

Celebrate Music Sunday
July 28, 2015

Reflection on Composer Carolyn McDade

Kat Robinson Grieder

The first hymn that we're going to sing together this morning is one which a number of you have mentioned as one of your favorites. "Come Sing a Song with Me" was composed by the talented Carolyn McDade, who celebrated her 80th birthday earlier this month.

Several years ago, the UU World Magazine wrote a poignant profile of Ms. McDade, a Cape Cod resident, who has written hundreds of songs and released over 15 CD's. Songs that she's written that are included in our UU hymn books include "Spirit of Life," "We'll Build a Land" and "Rising Green." Yet she identifies herself as an activist rather than a musician or songwriter.

She grew up in rural Louisiana as a Southern Baptist but has lived in New England for over 30 years. She says she didn't come from a singing family but she remembers the day her family rolled a piano into their home. Being shy and uninclined to sports, she turned to her piano and her sister for friendship.

In the mid-'60's she moved to Boston and joined the Arlington Street Church where a student minister invited her to put together music for one of the first women's services. But when she went looking for songs written by women, she had a difficult time finding them.

So late one night she sat at her piano and sang what she wanted to say to her three daughters asleep upstairs, which became the song "Come, Daughter." It was a turning point, the first time she had sung from her own experience, and a searing recognition of what she was meant to do.

“Writing my own song really was the beginning of finding of my own way,” she says. “I was a young woman activist, my children were young, and I had totally lost myself. I wouldn’t have known what to call it. Social movement was my healing, seeing my life as part of other lives.”

McDade speaks of her songs as her teachers. But “Come, Sing a Song” had kind of a time-delayed teaching for her. In the 1980s, the chaplain of the women’s state prison in Framingham, Massachusetts, asked her to come do a music program. She brought the song mainly because it was easy to learn. But the prisoners sang it in a way she’d never heard. She had to stop singing and listen. “That song needs context—‘I’ll give you hope when hope is hard to find’—and they had context to bring to it,” she says. “It went from sweet to profound.”

Reflection on Horace Clarence Boyer

Craig Spery

The composers of today’s anthem, “It’s My Desire,” are Freda Pullen and Dr. Horace Clarence Boyer. I’d like to tell you a little bit about Dr. Boyer and his connection with this congregation before the choir performs this favorite piece.

An expert in African-American music, Dr. Boyer wrote extensively about the history of gospel music. He was born into a Pentecostal family in Winter Park, Florida, and began performing gospel music in church as a boy.

He formed a gospel-singing duet with his brother, James and as the Boyer Brothers, they began recording as teenagers. As a gospel performer, he and his brother traveled to 40 states.

He attended the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, where he earned master's and doctorate degrees. He toured the world both as a director of choral ensembles and as a vocal soloist. He also led numerous music workshops and choral masterclasses throughout the United States. He served as curator of musical instruments at the Smithsonian Institution and held faculty positions and professorships at UMASS Amherst, the University of Michigan, Brooklyn College Conservatory of Music, Ithaca College and the University of Buffalo. He also lectured at Harvard, Yale, Temple, Howard and Tuskegee universities, Oberlin College, the Studio Museum of Harlem and the Harlem School of the Arts.

Our own Barbara Elder became friends with Dr. Boyer in the late 70s when she had seen him conduct the Blackstone Valley High School Music Festival. She was teaching at one of the participating high schools. She has carried his repertoire forward with her as a conductor since then and when she came to Nantucket, the UU Choir started singing two of his pieces "It's My Desire" and "Bringin' in the Sheaves."

Barbara says she asked Rev. Ted if Dr. Boyer could come in the summer (sometime in the 80s) and do a service about gospel music in the U.S. Dr. Boyer was then at UMass as Gospel Choir director. Ted said yes and the choir performed his music with him during the service and other hymns as well.

Barbara says Dr. Boyer was quite a fabulous gospel pianist as well and our UU congregation and choir connected well with him. Barbara personally loved that he was able to connect the black gospel tradition to young mostly white teenagers and adults and give a feel of what singing gospel is all about. He was a great ambassador for that. He had huge energy and a lot of love for all the singers in his presence. Over the years, Barbara also invited him to conduct (at least once it might have been twice) for the Cape & islands Music Festival. The high school students enjoyed him there as well.

