

NECROLOGIES

A Tribute to Robert King (1914-1999)

by Douglas Yeo

For those of us living at the dawn of the 21st century, it is often difficult to imagine life was not always as we see it today, even for those who have an interest in things past. Our 6,000-channel universe brings with it instant and easy access to the global marketplace, and the ability to exchange ideas over great distances in real time and at low cost. Not since the invention of the printing press has there been a 60-year period in history (1940-1999) where more changes have taken place in the business of publishing, and the only difficulty musicians face today when wanting to procure a composition or arrangement is to decide which credit card to use. The desktop publishing explosion, Internet ordering and myriad publishers and distributors represent a dizzying array of choices we all too often take for granted. Looking back, though, it is useful now and then to consider whence we came, and recall those who in another time set the stage for the global musical explosion we have before us today.

When Robert Davis King died on December 2, 1999, at the age of 85, we lost one of the great pioneers in the world of brass playing, publishing and arranging. Born into a musical family that boasted brass players going back three generations before him, King first saw the light of day in North Easton, Mass., on November 27, 1914, in the house he still called home when he died.

A Yankee among Yankees, his pedigree directly linked him to Mayflower passengers Myles Standish, John Alden, and James Chilton. His father was a tuba player who studied with LeRoy Kenfield (bass trombonist of the Boston Symphony, 1900-33). Robert King's first instrument was the trumpet but after decidedly mixed success with it, he switched to the baritone horn and euphonium as a youngster and thus began a lifelong love affair with the instrument, whether a three-valve Buescher bell-front baritone or the Conn five-valve double bell euphonium.

A baritone horn student of Walter Smith and Aaron Harris, Robert King received his Bachelor of Music degree from the College

of Music at Boston University (1936) where he studied composition under Alfred Meyer and also took private lessons with Roger Sessions. He continued his studies at Harvard University where he received his master's degree (1938) and nearly completed a doctorate while studying composition with Walter Piston and Nadia Boulanger. While a student at Boston University, King organized the Boston Brass Quartet in 1934, which gave its debut recital in 1936 to critical acclaim. As a baritone horn virtuoso, King concertized widely; the



Boston Transcript reported, "The virtuosity of Mr. King is little short of phenomenal." In 1994, he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Music Degree from New England Conservatory of Music.

Robert King's concept of brass playing was well developed and may come as a surprise to contemporary players who look at the modern orchestral brass section as the natural conclusion of an evolutionary process that has taken hundreds of years. King was no great fan of the modern brass quintet (two trumpets, horn, trombone and tuba) as he felt the conical tuba was a poor match for the cylindrical trumpets on top. King's Boston Brass Quartet had an instrumentation he considered reversible—a cornet and baritone on the top and bottom voices and a trumpet and trombone on the inner voices, thereby balancing the conical

and cylindrical instruments. Should a quartet prefer a more brilliant sound on top, he advocated the group having trumpet and trombone on the outer voices and cornet and baritone on the inner.

In 1940, Robert King published his first arrangement, a sonata by Pezel. This was the beginning of what came to be known as the Robert King "Music for Brass Series." The high cost of engraving the piece led him to start producing music entirely on his own, from his writing the notes by hand to printing, binding and distributing out of his home. Service in World War II as the band leader for the 81st Infantry Division in the Pacific theater (he was awarded the Bronze Star) interrupted his publishing work (which

was continued in his absence by his wife, Sally, and his father), but when he returned home from active duty, he continued his work of arranging and publishing, and by 1954 King's business had become successful enough that he could devote himself full-time to it.

