Patricia Carpenter in Commemoration

Compiled by Murray Dineen

As research scholars, we are known for our students as much as by our publications. Patricia Carpenter’s published writings, listed at the end of this tribute, constitute a major contribution to music theory and aesthetics. But her many students, a few of whom are represented in this commemoration, measure her legacy. As these memorial sketches reveal, she shaped countless students during her twenty-six years at Barnard College and Columbia University. For Pat, scholarly investigation was inextricable from teaching: everything tendered in the classroom was subject to the same scrutiny she brought to her own research. Everything she set before us as students around the long grey tables in Dodge Hall was a commitment as earnest as any address before a forum of learned colleagues. And from all of us she demanded the same high standard that she demanded of herself: endless curiosity tempered by unflagging criticism. In this regard, her students were indivisible from her publications, each formed rigorously to become a self-standing component in the broad intellectual circle that was Patricia Carpenter.

Patricia Carpenter died on July 8, 2000 at the age of 77. She is survived by her long-time companion Sylvio, two nieces, and a nephew. Born in Santa Rosa, California on January 21, 1923, she studied piano with Ruth Leginska, as well as percussion, bassoon, and conducting. She conducted the San Bernardino Symphony and served as an assistant conductor to Jacques Barzun in New York. Learning of Schoenberg from her teacher, she wrote a letter asking for composition lessons. From 1942 to 1949 she was Schoenberg’s student in formal classes at UCLA, in the “Sunday Morning” sessions she initiated with a colleague, and in private instruction. She wrote the following sketch of Schoenberg and the UCLA courses, which describes the effect his teaching had upon her musical consciousness, an effect she replicated with her own students at Columbia. The text was written for the panel discussion “Schoenberg in Hollywood” (August 22, 1999) at the Bard Music Festival Schoenberg and His World, and is reprinted here with the kind permission of the panel chair, Sabine Feist.

Schoenberg’s classes at UCLA were held in a little room on the top floor of Kirkoff Hall. He would come in with his big easel (his
blackboard, for he saved everything), his assistant (Clara Silver Steuermann in my time), and whoever was at the piano (probably Warren Langlie; Schoenberg liked to tease Warren about his studies with [Nadia] Boulanger: “What would Mme. Boulanger have said about this, Mr. Langlie?”). The character of his classes might surprise you. Although some students were musically sophisticated, most, I suspect, were—like me—quite naïve; we played an instrument, majored in music for various reasons, and really didn’t know much music. Looking back I am astonished at how much of his vast musical heritage he transmitted to these motley groups of Southern California youngsters.

The curriculum replicated that of the traditional European conservatory: harmony, composition, counterpoint, form and analysis, orchestration, and composition. But it was extraordinary, because Schoenberg taught them all. It was indeed the unified musical theory about which he has written so much. In [the course] “Structural Functions of Harmony” we worked on tonal forms. In “Double Counterpoint, Canon, and Fugue” we began with chorale preludes, for practice in writing cadences to all degrees of a key. In “Form and Analysis” we learned many pieces, focusing our techniques on concrete works (we began with Beethoven piano sonatas; Mozart, Schoenberg said, was too difficult). The composition course followed the lines of Models for Beginners in Composition, but in effect everything was composition. Composition, Schoenberg has said, is thinking in tones and rhythms. Essentially, that is what he taught: musical thinking, at whatever level we could learn it.

Somehow he reached all of us—beginner and sophisticate—in this immense project. . . . Because I was weak in harmony, for my private lessons I wrote dozens of scherzos, in which the problem is the modulating model and sequence. I remember an exam in which we were to write a fugal exposition. Schoenberg brought in a fugue subject for each of us, written for whatever difficulty he judged each could handle. I was sitting on some steps, working on mine, when a long finger pointed over my shoulder, and his voice asked, “Miss Carpenter, what is that G doing there?” He did not talk about theory—we practiced. But his ability to project to each student how to think in music seems to me to have been profound.

