

FACULTY OBITUARIES

“A Musical Contrarian”

Lukas Foss, a CFA professor of music, challenged his students and his audience

By Natalie Jacobson McCracken

LUKAS FOSS, A retired College of Fine Arts professor of music and an acclaimed composer, conductor, and pianist, died on February 1. He was eighty-six.

Foss began studying music at age seven in Germany and continued with prominent teachers after his family fled to Paris from Nazi Germany in 1932 and then moved to the United States. At fifteen, recommended by Gian Carlo Menotti, he entered the Curtis Institute of Music and his lifelong friendship with fellow student Leonard Bernstein began. Both went on to Tanglewood, where their faculty included Serge Koussevitzky (“Koussy was like my adopted father,” Foss said) and Paul Hindemith.

At twenty-two, Foss was the youngest composer to have a work premiered by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He was the youngest to win a Guggenheim Fellowship. At thirty-one, he became a full professor at UCLA, succeeding Arnold Schoenberg.

Foss (HON.'03) was a determinedly American composer — “more Catholic than the Pope,” he told *Bostonia* in 1994. But when a critic like British musicologist Wilfred Mellers called his work “a pocket history of American music during the twentieth century,” it was not necessarily a compliment. Foss was both extolled and reviled for his knowledgeable mixing of styles and periods and for improvisations on the works of past masters that could seem at once homage and deconstruction.

High-spirited ranging through the literature and beyond characterized his music, says Richard Cornell, a CFA associate professor of composition.



Lukas Foss

FRED SWAY

“As a pianist he could define a new piece, like Bernstein’s *Age of Anxiety*, or show us a new side of an old Bach concerto or a Mozart minuet. As a composer he went everywhere, and his art is everything: serious and full of humor, derivative and original, old and new. What it is not is predictable, comfortable; he spoke as a musical contrarian.”

Foss’s signature compositions include the orchestral works Piano Concerto No. 2 (1950), *Baroque Variations* (1967), and *Renaissance Concerto* (1986), and the operas *The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* (1950) and *Griffelkin* (1955).

His composition *Symphonic Fantasy* was commissioned by BU for the occasion of his eightieth birthday and was premiered by the Boston University Symphony Orchestra in 2002 at Symphony Hall. Foss told the *B.U. Bridge*, the University’s weekly newspaper, that the piece was accessible for listeners, but challenging

for players. “My work is written for people who can play,” he said. “They have to be damn good.”

As a conductor — Foss led the Jerusalem Symphony, the Milwaukee Symphony, the Buffalo Philharmonic, and the Brooklyn Philharmonic — he offered “provocatively innovative programs,” Cornell says. “He challenged his students, and they loved him for it. All this was accomplished with a wry spirit and a hint of mischief.”

Foss joined the CFA faculty in 1991, dividing his time between Boston and New York.

“Lukas Foss was a consummate gentleman and a passionate teacher,” recalls CFA Dean ad interim Walt Meissner (CFA’81). “His colleagues and fellow artists will tell you about his remarkable talent and legendary career, but I will remember Lukas most fondly for his gentle nature and his devotion to his students.”

“We are deeply privileged to have known him,” Cornell says.