

Remembering Sister Mary Dominic Ray 1913-1994

Sister Mary Dominic Ray, O.P., died in San Rafael, California on January 26, 1994, at the age of 80. As the founding director of the American Music Research Center at Dominican College she held a special place in the hearts of all who have worked with American music in northern California over the years, but her cheerful vigor touched many who lived far from that region.

Sister Dominic's first letters to me were much more than mere formalities or polite greetings to the new director. She wrote immediately as though we were old friends, although we had never met or even spoken on the telephone. She wrote warmly and intimately, encouraging me to celebrate American music as much as she had, and made comments on my personality and artistic taste based on the photographs on the post cards I had sent to her. With good humor she prodded me to come and visit her in California. I was charmed and completely won over by her directness and candor and began to understand how this one nun had single-handedly kept the fires of American music research burning in her part of the world for such a long time.

For the first twenty years of the AMRC's life in San Rafael it was Sister Dominic's operation. She recounted in volume two of this journal some of the adventures and challenges of those early years: the "myriad of little electric light bulbs flashing wildly within [her]" when first encountering the richness of American sacred music history; her first contacts with scholar/critics Irving Lowens and Donald McCorkle ("a great inspiration"); planning a series of American music festivals; and helping to assure a place for American music in San Francisco's American bicentennial plans.

Her last letters to me were no less glowing, filled as they were with astute observations and crisply stated reminiscences. Recent events put her in mind of classes she'd taken in art or music long ago, hunting for old manuscripts in the Bodleian Library or producing her beloved comic operas, *The Devil to Pay*, *The Chambermaid*, *Flora*, or her favorite, *The Mock Doctor*. Around Christmas of 1992 writing from balmy California, she rhapsodized, "I suppose you are enjoying beautiful snow storms and watching everything get whiter and whiter? I grew up in Evanston, so I remember how magical it all was: sleigh rides & ice-skating, etc. (parties, tobogganing and !?). I suppose you're familiar with it all—"

Sister Dominic began her musical life as a pianist. She studied at the Cincinnati Conservatory and in Berlin, with Arthur Schnabel's assistant Georg Gruenberg, before her American debut in 1939. She later began teaching at Dominican College and joined the Dominican Order. Curiosity led her to American psalmody and opera, but no lack of formal musicological training

dampened her enthusiasm for American music research after she discovered it, and her energy and thoroughness led to real productivity. She did summer research at Oxford and taught courses in American music for years at Dominican College and for two terms at York University in England. She co-wrote a short history of California mission music, *Gloria Dei* (1974), and made radio broadcasts and performed in several concerts in the San Francisco Bay area over the decades. (One commentator in 1962 commended the Dominican Order for allowing Sister to share her “superlative professional talent . . . with music lovers outside the order.”)

Her collecting of American music documents was unstinting and benefited many. A letter to her from William Summers of Dartmouth College in 1992 noted, “there would be no central repository of Spanish music for California if you had not collected it. We [music scholars] will be eternally in your debt.” We are still discovering and cataloguing the rich stock of letters, notes and miscellaneous photos relating to American music that Sister Dominic left in the Boulder files that now bear her name.

Although I never had the opportunity to meet Sister Dominic face to face—a lapse that in every letter she urged me to correct—I feel that I did know her quite well and that her remarkable and embracing spirit of adventure will continue to hover over the activities of the AMRC. In her will Sister Dominic made a generous financial bequest to the AMRC’s fund for the purchase of historical music documents. She also composed a brief song dedicated to St. Dominic that was sung at her funeral. With these and other reminders of her dedication to American music, we will continue to collect letters, mementos and other responses to the work of Sister Mary Dominic Ray. Contributions in her memory can be sent to the American Music Research Center, College of Music, Campus Box 301, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309

—Thomas L. Riis
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Figure 1. Sister Mary Dominic Ray at her desk, *ca.* 1990.
Photo by Chris Clark, from SMDR Collection, AMRC

