointed at Williams College. In 1943-44, he interrupted his tenure at Williams for service in the Cuban army, and from the summer of 1948 through the summer of 1949, he again took leave to teach as a guest professor in the Department of Music at UC Berkeley. In 1949, he was appointed to the faculty at Berkeley but returned to Williams for one year to complete his term as chair of the Music Department before taking up his appointment in Berkeley. While he was in the eastern part of the United States he conducted the Berkshire Community Symphony Orchestra. He became a naturalized citizen in 1951.

In Berkeley he was an active member of an organization of Bay Area composers and a member of the executive committee of the Composers Forum. From 1951 to 1954 he served as chair of the Department of Music and was very active in planning for the building of Morrison and Hertz Halls. Joaquín Nin- Culmell served both the University and the department in various capacities: as conductor of the UC Berkeley Orchestra, as an adviser for the College of Letters and Science, and as a member of the department’s Graduate Committee, eventually chairing the committee in the last seven years of his service. Although a colleague with strongly held musical opinions, he was always witty and cheerful. One always knew when he was around because he whistled constantly. Perhaps his most important influence on the department and the community was the founding of the Noon Concert series. Nin- Culmell was a dedicated and sympathetic teacher who taught music composition courses with an old world charm combined with a practical and straightforward American sensibility. He was always gentle with students, but at the same time demanded a rigorous musical training. He retired from the University in 1974.

Nin- Culmell was elected a member of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando in Madrid, a member of the Academy of Fine Arts of Sant Jordi in Barcelona, and a member of the French Legion of Honor. In later years he served as a judge for the Chopin International Piano Competition in Palma de Mallorca and as chair of the jury for the International Marguerite Long- Jacques Thibaud Competition in Paris. He was a virtuoso concert pianist who performed both in Europe and the United States. In the Bay Area he performed with the San Francisco Symphony, the Stanford Symphony and the San Jose Symphony. He also played numerous solo recitals. One of the most notable was one played in Berkeley in honor of Pablo Casals in 1960.

He performed his Piano Concerto (1946, revised in 1953-54) several times in the Bay Area, in Miami, in Havana and in various locations in Europe under such eminent conductors as Erich Leinsdorf, Erich Kleiber, José Iturbi, Fritz Stiedry, and Pierre Monteux. This work, a classical concerto, was infused with Spanish melodies and rhythms but had a contemporary twist, an aesthetic approach which was a hallmark of all his remaining compositions. He composed many pieces for solo piano, the most popular of which are the 48 Tonadas (1956-61), published in four volumes. This collection has been recorded and released on a CD. He composed numerous songs for voice and piano which were also derived from Spanish folklore. There are two ballets: *El Burlador de Sevilla* in three tableaux (1957-65), which was performed in concert version by the San Francisco Symphony conducted by Josef Krips, and *Le Rêve de Cyrano*, which the San Francisco Ballet performed in 1978. His most extensive composition — an opera, *La Celestina* (1965-85) — involved more of his creative attention than any of his works. Unfortunately this work has yet to be performed.

A devout Catholic, Nin- Culmell composed a number of works for use in the Catholic liturgy. Most notable are the *Missa Dedicatoria* (1965) for chorus and organ, the *Sinfonia de los Misterios* (1993-94) for organ and Gregorian chant, and a *Te Deum* for percussion, organ and chorus. The *Missa Dedicatoria* was commissioned for the opening of the new Saint Mary's Cathedral in San Francisco but actually had its first performance in Hertz Hall by the UC Chorus, conducted by James Cunningham. Among Nin- Culmell's orchestra compositions, his *Diferencias* (1962) stands out, because although it retains the rhythmic drive and clarity of his earlier works, it moves in a new stylistic direction. In the fall of 1999, in celebration of his 90th birthday, the UC Orchestra, under the direction of David Milnes, revived and performed this interesting work in Hertz Hall. Of the first performance of *Diferencias* by the San Francisco Symphony, Alfred Frankenstein wrote in the *San Francisco Chronicle*: "...the whole score is full of deftness and delicacy, subtle allusions, and quiet, understated, but very original and colorful effects. It brings *La Folia* into the orbit of modern music, but it reminds us of the melody's origins and so brings modernism and tradition together. A lovely piece, both in itself and in its philosophical implications."

Edwin Dugger
Lawrence Moe
John Roberts