Schoenberg has shaped my musical thinking, although at this point, it is hard for me to draw a line between his thought and my own. Let me try to convey to you the most important thing I learned from him, which has to do with the wholeness and concreteness of the musical work. We are in a little room in Kirkoff and have been
analysing the first movement of a Brahms string quartet for a few days. We have examined it in detail: harmonically, motivically (both entail rhythm), texturally, formally. Schoenberg indicates a short passage, makes a few squiggles on the easel, and the entire movement comes together. The piece is illuminated, it shines, as a complete unity of technique and intuition. Aha! Every detail falls into its place in the whole. What I learned from my years of such experience was to try to become conscious of and to formulate my real, complete encounter with a musical work, that is, to think in music.

In 1944, Patricia Carpenter gave the premiere of Schoenberg’s Piano Concerto, in a two-piano version, in Los Angeles. She composed several chamber and orchestral works, one of which was performed by the San Bernardino Symphony. Accepted into the composition program at Columbia, she came to work with Douglas Moore in composition and Albert Hofstrader in philosophy. She discovered Paul Henry Lang and embarked upon studies in musicology. Her Ph.D. in Music and Philosophy at Columbia University was completed in 1971. An active member of the music theory community, she contributed in many ways—both scholarly and administratively—to its advancement. The first woman to present a keynote address to the Society of Music Theory, she served as its Vice-President from 1992 to 1994.

Her scholarly interests lay in the aesthetics and theory of music, which she sought to demonstrate through analysis. Perhaps her best known early work is the article “The Musical Object” (1967), published as the centerpiece of a forum in Current Musicology, with responses by Leo Treitler and Richard Crocker. The article grew out of her abiding interest in musical wholeness, a subject she explored in a debate with Joan Stambaugh in the Journal of Philosophy and at length in her dissertation on the phenomenology of the fugue (1971a). In the 1970s, her interests turned to analysis informed by historical music theory, with a demonstration of coherence in a Dufay motet using an analytic framework adapted from compositional treatises of Dufay’s day (1973). Much of her later work took as its starting point Schoenberg’s theories of tonal harmony, and the crowning achievement of her later career was the publication of his so-called “Gedanke” or the “Musical Idea” manuscripts. The most influential and explicit adaptation of Schoenberg’s thought is to be found in the article “Grundgestalt as Tonal Function” (1983), although the innovative analytic concept referred to as the “tonal problem” is explored in other articles. In her work with Schoenberg’s thought there is a readily discernible individual approach that distinguishes her own insights from those of her former teacher.
Patricia Carpenter was the driving force behind the establishment of the doctorate in music theory at Columbia University. A pillar in the Department of Music, she was a constant friend to *Current Musicology*. As the following sketches reveal, she taught many subjects in music theory and aesthetics, from lecturing in harmony and counterpoint for entering classes at Barnard College to leading advanced seminars in aesthetics, analysis, and the history of theory for Ph.D. candidates at Columbia. Seminars in her later years were occupied with Schoenberg's theories of tonal harmony. Clad in purple, clutching her violet coffee mug, she is perhaps best remembered at the head of a seminar table dotted with a translation of Schoenberg's *Harmonielehre*, which the publisher had unwittingly but obligingly wrapped in a deep purple cover. Pat, we miss you.

—MD

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The first month after entering my doctoral studies at Columbia, I crossed Broadway to Barnard College, heart in mouth, for my first interview with my advisor. Pat's appraisal of my abilities that day was accurate and succinct: "You're doing fine. But you need to learn harmony." At the time, I was enrolled in her seminar on Schoenberg's studies of harmony. I displayed, probably quite clearly, my lack of skill at four-part voice leading, to which the opening part of Schoenberg's *Harmonielehre* is devoted. Having read Schenker's *Freie Satz* and *Harmonielehre*, I was completely at a loss. Where were all the "natural forces" of *Urlinie* and its bass counterpoint in Schoenberg? Wasn't harmony simply the revelation of these natural forces as they were tempered into gracefully descending lines drawn irrevocably by a musical gravity above and beyond human question?