According to Barbara, Dr. Boyer had an impact on many people over his career. He was the start of a generation of young Black musicians brought up in the gospel church but also receiving classical training and accepted in both worlds as experts. They've been able to make a huge amount of bridges in the music world.

Dr. Boyer passed away in July 2009 at age 74 but his love of music and spirit live on both here in our choir and in all of the lives he touched. We dedicate today's anthem to long-time choir member Pete Sawyer, who requested that we sing it today.

Reflection *Building Community Through Music*

Linda Spery

I'd like to take the next few minutes to reflect upon how we build community through music. The writings of UU singer-songwriter Joyce Poley (who wrote

“When Our Heart is in a Holy Place”) served as resources for the thoughts I’d like to share with you.

This morning we’ve heard about composers who have risen to the top of their profession, who started down the path of performing or appreciating music at early ages.

Like composer Carolyn McDade, I grew up in a Southern Baptist family in rural Louisiana. My mom was a choir member her entire life and my sister played the organ and piano at church services until she went away to college. Like many of you, I took piano lessons when I was young and sang in youth groups at school and church. So “there was music in my mother’s house,” as the tune goes that our Women’s Chorus sings.

Music is a part of almost every facet of our lives, whether we grew up in a musically talented household or not. From our leisure time, our entertainment and our education to our worship services, music is prevalent in some way.

Even Quakers today no longer oppose group singing or use of musical instruments in their services. Although in unprogrammed meetings where they wait upon the spirit in silence, any singing that is done is usually individual or a capella.

From the first lullaby sung to us as newborn babies, music provides the “soundtrack” of our lives. So much so that many of us take it for granted—just as we do the soundtrack of a film which we often hear without fully listening to it. That is, we enjoy the film without realizing how much the music conditions our reaction.

Music both shapes and reflects society. Dancers follow its beat; protesters use it to find their voice. It can promote ideals—like peace and solidarity. But it can also prepare armies for battle. It is part of almost every important personal and collective moment.

But it can also be mysterious. Musicians know the techniques by which they produce a certain sound. But no scientist or musician can explain the power that music has over our emotions.

In a world of diversity where values often clash, music crosses language barriers and unites people of different cultural backgrounds. I was looking at a You Tube video the other day at the performance of our anthem “It’s My Desire” performed in 2009 by a choir in Gävle, Sweden. They didn’t have quite as much swing and sway as when the spiritual is performed by the African American choirs but I think Dr. Boyer would have been pleased with their rendition nonetheless.

And so, through music, people can come together to make the world a more harmonious place.

Here on Nantucket in our UU worship service each Sunday we become participants rather than observers when we sing together as a congregation. We bring our individual voices together as a congregation. We bring our individual voices to the whole ensemble and, in turn, demonstrate first-hand how the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

With our combined voices we build community, expressing our commonalities as well as our diversity. Singing reinforces the reasons we come together. It speaks of our common struggles, often moving us to action toward a common objective.

Singing also expresses our diversity—of belief, of religious background, of ethnic origin—for we welcome all who come in search of individual truth and meaning. This is perhaps our biggest challenge as a religious institution, since we all come with such a wide range of religious convictions, as well as a wide range of preferred musical styles.

When we sing together, everyone contributes their own voice to produce something beautiful and meaningful in a way that moves us, touching us

emotionally and making us feel more whole. It is a musical celebration, created and experienced by each person present, and expressed within the context of community.

I'd like to thank all of you who responded when I asked you either in person or via e-mail "What is Your Favorite UU Hymn" in preparation for today's service. We've already sung some of your favorites this morning and I've put together a list of all of the responses so we can hopefully include some on the list in our future Sunday services.

Diane Lehman, our music director, is always welcome to your suggestions of songs you like best for the choir, our soloists or to be sung by the congregation as a whole. We also are always ready to welcome new choir members to be a part of our Sunday morning performances. We've had several new voices join us this summer and there's room for many more. The more the merrier. Just let Diane or any one of us in the choir know you're interested.