

ERWIN FISHMAN (1927–2009)

Contributions to Los Angeles' Classical Music Scene

YOU would be hard pressed to find a chamber music aficionado in town who didn't know Erwin Fishman. Those who knew Erwin realize that the description of him as amateur violist, longtime South Bay Chamber Music Society Board Member, and past President of the organization falls far short of capturing the magnitude of his contribution to Los Angeles' classical music scene. You get an inkling knowing that Paul Coletti, the dean of Southland violists, played at Erwin's memorial service last July — with a bow Erwin sold him.



And Erwin's lifelong friend and eminent cellist Ronald Leonard would have been playing alongside, if he could have been in town that day. Ron wrote:

I had known Erwin Fishman since I was in high school. It was he who turned me on to my love of chamber music. His first wife was a violinist and during my high school years we met regularly to read through tons and tons of chamber music. His enthusiasm for music never wavered in all the years of his life. Fortunately for me, we kept in contact over the years, and by chance we both ended up in Los Angeles. When he and Sue got married, my wife, Norma, and I played at their wedding, and of course I have played at the South Bay Chamber Music Society many times. Erwin loved his wife, loved his family, loved music, loved me, and he loved life. He was simply a wonderful guy, and I know I am one of many who miss him and will never forget him.

Ronald Leonard's words are echoed by Erwin's wife Sue:

It's difficult for me to do justice to Erwin's passion for chamber music. He loved playing the viola and listening to chamber music, both live and recorded. He especially enjoyed interacting with the musicians and sharing stories, tips for playing difficult passages, and ideas for future concerts. He had a special fondness for young performers, who were so enthusiastic and full of energy, and whose passion for music and music-making equaled his. He followed their careers with great interest and was proud of their successes, freely telling them so. As his strength

declined, he spent much of his time listening to CDs, which remained a lasting pleasure in his life.

Besides stepping in to assist the ailing Sidney Stafford in his role as Artistic Director of the South Bay Chamber Music Society, Erwin's contribution to the music scene primarily came from his infectious enthusiasm for conversation about chamber music. After any concert he attended, one would typically find a small group of people listening intently to Erwin and the artists engrossed in a wide-ranging and in-depth conversation about the music and the performance. These conversations weren't just at concerts. At TRW, where Erwin pursued his profession as chemist, there were countless lunchtime and hallway discussions centering on chamber music, which drew up-and-coming young engineers and professionals, including myself, into the fold and influenced them to be lifelong enthusiasts and supporters. Erwin and Sue would often invite them and other friends to their Hermosa Beach home for chamber music musicales and, of course, more good conversation.

Sue mentioned Erwin's special fondness for young performers, perhaps no one more so than Serena McKinney, Colburn Conservatory violinist and member of the wonderful Janaki String Trio that Erwin admired so much. Serena's thoughtful words are unmatched in capturing Erwin's essence:

Well, anyone who's ever met Erwin knows what a wonderful and special person he was — a humanitarian, a real gentleman, he was an intelligent and reflective man with a unique perspective; conversations with him were never dull! And of course we all know how passionate he was about music, especially about the Mozart Divertimento. Erwin was also the Trio's biggest fan from day one. As soon as we won the Coleman Competition, Ron Leonard and Andrew Bulbrook (from the Calder Quartet) introduced us, and he immediately booked us. We had been together for a very short time, maybe only a few months, but Erwin didn't care. Since then, we've basically been a part of the series every year.

What I find myself thinking about the most when I think of Erwin is his sense of humor, which was often borderline wicked. I remember after one of my recitals that had ended with the Carmen Fantasy, he said to me "Got cigarettes?" His charisma was such a delight to be around though, and reading an email from him always guaranteed a laugh. I think he used humor a lot to cope with his illness too, at least in an outwardly way. If I asked about his health, he would treat it like more of a minor nuisance than the serious condition it was — "I'm well, but Sue is weller" and "My leg remains a pain in the..." That was Erwin — he always seemed to find talking about others far more fascinating than talking about himself.

Erwin was always effusive with his compliments, especially after a concert. We would stay and talk for a long time, and if the conversation strayed away from our performance, he would abruptly steer it back and lavish more praise on us. Performing those concerts always felt like coming home. He would sign his e-mails to us “with my usual admiration and love” or “your avid admirer” and he hated to miss any of our concerts in Southern California. Once he had to because of his leg, which I think was very frustrating for him.

Erwin was always coming up with pieces he thought we would sound really great on, whether it was a string trio, a duo for Katie and me, or a solo work. He was so giddy about programming in an almost childish way, and oftentimes he would act as if he were discovering a work for the first time — even if it was something like the Mozart Divertimento, which he’s definitely heard at least a thousand times! We would talk about reading chamber music together — I knew that he and Ron Leonard used to read chamber music when Mr. Leonard was about sixteen — and in conversations about programming, I would often request that he program a sextet just so we could all play together. He would never agree to it, but I think he got a kick out of thinking about the possibility.

When I found out that Erwin had passed away, I was upset, but then I thought about Erwin and Sue, the life and family they created and shared, and I know that Erwin was a happy and satisfied man. He left a mark on this world that will be enjoyed for generations, but to know him personally was truly a gift.

Yes, when Erwin peacefully left us on Tuesday, June 9, 2009, he left an irreplaceable void in Los Angeles’ classical music scene. But its enrichment over the years from the gift of his presence was so much more.

*Jim Eninger
Wednesday, September 2, 2009*