

Reminiscences and Tributes to Kenneth Cooper

1941-2021

The Berkshire Bach Society Director of Music Emeritus

I was so sad to hear about the passing of Ken Cooper. I have read the praise about his musicianship, which many others can talk far more knowledgeably about than me. I am grateful to Ken for having been so key to the growth and continuation of The Berkshire Bach Society, a lasting legacy to him and my father. Mostly, though, when I think of Ken, I think of the wonderful friend he was to my Dad. Ken could meet my Dad on a very special level as a result of their love and devotion to Bach. Ken showed tremendous respect to my Dad, even though my Dad was self-taught in his great affinity for music, and also challenged him at a time in life when many people no longer have people in their lives who will do that.

I and my whole family will never forget the great gift that Ken gave to all of us when he came to Framingham with two other musicians and performed for my father at his nursing home in honor of my father's 90th birthday. My father never stopped smiling as he basked in the first live musical performance, spanning from baroque music to ragtime, he'd experienced in a number of years. And the ensuing discussion between Ken and my Dad brought an energy and glee that I had not often seen in my Dad over the previous few years. It was indeed a great day, many thanks to Ken and his kindness.

Diana Wainrib
Berkshire Bach Society Member
Daughter of Berkshire Bach Society Founder, Simon Wainrib

I worked with Ken more than 25 years at Berkshire Bach and he was the face of The Society with the year end "Brandenburgs" from inception. His tireless dedication and musical contributions were an essential part of Berkshire Bach's success as an outstanding musical organization for all these years! He will be remembered forever!

Adrian van Zon
Chairman
Berkshire Bach Society

Kenneth Cooper was a musical force and a dynamo! He had a way of shaping his environment such that the music, his fellow musicians and the music-making became the absolute best it could get. The Berkshire Bach Society would not have become the organization it is today without Ken, who was at the very heart of it along with our founder, Simon Wainrib. I met Ken 17 years ago when I came on board with Berkshire Bach as administrator. Ken understood that I was there to "herd the cats," as we used to joke, but that our shared mission was ultimately to bring our ever-growing audiences to a place of inspiration, appreciation and exhilaration that was, ultimately, the outcome of his musicianship, his creativity, his magical connections with his musical colleagues in the Berkshire Bach Ensemble, and his profound understanding of the music itself.

Paula M. Hatch
Executive Director
Berkshire Bach Society

For so many years Berkshire Bach and Kenneth Cooper were to me a duo. I so enjoyed his sparkling enthusiasm always present in his impressive level of musicianship, his generosity with his knowledge, and his ever-joyous physical expression. We are all much the richer for his having been among us, and the memory of his gifts will be dearly remembered and cherished.

Robert Kipniss
Long-time Berkshire Bach Society Member

Ken Cooper was a friend and fabulous musician with a genius level of imagination and creativity. He seemed to raise the quality of music coming forth from everyone around him. Knowing and making music with Ken for 25 years is surely a high point of my musical career. Regarding Berkshire Bach Society's annual *Bach at New Year's* which usually involves services from December 30 thru January 2, I always remarked how fun it was to end and begin my year with my favorite gig. Ken and his great inspiration will always be in my heart.

Jerry Serfass
Long-time Berkshire Bach Ensemble Member
Trumpet

Except for the first few, my husband and I have attended every Berkshire Bach New Year's Day concert in Troy, and once in Pittsfield at the newly renovated Colonial Theater. It's a beloved family tradition and Kenneth Cooper at the harpsichord was the center of every concert. We're not musicians, we didn't know him personally, but we were devastated to hear of Kenneth Cooper's death today. He was a giant of a musician - one can only think that he and 'old man' Bach were made of the same fiber and would have been wonderful friends, shared wonderful musical moments, full of humanity and good humor. One of our all-time favorite memories was the extraordinary improvisation during his last concert, when he fairly levitated - himself and certainly the entire audience - with spectacular harpsichord fireworks. What a joyful performer!

Thank you for writing and sending news of the availability of the Berkshire Bach archives. We will be listening with love and gratitude.

Gail Giles and Bart Thibadeau
Berkshire Bach Audience Members

As a classically-trained BA candidate at Columbia from 1968 to 1972, I knew Ken Cooper tangentially through my work as the accompanist for the Barnard-Columbia Chorus, directed by Dan Paget, and also my classroom studies and concert collaborations with organist Walter Hilse who often joined with the B-C Chorus in on-campus performances at St. Luke's Chapel. Mr. Paget and Mr. Hilse were good friends with Mr. Cooper and while I was interested primarily in Jazz, all three of them were Jazz sympathizers (to borrow a term) and I became acquainted with Ken as a result.

Decades passed during which my career as a Jazz pianist took me elsewhere but after moving to Hudson, NY in 2005 I began attending the New Year's concerts of Berkshire Bach with my wife as an annual ritual to start off our year on a good foot. It was through that revival of our connection that I began to fully appreciate the enormity of Ken's talent and accomplishments as, not only a first-rate harpsichordist, scholar and interpreter of Bach, but also a fearless improviser whose diversions from the beaten path breathed new and profound life into this time-honored repertoire with his own reflections that were sometimes fiery, sometimes introspective, but always compelling to my Jazz sensibilities.

With Ken's passing, the loss to the music world is immense. I feel so lucky to have known Ken, to have heard him play and conduct many times and bring Bach to the public. One year in particular, I can't remember exactly which but it was probably around 2010 at the Troy Music Hall, he led the Berkshire Bach ensemble through a reading of

all six of the Brandenburg Concerti in one afternoon. That concert will echo in me for the rest of my life. There is no replacement for live music, and Ken's was always ALIVE!! He will be sorely missed.

Armen Donelian
Jazz Pianist and Composer

I knew Ken only as an audience member at his New York concerts, when we were both graduate students. I met him more formally (though we were all informal) when he came to Dartmouth, where I was then teaching, to hear a mutual friend in a concert. And I got to know him best of all (and always admired him enormously) in his Berkshire Bach concerts. What a musical giant, and what a loss!

Steven Ledbetter
Musicologist and former Program Annotator
for the Boston Symphony Orchestra

He was a wonderful harpsichordist who brought the Berkshire Bach Ensemble to wonderful recognition!

Richard Collens
Berkshire Bach Society Board Member

In 1995, the year we bought our Berkshire home, my husband and I attended the Berkshire Bach Society's *Bach at New Year's* concert in the auditorium of Mount Everett High School in Sheffield. We were blown away by the performance under Ken Cooper's leadership. What a creative musical personality! My husband Richard served as Treasurer of the Berkshire Bach Board and came to know and admire Ken. I joined the Board after my husband's passing, and though I did not know Ken personally, I attended every concert but one until his retirement. He was a unique and amazing harpsichordist and conductor with flair, and a great loss to the classical music world.

Nancy King
Berkshire Bach Society Board Member

The late Kenneth Cooper, who passed away last Saturday, was a larger-than-life personality. As a member of the Emerson Quartet, I played a couple of concerts with him at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in the mid-1980s, but it was in the early '90s that I began to work intensively and on a regular basis with him for the Berkshire Bach Society's New Year's concerts. Ken had tremendous vitality; an uncanny ability to make the harpsichord sound like it could produce crescendos and diminuendos, just like a piano, through the sheer force of his personality and sense of musical direction; historical erudition that verged on the anecdotal and never seemed pedantic; and an infectious exuberance in making music with his cherished colleagues that conveyed to his audiences the excitement and sensuous beauty of varied works from the Baroque period.

Like most of my colleagues who knew Ken, I learned a lot from him. I was not the only player for whom he wrote out florid, imaginative ornamentation in works by J.S. Bach and others. He was adventurous in re-scoring certain works, like the first and third "Brandenburg" Concertos, in which he included more winds, brass, and even timpani (inspired by Bach's recycling of some of his own works when he produced cantatas week after week as part of his professional duties in Leipzig). It was gratifying to observe the level of excitement that Ken's New Year's events generated in Great Barrington, Troy, and Northampton. Good humor and an appetite for hard work reigned in our rehearsals, performances, and joyous post-concert celebrations.

