

Tributes to James Avery

**Brian Ferneyhough, Steven Schick,
Peter Veale, Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf**

Our last meeting was in some ways very typical. It was a hurried exchange of news carried out on a German station platform whilst both of us were changing trains in opposite directions. Although our contact in recent years had been sporadic as an inevitable consequence of distance and professional activities, James was, for me, the sort of person with whom essential personal contact was never lost. Right from his arrival in Freiburg his openness, refreshing lack of personal ambition and uncomplicated dedication to the cause of new music was a tonic. For someone who, at that time, had never been to the United States, the Avery Mid-Western "package" automatically offered a real breath of fresh air.

In the early 1980's James and I were much together, not least because of his learning of my piano piece *Lemma-Icon-Epigram*, which he insisted on playing from memory. One of my favorite memories of James was on the occasion of a soirée at the home of Betty Freeman in Beverly Hills, Los Angeles, where I talked and he played. The unforced atmosphere led to the interruption of a second performance of my piece by the arrival of a mountainous pile of spaghetti cooked with fanatical dedication by Betty's Italian husband. We often recalled that unequal competition between music and food with great glee.

I mourn James Avery as a good friend of thirty years standing, but also because his motivation for involving himself in the performance of a multitude of not-uncomplicated works was so straightforward: he *enjoyed doing it*. It is sometimes difficult to remember that this is what it should all be about. My memory of his sprightly demeanor and quizzical expression will remain as a permanent reminder that life and art are one.

Brian Ferneyhough

I played with James Avery before I spoke with him. He was a faculty member at the University of Iowa and I was an undergraduate percussionist. I idolized him. So when the chance to play Stockhausen's *Kontakte* with Jim arose (in a concert organized by William Hibbard and the university's Center for New Music), I leapt at it. I was very conscious in the difference of our positions and roles within the university, so during the time I prepared the percussion part I did my best to avoid him. To adopt an overly informal stance before proving myself seemed to invite karmic retribution. When the long-awaited first rehearsal came, we got immediately down to work. *Kontakte* is a piece of around 34 minutes in length. I am sure that the first of our hundreds of rehearsals together lasted less than 40 minutes: a run-through followed by our first conversation in order to fix our next rehearsal and point out some problem spots. When Jim left the room, I just sat back

and marveled: at the precision and intensity of his playing, at his friendly but laconic approach to work, and at my utter good fortune in having the chance to play such a great piece with such a great musician.

Every other encounter with James Avery in a duo relationship that lasted 33 more years was a reprint of that moment. Jim's engagement, his precision, his excellent taste and his quiet friendship were always there. Later we played a lot together, especially in our bi-annual residencies at the Darmstadt summer course. In the last years our contact was less frequent, but we always found an occasion for a concert or a visit. The last one was a recording we did last October of *Kontakte* on DVD for a Mode Records release this autumn. More than three decades had past since our first rehearsal of the piece. But the ease with which we resumed our usual working method, all play and little talk, showed the durability of those first imprints. Jim, it seemed, had barely changed. He still played like no pianist I have ever known; he still insisted on perfection without losing the lightness of his spirit; and when every once in a while he would flash his boyish smile the memories of our first concerts would rush back.

I will leave this reminiscence with those few memories, because, honestly, I do not know what to say about someone who changed my life the way Jim did.

Steven Schick

On March 8th 2009, the music world lost, after a serious illness, the remarkable performer, organiser, and conductor James Avery. He was born in 1937 in Hutchinson, Kansas and spent much of his life travelling, teaching and performing. Appointed Professor for Piano at the Musikhochschule in Freiburg in 1980, he taught regularly at various universities in the United States. These included the Eastman School of Music, Rochester, and the State University of New York at Buffalo.

His uncompromising dedication to high standards combined with his outgoing generosity and cosmopolitanism were a truly rare and wonderful combination. James was very flexible and open to all styles of music, and he treated those with whom he performed as equals. His more European side had him speaking a string of languages and reading fascinating literature and enjoying superb wines and all aspects of European cuisine.

James formed the contemporary music ensemble SurPlus in 1992, which he was to organise and conduct and with which he performed. After its debut performance in Freiburg, Ensemble SurPlus was invited to perform at the International Darmstadt Summer Courses for New Music, and thereafter performed at festivals throughout Europe. Many of the projects realized by the ensemble were subsidized by James Avery, and his extraordinary energy left many considerably younger musicians breathless. His optimistic attitude and tenacity, combined with his obsession for accuracy, were wonderful qualities for the entire field of new music.

As his duo partner for 27 years, fellow SurPlus member, and close friend, I am deeply grateful to have had the opportunity to work closely and just be with such an extraordinary musician and human being.

Peter Veale

Spiritus Rector for the Impossible

On March 8, 2009, James Avery died after a difficult illness. Born in 1937 in Hutchinson, Kansas, the American pianist and conductor was Professor of Piano with a concentration on contemporary music at the Musikhochschule Freiburg im Breisgau; he also returned occasionally to the United States as a guest professor. His reputation for performing the most difficult new works was unmatched. In this task, unifying idealism, pragmatism, diligence, and perfectionism, he became a specialist at mastering challenges which few musicians dare to attempt. This pioneer first truly blossomed with his own ensemble. It is not a matter of course that a university professor founds a new music ensemble—financing it in the beginning with his own means—in order to perform the work of a student that had been labeled "unplayable." Out of this generous spirit the Ensemble SurPlus arose, which since then has performed throughout the world and built up an impressive repertoire.

Avery was capable of anything. If one had wished him to perform the Second Sonata of Boulez on the International Space Station, he would likely not have refused. At the same time he always acted as an equal partner with his colleagues. One well-endowed concert organizer was doubtful because Avery did not request a higher fee than any other member of his ensemble. There was no contradiction between his modesty and his drive. He was full of life, attentive, and without arrogance. When one student maintained that in order to play "unplayable" works, the ensemble must possess supernatural capabilities, Avery countered with his inimitable humor, "We play only with what God had given us."

Avery had excellent rhythm and an almost perfect sense of tempo. He first rehearsed with individuals, then with the group; his model was Schönberg's Society for Private Musical Performance. Throughout this process, SurPlus became more than an ensemble of enthusiasts, turning into a sort of "insider tip" for the most extreme music. The primary rule was: no work would be turned down, for any reason. There was nothing that could not be done, primarily because everything should be possible, including the apparently unrealizable, as well as the difficult and the laborious. Although this may sound banal, whoever is acquainted with the most common ideological tendencies in the new music scene knows that this was a rare exception. Therefore, I offer him my thanks for the realization of nearly all my large works that were turned down elsewhere. Without James Avery, I would never have come so far as a composer. I, along with many others, will always be grateful to him.

Avery embodied nearly all the positive American virtues: urbane, stylistically open, democratic, fond of discovery, opposed to small-mindedness, anti-hierarchical, untiring and full of energy. Those who in recent years have suffered a loss of faith in America and Americans could encounter a powerful antidote in the person of James Avery.

Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf