

*The Morrison Artists Series presents **Nordic Voices**
February 20, 2015, 8pm in SF State's McKenna Theater*

In memoriam Laszlo Varga... ... and a bit of Morrison history

*A Morrison Chamber Music Center post
from Artistic Director Richard Festinger*



Cellist and conductor Laszlo Varga (1924-2014), who died at his home in Sarasota, Florida on December 11, leaves behind an indelible musical legacy in the San Francisco Bay Area. Immigrating to the United States from his native Hungary after World War II, he served as principal cellist for the New York Philharmonic under Dmitri Mitropoulos and Leonard Bernstein, one of innumerable musical accolades earned by this extraordinary musician as an internationally acclaimed soloist, chamber musician, recording artist and teacher. Varga joined the music faculty at San Francisco State in 1962, where he provided tutelage and inspiration to generations of music students until his retirement in 1988. In 1972 he succeeded Andor Toth as Artistic Director of the Morrison Artists Series, which he guided with a sure hand, impeccable taste and access to an unparalleled international network of performing artists.



Laszlo Varga

I first met Varga in 1975 at a time when I had only recently embarked upon what is now a 40-year composing career. He generously organized a read-through, by SF State's best string students at the time, of a work for string quartet I had just written. Fifteen years later he commissioned me to compose a sonata for cello and piano for himself and pianist Karen Rosenak, which they premiered on March 13, 1990 at the Cowell Theater at Fort Mason in San Francisco. It was my first opportunity to write for a musician of such consummate artistry, and the experience of working with him to bring my new work to life was unforgettable.

For a full obituary I recommend [Bruce Weber's piece](#) on the New York Times web site, and [Robert Commanday's](#) at San Francisco Classical Voice. The latter offers a wonderful quote from the well-known conductor Kent Nagano, who studied with Varga at SF State in the mid 1970's. Nagano says, in part:

"Looking back, Mr. Varga was one of the exceptional influences who, through his impatience, joy, intolerance of mediocrity, discipline, and love of art, taught me those things which last a lifetime — that music is a metaphor for life and as such must be cherished, respected, shared, and actively lived to its fullest every day."

Varga was the Morrison Artists Series' third artistic director. The first was Ferenc Molnar (1895-1985) who, in 1955, together with Edward Hohfeld, founded the Morrison Chamber Music Center at SF State. Principal violist with the San Francisco Symphony from

1943-1963, Molnar, also Hungarian by birth, was a polymath who taught engineering at Stanford University, and from 1952-1970 taught string instruments at SF State. In 1970 the series' helm passed briefly to Andor Toth (1925-2006), violinist, conductor and founding member of the Stanford String Quartet. Toth was in turn succeeded by Varga, who directed the series from 1972-1988. Guitarist Saul Gropman (b. 1955), whose distinguished pedigree includes studies with Manuel Barrueco and Andrés Segovia, was artistic director from 1989-2008. Composer Ronald Caltabiano acceded to the post in 2009, and when he left SF State in 2011 to become Dean of Arts at Butler University, I was asked to take over. It's an extraordinary honor to belong to the distinguished lineage of this remarkable concert series, and an unending source of pleasure interacting with the wonderful musicians and audience members who make the series the gem that it is.

NEWS FLASH: Morrison Artists Series artistic director Richard Festinger is one of only four composers to receive a commission in 2014 from the Serge Koussevitzky Music Foundation in the Library of Congress. The Foundation's mission statement describes its establishment as "an expression of Dr. Koussevitzky's gratitude to the creators to whom we owe our musical heritage and who are providing our legacy to the future. Throughout his distinguished career, Dr. Koussevitzky continued his broad international interest in contemporary music." Koussevitzky came to the U.S. in 1942 to conduct the Boston Symphony, a post he held until 1949, building the B.S.O. into one of the world's great orchestras. Festinger is among the few composers who have been twice recognized by the Foundation, receiving a commission in 1997 for his *Tapestries*, for the Laurel Trio. The new commission will support the composition of his third string quartet.



Serge Koussevitzky



Nordic Voices

The next Morrison Artists Series' concert, on February 20, 2015, presents the a capella group Nordic Voices, from Oslo, Norway, in what promises to be a fascinating program of music both old and new, featuring works by two great renaissance masters, Luca Marenzio and Clément Janequin, alongside works by impressionist composer Maurice Ravel, modernist giant György Ligeti, and Norwegian composers Lasse Thoresen, Frank Havrøy and Maja Ratkje. Nordic Voices is one of the top ensembles of its kind active in the world today. Visit us at <http://morrison.sfsu.edu>.

UPDATE: Following up on last month's newsletter about the city of Boston's new Art & Culture initiatives, the New York Times reported on December 27 that Boston mayor Martin J. Walsh has brokered an agreement with public school officials and teachers' unions to add 40 minutes to the Boston school day, affecting some 23,000 K-12 students, in order to offer more and better instruction in art, music, drama, foreign languages and other under-represented curricular areas.