

A few words from a former student

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I first came to CU in 1979 to study composition at the undergraduate level, and was assigned to the studio of a man named Richard Toensing. I knew nothing about him, but his last name made me wonder if he was somehow related to Tenzing Norgay, the Nepalese Sherpa guide famed for being one of the two first men to climb Mt. Everest, a notion quickly dispelled upon finally meeting Dr. Toensing and gazing upon his trademark Terry Thomas mustache and ascot tie.

Richard Toensing became my main mentor during my time at CU, and I studied with him two and a half out of my four years here. I remember being especially impressed (and still am) that his lessons were conducted entirely without the use of a piano. He had an innate ability to gaze at a piece of music for the first time, figure out what it's composer was trying to say, hear the harmonic content clearly, and diagnose what might be found lacking. Though I didn't always agree with his solutions (we had many entertaining debates over the years, which we both thoroughly enjoyed), his ability to hone in on a section that needed work was always spot on, and he always encouraged students to find their own solutions. Most important to me was the utter encouragement and inspiration he gave to his students: you left his office feeling like you couldn't wait to start composing again. He was also very human, very vulnerable with his students, not hesitating to point out moments in his own work he wasn't yet satisfied with, or sections of work in progress that were presenting a struggle. This is an important lesson for a young composer: it keys you into just what a mysterious and difficult art form writing music is, and how human we all are – no matter at what level of experience and background– when it comes to cracking its code.

Though my experience studying with Dick at CU was an incredibly formative one, in some ways it was only the very beginning of a long-term mentor- and friend-ship. And this is one of the things I found most astounding about Dick: his ability to stay in touch with his students over a long period of time after they graduated, and offer them the same level of encouragement and creative and professional advice as he had in the past. When I look at the numerous times after CU that I sought Dick's advice and counsel – how to weather the culture shock of graduate school, how to calm nerves before my first year of teaching, what kind of attitude to bring to the job search and interview process, how to deal with the tenure-track process, how to deal with the politics of academia – they comprise so many important signposts in my life as a musician. He was an ever-present well of support that I knew I could always count on drawing from when I needed it, a sturdy anchor on a constantly shifting sea.

The world of composition is filled with great teachers who are less-than-great composers, and great composers who are less-than-great teachers. Great composers who are great teachers are a distinct rarity, and Richard Toensing was just that. Many of you know that Dick's work went through a violent transition somewhere in the late 80's/early 90's. All artists go through transitions, but no one can really appreciate how difficult it is to pull off a stylistic transition this sharp. It amounts to nothing less than a fundamental change in how you – and as a result your listener – perceive the world. His earlier music I recall as being bracing, dissonant, propulsive, virulent and complex, but always with a spark of light within. His work after this period had a simplicity, beauty and purity about it, as if he were striving to cut through to a diamond sharp essence. (“When you visit I’d like to show you my new Flute Concerto,” I remember him once telling me, “but you’ll need to bring your own sharps and flats with you: there are none here.”) You can tell the music of this period was written at the time period it was written, but somehow this seems almost immaterial. The music simply exists, in all its transparent beauty.

After Dick's passing I had some correspondence with my dear friend and fellow CU alum Charles Shadle, who remarked that “as a human being, Dick held the bar pretty high.” This to me sums it up perfectly. Especially as a young student, it is easy to assume that this particular combination of high standards, devotion, encouragement, inspiration, artistry, and above all humanity are common. They are not. These are in fact a rare, rare combination of traits, and Richard Toensing was a very rare and special kind of human being. Those of us who were fortunate enough to be taught by him, to play his music, make music with him and otherwise know him received a very unique gift. It's a gift I will carry with me the rest of my life, and which I now try my best to impart to my own students.

Thank you Richard Toensing, for your gift of music, in its every way, shape and form.