

Earle Brown: A Brief Biography

Earle Brown, a major force in contemporary music and a leading composer of the American avant-garde since the 1950s, died on July 2, 2002 at his home in Rye, New York. He was associated with the experimental composers John Cage, Morton Feldman, and Christian Wolff who, with Brown, came to be known as the New York School.

Earle Brown was born in 1926 in Lunenburg, Massachusetts and, in spirit, remained a New Englander throughout his life. Like other artists from that region – Ives, Ruggles, Dickinson – he spoke with his own voice and found his own path. To America, these artists were iconoclasts, but to Europe they embodied America – and Brown was no exception: his music has been most frequently performed, studied, lauded, and revered by Europeans. Brown's interest in a broad range of aesthetic expressions, ranging from the writings of James Joyce and the poetry of Gertrude Stein, Kenneth Patchen, and others to the work of the Abstract Expressionist painters – and particularly Jackson Pollock and Alexander Calder – informed his own work. He said, as recently as in 2000, that “the earliest and still predominant influences on my conceptual attitude toward art were the works of Alexander Calder and Jackson Pollock...the integral but unpredictable ‘floating’ variations of a mobile, and the contextual ‘rightness’ of the results of Pollock’s directness and spontaneity in relation to the materials and his particular image of the work...as a total space (of time).”

Earle Brown's influence on the avant-garde community has been philosophical as well as tangible and practical. His conducting techniques and experiments with “time notation,” improvisation, and open-form compositional structure have become part of contemporary compositional usage. Among Brown's most frequently performed and reinterpreted works is DECEMBER 1952, the score of which is a stark, abstract series of floating rectangles – a musical equivalent to a Calder mobile. His early influential orchestral scores include Available Forms 1 and Available Forms 2, and his musical friendships were legendary, from Bruno Maderna who conducted first performances of many of Brown's works to jazz musicians such as Zoot Sims and Gerry Mulligan. .

Brown received many commissions, residencies, and awards, including a Guggenheim award; an honorary doctorate from the Peabody Conservatory of Music (1970) where he held the W. Alton Jones Chair of Music; and the John Cage Award from the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts, among others. Among his many residencies were those at the California Institute of the Arts, Yale University, the Tanglewood and Aspen Music Festivals, the American Academy in Rome, and the Basel Conservatory of Music.

On November 20, 2002, The Museum of Modern Art hosted an homage to one of the great American composers of the twentieth century : In Memoriam: A Concert of Selected Works by Earle Brown. The program included works, selected by Brown in conversation with his wife Susan shortly before his death, that span his career: **Music for Violin, Cello and Piano** (1952); **Corroboree** (1964); **New Piece** (1971); **Centering** (1973); **Tracking Pierrot** (1992); and **Special Events** (1998).

