Remembering Gary Iseminger
(1937-2022)

Longtime member of the ASA Gary Iseminger, age 85, died on December 11th, 2022, at his home in Northfield, Minnesota. Gary received his BA from Wesleyan University and his Ph.D. in philosophy from Yale. Upon completing his doctorate in 1961, he taught one year at Yale and in 1962 joined the faculty of Carleton College. There he taught for forty-two years, beginning as an instructor of philosophy and retiring in 2004 as the Stephen R. Lewis Jr. Professor of Philosophy & Liberal Learning. In addition, he held several visiting appointments, including at Lingnan University, Hong Kong; Trinity College, Dublin; King’s College, London; University College, London; the London School of Economics; the University of Edinburgh; the University of Lancaster; the University of Minnesota; Cambridge University; and the Mayo Clinic College of Medicine and Science.

As a teacher Gary was well-known for helping students to grapple deeply with complex philosophical issues across a wide range of philosophical topics: the philosophy of art and aesthetics, philosophy of music, logic, philosophy of law, medical ethics, epistemology, and the history of philosophy. Unhappy with available texts in elementary logic, in 1968 he published his own textbook, *An Introduction to Deductive Logic* (Appleton-Century-Crofts), as well as an anthology of philosophical discussions about logic, *Logic and Philosophy: Selected Readings* (Irvington). In 1984 he published *Knowledge and Argument* (University Press of America), an exposition of a systematic method of assessing arguments.

ASA members who are familiar with Gary’s work in aesthetics will know that he was concerned with, among other things, authorial intention and the aesthetic function of art. Regarding the former was his concern that an aesthetically relevant baby had been thrown out with the bathwater of work-centered criticism; regarding the latter was his belief that, unlike all the king’s horses and all the kings men, one could put artworks, the (informal) artworld, and the aesthetic back together again. Gary’s interests in these topics led, respectively, to his editing (and contributing to) the volume *Intention and Interpretation* (Temple 1992) and his monograph *The Aesthetic Function of Art* (Cornell 2004). Gary summed up the latter in his typically precise fashion:
I argue for three theses closely related to the idea that the function of art is aesthetic: that art [i.e., the artworld] is better than any other institution at promoting the aesthetic; that art is better at promoting the aesthetic than it is at doing anything else; and that art was intended by its instituters to promote the aesthetic (from the proceedings of the 1999 World Congress of Philosophy).

Gary’s philosophical concerns—the importance of authorial intention, the function of artworks as vehicles for aesthetic communication, and the importance of musical performance, most especially those “improvisatory” aspects of performance—are grounded in his recognition of the importance of the social contexts of art, and hence the social contexts in which aesthetic concerns are raised. In other words, Gary stressed that art and aesthetics are community enterprises, and to forget this is to lose sight of why and how we care about aesthetics in the first place.

Gary was the epitome of the community-minded scholar, long before “public scholarship” became a thing. He was an active member and trustee of the ASA and served on the editorial board of our journal. He worked with the American Philosophical Association on the undergraduate philosophy major and the teaching of philosophy, and served as an external reviewer to many philosophy departments, especially those at liberal arts colleges. Closer to home, in Northfield he met regularly with his fellow philosophers from St. Olaf College, just across the river from Carleton, which led to the tradition of St. Olaf and Carleton philosophers having an annual weekend retreat together (beginning in 1980, the tradition continues today), in which distinguished philosophers are invited to discuss their latest work. He was a founding member of a community Art and Philosophy Reading Group, in which philosophers, other academics, critics, writers, and artists meet monthly for engaging dialogue. The group, now in its 30th year, had sessions focused on Gary’s own work in aesthetics, and when Gary invited his colleagues in aesthetics to Carleton to lecture and teach (including Peter Kivy, Lydia Goehr, and Colin Lyas), he also brought them to the community reading group to be in conversation with Minnesota artists, critics, and friends of aesthetics.

Most of all, Gary was an extremely talented and thoughtful musician. For him, music and philosophy were intimately related. In his own words:

My first encounter with what I now know to be aesthetics—indeed, with philosophy—was during the early 1950s in the pages of *DownBeat*, then, as now, the premiere magazine of the jazz world… In a critical review of the music of Dave Brubeck the critic [N.B., probably Nat Henthoff, one of Brubeck’s defenders in the pages of *DownBeat*—JML], who wrote something like, “Why should it matter whether music is improvised or written down? What matters is how it sounds.” … I was intrigued and disturbed by this position. I now imagine it to have been influenced by the then New Criticism’s talk of “the poem itself,” *DownBeat’s* critics being a fairly erudite lot, but, of course, I knew nothing of that at the time. Such Sonicism, if such it may be called, did not seem right to me as a player and lover of jazz (from “Sonicism and Jazz Improvisation,” in a 2010 *JAAC* Symposium on Jazz Improvisation).

Many ASA members will remember Gary playing the vibraphone in the group “Aesthetic Attitude,” which included Phil Alperson (alto and soprano saxophones), John Carvalho (tenor saxophone), Bill Day (piano), Garry Hagberg (guitar), Casey Haskins (drums), Craig Thomas (bass), and Jerry Levinson and Jenefer Robinson (vocals); their first gig was at the 2002 Eastern Division meeting, and Gary relished every subsequent opportunity to make music with his fellow aestheticians. Back home, he performed with the local group “Occasional Jazz,” as well as the Carleton and Canon Valley Regional Orchestras as a percussionist. He was an avid and adventurous concert goer; I remember his enthusiasm about taking the overnight train to Seattle for a series of performances of Wagner’s Ring, armed with a stack of scores and a portable CD player to prepare for the concerts.

Gary is survived by his wife Andrea, his children Andrew and Ellen, and his grandchildren Cody and Lily. He is fondly remembered by his many friends and colleagues in aesthetics, philosophy, at Carleton College, and in Northfield. When Gary began teaching at Carleton, I was three years old (a point I made to him on more than one occasion). I have now taught at Carleton for 34 years, over half of my life. Many of those years Gary and I team-taught a class in the philosophy of music. It was in that class that he taught me how to teach aesthetics and philosophy—and a lot more about teaching in general. We all will miss him dearly.
Justin London, Carleton College
with kind assistance from Perry Mason (Carleton) and Charles Taliaferro (St. Olaf)