Music and the Pursuit of Truth

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I had the good fortune to experience Leonard Meyer’s way of thinking in several major events. The first was through his books; I was especially influenced in my own work by *Music, the Arts, and Ideas* for its discussion of how music performance reflects the musical mind. The second was during my year at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, where I joined him and five other musicologists and psychologists, led by Carol Krumhansl, for many thought-provoking discussions. The most recent event was Lenny’s memorial service in New York on January 13, 2008, at which many of his colleagues and family spoke. Three common themes repeated themselves throughout these events: Lenny’s obsessions with science and the truth, his scholarship, and his method of delivering these themes to his audience.

Leonard’s pursuit of truth was evidenced in his love of science. As a young boy, he co-founded the Scarsdale science museum with his friend Richard May. Located in Lenny’s basement, the museum was open to the general public on Sunday mornings at 10 am and featured a wide variety of items such as fossils, electric motors, butterflies, and plants, foreshadowing the breadth of his scientific interests later in life. Leonard’s pursuit of truth in adulthood followed a few principles: there was no place for posturing or pretense. Despite his prominence in the field, he kept himself out of his own writing. Hand in hand with lack of pretense, Len’s hallmark irreverence was famous; whether the topic was academics or religion, he thought grades were “hogwash” according to his daughter, and he wore pants bought from Sears (despite the fact that he usually appeared dapper in a bowtie and crisp button-down shirt).

Scholarship was another hallmark of Leonard’s life, as evidenced in the depth with which his writings on meaning, expectation, and emotion incorporate theoretical concepts from anthropology, biology, sociology, and other disciplines. In fact, Leonard’s scholarship is a cornerstone of the pioneering nature of his theories, which draw connections across these fields. Lenny was known to keep library drawers full of cards containing bibliographic entries at his home, where his office was sacrosanct (although he gave his daughters help with homework there when requested). Although Leonard’s personal library contained journals from many fields, his most prized one was *Science*. As he told his colleagues, there are three important aspects to administration: recruiting excellent faculty, recruiting excellent students, and building a distinguished library. That message is still salient today, in a field with rich acoustic and notational formats whose online database options are limited.

Leonard had a quick wit and derived great pleasure from word play. More than one audience found themselves lost at the message in his quotations from Shakespeare or Gilbert and Sullivan. Despite this, he was a generous man. Leonard attracted many talented students and colleagues to the U. Penn intellectual powerhouse that the Department of Music became in musicology and music cognition, including Eitan, Gjerdingen, London, and Narmour, later dubbed “the Penn school.” Many of Lenny’s colleagues speak of his graciousness in his tutorship during that period. When preparing his colleague Larry Bernstein for an administrative position, Lenny asked him to accept a position as vice-chair and met with him regularly, ostensibly to help Lenny. His message, as his colleague Bernstein reported, was “If you’re going to do it, do it like a prince,” meaning: do kindness in ways that make the recipient feel good. Although Leonard Meyer took delight in his play with words (he told a funeral director’s staff, upon viewing an overly ornate coffin, that his recently deceased brother “wouldn’t be caught dead in that”), he regularly suppressed his inclination to make jokes as he shared his opinions, and instead made his colleagues feel valued and respected. A lesson for us all.