By the time he retired from the business in 1991, Robert King had published over 300 pieces for solo and ensembles of brass instruments. The famous 1969 recording of King's editions of Gabrieli Canzoni with the brass sections of the Philadelphia, Chicago and Cleveland Orchestras (Sony Classical CD MHK62353) perhaps represented the zenith of his ensemble transcription legacy. King's editions were always practical and flexible and could be counted on to provide an important part for his beloved euphonium, an instrument he loved passionately. Generations of brass players first learned about Gabrieli, Purcell, Susato and many others through King's editions, and he took particular pride in his arrangements for brass and organ which were frequently played by members of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and organist E. Power Biggs. That early music scholars later would publish more musicologically informed editions never took away from the usefulness of King's transcriptions; they were always easy to read, sensibly edited and designed with the performer in mind. His editions of Viktor Ewald's first quintet and the brass quartets of Wilhelm Ramsöe brought original works for modern brass instruments to players starved for high-quality repertoire.



Not content to collect, edit and publish modern editions of Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque and Classical works for brass instruments or their precursors, Robert King sought out contemporary composers, particularly American composers, and championed their music through publishing and advocacy. A product of the band movement that flourished through the early part of the last century (he played in the Oliver Ames High School Band of Easton, Mass., and Stewart's Boston Band), King understood that American music had an important place on music programs and he took every opportunity he could to support the performance of music of American composers. His "Music for Brass" catalog is dominated by works of composers who needed an advocate, many of which have entered the standard repertoire such as Daniel Pinkham's *Christmas Cantata* and works by Alan Hovhannes, Gordon Jacob, Samuel Adler, Robert Starer, Leslie Bassett, Karl Pilss and David Uber among many others.



Robert King was a long-time supporter of the Boston Symphony. He served for many years as a member of the orchestra's board of overseers and in 1977 endowed the principal trumpet chair in perpetuity which he named in honor of his friend and long-time BSO principal trumpeter, Roger Voisin. Keeping with his lifelong advocacy of the baritone horn, an instrument he felt composers had unjustly neglected, King at one time offered to endow a baritone horn chair for the Boston Symphony on the condition that the player would devote himself exclusively to the baritone horn, not double on trombone. Never mind that the orchestral repertoire had only a few pieces for which a baritone or tenor tuba could be employed; King offered to pay for the re-scoring of many works to include a baritone and encourage composers to write new works that included the instrument. In the end, his offer was not accepted by the BSO, but King's lengthy written proposal and high-profile advocacy for the cause showed a tenacious passion for his favorite instrument. In recent years, King tabulated the works the orchestra performed each season and sent letters and charts to the music director, artistic administrator and trustees of the orchestra in order to prove his assertion that not enough music by American composers was being played on concert programs. His comprehensive analysis of Boston Symphony programs and its players, "Primary Study of the Personnel and Repertory of the Boston Symphony," resides in the Library of Congress.

The music distribution company that still bears his name, Robert King Music Sales, was his response in the mid-1950s to the fact that he no longer had the brass publishing market to himself. Instead of engaging in predatory business practices that would have hurt his competition, he celebrated the fact that more and more brass music was becoming available by founding a company which endeavored to carry and sell every piece of brass music available on Earth. His company published "The Brass Player's Guide" and those

who did business with him appreciated the prompt and efficient service that became his trademark. When he sold both his publishing and music distribution companies in 1991, he remained active seeking out music to edit and publish, always done so with his characteristic hand-written notes and attention to detail.

It would be difficult to find a brass player in the world whose life has not been touched in some way by Robert King. His wish that there be no memorial service after his death was a typical gesture from one who was at times both stubborn and self-deprecating. However, Robert King's legacy lives on in the music he brought to all of us. He was feisty, passionate, humorous, quirky, opinionated, interested and interesting, and no one who ever met him went away with less than a feeling that they had been in the presence of one who endeavored to change the world. Every time brass players get together to play chamber or large ensemble music, or to perform a solo at a recital, chances are the folders onstage will contain music in Robert King's handwriting. A true legend in the world of brass playing, Robert King will be sorely missed, but he will long live in the memory of grateful brass players who are forever in his debt.

Those wishing to honor Robert King may do so by making a donation in his memory either to the Easton Historical Society, North Easton, MA 02356 or the Tanglewood Music Center, Symphony Hall, Boston, MA 02115 where a student fellowship/scholarship will be established in his name.

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Photos courtesy of Nancy King.

