

The American Music Research Center: Some Vignettes From The Early Dominican College Years

Editor's note: At the time (winter, 1988-89) the American Music Research Center was moved from Dominican College in San Rafael, California, to the College of Music at the University of Colorado in Boulder, I asked Sister Dominic to write a history of her AMRC stewardship during the Dominican College years (1968-1988). My request was imposing, because Sister Dominic was ill and the AMRC written records had already been moved to Boulder. Nevertheless, she was able to produce a sixty-page monograph that not only is a tribute to her remarkable memory but also a demonstration of her enthusiasm for music in the United States and its history. I have chosen excerpts illustrating Sister Dominic's dedication, perseverance, and faith which led to the establishment and function of the AMRC.

In the very last two days of December, 1958, thumbing through a *Musical America* (February, 1958), I alighted on an article, "Moravian Music—Neglected American Heritage," by someone I had never heard of (!): Irving Lowens. Having always supposed that we Americans had no more musical heritage than folksongs and a few patriotic airs, I poured into this startling article with considerable skepticism and disbelief. Oh, I did recall having played a few of MacDowell's *Sea Pieces* during my high school days, but they had made only a momentary impact on me. Other piano music, bearing fanciful titles such as "Silver Mists," seemed nice for the moment, but were, I felt, best relegated to the attic.

My incredulous attitude toward this article was a result of my musical experience to this point, which had been directed solely toward preparing for, and thoroughly enjoying, a modest career as a pianist, steeped mostly in the classics and romantics, with a sprinkling of the impressionists. In addition, I thought, if we are said to have "a rich musical heritage," WHY hadn't my five years at a major midwest conservatory brought something of this to light? I couldn't even recall that any of my professional musician friends had even so much as mentioned anything of the kind.

Reading on, however, I suddenly realized that I should be crawling under the carpet—nay, under the varnish on the floor itself—in humiliation, for here was something not only thrilling but tremendously significant. I devoured the whole article and reread it fervently; a myriad of little electric light bulbs were flashing wildly within me. To think that we Americans *really* had some fore-

bears who truly loved profound spiritual music *and* even composed it as well, living it from morning to night! This was almost unbelievable. From that moment on, my life took a totally new turn. I was ablaze with excitement and HAD to find out more. Those lights never went out.

I ran to the encyclopedias and music histories, but they didn't reveal enough. I had to get hold of some of the actual music. One of those funny little gremlins that seem to help us in a time of crisis kept nudging me to write to the author of the article. My four-page letter told of our various student groups who would be able to perform reasonably difficult works and begged earnestly for help in obtaining some of the music. Very soon came an airmail letter from Mr. Lowens thanking me for my letter and stating that he was "taking the liberty of forwarding [it] to Dr. Donald McCorkle," the Founding Director of the Moravian Music Foundation—WHICH MADE MY DAY! For the next six years, Dr. McCorkle and I were in regular correspondence. He was a great inspiration to me, and I shall never forget all he did to help and encourage me.

During the next decade, Sister Dominic grew from novice to expert in American music history. She embarked on an ambitious program of self-instruction, acquired numerous materials, at first Moravian music but soon American music of all types, which she displayed in her piano teaching studio at various "exhibitions" and informally to visitors. She visited major libraries on both coasts in order to study, acquire materials, and meet other scholars. She performed and encouraged the performance of American music at Dominican College and in the community. She began teaching American music courses and, for a period of three years, broadcast local programs on American music. She turned to California history, acquiring mission music materials and honoring a commission from the California Historical Society of San Francisco to do research on music for the goldrush period. Her own narrative resumes with the events that led immediately to the establishment of the AMRC.

By 1965, the idea of putting on an American Music Festival came to mind. Thanks to the College President and Sister Antoinette, Chair of the Music Department, I obtained permission to go ahead, *provided I was willing to manage the entire Festival myself!* It was scheduled for the spring of 1966. As a performer, I had always relied on a manager, but this time the tables were turned and I was going to *have* to make good myself.

Fortunately everything began to fall into place. Hollywood actor-singer-pianist Charles Lampkin who, at the time, was giving programs on American music, accepted an invitation to present a program of work songs, slave songs, and perhaps a few "hollers." Dr. W. Thomas Marrocco, of the University of California at Los Angeles, agreed to speak on American music if I would play one of the Latrobe sonatas and some lively Gottschalk as a part of his lecture.

Finally, composer Lou Harrison, whom I had known a little in high school, seemed overjoyed that we wanted to do his *Four Strict Songs*, for eight baritone and orchestra (waterbowls and all).

These three events were scheduled approximately ten days apart, thus providing a welcome respite for both audience and producer! It was the only way I thought any of us could survive. In summary, the whole Festival was very exciting and was also a success; the local and San Francisco papers gave us wonderful publicity. I believe the whole thing stimulated a very considerable amount of interest in American music and in our musical heritage.

One more activity that played a part in what was soon to become the official American Music Research Center was a most productive and fascinating summer in 1967 doing newspaper research at the Missouri Historical Society for Professor Ernst C. Krohn. (I had met this remarkable eighty-year old bibliophile some six months earlier during an eight-hour train stop-over in St. Louis on my way to the New Orleans' conference of the American Musicological Society.) Professor Krohn wanted me to do all the reading and "leg-work" that he was no longer able to do; hence, I spent that hot summer climbing stairs and combing through all of the 1817-1832 St. Louis newspapers, looking for every conceivable evidence of musical life and making meticulous notes for each reference. Once a week, Professor Krohn, in his short sleeves and green eyeshade, would examine every little notation I had made—very much like a KGB officer on the hunt. This was my first experience working over an extended period of time with such a demanding scholar, and I loved every moment of it.

