

Crowd gathers for Samels tribute

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April 27, 2006

For three years, Robert Samels studied the photographs and personal information of his students in T231, so he could greet them when he saw them around the IU Jacobs School of Music.

"If you see me in the hall, say hello because I'm lonely," he told them.

But the crowd that filled the 616-seat Buskirk-Chumley Theater told another story Wednesday evening. Samels was far from lonely.

Friends, family, students, fans and other community members showed up at the theater to remember the Medina, Ohio, native.

Samels, a 24-year-old doctoral student in choral conducting, died in a plane crash late Thursday alongside four other IU Jacobs School of Music graduate students. Music school musicians and singers - familiar with Samels' booming bass-baritone - performed works in his honor.

"So much of the ministry here this evening is the music," said the Rev. Mary Ann Macklin.

Samels' knack for multitasking was a recurring theme at the service: He composed, conducted and sang, and he wrote and announced for WFIU, where he produced the show "Cantabile." He recently appeared as Mr. Gibbs in the opera "Our Town," and he wrote an opera with his friend, Jacob Sentgeorge, which received critical praise in 2004.

Samels touched all who knew him with his passion for music and his quirky sense of humor. He left a strong impression on all he met, whether for his grasp of complicated musical material, or his way of making "dull and boring material appear interesting and worthwhile," as one student wrote. He did so by using a favorite band of his, Cake, in musical examples, and by comparing various sonorities to ice-cream flavors.

Other memories, recounted by students and friends in writing for the service, spoke of his talent and his charm.

"Most of my friends and I hardly knew him, yet we talked about him all the time ... I think everyone who knew him was a little bit in love with him," one student recalled.

"Robert taught me that dorky was cool," wrote a friend.

Samels loved karaoke and SpongeBob SquarePants. He played hammered dulcimer. He turned 21 while in graduate school because he was so far ahead of his peers. He loved to make up games.

And he was so busy, people joked about how he probably never slept.

But he was never too busy to be friendly and engaging, even trying to greet students in their native languages, such as Korean.

Memorial services for the four other plane crash victims, Chris Carducci, Georgina Joshi, Zachary Novak and Garth Eppley, are listed at www.music.indiana.edu.

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Robert Samels, right, played the Sultan of Selim and Chris Carducci, seated, played the Poet in IU Opera Theater's 2004 production of "The Turk in Italy," with castmate Benjamin Gelfand, left. Samels and Carducci both died in a plane accident late Thursday night. Courtesy photo