Jonathan Bernard

Remarks, Allen Forte Memorial

9 May 2015

Sometime during the past couple of weeks, as I was mulling over what in the world to say to you all this afternoon, it suddenly occurred to me to ask myself: What would my life have been like without Allen Forte?

And the strangest thing about that thought was that I couldn't remember ever having had it before. It gave me a distinctly eerie feeling, I can tell you: a little like wondering, what if your parents had never met? Not quite the same thing, of course: presumably I would still exist in a biological sense. But I imagine there are many here today in this room who would agree with me that, professionally and scholastically speaking, we would be living rather different lives and would be to that extent different *people* had we not had the good fortune to encounter Allen in the course of our formation.

That this is so, is one measure of his enormous importance to the field of music theory; it is also a measure of his enormous importance to the field of musical scholarship in general. For in a very real sense, Allen Forte *invented* music theory as a distinct discipline in the modern era—and so, in a way, invented *us*, his students, strange as that may sound. Others might wish to qualify this statement; I do not, even though it could be asserted that, had Allen Forte not existed, someone would have had to invent *him*: that is, someone else would have emerged to fill the role he played. Perhaps; but also perhaps, music theory might have remained the province of composers—mostly interested in studying recent music—or of historical musicologists—mostly interested in studying older music. Or it might have become a branch of applied mathematics, or something even stranger than that. It might never have become its own thing. It fell to Allen, with his great breadth of interests, to create a self-sustaining intellectual environment in which

others could thrive: first, through his publications, starting in the mid-1950s and continuing, copiously and without cease, into the first decade of this century; second, through his example as a pedagogue.

Allen's scholarly record scarcely requires comment, I should think, from me or anyone else at this point. Suffice it to say that we all modeled what we did, at least initially, on his work; and even the apples who eventually rolled farthest from the tree have retained significant traces of Allen's influence in their own writings. As for the pedagogical example, I will come back to that shortly, but for now let me say that it was partly by way of the force of that example that Allen continually reminded us that, someday, if everything went according to plan, *we* would be the ones standing at the front of the classroom, sitting at the head of that seminar table, and that part of learning this stuff ourselves was learning how to teach it, in our turn.

Now, memorials, like funerals, are all too susceptible to solemnity. As Tom Lehrer sang (in quite a different context, and I won't sing here, for which you may be grateful):

When you attend a funeral
it is sad to think that sooner or'l-
later those you love will do the same for you,

And you may have thought it tragic
not to mention other adjec-
tives to think of all the weeping they will do…

I suppose—and hope—that the clever use of internal rhyme is one way of dispelling the solemnity. (No weeping allowed here; Allen wouldn't have stood for it anyway.) I'd like to spend the rest of my time up here at the podium on a few anecdotes that illuminate certain particularly important aspects of Allen as a person: aspects by which, for me, he is best remembered.

The first one dates from a point several years into my studies at Yale, when a few of us graduate students, recently appointed TAs or Acting Instructors, had gathered for some purpose with Allen in his office. At that time, we were all, naturally, a little nervous about our fledgling pedagogical efforts, and one of us, I can't remember who, took the opportunity to ask Allen if he had any advice for us. Yes, he said, I do. And he gave it to us in four words, the first of which was "Don't," and the last two of which were "the students." (As for the second word: Well, as Milton Babbitt used to say, You're all smart people; I'm sure you can figure it out.) The phrasing of this advice was, to be sure, shocking to the ears of us young men, as we all were at that time and on that occasion—but also, in its surprising saltiness, memorable. It put us on notice about not falling prey to certain temptations while also expressing a sympathy for us in our relative vulnerability: something I'm sure I didn't appreciate until some good long time later. These are the sorts of lessons about teaching that are not part of any standard curriculum that I know of, but Allen made sure that we learned them—and this, may I remind you, at a time well before there were any explicitly enunciated institutional policies prohibiting this sort of behavior, couched in rather less direct language.

My second anecdote is actually a retelling of one of Allen's own, about a Very Serious Theorist who shall remain nameless mainly because I can't remember his name; someone who was active during the 1950s and '60s. This man, as Allen told the story, was absolutely

determined that his child not grow up with any prejudices against modern music, and so decided to familiarize him with nontonal sounds from an early age. A very early age: The infant boy would be lying in his crib, and his father would make a regular practice of going to the piano and playing loud dissonant chords. (Allen told this part of the story with a particularly devilish relish, miming the V.S.T. pounding the keyboard.) Then he paused, presumably for effect, and commented, as if musingly: "I think the kid grew up hating music." Which, once you're done laughing, as I certainly did on hearing this story, you realize had a *serious* intent behind it too, something relevant to both pedagogy and scholarship. If you want people to appreciate what you're doing (I took the message to be), don't beat them over the head with it. Show them, instead, through your intense involvement in and your passion for the work you're doing, how important it is to you, and they will become curious enough to approach and find out what it's all about.

My last anecdote is more a reminiscence, and is of earliest vintage of my three, for it concerns my very first meeting with Allen. I had just been accepted into the Theory Ph.D. program, in the spring of 1972, and so I drove down to New Haven to check things out. Allen's office was in this very building, down in the basement where the Music Department had its modest quarters at the time. I don't remember much of anything that was said during that meeting, which is probably a reflection of the fact that, thanks to the rather conservative musical education I had received up until that time, I had absolutely no idea of what I was getting into. What I do remember was … Allen's smile. Not a broad, extroverted grin; something subtler: a slight, slightly inscrutable smile. And if I came away from that meeting still somewhat puzzled about just what the study of music theory was going to entail, I also felt, in an odd way, encouraged. Maybe this best explains why that question never arose subsequently in my mind:

What if I had never come to study with him? It wasn't that to have done so seemed fated, exactly; it just felt right. The smile conveyed a certain polite reserve—something always and forever inextricable from Allen's manner—but it also signaled, in ways I would soon come to appreciate, what life under his tutelage was going to be like. This was not a man, the smile seemed to say, who fearsomely brandished his erudition, daring you to venture—at your own risk—into the circle of initiates. It said, instead: Come on in. What we are doing here will interest you. It may even be fun at times.

Those of you—I would imagine that is just about everyone here—who have encountered this smile will, I am confident, know exactly what I'm talking about. And I thought we could take this moment now to remember—all of us—that smile.

Thank you, Allen. Rest in peace.

—Jonathan Bernard