

In Memoriam

veil a little, and I gained a small insight into Dan the person as opposed to Dan the standards manager. I discovered he was a man of principle and integrity.

“As I got to know Dan over the years I never ceased being amazed at the depth and breadth of his knowledge which embraced history, literature, music, politics, and law. After moving to Greece he even took up the challenge of learning to speak Greek.

“Dan’s dedication to the work of the Standards Committee was limitless. I will always be grateful for the support he gave me.

“At the convention in New York three years ago, in the midst of a heavy schedule of standards meetings, he would disappear occasionally to undergo radiation therapy. The thought of letting the AES down, as he saw it, never crossed his mind. I know that Dan was proud of the Distinguished Service Medal he was awarded in recognition of his dedication, although he didn’t enjoy making the acceptance speech.”

Nunn concluded: “Functional, not pretentious was always Dan’s philosophy. He will be greatly missed.”

Mark Yonge
Standards Manager

Hellmuth Kolbe, AES member, died July 15, 2002 in Zurich, Switzerland, at the age of 75. Kolbe was born in 1926 in Berlin, Germany, where his Viennese father, Walter Karl Kolbe, a lawyer, was then employed. His mother, the former Edith Berta Ehrbar, was from a Viennese family of renowned piano builders. Edith and Walter separated when Hellmuth was five. Hellmuth and his mother moved to Zug, Switzerland where she remarried, and where Hellmuth spent the remainder of his childhood.

Kolbe completed 12 years of schooling in Switzerland, then worked as a pianist for a season at a hotel in the Alps. He also sang, played accordion, bass, guitar, and drums and worked during the day as a



Hellmuth Kolbe
1926-2002

ski instructor. His fluency in English, French, and German was appreciated by his employer (later on he also learned Spanish and Italian). By the fall of 1946 he made his way to Vienna and began extensive studies in music and musicology at the Academy of Music there. He said that he didn’t complete the degree because the authorities would not accept his chosen topic for a dissertation: “The influence of Johann Sebastian Bach on Jazz.”

At about this time he approached the American Armed Forces Radio, looking for employment. Soon after they sent him to the Musikverein to record the many orchestras that performed there, and a recording career that produced more than 1000 albums had begun. Among them were Leonard Bernstein conducting Mahler’s 8th Symphony with the London Symphony Orchestra (nominated for a Grammy), a live performance of Bernstein, and Isaac Stern in Israel just after the Six-Day War, nearly all of E. Power Biggs’ recordings (including one in Bach’s own Thomaskirche in Leipzig and a lovely Gabrielli in San Marcos), Aaron Copeland conducting his own music with the London Symphony, multiple recordings by Philippe Entremont, Hans Vollenweider, and Pierre Boulez, and most of Columbia’s recordings in Europe between 1955

and 1975. He routinely worked for other record companies too, but since he was often an independent engineer, even for Columbia, most of his recordings are either uncredited or credited to a passive “supervising” engineer. He also loved jazz, especially the music of Lenny Tristano. He recorded the classic “Ellington Uptown,” and projects led by Stan Getz, Dexter Gordon, and Sonny Stitt.

Kolbe opened his first recording studio, Mastertone, in 1949 in Vienna. In 1957, he founded the Phonag record company in Switzerland, which was sold in 1988. That company is still quite active, and an internet search finds Hellmuth listed as a sideman on one electronic music session where he plays “potentiometers, generators, and sound effects.” He had perfect pitch, arranged music for jazz combos, and played bass. Sam Berkow tells of an informal excursion where Hellmuth picked out the individual frequencies of multinode train horns, and many of his colleagues tell of finding it difficult to listen to some recordings, systems, or halls after Hellmuth pointed out their subtle faults. During a recording session, he would make extensive notes on the musical performance, including the mistakes; this speeded up the editing.

Once, an orchestra performing the first of a “vanity” series of recordings of Mozart piano concerti rebelled ➤

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at the poor conducting skills of a wealthy patron who had commissioned the sessions and had hired Hellmuth to record them. "Hellmuth," said the orchestra, "either you conduct the rest of the series or we quit." He did, and completed the project. He is also reputed to have completed some parts of the score of Gottfried von Einem's opera *Dantons Tod* in time for its premier at the Salzburg Festival in 1947.

