

MEMORIAL MINUTE

November 2, 2016

Robert Middleton was born November 18, 1920 on a farm in Diamond, Ohio. A precocious pianist who also began to compose at an early age, he met--while attending a progressive high school in Columbus-- the famous Nadia Boulanger, who advised him to study at Harvard with Walter Piston. His undergraduate work there was interrupted first by a year of lessons with Boulanger at the Longy School in Cambridge and then by a three-year stint in the U. S. Army—from September 1942 until January 1946. He received his B.A. degree from Harvard in 1948 and was immediately awarded a John Knowles Paine Travelling Fellowship. This enabled him to spend a year in Paris, continuing his work with Boulanger, and then a year in Florence, where he established a friendship with the noted composer Luigi Dallapiccola.

He taught at Harvard for three years as instructor before joining the Vassar Faculty in 1953 as assistant professor. He became associate professor in 1958, full professor in 1966, and was appointed to the George Sherman Dickinson Chair in 1974. The composer of a significant body of vocal, instrumental and orchestral works, his third opera, *Command Performance*, was commissioned by the Vassar College Centennial Committee and had its premiere at the college on November 11, 1961. That performance featured a cast of such distinguished singers as Blanche Thebom and Ezio Flagello. It was directed by the legendary Sarah Caldwell. The production, with the same cast, was repeated in Boston. Bob was the mainstay of Vassar's music theory department for more than thirty years. He retired in June, 1985.

Robert Middleton was beloved as a teacher and as a colleague. He was sane, highly organized, without apparent ego or volatile temperament, helpful to younger faculty, a peacemaker among the elders. His elegant music showed early on neoclassical clarity and the influence of his teachers Piston and Boulanger, with chromatic flavoring suggestive of his admiration for Dallapiccola. In 1967, Bob published *Harmony in Modern Counterpoint*, a book that exemplifies his clear thinking and perceptive command of twentieth-century repertoire.

In the 1970s, somewhat unexpectedly, he became fascinated with graphic or spatial notation and aleatoric procedures (“I am sick to death of barlines!”). His Schumann-inspired piano trio, called *Vier Trio-Sätze in romantischer Manier*, written in that period, won praise in the NY Times. In a review entitled “Robert Middleton Dominates Concert”, Raymond Ericson called the trio “one of the best aleatory works this listener has heard.”

Bob was married for 62 years to the poet and pianist Polly Braun Middleton. Polly died in 2013. Bob died October 11, 2016, one month before his 96th birthday.

Respectfully submitted,

Bathia Churgin, Todd Crow, Richard Wilson