As a result of my St. Louis work, early musical theater attracted my attention. My curiosity was aroused at seeing so many advertisements for such comic operas as *The Agreeable Surprise*, *Poor Soldier*, *The Mock Doctor* or *The Dumb-Lady Cur'd*, *The Devil to Pay* or *Wives Metamorphos'd*. My theatrical appetite was more than thoroughly whetted. If only I could get to some of the East Coast libraries, or even to Southern California, surely I could find some of this music. Clearly I needed funds, more than the College would be able to give me. Convinced that the field of early musical theater needed prompt attention, I set forth on a quest for funds.

Sister Dominic's quest eventually led her to England. She made several trips there, two primarily for early comic operas, acquiring photocopies of 100 in 1969, another 86 in 1973, and having "wonderful, long sessions" with Roger Fiske, Anthony Milner, Charles Cudworth, Adrian Sunshine, and Rev. Joseph Stratman. The English operas, plus others acquired in United States libraries and through book dealers, bring the collection to some 200 works. Dominican College produced six comic operas between 1969-1988. But, the immediate quest to which Sister Dominic refers above led to a differ-

ent, more inclusive happening.

Filled with confidence and determination, I set out to appeal to the local Northern District of the California Federation of Music Clubs (CFMC). I conferred with its President, June Weybright Reeder, who convened a meeting that proved to be a very significant turning point in my work. I presented my understanding of the generally indifferent attitude toward our musical heritage, my ideas and needs on how to change it, and the work that we at Dominican College were trying to do in order to stimulate interest in and appreciation of American music. Apparently the members present really took fire; they called for another meeting the following week which brought forth, to my great surprise, the resolution that (1) Sister Dominic's American music collection be SPONSORED BY THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF THE CFMC, PROVIDED THAT (2) that it be housed in a special room of its own in the music building (At the time parts were in my studio and the remainder on shelves and in bookcases of other rooms), and (3) that the collection be known as the AMERICAN MUSIC RESEARCH CENTER. The conditions were taken to Dominican College officials; all were heartily approved and THE SHOW WAS ON. This was in the late fall of 1967.

CFMC sponsorship did not mean direct financial support to the AMRC, although individual members contributed funds. In fact, Sister Dominic requested in 1973 that the CFMC withdraw its official sponsorship because it inhibited acquiring funds from other sources. As early as 1970, Dominican College informed Sister Dominic that the AMRC "must be self-supporting," although it continued to provide space for the Center (three rooms in the College Library after 1974), some student help, and some production costs for the comic operas. Sister Dominic displayed considerable ingenuity and hard work in securing donations from individuals, corporations, and agencies that provided funds for the AMRC during its twenty-one year residency at San Rafael.

During this time Sister Dominic served as consultant for a number of regional and national commemorations. The final vignette is about such activity during the United States' bicentennial.

The M. H. de Young Memorial Museum's [San Francisco] principal offering was an exhibition of 100 American paintings from the private collection of John D. Rockefeller, the 3rd, some of which had never been publicly shown. Coinciding with the painting exhibition was a six-month educational lecture series conducted by well-known faculty from nearby universities and colleges. The three-hour, biweekly lectures were presented as colloquia, and each colloquium was conducted by three speakers. The subjects covered were early American literature, dance, music, amusements, architecture, theater, and social life. At first I was asked to be a music consultant—nothing more;

however, I soon realized at an early meeting that my sole duties were to provide some background music and offer any incidental advice about music that might be needed. A GREAT BOMB SEEMED TO EXPLODE WITHIN ME! Here was a major San Francisco museum dealing with every aspect of America's cultural history EXCEPT MUSIC! I STOOD UP AND VOICED MY OBJECTIONS EMPHATICALLY! There followed a stony silence. Gradually they began to realize that such an omission would be a grievous mistake. They asked me what sort of music I had in mind? (Now they were all very distinguished university professors supposedly cognizant of our cultural life.) After I told them about some of the early Moravians and New England's first indigenous composers, they unanimously concluded that I should bring to the next meeting a couple of recordings for them to hear.

The following week I came well-armed with an excerpt from one of John Antes's trios and another very carefully selected excerpt from a John Knowles Paine symphony. *They were all aghast, struck with amazement.* Never had they even dreamed of such beauty and skill in earlier American music. They immediately decided to have me participate on *both the opening and closing symposia* as a lecturer *and* performing artist. I was also to provide a half-hour of music, together with program notes, for each of the other colloquia. Finally, I was responsible for furnishing exhibit materials for the showcase in the foyer. This last assignment gave me the opportunity to show the AMRC's Sternhold and Hopkins Psalter from 1622, our 1737 edition of the Bay Psalm Book, our Geneva Bible and Psalter of 1599, and several of our eighteenth-century tunebooks—all with appropriate legends. In all, it was much work, but I felt it to be a great triumph for American music.

Sister Dominic was a familiar, gracious, and enthusiastic participant at Sonneck Society meetings up to 1984, after which time illness restricted such activity. If you would like to correspond with her, write to Dominican Convent, 1520 Grand Ave., San Rafael, CA 94901.