I think the defining moment of my harmonic understanding was produced by Pat's pencil. Holding the pencil with its eraser tip before me, she inquired: "What is this?" I replied, "A pencil." She questioned, in turn: "How do you know it's not merely an eraser?" To much the same end Schoenberg, her teacher, apparently used a hat, while Webern relied upon an ashtray. The answer, which Schoenberg, Webern, and particularly Pat illustrated at length, is that we know an object, be it pencil or musical work, through the critical vehicles of memory and projection. Music is not a surrender, however enlightened, to forces beyond our control. It is not determined mechanistically by nature or any other force above human affair. In Schoenberg's words, which blow through his *Harmonielehre* like a cool breeze, music is as much the product of a brain as it is produced by the forces of a naturally gravitating heart. In this regard, as in so many others, Patricia Carpenter taught me harmony.

Murray Dineen
I often hear Pat’s voice as I teach young composers, patiently repeating her simple phrases that served as an anchor in moments of bewilderment: “start at the beginning,” “beginnings, middles, and ends,” and the question with which she always started an analysis, “What strikes you?” Remembering Pat’s classes, what strikes me is the amazing feeling that one had of seeing “how it was done.” As a composer this glimpse behind the “tapestry,” as she used to call it, seemed like miraculous and lost information. She often used the metaphor of the tapestry to describe the kind of thing we were doing by analyzing pieces, looking at the way the object was constructed. Analysis is like carefully observing the back of a tapestry: one glimpses the way in which the parts of a piece are related and integrated into the whole of the work. Occasionally a sense of mysticism would emerge, an experience of something beyond ourselves in the massive integration of a work. At these moments Pat would often exclaim, “oh, isn’t that elegant!” Sometimes these glimpses made composing a daunting task. After studying Brahms with Pat, one could no longer rely on artifices like “gesture” or simply write chains of linked aphorisms. Musical ideas had implications and demanded adequate treatment and completion. On the other hand, one had more tools at hand for carrying through musical thoughts. And of course when one was daunted, one could remember her simple advice: “start at the beginning,” “beginnings, middles, and ends,” and “what strikes you?”

James Paton Walsh

It is somewhat rare to have an esteemed colleague who is also a dear friend, but such was Patricia Carpenter to me through all our years at Columbia. She was also my teacher in the broadest and deepest sense—broadest in that her subjects ranged from flower gardening to philosophy and even astrological systems, deepest in that she was my best instructor in the meaning of music and the other arts. My files carry dozens of drafts, analyses, and outlines that Pat shared with me to my profit.

None of the contributors here can have known the California Pat, but very occasionally they might hear her speak of her girlhood. (She fondly remembered her grandfather who served as a drummer boy in the Union army and was lucky enough to have seen Abraham Lincoln.) I think that anyone, however passingly acquainted with Pat, would feel she was a woman at home with her past, though her life and work were moved by a pioneering spirit. In fact, an implicit Westernness shone through her intellectual and personal independence, her originality, and her extraordinary generosity.

Chris Hatch
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Pat had the great gift of reaching straight to the individual, even in large classes. She would play a piece and ask "What strikes you?" prepared to deal with any answer. She told me once she had played some Bach in an introductory music class, and when she asked what struck anybody, one student said, "It sounds like God." While the other students rolled their eyes, Pat pursued it: "Well, what do you mean, Miss _____?" She was often able to develop a good discussion from such a starting point, by drawing the student out, without appearing to lead. She made her students feel like important contributors.

Pat paid attention not only to our ideas, but also to our instincts, feelings, and desires. She used to say: "You have to train your instincts." The urge to shape and discipline a mind was also apparent in her gardening. The broad wooded slope behind her house gradually, over several years, became a park filled with plantings, paths, benches, and other ornaments. She said she was "articulating the space," the same terms she used in analyzing musical structure. For her, garden, music, and mind were all material to be formed.

