



Smithsonian music curator James Merle Weaver died on 16 April in Rochester, New York, from complications of COVID-19. He was 82.

Weaver began his lifelong engagement with music as a piano, and later, organ, student in his hometown of Danville, Illinois. He attended the University of Illinois in nearby Champaign/Urbana. His weekend activities during that period, which he would later relate with mischievous pleasure, started on Saturday morning with giving piano and organ demonstrations and private lessons at the local music store. Saturday evenings began with several hours of cocktail piano at a lounge, followed by background dinner music and another stint in the bar, then a late night shift providing “accompaniment” at one or another of the local burlesque establishments. After finishing in the wee hours, he would meet a fellow organist

for a diner breakfast before heading off to the first of his several Sunday church services. In this way, he earned all he needed for the week, and cemented the musical eclecticism that would characterize the rest of his long and productive life.

While on a high school field trip to Washington, DC, Weaver saw his first harpsichords: unrestored, non-playing instruments displayed—for lack of a better venue—at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History. Sometime during his sophomore year at the U of I, he and his slightly older school colleague Alan Curtis decided that they should go to Amsterdam to study harpsichord and the just-developing field of historical performance practice with Dutch organist and harpsichordist Gustav Leonhardt. The three men became fast friends—Leonhardt was only about a decade older—and spent many days driving (at Leonhardt’s preferred breakneck speeds) around Holland, and farther afield, visiting historic organs, art museums, and antique dealers, developing the young Americans’ (who were only the second and third of what would eventually become several scores of American Leonhardt students) taste in antique instruments and the fine and decorative arts of the baroque.

Returning to Illinois, Weaver completed his bachelor’s (1961) and master’s (1963) degrees. It was at this time that he met Malcolm Bilson, then working on his DMA,

who would slightly later “discover” the late-18th-century fortepiano, an instrument Weaver also eventually added to his repertoire of historic keyboards.

Weaver and his young family moved to Boston’s North End in 1963. His facility as a continuo player soon made him much in demand, both as a concert artist and for recordings, especially those for Charles P. Fisher’s Cambridge Records. While in Boston, he befriended the music director of the Old North Church, John T. Fesperman, who had been Leonhardt’s first American student (1955-56). Fesperman left Boston in 1965 to take a position at the collection of musical instruments in the Smithsonian’s newly opened National Museum of History and Technology; Weaver followed him to the Smithsonian the next year, where he began a remarkable and diverse career.

Having been hired to produce concert programs, he went at it with his usual vigor, pursuing several paths simultaneously. He continued the Music on the Mall and Tower Music series already underway through the efforts of the colleagues he was joining, including Fesperman, Cynthia Hoover, Scott Odell, and Robert Sheldon. He led and/or participated in some memorable historical popular music projects, including an American 19th-century ballroom dance academy and concert evening, a celebration of Stephen Foster (with Jan DeGaetani and Gilbert Kalish), a recreation of the Civil War-era abolitionist Hutchinson Family Singers’ repertoire, and an exploration of music and dance in the age of Thomas Jefferson, each of which resulted in a well-received LP recording. He also contributed music to many exhibits. Through Weaver’s efforts, the Smithsonian’s intimate Hall of Musical Instruments and the larger Baird Auditorium hosted appearances by many of the most important European and American early music ensembles and soloists, including Nikolaus Harnoncourt’s *Concentus Musicus Wien*, the Alarius Ensemble, the Kuijken Quartet, The Viola da Gamba Trio of the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, Music from Aston Magna, The Early Music Consort of London, *Quartetto Esterhazy*, the Amadé Trio, the Haydn Baryton Trio, violinists Jaap Schroeder, Lucy van Dael, and Stanley Ritchie, cellist Anner Bylsma, oboist Michel Piguet, recorder player Frans Brüggen, keyboard players Gustav Leonhardt, Lili Kraus, Jörg Demus, Paul Badura-Skoda, Christopher Hogwood, Alan Curtis, Albert Fuller, Louis Bagger, Lisa Goode Crawford, and numerous others. When, in 1971, Museum funding for these concerts was suddenly suspended, he worked with Constance Loudon Mellen to found the Friends of Music at the Smithsonian, which continues to this day to support the Smithsonian Chamber Music Society to this day.

