

Memorial Minute for Philipp Otto Naegele (1928-2011)

Read aloud at the faculty meeting of Wednesday, February 16, 2011

If Philipp could see me standing here, he would say what Hector Berlioz is reported to have said to a colleague of his at the Institut de France: if *you* are going to speak at my funeral, I would just as soon not die. In fact the last thing I heard from Philipp was a quip about Berlioz: he was biting, and lucid, to the end, which came on January 31st of this year.

Philipp Naegele had a great sense of humor tinged with a touch of malice—as great senses of humor tend to be—and he was prepared to joke about everything, such as, in no particular order, Telemann, Wagner, Poulenc, and death, about which he had thought a great deal. He used to read Nietzsche, I remember, and for Nietzsche, life itself was a species of death.

It was in the year 2000 that Philipp retired from the faculty of Smith College; he had been teaching here since 1964. For eight years before that time he played the violin in the Cleveland Orchestra under the dictatorial baton of George Szell. Tom Mendenhall, by comparison, was benevolent in the extreme. Smith was a congenial place in those days, and Philipp took advantage his newfound liberty by giving lessons and courses assiduously while trying as often as possible to tour and record with Music from Marlboro and a number of other celebrated ensembles that appreciated Philipp's articulate and intelligent playing.

Philipp's father, Reinhold Naegele, was a well-known artist in Stuttgart in the nineteen-twenties and thirties. He married a Jewish physician, Alice Nordlinger, and the couple had three boys of whom Philipp was the youngest. When it became clear that it would be wise for such a family to leave Germany, Philipp made his way to England, as an eleven-year-old, and to the United States, when he was twelve. He went to the High School of Music and Art in New York City and then to Queens College, where he received his bachelor's degree in 1949. After a year at Yale, which he apparently disliked, he went on to Princeton, where in 1954 he received a Ph.D. in musicology with dissertation on a famous music critic and historian, August Wilhelm Ambros. Only someone who had read Kant and Hegel in the original language could have produced such a serious thesis, which I read as a fledgling instructor here in the process of writing my own.

At Smith, on two or three occasions only, Philipp gave courses on Bach and Mozart: he wrote out all the words he intended to speak, and spoke them with a special kind of modest intensity and authority. His usual teaching obligations consisted of violin lessons, chamber music coaching, and putting together two or three student-faculty chamber-orchestra concerts that attained a near-professional level. As one of my colleagues put it, when Philipp was around—whether performing or merely listening in the hall—it somehow seemed important to get things right: the right pitch, the right pace, the right point of view. Jill Conway must have sensed something of this in 1978 when she sat Philipp down, to his great surprise, in the professorial chair endowed in the name of William R. Kenan, Jr. There were only fourteen endowed chairs in 1978; today there are almost fifty.

Philipp was never much of a committee person, and department meetings were certainly not his cup of tea. Even in the days when these faculty gatherings were less scripted, he would eschew them, not feeling the need to have his eminently creative ideas ratified by this eminently deliberative body.

Philipp was conspicuously at home at Marlboro, where he went, first, in 1950, to play chamber music on an informal basis with Rudolf Serkin, Adolf Busch, and Marcel Moyse, who were in the process of founding what became *the* preëminent summer festival. He remained a continuous presence in Marlboro until this past summer—a sixty-year stint that allowed him to make music and break bread with almost all of the musicians who played a role of musical importance in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century and beyond. In addition to performing at Marlboro, where some of his best work was as a violist, Philipp gradually assumed the role of mentor, admissions counselor, translator, and musicologist. He nonetheless wore lightly the mantel of *éminence grise*, or so it always seemed to me, because, like the one person he seems to have admired above all others, Rudolf Serkin, he knew that he was in some sense exceptional, but at the same time, in the presence of Bach and Mozart and the others, he knew, too, that he was human, all too human.

—Peter Bloom, *Grace Jarcho Ross 1933 Professor of Humanities*