

an authentic creative genius: UH's Dr. Georg von Bekesy

Harlan Cleveland, University of Hawaii president, yesterday eulogized Dr. Georg von Bekesy, the Nobel Prize-winning professor who died Tuesday.

Said Cleveland:

"Dr. Georg von Bekesy, one of the great minds of the 20th Century, died peacefully on June 13 at the age of 73.

"Those of us in Hawaii who know him are saddened by the loss of a friend, but the whole world has lost one of its first citizens, an authentic creative genius in the medical sciences. The word 'genius' is used rather frequently these days, but to meet Dr. Von Bekesy was to realize again that there are intellectual giants who tower over the merely brilliant as great mountains tower over high buildings.

His work on the delicate machinery of the human ear formed the firm scientific basis for most recent advances in the treatment of deafness, and also showed the unity of design in sensory systems in all of nature.

"**THIS WAS** the work for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine and Physiology in 1961, but it represents only part of his amazing scientific achievements. His interests were far-ranging in all of biology and physics, but were chiefly directed at biological transducers, the sensory equipment such as eyes, ears and noses, by which animals are aware of their environments.

"He did pioneer work in the subtle processes of inhibition, by which our brains screen out the otherwise overwhelming input of information from the senses, permitting us to concentrate on that which is immediately relevant.

"All his life he retained a child-like sense of wonder at the Universe, but when a problem interested him he approached it with the cool objectivity of a sophisticated physicist and all tenacity of this formidable intellect.

"**AT ANY AGE** when many senior scientists are prone to reminiscence about great events of their lifetimes, his conversation was always about the experiment to be done tomorrow. Most of his discoveries defy simple description, but it was characteristic of the man

that so many of them relate to the means by which human beings can enjoy the world.

"His lifelong interest in art and music perhaps formed the basis of the original direction of his research into the sensory modalities through which art communicates. One of his papers published just two week ago concerned some revolutionary concepts in the theory of music and another, published earlier this year, could be regarded as the last word on concert-hall acoustics for some time to come.

"He was internationally recognized as an authority on the art of the early Central American civilizations and only slightly less so on the art of China and Japan. It has been told that at the time of his Nobel Award, an official function in Stockholm was delayed because the King of Sweden and Dr. von Bekesy were deep in conversation among the King's noted collection of Oriental ceramics.

"**IRONICALLY**, he never visited Japan despite the urgings of leading Japanese scientists; that was always something to look forward to when he was less busy. Nevertheless, he greatly cherished the graciousness of his Oriental friends in Hawaii and his numerous visitors from Japan. He had felt a considerable bond with Dr. Yasunari Kawabata, who spent several months at the University of Hawaii following his Nobel Award in Literature, and was profoundly moved by his recent death.

"Dr. Von Bekesy was born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1899, the son of a diplomat. His early education and undergraduate work was largely in Switzerland, and he received his doctorate in physics from the University of Budapest in 1923.

"As in most European countries, the telephone system in Hungary was a responsibility of the Post Office. Dr. Von Bekesy joined that organization and spent more than 20 years in research on long distance communications including, of course, his great work on the functions of the ear, which is an essential component in telephone communication.

HE WAS ALSO simultaneously professor of physics at the University of

Budapest. He was always reticent about the trauma of the Russian occupation, but the bare facts are that he left Hungary for Sweden in 1946 and a year later moved to Harvard University where he remained until 1966. At that time, with the encouragement of Gov. John A. Burns and the provision of an endowed chair by the Hawaiian Telephone Company, he moved to the University of Hawaii.

"After his mover to Hawaii at an age most would consider as reasonable for retirement, his productivity and creativity actually increased. He though that Hawaii was the most wonderful place to work; his only complaint was that University regulations did not allow him to live in his laboratory!

"From that modest laboratory poured a stream of lucid, innovative papers; scientific leaders from all over the world would leave replete with advice and constructive criticism. Those of us who were his friends will perhaps best remember that one of his greatest pleasures was to watch from his laboratory door, the clouds and rain squalls weeping across the Manoa Mountains.

"His honors in otology, psychology, acoustics and medicine are too many to list here, but one of them meant more than the Nobel Prize. This was an award from the Hungarian Government in 1969 (officially bestowed at the Hungarian Embassy in Washington, D.C.), and which could be regarded as something of an apology from that proud and troubling country to one of its most distinguished sons."