

# Princeton University

Honors Faculty Members  
Receiving Emeritus Status



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The biographical sketches were written by colleagues  
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# Paul Lansky



In his 2011 James Baldwin Lecture for the Center for African American Studies at Princeton, Paul Lansky quipped that his career had been spent “trying to make dumb computers sing.” He has succeeded in not just that, but also in defining an entire generation of composition. Most often he has made machines sing familiar songs: American folk tunes (on the album *Folk Images*, 1995), blues harmonica (“Guy’s Harp,” 1984) and guitar riffs (“Blue Wine,” on *Folk Images*), rap dialogues (“Idle Chatter,” 1985), conversations with his wife (“Smalltalk,” 1990), and the cacophony of his kids clearing the dinner table (“Table’s Clear,” 1990). Throughout his 40 years writing computer music (along with the necessary software to create it), Paul has never foresworn the human element. His pieces “create a nostalgic ache in that they almost capture events which are, in reality, gone forever,” as the composer himself explains. The computer serves as but a microscope, a tool to examine—and ultimately to celebrate—the essential flesh and blood of music as of life.

There has been and will continue to be enormous, sincere, and utterly unique feeling in Paul’s music. His is an art that reflects the sadder consolations of life, but also keeps a rueful distance from them, clinging at times to a state that might be likened to childlike wonder, were not the harmonies so luxuriant, the resonances so haunting.

Born in 1944 to a recording engineer father and a politically progressive mother, Paul was named for famed African American bass Paul Robeson, and grew up in the Crotona Park neighborhood of the South Bronx. He attended the High School for Music and Art in Manhattan, whose school song is half-remembered in “Looking Back” (1996). Paul went on to receive an undergraduate degree from Queens College, where he pursued composition and French horn. He received his graduate degree from Princeton, studying with Milton Babbitt and

Earl Kim, and joined the faculty in 1969. He retires as the William Shubael Conant Professor of Music.

One of his most notable early works, “mild und leise” (1973), harbingers a basic compositional preoccupation: The piece (and its title) references Richard Wagner’s music drama, *Tristan und Isolde*. Something old, something borrowed becomes something entirely new as Paul transforms the hoary harmonies of Wagner’s “Tristan” chord into something fresh and unusual, using an IBM mainframe with one megabyte of memory. He has influenced and been influenced by pop art, cinema, and animation. Auto-Tune derives from his technological innovations. Radiohead would not have been Radiohead without him, certainly not the album *Kid A*, which quotes “mild und leise.”

Paul’s setting of poetry by Thomas Campion (1979) as read by Paul’s wife, Hannah McKay, inaugurated his embrace of language itself as at once likewise freighted with past associations, possessing semantic meaning, and also as pure syntax to be reconstructed in the present by an active listener. The process of speaking and listening and understanding underlies a series of works: “Idle Chatter,” “just\_more\_idle\_chatter” (1987), and “Notjustmoreidlechatter” (1988). There are mesmeric sequels about numbers and letters and the domestic menace of dust bunnies.

Since the mid-1990s, Paul has moved to writing for performers and instruments, rather than machines. Among his navigators in the turn has been the ensemble Sō Percussion, long in residence at Princeton. He returned to writing for his own instrument as well, writing an award-winning trio for horn, violin, and piano (“Etudes and Parodies,” 2005), and even produced a string quartet indebted to 17th-century counterpoint (“Ricericare Plus” 2004). In 2008, the Alabama Symphony premiered his concerto, *Imaginary Islands*, the culmination of his tenure as the inaugural composer-in-residence. While there, he worked with elementary school children. “I never thought I’d have a rapport with fifth graders,” he observed.

His aesthetic shift from computer to instrumental music was detailed in a 2008 feature piece in *The New York Times*. But the new means is being put to the same ends. Paul’s entire oeuvre is united

by a single concern, which he himself has elegantly and succinctly described. “I view my work as a constant attempt to ‘get it right,’” he explains, “to find and express the implicit music within me rather than within an instrument or machine.” That integrity has marked his tenure at Princeton, during which as chair he directed the building of the new Woolworth Center of Musical Studies. This was his architectural achievement. His greater, artistic achievement is the cosmos of sound that he has brought to life in his humble home studio and offered up, with equal modesty, for listeners here, there, and everywhere now and evermore.