At the same time, Weaver pursued his exploration of newly-restored harpsichords and fortepianos in the Smithsonian’s collection, recording, with violinist Sonya Monosoff, the complete sonatas of J. S. Bach for violin and obbligato harpsichord. This was the first commercially issued American recording to use museum instruments, released initially by Cambridge Records in 1968, and re-released by the Smithsonian Collection of Recordings a decade later as part of a larger box which also included Weaver’s traversal of the first part of Bach’s *Clavier-Übung*. For that

project, he worked with New York Baroque Dance Company co-founder Ann Jacoby to incorporate the kinetic impulses of historical dance as guides to his interpretations of the many minuets, sarabandes, gigue, etc. that make up these Partitas. Yet another Bach recording project, containing the second part of the Clavier-Übung, was completed in 1987 using a beautiful German-style instrument commissioned from the talented Washington instrument builders Thomas and Barbara Wolf, whose careers as restorers and creators of new instruments Weaver encouraged, especially with regard to the maintenance of the Smithsonian's keyboard collection. Weaver's early championship of the late French baroque composer Jacques Duphy resulted in an acoustically stunning recording made in 1977 on the Museum's 1760 Benoist Stehlin harpsichord. He also enjoyed playing harpsichord and fortepiano for singers including Jean Hakes, Max van Egmond, and René Jacobs.

Among his most important collaborations near the beginning of his first Smithsonian decade was the lifelong musical and personal friendship he developed with oboist James Caldwell and his cellist wife Catharina Meints during their two-year membership in the National Symphony Orchestra before they moved to Oberlin in the late 1960s. Weaver had long hoped to establish an ensemble in residence at the Museum, and, when he was given the opportunity to do so in 1976, engaged Caldwell to help him select personnel for the nine-member group, which included soprano Jean Hakes, the Caldwells' Oberlin Baroque Ensemble violinist colleague Marilyn McDonald, cellist Kenneth Slowik, and bass player Thomas Wolf. With countrywide tours sponsored by the Smithsonian National Associates, the Smithsonian Chamber Players, as the group was called, further developed its outreach with a series of Handel recordings—including the first American period-instrument *Messiah*, conducted by Weaver—given widespread mail-order distribution through the Smithsonian Collection of Recordings, an arm of the Institution's Division of Performing Arts (DPA), which Weaver joined in the late 1970s.

At DPA, Weaver helped foster the work of a wide variety of artists in an equally wide range of repertoires, demonstrating that the Smithsonian was, at least at that time for him, a near-perfect place in terms of reflecting the catholicity of his personal musical tastes. Projects and ensembles under DPA's purview included, in addition to the Smithsonian Chamber Players, the Folger Consort, the 20th Century Consort, the nascent Emerson String Quartet (which served as the backbone, with pianist Lambert Orkis, of The Romantic Chamber Ensemble), Bernice Johnson Reagon's Program In Black American Culture, a country music program, a world music and dance initiative, Martin Williams' important Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz and the jazz repertoire orchestra and Smithsonian Collection of Recordings it spawned, and DPA Director James Morris' recreations of early 20th-century musical theater.

When, in 1983, DPA's functions were absorbed by other portions of the Institution, Weaver returned to the Division of Musical Instruments at the National Museum of American History, (NMAH) as the National Museum of History and Technology had been renamed in 1980. Although Weaver continued to work with the Chamber Players, whose repertoire he had pushed further into the Classical era with the establishment, in 1982, of both the Smithsonian String Quartet and the Smithsonian Chamber Orchestra (each led by Dutch violinist Jaap Schroeder), the Museum's new emphasis on things American offered Weaver the opportunity to support director Roger Kennedy's initiative—in which he was joined by the musical polymath Gunther Schuller—to develop a lively jazz presence at the Museum. When John Hasse was hired as the first jazz curator, Weaver worked tirelessly to help him through some labor problems encountered in the early years of the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra, and also was instrumental in the development of Jazz Masterworks Editions. Working with Scott Odell and Gary Sturm, he helped bring two large collections of priceless Old Master Italian stringed instruments, including many by Stradivari and Amati, to the Museum.

As he became more involved in these and other initiatives (including, eventually, working with the Smithsonian Associates' Carol Bogash and NMAH's Marvette Perez on various Latinx projects), Weaver turned over artistic direction of the Smithsonian Chamber Music Society to Kenneth Slowik in 1984, remaining Executive Director for much of the next three decades. After a decade as Chair of the Division of Cultural History (indirect successor to the old Division of Musical Instruments), Weaver was detailed to work with the Federal City Council in 2002 to try to develop a National Music Museum in Washington, an ultimately unfulfilled eight-year endeavor which nonetheless resulted in some shorter-term, hands-on educational projects for disadvantaged youth.

