John Hsu was born in Swatow, son of Benjamin Hsu, director of the Bailey Theological Seminary and pastor of the Presbyterian Church, and Lucy Ma Zi, four of whose siblings were musicians. He began piano at four. After the Sino-Japanese War started, Swatow became unsafe and the Hsus fled to Hong Kong. Two years later they relocated to Shanghai. John was enrolled in a bilingual, Chinese-English school.

Shanghai opened a world of possibilities. John renewed his piano studies and soon was accompanying his father’s church choir on piano and organ, and eventually conducting it. During the 1930s, thousands of European Jews fled eastward, settling in Shanghai and establishing a culture-in-exile. John studied harmony, counterpoint, form and analysis, and orchestration with Wolfgang Fraenkel (1897-1983), Berlin composer, theorist, performer, and conductor. Continuing piano studies with a cousin, John added cello and was accepted for lessons by Johann Kraus, former first cellist of the Berlin State Opera. John didn’t have to go west to study Western music; the West had come to him.

World War II ended, John received a tuition scholarship at Presbyterian-affiliated Carroll College in Wisconsin. He loved to recount his other funding. The women of Swatow were famous for embroidery. Before John left China, they made a banquet-sized tablecloth, which by pre-arrangement he sold to a buyer in San Francisco for enough money to support a year’s study. At Carroll another refugee, principal cellist of the Milwaukee Symphony Joseph Schroetter, taught John for a semester and then advised him to transfer to a music school. Thus began John’s association with the New England Conservatory, where he earned Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees, was in 1971 awarded an Honorary Doctor of Music and in 2003, an Outstanding Alumni Award. After arthritis struck, John donated his precious David Tecchler cello (Rome 1711), which had been Joseph Schroetter’s, to NEC. The Conservatory yearly lends John’s Tecchler to an NEC cellist who deserves a fine instrument. John also endowed a scholarship at Carroll College. Thus he repaid the institutions that made his career possible.
Hsu came to Cornell in 1955 where he taught for 50 years. He was department chair 1966-1971 and named Old Dominion Foundation Professor in 1976. He gave lessons, conducted various ensembles, and taught courses in music theory, music history and historical performance practice. His decades at Cornell were marked by striking evolutions in his musical and scholarly activities. As John put it, “In retrospect, it seems that I undertook new musical explorations with each new decade.” A turning point occurred when Department chair Donald Grout asked John if, to expand the study and performance of early music, he would be interested in learning to play the viola da gamba. John agreed and Grout arranged to acquire a “chest” of viols (treble, tenor and bass). Once the instruments arrived, the die was cast.

During the following decades John became a leading performer and teacher of the six- and seven-string viola da gamba, baroque cello, five-string cello and that duckbilled platypus of instruments, the baryton. He toured North America and Europe with other performers, issued commercial recordings, and made Ithaca a center for such matters. For 24 summers, from 1970, John held institutes at Cornell, where gambists could work with him at a time when such opportunities were limited. John was also a mainstay of the Aston Magna early-music festival in Great Barrington, eventually becoming its director.

John’s friend Malcolm Bilson recalls those days:

I loved John Hsu like a brother. His influence shaped most of my musical life from the time I came to Cornell in 1968. He encouraged me to pursue study of the early piano, and persuaded Cornell’s Hull Fund to give me a grant to help me purchase one. John's summer viol courses were models for my own later Fortepiano Workshops. The Amadé Trio (John, our violinist colleague Sonya Monosoff and me), central to Music Department concerts in Barnes Hall in the 1970s, was considered groundbreaking for chamber music on original instruments on both sides of the Atlantic. John demonstrated that playing on historic instruments could bring one closer to the aesthetics of the time through study of the instruments and playing styles of the day. He set a standard that I have always done my best to come up to.

All this was more than enough for a single lifetime, but John had two other careers: conductor and musicologist. He conducted Cornell’s Collegium Musicum and Symphony Orchestra and at Aston Magna. He founded and conducted the Apollo Ensemble, with which he recorded Haydn symphonies, collaborating with Cornell’s noted Haydn expert, James Webster. He also led the Atlanta Baroque Orchestra and the Vivaldi Project.