Peter Schubert

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Patricia Carpenter came into my life in the fall of 1971 as I began my second year at Barnard. I vividly remember entering the classroom on the sixth floor of Dodge Hall for Music Theory III. Even the urbane New York girls were unusually subdued as we awaited our professor's arrival. We'd heard many rumors: she wore purple, she lived in Greenwich Village, and most unbelievable, she had been a student of Schoenberg. Patricia Carpenter arrived, tall, commanding, serious in demeanor, speaking in a slight lisp but with distinct enunciation. Her tone of voice was penetrating, but at the same time she was interested in hearing our remarks. "What do you have going there?" she would ask. We certainly saw what Bach, Beethoven, Schubert and Brahms "had going" as she led us through fugues and sketched out entire symphony and sonata movements before our eyes. When we had difficulties, she listened and helped, where others might simply have closed the door. For our final exam in Theory IV, she sent us off to search out all the tones foreign to the key in the first movement of Brahms's Symphony No. 4. That still ranks as one of the greatest adventures of my life. In the Program in the Arts junior colloquium on "Imagination," she taught us how to read an aesthetic text, to identify a concept and see it grow as a thought throughout the article. We read Schelling, Coleridge, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and the writings of her good friend Rudolf Arnheim, and we learned how a concept could grow in many directions and emerge in different fields—in philosophy,
literature, anthropology, or in the theory of art. The classes were great adventures as much for her as they were for us. With what relish she spoke about ideas, with what respect for them and what decorum as a teacher—how much she taught us by example!

I thought of her as a modernist but later found out that she loved Rossini, Donizetti, Tchaikovsky, and that Die Fledermaus was a great favorite. I pictured her growing up in California near the ocean, the orange groves, and the dry purplish hills, but learned that she lived in a little colony of European emigres—her neighbor Lotte Violin having known both Thomas Mann and Theodor Adorno (and called them Tommy and Teddy!). Pat commanded every space around her, whether seminar room or dining room (but admitted being terrified of her cat Clancy). Walking through the house at Yorktown Heights, one saw her sister’s paintings, a drawing of her as a young woman, face in profile turned at an interesting angle, to show shoulder and arm. One noticed her great-grandfather’s mustering-out papers from his Iowa regiment in the Civil War (yes, he shook the hand of Lincoln), and her grandfather’s clock. How privileged we were to enter the dwelling of so very rich a heart and brain. She was the fostering mother of our intellectual lives, alma mater in the truest sense.

Jo-Ann Reif

Patricia Carpenter and Leonard Stein were guests for a day at our home on the Mills College campus in the spring of 1994. The occasion was the annual meeting of the West Coast Conference of Music Theory and Analysis. Pat was the keynote speaker, and Leonard Stein performed several works by Arnold Schoenberg. We live in a small cottage, once occupied by Darius and Madeleine Milhaud. Pat stayed in our master bedroom; Leonard Stein shared one of the two bunk beds in my son Jeremy’s room, who was then four years old. In the morning, our two distinguished guests, clad in bathrobes, were sitting at our dining room table sipping coffee when suddenly a rubber tipped arrow, which Jeremy had shot from across the room, narrowly missed both of them and stuck to a nearby window. My wife Jamie and I were mortified, but Pat merely turned around and smiled at Jeremy with a twinkle in her eye.

Pat invariably handled every difficult situation with grace. She was among the most refined and dignified people that I have ever known. Pat also had an extraordinary strength of character backed up by the courage of her convictions. I imagine that these latter qualities may have stemmed in part from her California upbringing during a time when that part of the country still retained aspects of the “Wild West.” When I was offered a teaching position at Mills, Pat was amused after I expressed concerns
about moving to “earthquake country.” She told me about driving down the freeway with her father during an earthquake, nonchalantly dodging crevices in the road.

Pat’s most formidable challenges occurred during her career as a professional music theorist and faculty member at Columbia University. She was a pioneer in a field where women still remain underrepresented. The first woman to present a keynote address before the Society for Music Theory, she was highly respected by everyone in the profession. Year after year during the Society’s annual meetings, I remember how much everyone valued her tactful and always supportive, yet keenly critical responses to the latest research. Pat was a gifted teacher. Her graduate seminars at Columbia were intense, for she always encouraged a free exchange of ideas among students that were traditionally very outspoken. I can remember more than a few occasions when several wild-eyed young music theorists engaged in a rapidly escalating argument over such minute details as the interpretation of a passing tone in a Beethoven piano sonata. Pat would let things run their course and then elegantly demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses inherent in both positions. She taught us that intellectual rigor need not be ideologically narrow. This lesson served her students well; it is not surprising that those who studied at Columbia during her relatively short tenure as head of the graduate theory program now occupy teaching positions at colleges and universities throughout the United States and Canada.

