



Phyllis Zimmerman

February 22, 1934 - October 10, 2012

PHYLLIS E. ZIMMERMAN, 78, beloved choral director, composer and music teacher, passed away peacefully in Santa Barbara on Wednesday, October 10.

Born in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, on February 22, 1934, she was the only child of William and Isabelle Zimmerman. As a child she sang and studied piano, and in her teens had her own weekly radio show, singing to her own piano accompaniment. She received a BA in Sociology and Psychology from Thiel College in Greenville, Pennsylvania, and spent a year in Erie, Pennsylvania, as a medical social worker, but music was her true calling. A fortuitous encounter with “a red vinyl record” of the Concordia Choir under the direction of Paul Christiansen led to her attending one of Christiansen’s workshops and then enrollment in Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, to earn a second bachelor’s degree in just two years, studying voice, composition and conducting under Christiansen.

She started her teaching career in Wellsville, Ohio, in 1959 and returned to her native Pittsburgh as the choral director for Churchill Area High School in 1963. After a year of graduate studies at Occidental College, in 1969 she accepted what was intended to be a transitional job as music teacher and choral director at Santa Barbara High School. However, “the idea of starting a tradition was exciting to me,” she said. She stayed at SBHS for 26 years.

Ms. Zimmerman instilled discipline, integrity and love of beauty in her students, and they recall pithy aphorisms ranging from the sublime “Music is love that has found expression” to the ridiculous “You can mix mud and ice cream – it won’t hurt the mud.” Her standards were high and her discipline strict because she so greatly valued accuracy and authenticity. Students found that choir was one place where they were not underestimated as full human beings, a model microcosm where the same beauty, excellence and inspiration were available to all. Ms. Zimmerman's tenure was legendary, not merely on campus but for the city at large. Her concerts became community events, attracting large audiences who were consistently astounded that music so mature and sophisticated could be produced by teenagers.

Immediately upon her retirement in 1995, Ms. Zimmerman was approached by former students who wanted to sing with her again. Canticle A Cappella Choir became her focus

for 10 more years and 20 concert seasons, drawing crowds who continued to thirst for excellent choral singing. Canticle self-produced six CDs, including Phoenix, a double set of Ms. Zimmerman's own compositions and arrangements.

Early in her teaching career Ms. Zimmerman began composing, often simply because she needed a particular kind of piece for a concert. Her library of compositions and arrangements grew almost yearly. In 1995 she was one of twelve female composers (out of over 700 nominees) honored by the American Choral Directors Association for her composition Fog, and while directing Canticle she debuted two significant commissions, Seasons of His Mercies (2003) and Four Songs of Concord (2005).

Ms. Zimmerman was preceded in death by her parents and her beloved partner of many years, Barbara Wright (1926 – 2000). She is survived by her loving companion Lorraine Balun of Pittsburgh, her dear friend and caregiver Ann Turnock, and many hundreds of friends and former students.

A memorial service will be celebrated at Trinity Episcopal Church, 1500 State Street, Saturday, November 3 at 11am, with reception following.

In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the Santa Barbara Foundation re: The Barbara J. Wright and Phyllis E. Zimmerman Scholarship.

Previous Events

Memorial Service

NOV 3. 11:00 AM (PT)

Trinity Episcopal Church
1500 State Street
Santa Barbara, CA