

Meet the Composer: Gwyneth Walker

Gwyneth Walker is a composer well-known in the world of American music and well-known to Mansfield audiences. She has visited Mansfield University quite a number of times, most recently in the fall of 2011. In 2004, student groups at the university commissioned from Walker a piece in memory of Helen Lutes (1909-2003), long-time faculty member in the athletics department and benefactor of the university. Walk On Up To Heaven was premiered by the Mansfield University Concert Choir. Walker, who at one time played tennis at a semi-professional level, responded with a delightful and humorous composition that incorporated gestures and movements found in sports and thereby honored Helen Lutes, who, at one time, also played tennis on a better-than-amateur level. The editor sat down with Walker at the recent ACDA Eastern Division conference in Providence, Rhode Island, resulting in the interview below.

Editor: Gwyneth, we have something in common. Our first jobs at Oberlin College-Conservatory—I was there on a sabbatical replacement in the spring of 1973, pitching in for Richard Murphy—made us almost coincide. Oberlin, from my hindsight perspective, was a hotbed of the musical avant-garde. How did you survive there, being a composer of a kind of music people actually like to hear and to perform?

GW: Jürgen, while I was at Oberlin, I was mostly a teacher (teaching advanced level theory classes). I did have a few composition students as well. My life as a composer was focused on my travels, where I heard my music performed in many places across the country. I wrote in my style, which you know today, and the music started being performed far and wide. Not in the town of Oberlin, and not at the Conservatory (except by the fine students).

Ed: You resigned your position at Oberlin and became a free-lance composer. Was it difficult to give up the possibility of tenure (and thus of life-time protection) and subject yourself to the fickleness of the market place?

GW: My decision to leave my wonderful teaching job was made to follow my path in life as a composer. It may have been frightening to leave the comforts of the teaching job. But a far more frightening thought would be to never leave Oberlin at all, and thus perhaps waste my life!

Ed: For many years, if not decades, you have lived in Vermont in rural surroundings? Is the solitude of the country conducive to composing? And how do you keep in touch with urban life, where cultural activities abound and opportunities for performances, also for your works, materialize? Am I wrong in my assumption?

GW: When I left my teaching job, I had minimal finances. I had saved half of my salary from Oberlin to be used to support myself, if I lived very simply, for perhaps a year or two. If it turned out that I could not support myself from my composing after two years, then I felt that the career of a composer was not for me.

I debated where to live. With a very small budget, I could not afford a spacious mansion in the country!!! However, I was delighted to find that I could afford an apartment on a dairy farm in Vermont. This gave me access to plenty of open land (even if I did not own the land!!!) right outside my window. Perfect! Peaceful. Beautiful. I need quiet surroundings for my work.

I knew in advance that Vermont was and is an extremely supportive place for music. There are many performing ensembles. So, artistic life abounds in Vermont. We should not assume that the arts are less flourishing in the rural areas than in the urban areas. Far from it!

Once my music career developed, I found myself traveling far and wide to concerts, in rural and urban places in the US.

Ed: Recently, you have given up your abode in Vermont's dairy country to move closer, but not quite yet, to the Big City. Do you want to be closer to where the action is and what does the move mean for you as a composer?

GW: I now live in New Canaan, Connecticut, my childhood home town. This is where I compose most of the music. [The rest is composed during my travels.] My performances usually take place in locations other than New Canaan. Because New York city is such an active cultural place, I spent some time in Manhattan, attending concerts, living in the city. My feeling, after having given this living situation a try, was that NY has outstanding performers. But that the programming of new music is not more active than in other places, including rural Vermont.

Therefore, as a composer, I was just as well off living on the dairy farm, and mailing my music to NY, as I would be living in the (noisy) city. My move from VT to CT has both the positive factors of returning to my childhood hometown where I have friends and beloved places, and the negative factors of leaving behind friends and beloved places in VT. I look forward to a concert trip back to VT soon.



Gwyneth Walker and Peggy Dettwiler in Providence, Rhode Island

though Mansfield is not a convenient trip from New England, I have traveled out there more than once, and will happily do so in the future. Bravo to Peggy and her outstanding students!

The move to CT has had absolutely no affect upon my compositional life.

Ed: The Mansfield University choral ensembles have performed your works quite a number of times during the last ten years. They even commissioned a piece in memory of Helen Lutes, a beloved faculty member in the athletics department and generous benefactor of the university. You must have heard some of your works as performed by the Mansfield folks. Do you have any thoughts on their renditions?

GW: My familiarity with the Mansfield University Music Department is entirely related to the choral performances conducted by Peggy Dettwiler. These concerts have been wonderful. First class. And thus, even

SAMUEL ADLER AT MANSFIELD UNIVERSITY

In April 2012, Samuel Adler, one of the most respected and prolific of American composers, visited the campus for three days of teaching, lecturing, and concerts devoted to his works, including the one-act opera The Outlaws of Poker Flat. As part of the "Adler Festival", the Festival Chorus concluded its performance of Mozart's Requiem for soloists, chorus and orchestra with the last movement from Adler's Transfiguration: An Ecumenical Mass for soloist, choir, brass quintet, and organ. The following is a slightly revised version of the Adler section of the pre-concert talk given by the editor of Hear the Voices on April 15, 2012, in Butler Music Building.

Samuel Adler and I go back for a long time. We were colleagues at the Eastman School of Music from 1973 to the mid-1990s, and even after he and his wife Emily Freeman Brown moved to the suburbs of Toledo, Ohio and he began to commute once a week to teach at the Juilliard School, we remained friends and stayed in touch by phone and in person.

I could tell you about the many compositions he wrote, but, since he is a very prolific artist, that could take a long time.

I could tell you about the excellent composition department he built when he was chair of the department—and that was most of his Eastman years, because nobody else wanted to do it. During his leadership two young composers were hired, who later became Pulitzer Prize winners: Joseph Schwantner and Christopher Rouse. That may not quite match Robert Schumann's clairvoyant prediction of the young Brahms's ascent to Parnassus, but, since it is not just one but two composers who were so honored, it is still a pretty good track record. (The lesson is, of course, that, if you want to improve an academic department, you cannot be insecure: you need to recognize good talent and have the courage to bring it onto your turf.)