



In Memoriam: Nicolas Slonimsky (1894–1995)*

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A MEMORIAL TRIBUTE to Nicolas Slonimsky who died on Christmas Day 1995 in UCLA Hospital of coronary collapse, was held Monday night, January 22, 1996, at the UCLA Faculty Center. I'd like to write about it as much for my own sake, putting together my thoughts about the event, as for my drive to document it. It is the kind of event that will stay with you for a long time, one that seems to represent the end of an era. It was memorable.

About 180 people from New York, Boston, Illinois, Texas, Arizona, and other areas, warm and cold, and from throughout California gathered in the California Room at the UCLA Faculty Center. It is located just across the street from Schoenberg Hall where Nicolas Slonimsky, along with Lukas Foss, Roger Wagner, Roy Harris, John Vincent, and even Arnold Schoenberg himself had taught in the old days. Even now the Musicology Department is chaired by none other than Susan McClary.

How fitting, then, that the California Room was filled with illustrious names in the musical world last night. There was laughter, and exclamations of surprise, as friends of Nicolas who hadn't seen each other for many years caught up with their respective lives. As we took our seats, Electra Slonimsky Yourke, Nicolas's daughter, came up to the lectern

and welcomed everyone to the Memorial. She remarked how happy she was to see so many old friends, thanked us all for coming, and proceeded to explain what it was like to be the daughter of Slonimsky. Her remarks were loving and low-key, setting the tone for the event, as she talked about being a child at the family's dinners with Ruggles, Cowell, Varèse and "new music" people. She spoke about Nicolas's fascination with the world about him, especially ideas, and his struggles with his careers. "He was very cerebral, actually," she concluded. Then she introduced composer David Raksin, perhaps Slonimsky's best friend. Raksin served as emcee through the evening, introducing each guest speaker in turn with a friendly quip.

Raksin introduced Ernest Fleischmann, Executive Vice President and Managing Director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, who spoke about Slonimsky's early and short-lived conducting career in Los Angeles, especially at the Hollywood Bowl. He pointed out how Slonimsky's programs of new music ran against the wishes of the Hollywood Bowl supporters, and his career there was summarily terminated. And yet 60 years later the new music programs of Esa-Pekka Salonen are welcomed. Fleischmann also noted that the essence of each musician in Baker's was described perfectly by Slonimsky in just the right word or phrase.

David Raksin then gave his own accounting of his friendship with Slonimsky, offering a series of funny

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anecdotes, but also describing his depth and intellectual capacity. He remarked on the 90th birthday celebration and the 95th birthday event—both in the UCLA Faculty Center—as well as on the gala 100th birthday celebration at the L.A. Museum of Modern Art, which Frank Zappa attended. He termed Slonimsky as the “Tyrannosaurus Rex of Lex.”

Laura Kuhn, Director of the Interdisciplinary Fine Arts program at the Arizona State University West campus in Phoenix, spoke about working with Slonimsky on the late Baker’s editions and on his biography *Perfect Pitch*. She was bowled over by the events of his life, as reflected in the book, and by the staggering number of interests and endeavors in which Slonimsky excelled.

Lawrence Weschler, whose profiles of Slonimsky graced the pages of the *New Yorker* many years ago and in the current issue, talked about how giant a figure Nicolas seemed to be to him, at age 7, when Slonimsky visited his grandfather, the composer Ernest Toch, for dinner. Weschler mentioned witnessing Slonimsky in UCLA classes in the mid-1980s when Nicolas was invited to lecture. Then he read from his early *New Yorker* profile.

Karen Murphy, Slonimsky’s secretary for many years, chatted about how it was to work with him: the fun, the work, the tribulations, the visitors to his home, the zany pranks, and especially everyone’s love for him. Ida James, his housekeeper for many years, was ill with the flu and could not come to speak.

Robert Stevenson, long-time UCLA music and musicology professor (he came to UCLA in 1949!), spoke briefly but with admiration about Slonimsky’s stature in the world of music, his many accomplishments, and about many of his recent tributes. David Raksin introduced Stevenson as possibly the only man Slonimsky’s intellectual equal. Quite a tribute to both men!

Betty Freeman, wealthy supporter of the arts in Los Angeles and long-time Slonimsky friend, described his intellect and curiosity about things musical, and related two Slonimsky stories. Betty had arranged for his 100th birthday celebration, and for the special birthday pieces composed by Leonard Bernstein and Lukas Foss played there.