The introduction of the compact disc caused him to change careers. He believed the format had been rushed into production with "not enough bits" for his ears. Although he continued to do occasional recording projects, from then on his interests lay elsewhere. He studied acoustics and control room design and was soon designing studios, concert halls, churches, the German parliament in Bonn (acoustic renovation), and even cinemas, including the highly regarded IMAX theater in the Swiss Museum of Transport in Lucerne.

Throughout his life Hellmuth was in the continuous pursuit of excellence, borne of a passion for the art of music. In addition to his extensive music studies in Vienna, he also studied the sciences at the Swiss Federal Technical Institute, ETH, in Zurich. That pursuit also included a serious program of self-study, learning, as his American friends would say, "in the woodshed" as he took on new challenges. He formed many long lasting friendships at Don and Carolyn Davis's SynAudCon workshops where he heard lecturers such as Gerald Stanley, Ron McKay, Eugene Patronis, Chips Davis, and Richard Heyser (all of whom considered him their equal), and lectured at several of those workshops himself.

At every stage, Hellmuth was an innovator. He did the first European recordings for a U.S. recording company (1953); accomplished the first realization of electronic music with K. H. Stockhausen (in the mid-50s) in pursuit of a hard center image; designed the first 3-channel recording consoles and recorders for Columbia

(1960); and did research on quadraphonic recording with Ben Bauer (mid-60s). Remote recording wasn't easy when Hellmuth began doing it. He developed techniques for carrying the large, vacuum-tube recording equipment of the 50s and 60s across borders, for making suitable recording venues of ancient cathedrals, moving historic organs across the continent, and for dealing with bureaucracy at all levels. When a space was too reverberant, he filled pews with nuns or choristers.

Hellmuth studied TDS with Richard Heyser, and was the first to use the technique in Europe; experimented with pressure zone microphones on orchestral recordings (Berlioz's *Requiem* with Bernstein, 1975); studied head-related ear recording for acoustic measurement (1986); and pioneered the use of quadratic residue diffusors, designing and building custom units into recording studios and concert halls. One innovative design used a low-frequency diffusor to control room modes in a tiny control room in Lucerne, while another built literally tons of QRD's into the massive moving walls that turned a multipurpose space in Cham into a fine concert hall (and provided excellent noise isolation in the process).

Around the corner of the lake, in Zug, transducers coupled to side walls of a concert hall reproduced reverberation generated in a chamber beneath the audience. He used scale models to test his designs and documented their performance with TDS. Later, he adopted Ahnert and Feistel's EASE as a modeling and auralization tool. Beginning in 1993, Hellmuth was listed in *Who's Who in the World in Science and Engineering*.

Hellmuth was very supportive of others who shared his enthusiasm for advancing the state of the art in audio, including Wolfgang Ahnert, Sam Berkow, Peter D'Antonio, Don and Carolyn Davis, Chips Davis, Markus Erne, Kurt Graffy, David Norman, Dirk Noy, Ken Wahrenbrock, and this author. Berkow and Graffy both

emphasized his graciousness when he visited their homes.

Vacations were invariably spent skiing and mountaineering, occasionally by helicopter, and even at age 75. Visitors to his home in the 1980s were treated to a model train layout that ran both through his home (including tunnels built into walls) and through his garden. In 1985, he brought in earth-moving equipment and excavated a new basement where he spent the rest of his life constructing 60 locomotives and an extensive layout, most of it hand built. His trips to the U.S. were punctuated by visits to jazz clubs and restaurants where he could enjoy spicy food from places such as Korea, Thailand, and China.

Hellmuth met Ursula Delabro in Vienna, where she was working in a recording studio. They were married in 1966, and have two children, Christian (born 1966) is a television newsman and Daniel (born 1971) works in events management. An earlier marriage ended in divorce, and both his first wife and son from that marriage are deceased.

Hellmuth was modest to a fault, rarely speaking of his accomplishments unless prodded to do so. His acoustic design of those two fine halls on Lake Zug could each have been the subject of papers to the AES or ASA. His only publication of them was a brief paragraph in a letter to Don Davis, which I learned of later when I urged him to show me more of his work. Like the composer Thelonious Monk, Hellmuth was a man of few words, but every one of them was well considered and to the point. Davis wrote, "We never knew him to ever be less than exact and his word on a matter was gold. Diogenes, the man with the lantern searching the world for an honest man, would have stopped with Hellmuth had he met him."

Jim Brown
(with research by David Norman
and contributions from Sam Berkow,
Don Davis, Kurt Graffy,
Markus Erne, Ursula Kolbe, and
Robert Lattman)