In addition to his Smithsonian activities, Weaver participated in some other unique-to-Washington music making, occasionally appearing with the National Symphony Orchestra and with various of the professional choruses of the area. With the Chamber Players, he had a major presence in the Inaugural festivities for Jimmy Carter, and later performed twice, including once as harpsichord soloist, at the Carter White House. He was subsequently invited to play at five of the bipartisan Inaugural Luncheons, from Ronald Reagan's second Inaugural to George W. Bush's first.

For much of his adult life, Weaver taught at a succession of institutes of higher learning, including American University, the University of Maryland, Cornell University, the Aston Magna Academy, and the Baroque Performance Institute founded by the Caldwells at Oberlin. His private harpsichord and organ students were not numerous, but testify to having learned a great deal about both solo and continuo playing.

Following his move to Washington, DC in the late 1960s, Weaver served as organist or organist/choirmaster at a number of churches. One of his longest tenures was at the Charles Fisk organ (Op. 35 of 1961, the first large tracker organ from Fisk's shop) at Baltimore's Mount Calvary Church. When the commute to and from Baltimore became longer and less predictable with ever-increasing traffic, Weaver accepted a two-year appointment as interim organist at St. Columba's Episcopal in Washington. Subsequently he was engaged by All Souls Episcopal Church in Washington to use the power of music to grow the congregation from a figurative handful of members into a thriving community, staving off the diocese's threatened closure of the parish. His last church job in the Washington area was as organist/choirmaster at All Hallows Episcopal in Davidsonville, MD.

His interest in service informed his work with the Westfield Center for Historical Keyboard Studies, which included serving as President ex-officio of Westfield's 2012 International Harpsichord Competition and Academy. He also worked on the Velvet Foundation's efforts to establish a National LGBT Museum.

Following his retirement from the Smithsonian, he was appointed Executive Director—later CEO—of the Organ Historical Society. His cheerful and calm demeanor was welcomed by an organization that was in financial crisis, and one whose facilities were scattered across three states. During the last years of his tenure at the OHS, he supervised the massive relocation of its headquarters and archives to "Stoneleigh," the former estate of the Haas family in Villanova, Pennsylvania. He was responsible for turning around an organization with diminishing membership and revenues, and lead it through difficult times of reorganization. At the end of his term of office, membership was growing and major financial contributions to the OHS tripled. Early on, he recognized the importance of attracting young members; under his leadership, he expanded the E. Power Biggs Scholarship program that provided funds for student membership. James Weaver was loved by everyone he met. Upon news of his death, tributes of gratitude poured into the OHS headquarters with comments such as "a prince of a human being," "an infectious personality," "a human being with a great heart," "he made me want to do things for the OHS," and "his gentle and generous manner will be missed by all."

In addition to his many close musical and museum-world colleagues, Weaver kept a remarkably varied circle of interesting friends, including designers Barbara Fahs Charles, Robert Staples, Benjamin Lawless, Elizabeth Miles, Richard Molinaroli, and Miles Fridberg; film maker Karen Loveland; painter Carlton Fletcher; landscape architect James van Sweden; poetess Lee Woodman; songwriter Brock Holmes; potter Renee Altman; and attorney Peter Powers.

He is survived by husband/partner of 33 years, Samuel Baker; son Evan (Jill), grandchildren Kaitlyn (Tyler) Weigang, Phillip, and Lindsey, great-grandchildren Rylee and Declan; sister Carolyn (Peter) Tschomakoff; sister-in-law Sandra Weaver; nieces Tracy (Darren) Bodine and Zheina (Chris) Biedron and nephews Ivan

(Margarita) Tschomakoff and Brad (Nina) Weaver. He was predeceased by wife Patricia Estell, parents Merle and Aileen Weaver, brother Robert Weaver, and long-time former partner, Eugene Behlen.

In lieu of flowers, please send memorial gifts to the Biggs Fellowship Program of the Organ Historical Society, 330 N. Spring Mill Road, Villanova, Pa. 19085; or the Friends of Music at the Smithsonian, P. O. Box 37012, Washington, DC 20013-7012 (<https://www.smithsonianchambermusic.org/donate>).