



Michael Ondon Stairs

October 13, 1945 - August 11, 2018

Michael Stairs died peacefully at home on Saturday August 11th, 2018. He was the consummate musician and teacher. He inspired scores of students during his twenty-five years at the Haverford School and prior to that at the University of the Arts. He is also remembered by many as the long-time organist for the Philadelphia Orchestra, earning the respect of some of the finest conductors in the world. Stairs is equally known as an eminent and revered church musician, serving as director of music at the Church of the Redeemer in Bryn Mawr for over twenty-five years. He also worked with countless other churches, synagogues, schools and other Philadelphia area musical and choral groups. Other artistic pursuits include many years assisting at the famed Wanamaker Organ at Macy's, Philadelphia, as well as performing and recording at Longwood Gardens, Girard College and other venues throughout the city, the United States, and internationally. Michael Stairs also served on many advisory and administrative boards of musical and performing arts organizations, being known for his wisdom and keen insight in helping these groups further the arts in Philadelphia and beyond.

Michael's gentle and loving personality earned the respect and admiration of friends, students, congregations and audiences. His humility and grace inspired all who crossed his path. His enormous talent and his quick sense of humor endeared him to everyone. Requiescat in pace, dear friend.

He is survived by his wife, Margaret Connell; stepson, William Adams; sister, Beth Zaccaro; aunt, Joan Bishop; several cousins, nieces and nephews and was predeceased by his brother, Peter Stairs.

His Funeral Service will be held on Saturday September 8th at 11 AM in Church of the Redeemer, 230 Pennswood Rd., Bryn Mawr, PA 19010. A reception will follow.

In lieu of flowers, contributions may be made in memory of Michael Stairs to Wanamaker Organ Restoration Project, Attn: Friends of the Wanamaker Organ, 630 Hidden Valley Rd., King of Prussia, PA 19406-1712

Previous Events

Funeral Service

SEP 8. 11:00 AM (ET)

Church of The Redeemer
230 Pennswood Road
Bryn Mawr, PA

Tribute Wall

CW

“*Michael Stairs was one of my favorite teachers. Several poignant memories from Haverford are attached to him – on tour with the Male Chorus; practicing and performing with the Notables; making “Patience;” sharing stories during dinner parties at my childhood home. Although these moments often feel long ago and far away, I carry Stairs with me – in shared songs, in memories of his generous spirit and in faith.*

Thank you Mr. Stairs for all you shared with me. And condolences to all who gather together to remember his life on September 8!

Christian Williams (Bloemfontein, South Africa)

Christian Williams - September 02, 2018 at 04:17 PM

MH

“ Michael was without doubt one of the kindest souls on this earth. My fondest memory is when Edward Hallowell, Michael and myself worked on the operetta ‘Patience’ by Gilbert and Sullivan at the school. Michael was dazzlingly preparing the boys’ vocals, myself responsible for the Irwin girls’ vocals and Edward Hallowell was setting it all in motion with his brilliant stage production. Another highlight was when Joo-Gim and I hosted the Notables and one of the Harvard A Capella vocal ensemble groups at our home. Michael, the Notables and the Harvard A Capella were outstanding. Michael and I shared a number of music tours together to New York, England and Italy where I not only saw him as the consummate musician but during these time we became very close friend as well. He always had a great sense of humour and we spent many fond evenings together.

Michael stunningly accompanied many of my students with such skill and musicality that it not only lifted their confidence in playing but enthused them to practice harder. He always had that knack of making everyone who worked with him rise to their highest performance level. We were all fortunate and blessed to have him in our lives. We send our deepest sympathy to Margaret and the family.

Much love from Joo-Gim, Nathanael, Edward and Michael Heaney (Australia).

Michael Heaney - August 25, 2018 at 11:20 PM

TS

“ I so grieve the death of Michael. We were colleagues together at Church of the Redeemer in Bryn Mawr. Following retirements and departures, some of us formed the ad hoc 'Alumni Club' and Michael never failed to join us for libations on 'Fridays after work'. It was my privilege and joy to have shared time with him. Go in peace, Michael. And may flights of angels attend and wing you into the palm of God's hands.

