

James Primosch, Music

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James Primosch

James (Jim) Primosch, the Dr. Robert Weiss Professor of Music in the School of Arts and Sciences and a prolific composer and performer, died on April 26 at Penn Hospice at Rittenhouse due to complications from pancreatic cancer. He was 64.

Born in Cleveland, Dr. Primosch earned degrees from Cleveland State University, Penn, and Columbia University, and studied with composers Mario Davidovsky, George Crumb, and Richard Wernick. A fellowship to the Tanglewood Music Center also permitted him to study with John Harbison, to whom Dr. Primosch became a lifelong friend. While a student, he wrote works for Emmanuel Music at Boston's Emmanuel Church and plenty of other church music; while at Columbia, he wrote extensively, including a psalm per week.

Dr. Primosch joined Penn's faculty in 1988 as an assistant professor of music. In 1993, he was named the Laura Jan Meyerson Term Chair in the Humanities, then, a year later, he became an associate professor of music. In 2002, he became a full professor, and in 2006, the Dr. Robert Weiss Professor of Music, a chair he held until 2013 and then again beginning in 2020. In addition, Dr. Primosch served as the department chair of music from 1996 to 1998 and 1999 to 2000 as well as the undergraduate chair of the department from 2002 to 2005. Dr. Primosch also served as a faculty advisor to freshmen and sat on several departmental and University committees.

Dr. Primosch was a widely accomplished pianist, composer, and performer. His instrumental, vocal, and electronic works have been performed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, the New York New Music Ensemble, and the 21st Century Consort. His piece *Icons* was played at the ISCM/League of Composers World Music Days in Hong Kong, and soprano Dawn Upshaw included a song by Dr. Primosch in her Carnegie Hall recital debut. He wrote commissions for the Chicago Symphony and the Albany Symphony, as well as projects for the Fromm and Koussevitzky Foundations and the Barlow Endowment. He worked extensively with Philadelphia groups like the Mendelssohn Chorus, PRISM Quartet, and Lyric Fest, and new music groups like Orchestra 2001 and Network for New Music. Dr. Primosch expertly combined experimentation with approachability.

"It's a massively complex work but not to the listener at all," said Donald Nally, conductor of the Crossing, a group that has performed Dr. Primosch's work. "It's written in a way that you really understand the journey on first hearing—a pretty impressive accomplishment."

"Within the department of music, Jim could be found practicing piano early in the morning; or engaged in an impromptu discussion with a colleague about a jazz tune; or working with his students in studio lessons or seminars; or planning a concert with one of our ensemble directors; or catching up with a staff member," said the department of music in an online tribute to Dr. Primosch. "Jim also served the department by taking on official administrative roles, serving as department chair and undergraduate chair on several occasions. In all of these roles—whether as an administrator, colleague, or mentor—Jim's wry sense of humor, his commitment to excellence, and his humanity shone through brightly. Jim's impact on his students, colleagues, collaborators, and friends is impossible to overstate and we will miss him dearly."

Dr. Primosch and his work have received many accolades. In 1994, he was the composer-in-residence at the Marlboro Music Festival. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Pew Fellowship in the Arts, a Regional Artists Fellowship of the American Academy in Rome, and the Stoeger Prize of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Most recently, Dr. Primosch received the 2020 Virgil Thomson Award in Vocal Music, administered by the American Academy of Arts and Letters (*Almanac* June 23, 2020 (<https://almanac.upenn.edu/volume-66-number-40#james-primosch-virgil-thomson-award>)), and was nominated for a Grammy award for Best Choral Performance for his album *Carthage*, performed by the Crossing (*Almanac* January 19, 2021 (<https://almanac.upenn.edu/volume-67-number-23#james-primosch-grammy-nomination>)).

Dr. Primosch is survived by his wife, Mary Murphy; son, Thomas; daughter, Mary Rose; brother, Edward; and sisters, Rita Timko and Jean Tomcho. A service was held on May 1. Donations in his memory may be made to Face to Face, a social services group in Germantown, <https://facetofacegermantown.org/> (<https://facetofacegermantown.org/>).