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Local Musician Strikes a Different Chord in "The Star-Spangled Banner"



By Victoria Scott

It has been 43 years since mainstream America watched Jose Feliciano deliver his nontraditional rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner" at a 1968 World Series game in Detroit. Ever since, musicians have been warming up crowds at sports events with idiosyncratic and sometimes controversial versions of the song. But a longtime Evanston resident recalls an era when the national anthem rang out in concert halls as well as stadiums – and a time when her bravura piano performance of "The Star-Spangled Banner" evoked reverence rather than whistles and cheers.

It was 1944 when Carol Lems-Dworkin opened her Orchestra Hall recital with the dramatic concert arrangement she had written for the occasion. "These were World War II years," Ms. Lems-Dworkin explains; it was customary for programs to begin with the national anthem.

Just 19 years old at the time, she had won the chance to play in Orchestra Hall as a prize in a piano competition in which she was named "Outstanding Young Pianist of the Midwest." Her recital was the third of six in the Musical Arts Piano Series, she says, with performances by some of the era's most famous pianists scheduled before and after hers.

It was not her first Orchestra Hall appearance. Ms. Lems-Dworkin had played a Beethoven concerto there with the Chicago Businessmen's Orchestra after winning a Beethoven competition at age 17.

Still, she says she knew she would be nervous before performing the Bach/Busoni,

Chopin, Schumann, Khatchaturian and Ravel works she had chosen for her concert in the Musical Arts series. She decided to dispel her tension by writing and playing the grand chords in her own version of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Emphasizing that she is "not a composer," Ms. Lems-Dworkin says she nevertheless completed the work as a "concert version" of the anthem "in the style of the unsurpassed brilliant pianist, Vladimir Horowitz" – her longtime idol.

Intended to be played and not sung, the arrangement, she says, "makes use of thunderous chords in both hands, along with frequent octaves, hit first at the very bottom of the piano and suddenly jumping up...in solid roaring chords suggestive in some way of 'the bombs bursting in air.'"

As she finished playing "The Star-Spangled Banner," she says she heard "a rustling sound" and, looking up from the keyboard, she saw the entire Orchestra Hall audience rise to its feet in appreciation.

She played it just that once, on Jan. 4, 1944. And although the arrangement had demonstrated its power, she filed her composition away. It was 2010 – nearly seven decades later – when she rediscovered it and decided to apply for a copyright.

In the intervening years Ms. Lems-Dworkin's life took on the complexity of the African polyrhythms and Bach ornaments she studied and wrote about. She gave a concert in New York's Town Hall to favorable reviews by the New York Times but says the 10-12 hours of daily practice it required left her tired.

She turned her energies instead to earning a bachelor of science in botany from Northwestern University, while continuing to study piano with Howard Wells. It took her seven years as a part-time student to graduate.

She married, had two girls, and gave up the piano entirely for some years. But when her 10-year marriage ended in divorce, she returned to the piano and to school, earning a master's degree in piano from Northwestern.

Not only did the academic degree give her the credentials to launch an academic career, but it afforded her a chance to study with Melville Herskovits, whose Northwestern anthropology courses introduced her to the African cultures that would become her lifetime passion.

Immediately after graduating, Ms. Lems-Dworkin landed a position teaching seven piano students at Kendall College. Over the years she assumed more responsibilities, gaining tenure and becoming head of the Kendall Music Department.

Bringing together her two great interests, Ms. Lems-Dworkin took a sabbatical in Ghana

in 1973 with a National Endowment for the Humanities grant to research African music for a piano teaching book based on African themes. At Kendall she taught what she believes was the first class on African music in the Midwest. She published several books on African music and a CD on the ornaments of J.S. Bach.

A sex discrimination suit she filed took seven years to settle out of court. Afterwards, she became an adjunct professor at several area colleges and continued to teach private piano lessons.

All the while, her 1944 score lay dormant. When she rediscovered and considered publishing it, she applied for help from Lawyers for the Creative Arts, which offers free legal services in all areas of the arts. The process was simple: She paid a minimal copyright fee and the costs of copying her yellowed manuscript into standard sheet-music format.

The requirement for copyright is that "your version must differ significantly from all other extant ones," she says. Ms. Lems-Dworkin's arrangement, one of more than 700 when she applied, differs in having "an unexpected chord in measure 31 that supports the long-suspended high note that always occurs in each stanza on the word 'free,'" she says.

But "different" can have narrow parameters when applied to a patriotic symbol. Igor Stravinsky ran into trouble with the Massachusetts law in 1944 when he wrote an orchestration of the national anthem the Boston public considered too different. Apparently he was asked to drop the piece from a later concert; Boston cops may have seized the music, and an alleged mug shot of the composer circulates on the Internet even today.

On the federal level, a 1971 House resolution attempted to standardize the anthem by setting down the words and issuing vague guidelines about avoiding "strange and bizarre harmonizations."

But the resolution never became law. In any case, Ms. Lems-Dworkin characterizes her arrangement as "basically tame." Its uniqueness rests on that single chord: In place of what she calls the "premature appearance of the tonic [chord]" just beats away from where it elevates the final word, 'brave,' Ms. Lems-Dworkin substituted a median chord she says "hold[s] us captive for a few glorious moments in space and time, until the tonic can finally resolve everything and shine through in all its glory."

Unveiling her long-lost work in the time of another war, she managed to insert a note of peace. A dove, not a flag, adorns the cover of the sheet music.