

## Stephen Toombs: an appreciation

by Steven Plank

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*In a sadly pleasing strain  
Let the warbling lute complain.*

Alexander Pope's memorable couplet from his *Ode on St. Cecilia's Day* poetically voices the doleful propensity of the lute, and with the news of the death of Stephen Toombs on August 17, it also seems to voice the Cleveland musical community's deep sense of loss. In his 28 years as the music librarian at Case Western Reserve University, Stephen combined a love of scholarship and the diverse sources that bring it to life with a passion for the music that was dearest

to his heart: Renaissance and Baroque music for the lute.

The intertwining of these strands was deep-rooted in his training as musicologist, librarian, and lutenist, and given the high distinction of the performance practice program at the University, this meant that at his arrival there, both the school and its new librarian could rejoice in a match most felicitously made.

Stephen's musical formation at Washington University in St. Louis and with the esteemed baroque lutenist Toyohiko Satoh at the Royal Conservatory of The Hague was undertaken amid the rising excitement of the early music movement taking hold in the U.S.



It is easy to understand how the excitement of those years bred a passionate devotion, and those who knew Stephen's joy in playing, be it in his early years with the Early Music Ensemble of St. Louis, his long leadership of Cleveland's Ensemble Lautenkoncert, or his quiet lunchtime lute practice in his office, could have no doubt that the devotion ran deep.

As did his professionalism and giftedness as a librarian. Academic librarianship was a family affair, shared with his wife Jean (the recently retired director of the music library at the Cleveland Institute of Music) and his older brother, William. And as a librarian, Stephen would exercise not only his own giftedness — his work on the Reilly Digital Catalogue of Mahler's Musical Manuscripts is a recent example — but also his giving nature. Repeatedly since his death, friends, colleagues, and students have pointed to his kindness and generosity, of the way in which his work as a librarian not only enabled, but also taught.

A recent Case graduate, Hannah De Priest, recalled that "he used every one of my questions as an opportunity to teach me to become a more self-reliant and capable scholar." But she also added that "while his goal was to transform us into self-sufficient researchers, he remained himself the most accessible and generous resource in his library." That view is echoed by CWRU alumna and faculty member, Debra Nagy, who recalled that "I'm sure I never heard him speak above a whisper, yet he loomed large as a benevolent fixture in CWRU's music department."



Quiet of manner, quick to smile, kind of heart, and devoted to the musical life, Stephen Toombs was a rare gift to those who knew him. Shakespeare reminds us that “Orpheus’ lute was strung with poets’ sinews.” How fitting then that in Stephen’s legacy we find both a lyrical and human poetry that long will place us in his debt.

*(Middle photo: Early Music Ensemble of St. Louis ca. 1978, Toombs and Plank on right.  
Bottom photo: Ensemble Lautenkonzert.)*

*Steven Plank is Professor of Musicology at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music.*

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