The Rev. Stephen B. Snider

Boise, Idaho

The Rev. Stephen B. Snider - August 21, 2018 at 09:03 PM

SF

“ Sista and family purchased the Divine Peace Bouquet for the family of Michael Ondon Stairs.



Sista and family - August 21, 2018 at 04:35 PM

L(

“ So very sorry to hear about Michael's passing. He was a tremendous presence who enriched so many people's lives by sharing his deep love of music. He will be missed by all.

Lee Clancy ('86) - August 19, 2018 at 05:08 PM

 James
Weiss

“ *Michael Stairs was a nearly daily presence in my life from the time that I was about 12 years old through my graduation from Haverford in 1992. I'd studied piano from age five, and I'd learned from excellent Haverford teachers - Lynn Herson, Sean Deibler - but music at Haverford was still pretty fringe before Stairs's arrival, and I kept my music life somewhat separate from my school life.*

I'm not sure when I first met Stairs [yes, we really all called him that]. I just remember that, starting in roughly the 7th grade, I would traipse down to Centennial Hall to study with him, or just to chat. He shared his talent freely, and he was an exceptional teacher, always enthusiastic, always encouraging me to perform.

Most of my best memories from Haverford are with Stairs, whether it was the Glee Club, musicals, opportunities to solo, or simply hanging out. Goofing our way through Switzerland and Germany on our (first?) Glee Club tour, with the requisite stop at a famous beer hall. The Brearley exchanges. Playing a duet of Rhapsody in Blue, with Stairs on the Centennial Hall organ, for Upper School assembly.

As I've drifted further from a life in music, I fell out of touch with Stairs. But it was amazing to watch from afar his role in building a top-class music program at Haverford - and, perhaps more importantly, making music “cool” for students.

I'm not sure any of us rank amateurs truly understood the immense privilege of performing with Michael Stairs. I'm just happy I had the chance to know him.

Love and respect, good sir. Rest in peace.

James Weiss - August 19, 2018 at 11:48 AM

RA

“Michael was, as many have pointed out, a rarely talented musician: a superb organist, whether playing preludes and postludes at his beloved Redeemer Church in Bryn Mawr, accompanying the services there with great sensitivity and warmth, directing choirs at the church and at Haverford School, or, in his most public guise, performing multiple roles with the Philadelphia Orchestra--not least, playing the accompaniment for the entire Messiah of Handel. But, beyond all that, he was a person of great charm, wit, and tolerance. I got to know him well when we were both appointed members of the American Guild of Organists local chapter's long-term endowment committee, a group that would spend many hours considering proposals for projects involving organs and organists in the Philadelphia region. To say that Michael will be missed is a massive understatement. He was a towering figure in Philadelphia's music scene and a wonderfully warm human being. May he now rest in peace--requiescat in pace...

ROGER ALLEN

Roger Allen - August 17, 2018 at 07:55 AM

BC

“ When I was 16 years old, Michael and I "competed" in a Concerto Contest in Erie, PA. Schumann A-Minor. I won, and performed with the Erie PA Philharmonic. Little did I know that Michael and I would attend Westminster CC. He had advanced his keyboard skills far beyond mine, and matured musically way farther than me, and as such, excelled in every musical and artistic way. We were "on-again and off-again" friends, because I began to recognize that I had given-up after achieving some keyboard success, while he had driven to greatness. A couple of years ago, I witnessed this greatness with the Philadelphia Orchestra in a performance of the Malher "Symphony of a Thousand". I was priviledged to "bravo" Michael in this performance, and remember that he took our competitive "loss", and achieved artistic excellence. While I went on to other endeavors.

A couple of months ago, I learned of his illness and connected with him on Facebook. And made a modest contribution to the Prostate Cancer Foundation he was fond of.

The world is a better place because Michael Stairs lived among us, and I pray will rest in peace as all of God's servents do.

Peace, my friend.

