



IN MEMORIAM

John Holland Thow
Professor of Music
UC Berkeley
1949 – 2007

John Holland Thow, a composer of international acclaim, died on March 4, 2007 of complications from a chronic illness. He was 57.

Thow, who joined the University of California, Berkeley faculty in 1981, produced an extensive and diverse repertoire of solo, chamber, vocal, choral, operatic and orchestral music. As Allan Kozinn wrote in *The New York Times*, “his music combined a modernist’s approach to rhythm and harmony with an almost Romantic lyricism, and often — in works like *Trilce* (1992) and *Breath of Sun* (1993) — the music’s interest lies in the tension between those contradictory impulses.”

Born in Los Angeles on October 6, 1949, Thow grew up in Ventura, California, and studied flute and piano as a child. He earned a bachelor’s degree in music in 1971 at the University of Southern California, where he studied composition with Adolph Weiss and Ingolf Dahl, and conducting with Frank Salazar. He continued his studies at Harvard University with composers Earl Kim and Leon Kirchner, and received a Ph.D. in composition in 1977.

As a graduate student, Thow received a Fulbright Fellowship, which allowed him to travel to Rome in 1973 to study composition with Luciano Berio, who would become an important mentor and influence. Thow later returned to Italy as a recipient of the prestigious Rome Prize. During that time, he also studied with Luigi Dallapiccola and Franco Donatoni. Thow found a deep affinity for Italian culture, becoming a superb cook and learning to speak Italian fluently.

His compositions have been commissioned and performed widely in the United States and in Europe by L’Orchestra della RAI (Rome), *Speculum Musicae*, the Boston *Musica Viva*, the Brooklyn Philharmonic, the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, the San Francisco Symphony and many others. His work has been featured at the Tanglewood and Edinburgh Festivals. Among his many awards were two from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Guggenheim Fellowship and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the American Music Center. He served as artist-in-residence at the Yaddo, Djerassi, Temecula Arts and Wurlitzer Foundations, among others.

Thow’s lyrical and richly colored music has been consistently championed by prominent performers and ensembles. His relationship with the San Francisco Symphony began with a 1986 performance of his composition *Resonance*. The symphony subsequently commissioned a three-movement work titled *Into the Twilight* in 1988, and *Bellini Sky*, an English horn concerto inspired by paintings of the fifteenth century artist Giovanni Bellini, in 2005.

A master of orchestration with a passion for literature and indigenous musical traditions, Thow produced a series of works featuring unusual instrumental combinations and vivid texts. His *Chumash Songs* for clarinet, violin, percussion and piano (2000), commissioned by the Ventura Chamber Music Festival, incorporated melodic and rhythmic elements of the Southern California Chumash Indian tribe. His *Musica d'amore* is a trio for oboe d'amore, viola d'amore and harp, and his *Summer Solstice* (2005) is based on contemporary Greek poetry. *Three Echoes* (2001) was written for the five-hole Lakota Sioux flute, *Three Pieces for Carillon* was performed at the International Carillon Festival at UC Berkeley's Campanile in 1998, and *Six Duets for baroque flutes* was premiered in London in 2006.

Thow's opera *Serpentina*, based on a story by E. T. A. Hoffmann, was premiered at the Berkeley Opera Company in 1999. His music for a production of *Much Ado About Nothing* was performed at the Berkeley Shakespeare Festival in 1990, and a dance work, *Rim of Heaven*, was premiered at the Edinburgh Festival in 1984.

His recordings may be found on the Neuma, Music and Arts, Cantilena and Fish Creek Music labels. His music is published by Carl Fischer, G. Schirmer, Shawnee, Theodore Presser, Fall House Press and Fish Creek.

During his 26 years on the UC Berkeley faculty, Thow served as department chair in 1991-92, was involved with the Berkeley Contemporary Music Players from 1997 to 2001, and mentored a generation of young composers. Yiorgos Vassilandonakis, a former graduate student, remembered him as "a tremendous teacher" with an "amazing sense of humor" and an extensive knowledge of European culture, poetry, literature and art. Professor Thow's specialties in composition and contemporary music are reflected in the courses he taught at UC Berkeley: composition, orchestration, counterpoint and analysis at all levels. In addition, he was active in organizing concerts of student works and special celebratory concerts featuring the work of Andrew Imbrie, Henry Cowell and Luciano Berio. Thow and Richard Taruskin, a music historian on the Berkeley faculty, gave a long series of fondly remembered "T&T" seminars for graduate students in composition and musicology, covering the music of the twentieth century, decade by decade. Professor Taruskin looks back on these seminars as exemplifying what was so special about Berkeley, where scholars and creative musicians worked in close and cordial cooperation.

John Thow is survived by his former wife, Peggy, of Berkeley; two daughters, Diana Thow of Iowa City, Iowa and Caroline Thow of Davis, California; and a brother, George Thow, of Santa Rosa, California.

Richard Taruskin
Cindy A. Cox