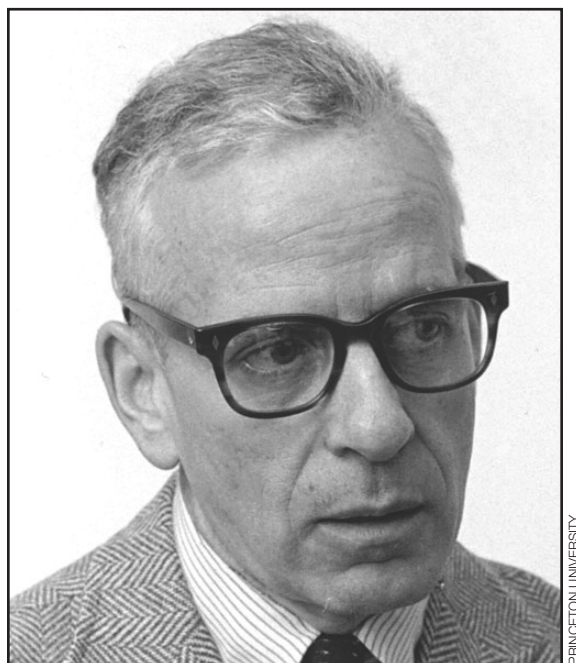

KENNETH LEVY



26 FEBRUARY 1927 · 15 AUGUST 2013

KENNETH J. LEVY, the Scheide Professor of Music History Emeritus at Princeton University, died on 15 August 2013, in Princeton, New Jersey. He was not Catholic, but as a medievalist, he appreciated the significance of the date: the day the Virgin Mary was assumed into heaven.

Ken was born in New York City in 1927. He studied music history and music theory at Queens College of the City University of New York, receiving his B.A. in 1947. During that period, at the very end of the war, he also served in the United States Naval Reserve in the Pacific, an experience he often recalled proudly. Graduate study in musicology followed at Princeton University, where his teachers included Oliver Strunk, a largely self-educated polymath whose father, William Strunk, Jr., was the Cornell English professor who wrote the original *The Elements of Style* (1920), later to be expanded by E. B. White (1959). Oliver Strunk had studied privately with music historians in Germany but never earned a doctorate. He returned home to become one of the founders of American musicology. Although he was broadly interested in all periods of music history, Strunk became one of the pioneering scholars of medieval Byzantine chant, a subject he first encountered when a Princeton colleague, art historian Kurt Weitzmann asked him some questions about an illustrated music manuscript. In 1977, Ken edited a collection of Strunk's articles on the subject: *Essays on Music in the Byzantine World* (New York: Norton). Another influential teacher at Princeton was Arthur Mendel, a scholar of broad interests who was one of the leading experts on Johann Sebastian Bach.

Ken received the Master of Fine Arts degree from Princeton in 1949, then studied at the Sorbonne for a year on a Fulbright Scholarship. In 1955, he completed his Ph.D. with a dissertation on the chansons of French composer Claude Le Jeune (ca. 1530–1600). Thus, Ken belonged to the first generation of Americans to earn the Ph.D. in Musicology. A Guggenheim Fellowship followed the same year, which turned out to be pivotal in more than one way: While studying Renaissance chanson manuscripts in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, he suddenly felt an urge to change direction and headed for Rome, where he soon found himself looking at manuscripts of Byzantine chant in the Vatican Library. It was during the same Roman sojourn that Ken met his wife, classicist Clara Brooks Emmons, whom he married in 1956. They had two children, Robert and Helen.

Ken taught at Princeton from 1952 to 1954, when he was hired by a fledgling Brandeis University. The Music Department he chaired at Brandeis would grow to house a leading musicology Ph.D. program. It is no accident that the Creative Arts Library at Brandeis bears an uncanny resemblance, in size and layout, to the Music section on C floor of

Princeton's Firestone Library. Ken was very proud of the fact that this powerhouse of music history research was located on Firestone's lowest subterranean level, with no distracting windows. When he first met me there as a newly arrived graduate student, he warned, "I hope you don't like sunlight."

He returned to Princeton in 1966 as Oliver Strunk's successor; Strunk had retired to the Byzantine monastery of Grottaferrata near Rome. From then until his retirement in 1995, Ken was one of the most popular teachers on campus. About one-quarter of all undergraduates during that period took his "Introduction to Music" course, in which generations of musicology graduate students learned how to teach. Ken himself had been a graduate teaching assistant in the earliest version of this course, when it was taught by Roy Dickinson Welch, who had founded the Princeton Music Department in 1934. Ken's more advanced undergraduate course on "The Symphony" was also a favorite, frequently ranked among the college's most popular courses. Princeton awarded Ken the President's Distinguished Teaching Award in 1995.

