



A portrait of Ned Rorem  
by Marc Geller.  
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## Rorem, Ned (b. 1923)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Ned Rorem is one of the most accomplished and prolific composers of art songs in the world, but his musical and literary endeavors extend far beyond this specialized field. Rorem has also composed symphonies, piano concerti, operas, chamber music, ballets, and music for the theater. In addition, he is the author of thirteen books, including five volumes of diaries and collections of lectures and criticism.

Born in Richmond, Indiana on October 23, 1923 to Quaker parents, Rorem was raised in Chicago, where he demonstrated an early interest in composition and piano. At seventeen, Rorem entered the Music School of Northwestern University where he pursued advanced musical studies.

Two years later he received a scholarship to the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. He then studied composition under Bernard Wagenaar at Juilliard, from which he received his master's degree in 1948. While at Juilliard, Rorem also worked privately with Aaron Copland at Tanglewood and Virgil Thomson in New York.

Additionally, in 1948 the Music Library Association voted his song *The Lordly Hudson* (based on a poem by Paul Goodman) the best published song of that year.

Upon graduating from Juilliard, Rorem traveled to Morocco and in 1950 to Paris, where he remained for seven years, achieving international recognition for his compositions and recording his experiences in a diary published to literary acclaim.

His years as a young composer among the leading figures of the artistic and social milieu of post-war Europe are portrayed in *The Paris Diary of Ned Rorem* (1966). His subsequent diaries and essays offer elegant and erudite analyses of aesthetic questions and candidly detail his life in the gay cultural fast lane.

Since his return to the United States in 1957, Rorem has divided his time between Manhattan and Nantucket, continuing to add to his extensive catalogue of over four hundred art songs. His individual settings and cycles draw their texts from a wide range of poetry and prose. Among his favorite sources have been poems and prose by W. H. Auden, Paul Goodman, Frank O'Hara, Theodore Roethke, and Walt Whitman.

In addition to his art songs Rorem has also composed three operas, most notably *Miss Julie*, based on the play by August Strindberg, which premiered at the New York City Opera in 1965; three symphonies; three piano concerti; several large-scale choral works, including the powerful *Whitman Cantata* (1983); as well as smaller-scale keyboard and chamber pieces.

Among the distinguished conductors who have performed his music are Leonard Bernstein, Eugene Ormandy, Kurt Masur, Thomas Schippers, and Robert Shaw.

In 1976, Rorem received the Pulitzer Prize in Music for his orchestral work *Air Music*.

Rorem continues to write and compose, and he enjoys a steady stream of commissions and performances. He has steadfastly remained faithful to tonality and the song; his compositions are musically rich and exquisitely fashioned. Above all, there is an emotional generosity that pervades much of his work, together with his unique brand of soaring lyricism that has attracted some of the twentieth century's most distinguished interpreters.

Recent recordings of Rorem's work include *Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1998), a 36-song cycle based on disparate texts ranging from works about youth's unbounded hope to the losses and hard-won faith of old age; *Songs of Ned Rorem* (2000), a collection of 32 songs sung by lyric mezzo Susan Graham, and *More Than A Day* (2000), a song cycle, sung by countertenor Brian Asawa, based on poems by actor and writer Jack Larson to his late lover the film director James Bridges, both of whom Rorem first met in the early 1960s.

Rorem's own lover of over 30 years, Jim Holmes, died in 1999. *Another Sleep* (2002), a cycle of nineteen songs based on texts by such authors as Milton, Shakespeare, and Sappho, is a memorial to Holmes.

### **Bibliography**

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The Official Ned Rorem Web Site. [www.nedrorem.com](http://www.nedrorem.com).

### **About the Author**

**Craig Kaczorowski** writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.