

# DAVID COHEN, MUSIC LOVER AND ACTIVIST 1944-2006

**Possibly an 'autistic savant,' he was the Vancouver Symphony's 'No. 1 fan' and tirelessly promoted human rights**

By LI ROBBINS, Special to The Globe and Mail

His bedroom was the concert hall; his kitchen, the lobby. David Cohen, the man in the crumpled suit whose frequent appearances at Vancouver Symphony Orchestra concerts caused the musicians to nickname him "No. 1 fan," didn't limit his passion for music to the conventional venues. He was his own impresario, inviting friends to his apartment for annual birthday concerts, where music videos were screened to the reverent silence he insisted music required -- chit-chat was allowed only out in "the lobby."

These friends included musicians, social activists, politicians, members of the Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network and people of all walks of life, the people Mr. Cohen encountered during his peripatetic travels through his city.

Music was Mr. Cohen's dearest love, but he also had a ferocious commitment to human rights, tirelessly writing letters on behalf of Amnesty International. He engaged vehemently with causes, politics and people. He volunteered in every election and was involved with the Coalition of Progressive Electors. He frequented 13 libraries on Vancouver's lower mainland and was a passionate advocate of the city's public-transit system. David Cohen was also autistic.

He was considered "high functioning" on the scale of Autism Spectrum Disorders, possibly an "autistic savant," a term often used to describe people who possess extraordinary powers of memory. This kind of autism -- the strangely brilliant kind -- has become something of a symbol to the "neurotypical" population of the mysteries of the human mind and perhaps of secret hopes that anyone's oddities might contain a spark of misunderstood genius.

Mr. Cohen unquestionably had a kind of genius, although no one would have said so when he was a boy. Diagnosed as autistic after a bout of infant meningitis, he barely spoke until he was 7 or 8. This is not so say he barely comprehended. In later years, he would recall with great detail every family vacation, every family home, even details of a hospital stay at the age of 4.

His mother, Garland Cohen, was dedicated to seeking the best for her son. In 1951, she brought him to Hedwig Hergl, founder of the Hergl School in Manhattan, which specialized in children with language disabilities. Hedi, as she was called, came to believe that the boy who would scream at the sound of a vacuum cleaner was also a boy with a remarkable mind. When the Hergl School relocated to San Francisco that same year, the Cohens moved, too, so that David could continue studying with Hedi.

He was also home-schooled -- his mother, who already had a degree in mathematics, went on to do graduate work in speech and language therapy. In 1959, Mr. Cohen entered the public school system, an experience he later recalled as being both "good and bad." He also characterized his early work experiences in this way, jobs on city cleanup crews, and working on reservoirs -- for \$1.32 an hour.

After high school he studied accounting at the City College of San Francisco, and he took an evening course in symphonic music. His love of music dated to boyhood, encouraged by his grandmother, who played the piano. As a young man, he enjoyed listening to Metropolitan Opera broadcasts. Because he had a fine-motor disability he could not play an instrument, but he could listen. And he remembered everything he heard.

"He had an enormous capacity for musical information," said Owen Underhill, a composer and teacher at Simon Fraser University, "including the birth dates of composers and the years when various individual compositions were written." It wasn't just data for data's sake though. "Music was so embedded in David's life that it was

directly connected in an intimate way to all the most important things that happened to him," said Mr. Underhill.

The Cohens came to Canada in 1967, fleeing what Mr. Cohen described as the "distressing and tense political situation" caused by the Vietnam War and by racism. He found Vancouver to be "appealing, cosmopolitan, diverse and energetic." In the 1970s, he moved out of his parents' house, living at the YMCA and in various rental accommodations and continuing to take business courses. But he was not able to successfully translate this education into the mainstream job market. He was able to fully pursue his love of music though, and his interest in human rights.

Mr. Cohen could cite volumes of statistics regarding the death penalty -- which countries still had it and how many people had been executed and in which years. His interest in the death penalty, expressed through letter-writing campaigns with Amnesty International, was in part because he was well aware of how many people on death row had various kinds of mental handicaps. This bothered him. But he took a gracious, non-combative approach.

Joy Pantier, a fellow Amnesty volunteer, recalled that his letters usually started with phrases like, "I know of your country's natural beauty, its music, its long history of economic and political instability . . . and its use of the death penalty."

In 1979, Mr. Cohen's father died, and in 1981 he moved into an apartment in his mother's home. Then her health began to fail. Concerned that after her death her son would become too isolated, she set up a trust through the Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network, ensuring he would be able to live in his own apartment with the support of a network of volunteers and one paid facilitator, Karl Perrin, a speech and language pathologist. Mr. Perrin said Mr. Cohen, like many people with autism, lacked in the "subtle social graces," but this did not equate with the utter lack of empathy frequently ascribed to autistics.

The blueprint for mainstream understanding of savants came in the 1988 movie *Rain Man*, inspired by Kim Peek, an autistic man nicknamed "Kim-puter." Mr. Perrin said that Mr. Cohen's memory was not as phenomenal as Mr. Peek's, as portrayed by Dustin Hoffman, but there were similarities between the movie version of Mr. Peek and Mr. Cohen -- the fantastic memory, to whatever degree, and also the day-to-day struggles.

Some of the stuff of daily life completely eluded Mr. Cohen: budgeting, changing light bulbs, dealing with misplaced apartment keys. And then there was a certain cadence of speech, the rapidly repeated phrases and an awkwardness about the hands. But perhaps the biggest similarity with Mr. Peek was a quality of immense likeability.

Mr. Cohen knew he was "different," although he rarely acknowledged this. Sometimes, when writing letters for Amnesty International, he would mention that he was a member of a "mentally handicapped group." And on one occasion, speaking as a panelist about opera and disability, he said Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* was his favourite opera because it was about someone who was an outsider.

In a recent documentary aired by CBC-TV's *The National*, a reporter asked Mr. Cohen: "What do you think people like about you?" He thought about it. "I'm not sure what to say," he finally replied. His friends and colleagues certainly were.

(Julian) David Cohen was born on July 17, 1944, in White Plains, N.Y. He died of brain cancer in Vancouver on Jan. 27, Mozart's birthday. He was 61. On Jan. 30, Bramwell Tovey, conductor of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, dedicated a performance of Mozart's Masonic Funeral Music to David Cohen.