In his graduate teaching, Ken usually alternated two seminars. Every other year, he taught a seminar on medieval monophonic chant, Latin and Greek. On the years in between, his two-semester seminar followed the development of rhythmic notation for medieval polyphonic music, from the Notre-Dame school of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to the *Ars Subtilior* of the late fourteenth. Ken's informal classroom style was often amusingly casual, and the students in his graduate seminars enjoyed his propensity for off-the-cuff, homespun aphorisms. For example, his advice that codicological and paleographical anomalies should always be investigated because they can reveal aspects of the manuscript's origin and history entered Princeton lore as "Beware of freaks and blobs." Indeed, Ken probably loved exploring medieval manuscripts more than anything else he did. As he grew less active during retirement, he found it saddening to think that he was unlikely to discover any new sources.

Yet Ken had high expectations when it came to scholarly writing. A good article, even a book review, should be exhaustively informed about the subject matter, and concretely advance research in the field—but it should also be written with great clarity, unfolding with the taut suspense of a detective story. Better not to publish at all than to "muddy the waters" with inadequately informed, poorly thought-out essays that obscure more than they enlighten. It was Arthur Mendel who told me the background story that Ken himself would never have revealed: As a graduate student, Ken had written a paper on the subject of his eventual dissertation and showed it to his teachers. Strunk and Mendel concluded that it was strong in content but poorly written. Learning

that his paper was not publishable provoked a deep personal crisis for Ken, who retreated to his room for several days. “But somehow, when he came out he was able to write,” Mendel told me. The paper became one of his first published articles.

Kenneth Levy published many articles on medieval Greek, Slavonic, and Latin chant. His most influential are intricate studies that follow the transmission of one text, or a few closely related texts, across multiple languages and regions. The melodies set to these texts differ greatly across language and area boundaries but often reveal fascinating interrelationships that raise central questions about the origins of the chant traditions and their ramification into distinct regional branches. On the Latin side, retracing the transmission history often pointed away from the central Gregorian chant repertory toward the older local Latin repertories that Gregorian chant supplanted—the imperfectly preserved repertories from Ravenna, Milan, Benevento, Mozarabic Spain, and the local, non-Gregorian repertory of Rome itself that is often called Old Roman chant. Pathways on the Greek side could lead toward Palestine or Constantinople, Mount Athos or Mount Sinai, Byzantine Italy, or the first introduction of Byzantine culture into the Slavic world. This type of comparative study, which no one did better than Ken, was commemorated at a 1992 conference in Princeton entitled *Three Worlds of Mediaeval Chant: A Conference on Greek, Latin, and Slavonic Liturgical Music for Kenneth J. Levy*. The proceedings, published as *The Study of Medieval Chant, Paths and Bridges, East and West: In Honor of Kenneth Levy*, ed. Peter Jeffery (Woodbridge/Cambridge: Boydell Press, 2000) could serve as an introduction to Ken’s distinctive approach.

A controversy broke out in the late 1970s. Some said that medieval musicologists were overly focused on the written manuscript tradition and needed to pay more attention to the likely role of oral transmission processes in shaping medieval chant—especially Gregorian chant, the dominant western tradition. Manuscripts containing the Gregorian texts survive from the end of the eighth century and fragments with musical neumes from the ninth. But only from the early tenth century do we have manuscripts containing the complete textual repertory fully supplied with musical signs; by that time, the melodies were already fully formed. The question was how to investigate what might have happened before the tenth century, when the melodies were still being formed. With characteristic caution, Ken avoided jumping into the fray until 1987, when his article “Charlemagne’s Archetype of Gregorian Chant” (*Journal of the American Musicological Society*) inaugurated a series of articles arguing that written neumatic notation must have appeared relatively early and played a formative role in chant

transmission. Ken disapproved of grandiose, procrustean theories that attempt to explain everything. His articles were exquisite miniatures; as he wrote in 1984, each “situation must be examined category by category, mode by mode, chant by chant.” Or, as he advised me back in my student days, “Reign in your impetuositities. This is slow stuff, this medieval musicology.” “Charlemagne’s Archetype” won an ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award from the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers. It was later incorporated, with some other articles and new material, into the book *Gregorian Chant and the Carolingians* (Princeton University Press, 1998), but Ken continued publishing articles on this topic into the early 21st century.

In 1988, Ken was appointed to an endowed chair as Scheide Professor of Music History and was elected to the American Philosophical Society. Princeton awarded him the Howard T. Behrman Award for Distinguished Achievement in the Humanities in 1983. He served on the editorial boards of the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* and the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, and was elected a Fellow of the Medieval Academy of America in 1994. After retiring in 1995, Ken was a Quatercentenary Visiting Fellow at Emmanuel College, Cambridge University. He donated his extensive library to the University of Notre Dame, where it supports expanding graduate programs in both Sacred Music and Byzantine Studies.

Elected 1988

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