John was of necessity largely self-taught as a gambist, but being the conscientious person he was, he didn’t reply solely on trial-and-error experimentation. Rather, he studied the music, instruction manuals, and other documents relating to the instrument and made them the basis of his playing and teaching. There was no textbook for the gamba, so John distilled his research and hands-on experience into A Handbook of French Baroque Viol Technique (1981). Performing and recording music of the leading composer of solo music for viola da gamba, Marin Marais (1656-1728), John found that reliable modern editions were lacking. Collating extant copies of original editions and surviving manuscripts of Marais’ instrumental music, he produced an impeccable critical edition in seven volumes (1980-2002). In 2001, the French government
recognized his contributions by dubbing him *Chevalier de l’ordre des arts et des letters.*

John was a musicians’ musician. It wasn’t just his versatility. Before he taught, performed, recorded or published a piece of music, he analyzed and pretty much memorized it. An incident illustrating that aspect of John’s gifts occurred at the farewell concert upon his retirement from Cornell. John had requested that the concert be a performance of Haydn’s oratorio, *The Creation,* with himself conducting a professional orchestra, the Cornell choirs and professional soloists. After John appeared to sustained applause, bowed and turned to the orchestra to begin the “Representation of Chaos,” he realized that he had forgotten his glasses and couldn’t read the score. As John explained with characteristic modesty, “Of course I had to continue conducting and fortunately knew the score well enough to get through without faltering.” John had conducted an hour and 45 minutes of Haydn’s music from memory!

John was the most loyal friend and colleague one could imagine. He was always ready to appear with a bottle of champagne to celebrate the successes of students and colleagues, and he maintained contact with wide circles of friends and relatives. Late in life John’s beloved wife Martha helped him to publish his autobiography, *It’s All About Music: A Memoir* (2015), to which this essay is indebted.

The reminiscences of two of John’s protégés—one of whom earned her doctorate under his supervision—can serve to explain why John exerted a profound influence on his students and so endeared himself to them.

I was one of John Hsu's cello students at Cornell University, and then developed that relationship as a friend and neighbor when he and his wonderful wife, Martha, moved near my home in North Carolina. John brought the music of the 18th century to life for me, unlocking the language and rhythms of its phrases with uncanny insight into their most expressive elements. He rarely told me precisely how to play something (cello playing seemed almost incidental in the larger scheme of things), but instead gave me the technical and intellectual tools I needed to make my own performance choices, and even more importantly, to continue to grow as a musician. A man of tremendous grace, a simple gesture of his arm, while playing, teaching, or conducting, could convey so much musical understanding. He embodied that same grace in the generosity and kindness with which he treated my family and me, and all who had the pleasure of knowing him.

—Stefanie Vial

I had my first viol lessons with John during the summer of 1981 at the Aston Magna Academy and the Cornell Summer Viol School. The ways he helped me rethink my viol technique and also my understanding of much 17th and 18th-century music transformed my work and career. The following year I applied to be in the inaugural class of DMA students at Cornell, but was unable to secure a leave from my teaching position in Minnesota. Then a position opened at UNC-Chapel Hill, and John’s recommendation was an important part of why I was hired. Unable to come to Cornell, I continued to study with him whenever possible. His mentoring throughout my professional life extended to my work as a cellist as well as viol player, helping me to become a more complete “thinking” musician and teacher. John became the model of what I wanted my own life as
a musician in academia to be. After his retirement to Chapel Hill, I enjoyed having him and Martha nearby, and saw them often. It was always a joy to be with him, especially when he took us to his favorite Chinese restaurant. And I treasure his last round of musical advice, when we prepared a program of Haydn’s Baryton music in his honor in Chapel Hill. His mind was still at work considering new solutions to old questions. He also was still keenly aware of the people around him, and cared about their families and health. I feel I have lost not only my dearest teacher but a parent.

—Brent Wissick

Written by Neal Zaslaw (chair) and Malcolm Bilson