

# The Gentle Monster: Jonathan Harvey in Memoriam

Kris Falk

(We must say what we think!)<sup>1</sup>  
- Jonathan Harvey

Some monsters frighten us by the vastness of their knowledge, wisdom, and honesty.

The music of few composers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries can be described as "elegant," and yet that is exactly the term I would use for his music. He was, without a doubt, the most insightful and perceptive composer I have ever met. He could scan an entire composition and point to its weakest moment immediately. His comments on any composers' works were always positive, and yet brutally honest and deep. Harvey viewed himself as a resource: his first questions to any student were, "What are you trying to do? How can I help?" When I presented a complex time issue to one composer, that composer immediately stated, "It cannot be done." Given the same question, Jonathan Harvey replied, "I have done that; here is how to do it..." He cultivated the most diverse and yet serious group of composers ever to reside at Stanford University: all seeking excellence in music composition, but no two searching in the same manner.

Jonathan Harvey became interested for a time in the concept of one *becoming* the music while listening. I showed him a composition of mine, which made use of very limited material and a great deal of silence. As Dr. Harvey looked over the score, he said, "I am a piece with much silence... I speak in fragments." Later, a composition colleague of mine had a piece for two pianos in which there were descending scales at various speeds in all the parts. "I am a scale," Jonathan Harvey gently declared, as he extended both his arms as though ready to fly.

Many of my Stanford colleagues and I never stopped marveling at the variety of compositional approaches Jonathan Harvey employed within the same sections of a piece, and yet the composition's totality always sounded incredibly unified.

His statement "Don't show me how clever you are" resonates with me to this day.

The sign of a great teacher is the ability to crystallize complex concepts into short, non-cryptic statements that prove to be true no matter how far one delves into the subject. For example, he would say the most meaningful pieces reconcile what initially appeared to be disparate ideas into a suspended unity.

As a composition teacher Dr. Harvey treated all composition students as colleagues, much to our own embarrassment. He shared with me the movements for a work in progress entitled *Death of Light, Light of Death* on a sunlit terrace, he openly spoke of his compositional technique(s) in seminars, and he confided to me where he felt the weakest point might be in his orchestral work *Mothers Shall Not Cry*.

---

<sup>1</sup> Julian Johnson, "An Interview with Jonathan Harvey" in *Aspects of British Music of the 1990s*, Peter O'Hagan, ed. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), p. 122.

He once confided to me that he felt his mission in the United States was to free students from academic ossification in music composition (my paraphrase).

In one seminar we improvised with various percussion instruments, and he picked up a flexatone. "Ever written for this before?" he asked. In his next composition there was a flexatone solo.

One day Jonathan Harvey and I bemoaned the fact that we had reached the point where no new music will surprise us anymore.

When I extended my greetings from J. Harvey to Helmut Lachenmann at Darmstadt, Mr. Lachenmann broke into his first beaming smile of the day: "Jonathan Harvey!! How is he?!" I believe they had not seen each other in over twenty years.

Jonathan Harvey never had a harsh word for anyone, although some students tested his patience: at one point he softly chided a persistently negative student for being "tiresome".

He was a composer with a truly hard and determined will, who once admitted, "Don't you ever listen to some music and say, 'I could do better'?"

I saw him at a pre-concert lecture skillfully extemporize on the differences between the cello and violin versions of a Fauré sonata from a truly random question in a new music audience.

At another public talk, he admitted to not knowing Philip Glass' work very well, but could not see the connection an audience member made between his and Glass' work.

It was impossible to fool Jonathan Harvey with a dishonest musical statement: he saw through everything.

We have a vision of the perfect afternoon of the perfect relationship or whatever and we persuade ourselves that it is real whereas in fact it is changing – and obviously the worst thing is that we get old and die. But I want to acknowledge that in art because I think only by acknowledging it can you achieve 'emptiness', the realization that things don't exist without our construction, which is actually the same as bliss. There's nothing dark about emptiness – it's a liberation from the self-grasping mind... So I would say that my music is actually about bliss.<sup>2</sup>

Some monsters frighten us by the vastness of their knowledge, wisdom, and honesty, but "gentle" will always be the first word I associate with Jonathan Harvey.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.