



## EDITOR'S CORNER

**In Memoriam: Robert M. Stevenson (1916-2012)**

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The name Robert Murrell Stevenson figured powerfully in the minds and memories of thousands of people, including admirers, colleagues, collaborators, and former students. This is due to his many decades of transnational labor in, as he put it, “rescuing the musical heritage of Latin America.” It would indeed be impossible to calculate with any accuracy the impact that he had on our knowledge and understanding of Iberian and Latin American music. Few if any other scholars have penetrated so far and so deeply into such a wide range of musical issues, from every region and every epoch, in every style of making music. And few scholars in any discipline have inspired so many others to follow in their footsteps. The year 2016 is the centenary of his birth and fourth anniversary of his death. I offer below a few words of reminiscence, in honor of a scholar who did so much for so many.<sup>1</sup>

What I wish to offer here, however, is not a catalog of his contributions, which in and of themselves would constitute a whole book; rather, what follow are a few personal recollections of the maestro, reminiscences that may provide some insight into the motivations and methods of a scholar *sine qua non*, *non plus ultra*, and *sui generis*. These memories are garnered from a twenty-six-year acquaintance with Dr. Stevenson—as he was customarily known. Though undergraduate students of more casual acquaintance affectionately hailed him as “Doc,” I rarely heard someone refer to him as “Robert,” much less “Bob.” Something about his attire may have prompted such formality, as I never saw him wearing anything other than a suit and tie. These served to convey his seriousness of purpose and consummate professionalism. Now, to be sure, the suit and tie in question (as well as his shoes) were never of high quality or fashionable, but this fact simply spoke to another of his outstanding traits, and that was thrift. Those who broke bread with Dr. Stevenson became familiar with old-style, inexpensive diners like Norm’s or Clifton’s, never the Ritz. The dorm cafeteria was also a favorite dining destination, insofar as he resided in student housing at UCLA for many years (in his final years, he occupied an apartment in Westwood Village). This careful money management had its advantages: among other things, it eventually enabled him to endow an AMS award for Iberian musicology in his own name.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay first appeared as an introduction to the Stevenson festschrift *Treasures of the Golden Age: Essays on Music of the Iberian and Latin American Renaissance in Honor of Robert M. Stevenson*, ed. Michael O’Connor and Walter Aaron Clark (New York: Pendragon, 2012), xi-xiii.

When not eating or sleeping in the dorm or teaching in the classroom, he was almost always working in the UCLA Music Library. This was rarely a locale conducive to concentrated study, as noise and interruptions were more or less constant. Yet, Stevenson seemed to thrive in that environment precisely because such distractions were an apparent spur to his phenomenal powers of concentration. And he never seemed much to mind being interrupted, if someone wanted to speak with him. When he needed genuine solitude, he headed for one of the piano practice rooms, where he was often observed playing late into the night. The amount of repertoire he had committed to memory was staggering, and I personally recall a Chopin recital he gave at the 1999 national meeting of the American Musicological Society in Kansas City. It was a from-memory *tour de force* never to be forgotten, especially considering that he was 83 years old at the time, an age at which most people struggle to get the cap off their medication and cannot remember where they left their keys (some of us have already arrived at this distressing juncture).

I entered the graduate program at UCLA in 1986, completing my dissertation under his guidance six years later. He has certainly retained a prominent place in my mind and memory—and my affection—since that time. He was a true *Doktorvater* to me. I welcome any opportunity to relate the influence he had on me, influence that has determined the course of my life from those days onward. I cite below a few life lessons I learned from Stevenson, lessons that have stood me in good stead these many years and that I have passed on to my students.

*Precision.* Stevenson always encouraged his students to “get it right!” He was intolerant of careless mistakes and insufficiently dogged pursuit of all possible primary and secondary sources. Woe unto that student (who shall remain nameless here) who mistranslated a word, got some basic historical fact wrong, or failed to find information where Stevenson said it could be found. I have since come to understand that if one does not get the small details right, it will tend to undermine a reader’s confidence in the conceptual framework those details necessarily undergird. Though mistakes may be inevitable, we must strive to keep them to the absolute minimum possible.

*Documentation.* Yet, Stevenson was basically a realist, not an idealist, and he once assured me that a scholar never feels that s/he has enough documentation. When I later paused to consider the prodigious quantities of documentary evidence that inform his books and articles, I felt a certain amount of relief—not that I could or should ever relax my efforts, of course. But when deadlines are approaching and editors are breathing down one’s neck to finish something, it is consoling to recall that the master of documentation himself never felt he had enough.

*Facts.* Another Stevensonian declaration I clearly recall went like this: “I’m a fact man, a book man; I leave the philosophizing to others.” I found that remark disingenuous at the time, and I still do. Stevenson’s entire career was inspired by a philosophical commitment to musics on the margin of traditional musicological discourse, especially those of the Americas and Iberia. However, it was not a commitment confined to particular geographical regions. He was a champion of the women and minorities routinely excluded from canonic histories of Western music, musicians like Teresa Carreño and Manuel de Zumaya. Yet, there is some truth to what he said about himself. Given the path-breaking work in which he was engaged, locating, describing, and preserving primary sources was his chief occupation. Others could wax philosophical about issues of identity and sexuality, but

he would always have the satisfaction of knowing that he had personally provided much of the grist for their mills.

*Conviction.* Finally, Stevenson always encouraged his students to follow his example and take the road less traveled. He was proud of the scholarly achievements of his advisees, and of the fact that all of them had jobs. Still, back in 1990, writing a dissertation on a *Kleinmeister* composer such as Isaac Albéniz seemed to me a risky thing to do, despite my passion for the subject. Who, I wondered, would hire an *Albéniz* specialist? (Several places, it turns out, but I could not imagine that at the time.) He urged me forward, saying, “It’s wide open.” He knew the relevant literature, and he recognized that there was a tide here which, taken at the flood, would lead to fortune—or at least gainful employment in the profession. That decision has made all the difference. He always believed that it was not so much which topic you chose but rather the conviction and skill you brought to the endeavor that would carry the day. Conviction and skill. Curiosity and knowledge. These are the indispensable tools of our trade. Skill and knowledge can be acquired, but conviction and curiosity are innate and necessarily precede the other two. These are the stuff of which a multi-generational impact is made, the kind of impact Stevenson had. His legacy of conviction, skill, curiosity, and knowledge will outlive us all.

WALTER AARON CLARK. “In Memoriam: Robert M. Stevenson (1916-2012).” *Diagonal: An Ibero-American Music Review* 1, no. 2 (2016): 116-118.