David Bernstein

Patricia Carpenter had many special gifts as a teacher, among them her deep knowledge of music (in part the result of her work with Arnold Schoenberg), her philosophical bent, and her knack for asking just the right question to help a student sort out a complex idea. For me, however, one specific incident encapsulates what I thought was her greatest gift.

In the fall of 1978, Professor Carpenter offered a seminar on Schoenberg’s tonal theories. While looking for a topic for a term paper, I became fascinated by Schoenberg’s attempts to define a musical idea, not knowing at that time that it was one of the key notions of his theories and that he had attempted to write an entire treatise on the subject. One day, I encountered Professor Carpenter on the walkway at Barnard College. I found myself telling her how intrigued I was by Schoenberg’s attempts to define the musical idea, which to me remained a mystery. I told her that I would really like to write my paper for her course on that subject rather than one on the topic of the seminar. To my surprise, Professor Carpenter agreed, saying that she would accept simply the attempt to write such a paper. The result was published later in Current Musicology as “Three
Levels of Idea in Schoenberg’s Thought and Writings,” an article that has brought me much recognition as a Schoenberg scholar.

To this day, I do not know what Professor Carpenter’s reasons were. I do know that nothing was expected of the paper other than that I try. For the first time in my academic life, I was granted the freedom to pursue something that truly inspired me. As a result, I discovered the work that has carried my career for over twenty years and which I still feel moved to do. Professor Carpenter’s gift to me was to allow me to follow my own inspiration.

Charlotte M. Cross

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I first met Pat as a student in her 1971–72 graduate seminar in early music theory. Pat’s door was liberally open for office hours, and she and I would discuss my progress in the self-imposed task of understanding as much of Gerbert, Coussemaker, and other theorists as was feasible in a year. Pat would encourage me and suggest parallels in twentieth-century aesthetics and psychology that were worth looking into. After the course and until my dissertation was completed, Pat and I continued to write and meet with each other, at Columbia or at her home. We talked mostly about my work on French monophonic songs around 1500, and later about music in the most general sense.

Pat always seemed much more at ease with ideas than with theories, methods, techniques, or systems. Although her classes and our conversations never flagged for an instant—even her thoughtful pauses had a continuity of their own—Pat said very little. Instead, like a virtuoso interviewer or moderator, she steered participants through the more important points. In her seminar she made two recurrent points: it is generally valuable to consider what the “givens” in a piece are (for example in a polyphonic texture, the cantus firmus); and if one gets bogged down in analyzing an intricate contrapuntal work, it is often helpful to consider its “discant structure” (a comment Pat would often make on her way to the blackboard to clarify a piece or passage). Pat’s continual recourse to “discant structure”—a linear heuristic, unencumbered by theoretical orthodoxy or rigidity—provided a remarkably reliable way of sorting through complicated possibilities. Pat’s insistence on considering what was “given” in early music encouraged me in trying to comprehend the texts and tunes that were the focus of my dissertation and the basis of much Renaissance counterpoint. Beyond this, a concern with what is “given” quickly led me far from early music into an Ockham’s-razor quest to distinguish between what is really given and what has been taken for granted in analyzing music.

Another direct influence of Pat’s teaching upon me has been a concern with musical process and Gestalt principles. Whereas I had been aware of
such notions at a second remove (mostly through writings by Leonard Meyer and Victor Zuckerkandl), Pat emphasized the relevance for music of Kohler's *Principles of Gestalt Psychology* and Arnheim's *Art and Visual Perception*. Their thoughts, via Pat, have pervaded almost all my subsequent work. I doubt that Pat, or many others, would find congenial the way I currently frame my response to the challenges of form and process, by means of a Gestaltist behaviorism, according to which the more enduring, "robust" Gestalt principles might be understood as embodying highly generalized reinforcers. All the same, I feel my wayward development exemplifies an important effect of the best teachers, even on their most prodigal students.