Jennifer Batten, the wild and comely rock guitarist whose recording of “Flight of the Bumblebee” on her Ibañez electric was a sensation, had been drawn to Slonimsky by his *Thesaurus of Scales and*

Melodic Patterns. Following her tour with Michael Jackson a decade ago she became a devotee of Nicolas, and had him conduct one of her recordings. She described the slumber party she arranged for Nicolas on his 98th birthday with the bevy of beautiful women who had worked with him over the years. It was so successful, she said, that she arranged another slumber party, again at his home, for his 99th birthday, but this time with the addition of a professional stripper. “Ya don’t believe it? Here’s the scrapbook with the pictures!” (And it was videotaped!)

Slonimsky’s personal physician for more than two decades, Dr. Charles Friedman, had brought Nicolas’s medical records and gave us details of his health over the years. He said that Nicolas had always had a cholesterol count that fluctuated between 250 and 290, but in those days (the 1960s) no one worried much about it if it didn’t reach 300. He said that a colonoscopy had revealed a small colon cancer, which was removed, and in 1991 he had suffered a small stroke. David Raksin quipped that it was probably a semicolonoscopy, knowing Nicolas.

Then it was my turn at the lectern. I described what Slonimsky had meant to music librarians with his work and by his example, and then read an e-mail statement, today’s equivalent of the telegram for an event like this from the Music Library Association’s own Suki Sommer. Here is her statement:

A legend he was—yes. But he was more than that to music librarians who relied on his “Bible,” *Baker’s Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, as their first line of defense in any workaday encounter. As a librarian facing an anxious or demanding questioner, you could count on two things from Nicolas Slonimsky’s work: accuracy and opinions.

The accuracy is extraordinary (thank goodness!). The lengths he went to, to get the facts are documented in his inimitable preface to Baker’s, which is required reading for all prospective music librarians. And the opinions? Well, shouldn’t we all have opinions? But they also served to point a new audience in directions they might want to follow. Too few people today are willing to make those decisions: what *were* his most important works; what did he contribute; why was she important? Facts are not enough. We need informed direction and Nicolas Slonimsky was always ready and willing to point the way.

A self-styled Wunderkind, but one who excelled in the most demanding and exacting of disciplines, he will remain the greatest of music lexicographers, and—in one of his favorite words—diaskueasts of our time.



Then Joyce Jones, the first of the bevy of beautiful women who worked for Slonimsky over the years, talked about how she was a student at UCLA and took his editing/secretary/etc. job because it paid more—\$2.50/hr.—than campus jobs. She recounted working for him for 15 years, through which time she married a scientist (whom Nicolas adored), and had a baby (for whom Nicolas sat while she worked afternoons at another job).

John Huszar described the documentary film he made about Slonimsky's life and trip to Russia. He said Nicolas was unflappable with all the cameras, lights, and action going on, and was as "good" off camera as on camera. He excitedly announced a "recently discovered" 17 second segment of silent film showing Slonimsky conducting at the Hollywood Bowl in 1933. The film was from Philip Kagan's home movie collection which he made as a violist in the L.A. orchestra in the 1920s and 30s. It was loaned by the UCLA Film and TV Archives, and prepared by Charles Barber and Huszar. The segment, and segments from the Slonimsky documentary, were shown following the speakers.

The final scheduled speaker was Kate Yourke, Slonimsky's granddaughter, who talked about the women in Slonimsky's life—"the pilgrimage of astonishing women" who worked for or with Nicolas. She spoke of the devotion of him to the

with. Audience members were invited to speak about Slonimsky, and several came up to the lectern. Jerome Kessler, cellist, spoke about making the recording on the Orion label of Slonimsky's Suite for Cello and Piano, and how Nicolas has made a lasting mark in the world. Gregg Hettensberger, critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, mentioned a few anecdotes and articles he wrote in covering Slonimsky in the *L.A. Weekly*. Alan Rich, music critic, described how his entry in Baker's was used by enemies to keep him from working for the *Los Angeles Times* when the *Herald Examiner* folded. John Santana, radio station KKGQ announcer, described his taped interviews with Slonimsky. Composer Leon Levitch spoke lovingly about Slonimsky as a role model for himself, and about his last visit with Nicolas. And finally David Raksin read the poem "Who Was That Crying" by Louise Geist, inspired by the death of Slonimsky.

Following the showing of the films, the group gathered for the Faculty Center's excellent food, wine and soft drinks, for reminiscing with each other about Nicolas, and for renewing old acquaintances. It was a beautiful event, and we all left greater people than when we had come, thanks to Nicolas and his family.