*Bob Childs
eyetec@rochester.rr.com*

Bob Childs - August 16, 2018 at 06:59 PM

JB

“ Though none of us -- my father (Haverford School '42), his two brothers ('46 / '49), and I ('77) -- had the pleasure to learn under Stairs' baton, we all celebrated when the Headmaster proposed him to be the first holder of the chair at the Haverford School named in our parents' and grandparents' name. Michael made an extraordinary commitment to Haverford and its community of young men in the arts, and he lives on there through generations of musicians he taught and programs he helped create. In his role as Principal Organist of The Philadelphia Orchestra, he helped burnish its reputation as one of the world's preeminent symphonic ensembles and, with the opening of Verizon Hall and commissioning of the Haas Organ, helped lead that august institution into the 21st century. And, as a leader of musical and spiritual formation at the Church of Redeemer (Bryn Mawr), he "threw open the doors" to its community so that many others could visit, and some would join. For these and many other of Michael's gifts to our region and world, our family is most grateful for Michael Stairs' life and grieves this loss.

Jim Buck - August 16, 2018 at 02:58 PM



“ Magnificent Life Spray was purchased for the family of Michael Ondon Stairs.



August 15, 2018 at 10:07 PM



“ Au plus généreux, gentil et bienveillant des organistes. Merci Michael pour les moments partagés avec toi.

Julien Girard - August 15, 2018 at 09:37 PM

RA

“ We are members and my late dad; Leon Love, of Broadcast Pioneers of Philadelphia, and close friend of William Kelley. We heard from Bill of Michael's passing and we all as a family wish the family, friends and colleagues our deepest condolences. Michael will be remembered for his wonderful talent and gifts he gave to all as well as his community and the public for whom he graced with his presence and expertise for decades. Our deepest thoughts and wishes are extended,
The Adelman family,
Robin, Ira, Marlene and Belle

Robin Adelman - August 15, 2018 at 06:24 PM

AH

“ Michael knew how much he meant to the Haslett family. He was part of us. He directed all three boys in the junior choir at our church, taught them in music classes at The Haverford School and directed them in their favourite activity, singing with the Notables. He joined us for Christmas Eve dinners after the Redeemer pageant and was a dear dear friend. His humour, talent, enthusiasm and joyful spirit were contagious wherever he was. Michael was a bright light, a unique human being, a gift to the music world and to all who knew him. His gifts were those we hold internally. Thank you Stairs, for your generosity and fine teaching and example. You are now in the Stars of Heaven where we will look, whenever we hear Heavenly Music.

Alida M Haskett - August 15, 2018 at 05:35 PM

TW

“ As the father of a four-year Notable, it was a great honor and pleasure to get to know Michael. The professionalism of the group and devotion to quality music was a joy to witness. Their annual performance of "The Star Spangled Banner" at their reunion concert was my personal favorite. Such a beautiful job...every year! Michael gave the boys an appreciation for art and the dedication required to make it. A tremendous lesson for a young man. My life was made richer by you, Stairs, and i thank you for that. You'll be missed but never forgotten! Rest in peace.

Tobin Williams - August 15, 2018 at 04:10 PM

SM

“ I work in Macy's center city & Michael has always been a highlight of my day when he played the Wanamaker Organ (hearing the chimes at the beginning of the show was always his signature) I'm very glad I got to know him and how kind he always was to me. He will be missed greatly, but heaven now has the best Organist...may he rest in peace.

Steve McCarraher - August 15, 2018 at 03:02 PM

JS

“ I first met Michael when I was singing for Earl Ness in the Philadelphia Oratorio Choir. Since then, I have enjoyed working with Michael numerous times; most notably when he accompanied the Mendelssohn Club for their Christmas concerts at St. Paul's, Chestnut Hill. Michael was a man of enormous talent. To me, just as important, he was a man of tremendous grace. He possessed a witty sense of humour and was always complimentary. We were fortunate to be able to call him Friend. He will be missed. Jim Kirk

Jim Scarborough-Kirk - August 14, 2018 at 01:08 PM

JB

“ I have known Michael for 46 years. A better musician there never was. We shared early days together making music with The Philadelphia Singers. In subsequent years, I was his soprano soloist at Church of the Redeemer in Bryn Mawr for 20 years. I will always miss his smiling face and musical genius. Janice A. Bryson

Janice Bryson - August 14, 2018 at 12:55 PM