Rather than inculcating a "method" or "approach" in their "disciples," teachers like Pat vividly convey ideas with which their students can run for several years, ideas "with legs." In other words, the outcomes of creative teachers, like Pat, can be divergent, rather than convergent with what has been immediately "taught." Though Pat and others might put it differently, these teachers can shape the activity of searching in their students with rewards according to a variable-ratio schedule: a word now, a laugh then. Set loose in the world, their former students—like gamblers, the superstitious, or foragers—will persist, will get "hooked on," will find it difficult to discontinue the albeit arguably worthwhile activity of trying to make "sense" of things.

**Jay Rahn**

I remember Pat's undergraduate analysis class. At one point we were analyzing the development sections of the first movement of Brahms's Fourth Symphony and making four-part reductions of the voice-leading. Suddenly, it became clear to me like a ray of light that this music, which had seemed so mysterious, was constructed as a set of models and sequences that I could understand. The "Liebestod" from *Tristan* opened up to us similarly. During the year I realized that music is not magically created, but rather that composers do real things with comprehensible musical techniques. Pat had a way of penetrating to the heart of a musical work the same way she penetrated to the heart of others' arguments, asking just the right question or making just the right comment. Pat's kindness was constantly evident. For her, there was no such thing as a stupid question. She would make something important out of any response. I saw her correct people so gently they never realized it. Her approach came from a deep sense of seeking the truth rather than personal aggrandizement. My greatest regret is that Pat never got to complete a career-culminating book after she retired. Right up to the last moment I was hoping she would put her thoughts on paper for posterity. But cancer intervened, and she bravely fought it. I miss her very much.

**Janna K. Saslaw**
Plate 1: Handwritten note by Arnold Schoenberg to his student, Patricia Carpenter, on corrected musicianship exercises.
Pat’s luminous enthusiasm filled our conversations with bracing life as she shared with us her passions for Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, the I Ching, Jung, and so many others. Her thoughts about music were instilled with love for music. She showed us that an affair of the head and an affair of the heart could be one and the same. The mauveness of her presence and the generous songness of her voice enlivened Columbia’s halls with fresh swerves, and her generosity of feelings saw us and enriched us, for which we enduringly give thanks.

Beverly Bond and Austin Clarkson

In October 1991, Pat and I flew to a conference at the Arnold Schoenberg Institute. The occasion was the retirement of Director Leonard Stein. She was in a mood to reminisce and spoke of Schoenberg: “When I first met him, I told him I hated Wagner—I was a kid, you know. He told me that he thought I would change my mind.” One day she was working on “vagrant” chords outside UCLA’s music building. Suddenly, a bony finger came over her shoulder. Schoenberg said, “Miss Carpenter, I would think again about that line.” She recalled that at the Sunday morning analysis class in the study of Schoenberg’s home, “he would illustrate his points on the easel he kept in front of the class. His analysis would progress, and then at one amazing point, the whole piece would become a whole—it was miraculous!”

A day before the conference ended, the Ronald Schoenbergs invited participants to their house in Brentwood—the former home of Schoenberg himself. I could sense Pat’s anticipation as we approached the front door. She immediately turned into his study and insisted that each person in the room sit in Schoenberg’s old leather armchair from which he expounded musical wisdom. She talked about how she delivered spools of corrected examples for his counterpoint book (see plate 1) to this very place. She also said that here she typed Schoenberg’s famous letters to Olin Downes, the New York Times critic, who had made negative statements about Mahler. She added, “We all had chores, you know. That’s how we paid for lessons.”

A few hours later the party was ending, and we walked to the bus bringing us to our hotel. Pat looked back at the house—a long look full of living memories. To my knowledge, she never visited there again.

Severine Neff
Selected Publications by Patricia Carpenter