It was an honor for me to succeed Kenneth Cooper as music director of the New Year's concerts a few years ago. His were big shoes to fill. He was generous enough to lend me his scorings of music from Henry Purcell's "Faerie Queene" and Corelli's Christmas Concerto for those concerts, and as a sort of unspoken tribute to him in my first year, I avoided using harpsichord altogether by programming later repertoire and combining it with the Baroque selections. I should mention that he was a fine and exuberant pianist as well as harpsichordist, and that his tastes ranged from the Baroque period to the 20th century. My wife and I played a Haydn trio with him at the Grand Canyon Festival shortly after our son was born in 1994, and I recall sightreading a Mozart piano quartet with him at a recent New Year's Eve party in Great Barrington, when we were all happily tired and somewhat inebriated after performing the six "Brandenburg" Concertos. I can also vouch for his skill as a convincing arranger and performer of Scott Joplin's rags. In short, Ken had a large and varied musical appetite; he taught us all that an expansive musical personality should not be limited to one historical period or to one prescribed way of presenting the masterworks of our legacy. I will always be grateful to him for that lesson.

It was a shock to learn of Ken's passing last Saturday. The loss will be felt by his colleagues and music aficionados for years to come. It's hard to believe that he's gone.

Eugene Drucker
Music Director, *Bach at New Year's*

I joined the board of The Berkshire Bach Society in late 2016, just before Kenneth Cooper's last *Bach at New Year's* concerts. I remember the performance that year at the Academy of Music in Northampton, MA, as a sparkling affair with all six "Brandenburgs" in which Ken particularly delighted the audience with his harpsichord solo in the fifth concerto. As it was a farewell concert, he gave it all he had, and caught up everyone in his enthusiasm and high spirits as he showed off all his virtuosity. While I never met Ken in person, I had started to work with him on programming radio spots for *Bach's Lunch*, the WMHT weekday series that includes "a taste of Berkshire Bach" on Fridays. The format includes commentary by our performers, and Ken had begun to select his favorite Berkshire Bach archival recordings, and had recorded a few of the interviews. He seemed to enjoy the opportunity to reminisce about the concerts and our musicians, but also to delight in speaking about the music—its history, its structure, its emotional impact—in a way that was both intuitive and insightful. I regret we didn't have more time to complete his list of favorite performances. He was a creative and unique musician who built a powerful presence for Berkshire Bach in the region, and we miss him.

T.A. McDade
Musicologist, Berkshire Bach Society Board Member
and Director of Programming

I feel so fortunate and honored that I was able to know Ken, both personally and professionally. He brought excitement and joy to all every New Year's Eve and beyond. His decades of dedication to performances and music education is so far reaching, providing a great legacy. As a performer and a teacher, his vast understanding and knowledge of Bach gave all of us a richer appreciation of the depth, breadth, and emotionality of music. We are indebted to his lasting contributions.

Kenneth Stark
Berkshire Bach Board Member

The first time I played with Ken I was struck by his incredible passion and energy. Then came a deep appreciation for his musicianship and his unparalleled inventiveness. His spontaneous improvisations and his wonderfully thoughtful and quirky embellishments in the Brandenburgs were a revelation to me. There was never a repeated phrase or movement that wasn't improved by these qualities. I know that there are those for whom his

ornamentation was a sacrilege, but for me they were the heart and soul of his creativity. It also inspired me to do likewise, to trust myself, be brave and let my heart dictate what I wanted to do.

I will miss Ken terribly, even more so for the knowledge that we will never again enjoy the wonders of his wonderful interpretations. His was a big presence in every way, and he exhorted us all to do likewise.

Ronald Gorevic
Long-time Berkshire Bach Ensemble Member
Violin/viola



The Berkshire Bach Society
dedicates our 2021-2022
Bach at New Year's
concerts to
Kenneth Cooper
In memoriam

