

Musical Treasure Chest #28

Life's inevitability has been made obvious again to me this week as I mourn the passing of two beautiful women, who were not only quite important to the arts and to Musicians of Ma'alwyck, but were dear personal friends. You may not know either of them, but their stories are worth sharing and their deaths leave a hole in the arts community and in my circle of people I care deeply about.

On October 15th **Mary Ellen Fenner** passed away at the age of 91. For those of you who have been reading these MTCs since I started them last spring, I wrote about my cherished memories of living with Don and Mary Ellen Fenner during my first years in the Glimmerglass Opera Orchestra. Mary Ellen and Don bought a home across the road from the opera house, which they lovingly restored and named Duke's Oak, specifically to house opera personnel, and I was their initial "guest." That first summer was 1987, and I lived there until 1997 when my first child was born. My summers with the Fenners were incredibly special, filled with laughter and joy and warmth. We had wonderful meals, and late nights after the opera swimming in Otsego Lake, followed by drinking wine on the porch and gazing at the stars, dissecting the evening's performance. I was only one of a number of summer residents; they would house and feed as many as 6 or 7 guests for the whole opera season. My housemates were singers, or set painters, or stitchers in the costume shop, with the common denominator that we were part of the opera and that we were treated so graciously by the Fenners. Mary Ellen toiled to keep us all fed and happy. Every meal was home made, and we would all squeeze around the kitchen table family style for her delicious food and lots and lots of animated conversation.

But Mary Ellen wasn't just a wonderful host, she was an active musician—a professional organist for all of her adult life and a very accomplished pianist. One of my delights of life at the Fenners was playing duos with Mary Ellen, in fact we even did a bit of concertizing together. The last concert I played with her, which was back in 1997, we did a program of music that included the **Mozart Piano Trio in E Major, K 542**. A beautiful work with a concerto-like piano part, Mary Ellen

played it with ease and fluency and great musicality. I was sorry when our days of performing together were over. Music was such an important part of her life. Here is a link to the first movement of the glorious E Major Mozart

trio: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfTB9YGksM4>

Francesca Zambello wrote a beautiful tribute to Mary Ellen in her most recent Traveling I-Pad from which I have included an excerpt. It lists all of Mary Ellen's other activities and shows her great devotion to the opera company. Mary Ellen was one-of-a-kind, and I and many, many others will miss her greatly.

In Memory of Mary Ellen Fenner

Mary Ellen was a legendary leader of the Guild's education and outreach efforts, pulling music and ideas from her vast library of Opera News magazines, scores, recordings and books to inspire young people about the art form. She and Don served meals and recycled trash — whatever was needed. For many years they hosted staff Christmas dinners and monthly lunches known as LAF Days (Lunch At Fenners). And their contributions were lauded by their admirers. They received the Glimmerglass Opera Volunteer of the Year award twice — in 1987 and again in 2005 — and in 1994 were honored nationally by Opera Volunteers International with that organization's "Partners in Excellence Award." When I returned to Glimmerglass 10 years ago, I immediately thought of the Fenners, and my family and I subsequently became their neighbors, building a house across the road from theirs. As with all lives well-lived, Mary Ellen's went well beyond Glimmerglass — into the community, her church, and her amazing career. Her award-winning smile exemplifies the kindness, generosity and warmth that she brought to all her endeavors.

The second woman we lost was **Mary Jane Dike**, who passed away on October 22nd at the age of 90. Mary Jane was extremely active in the arts throughout her years in the Capital Region. A modern dancer, choreographer and dance instructor, Mary Jane was one of the founders of the Capital Area Dance Alliance. I first met Mary Jane when I was in high school, as the mother of one of my closest friends, Laura Dike (we were in ballet and school together). Throughout the years since I became an adult Mary Jane remained in both my professional and personal life. She could always be counted on to house musicians for my various musical groups. She was an avid concert attender and fan, always promoting Musicians of

Ma'alwyck. Even in her later years when she had moved into a retirement center, I knew she would without fail be in the audience if we were playing there, and she would often organize bus trips for the residents to our performing sites. She was a generous and loyal donor to Musicians of Ma'alwyck, and that support, especially in our formative years, made a huge difference in our ability to program and to be solvent.

Mary Jane was from Texas, and I can still hear her gentle drawl in my mind. She had a wonderfully theatrical flair and true appreciation of the arts. Her observations about our concerts were always spot on and helpful. I knew that after each concert or gala I could count on a beautifully hand written letter with many comments. She passed her love of the arts onto her three children who are all active in the arts and wonderful patrons, in fact Laura is on the Musicians of Ma'alwyck board. Mary Jane enjoyed all of the arts, but dance was her true passion. A few years ago I had a chance to repay her for some of the wonderful gifts she has given me. I enrolled her in a series of ballroom dance lessons and drove her to them. To watch the complete and utter joy in her face as she danced was sheer pleasure.

I have thought long and hard about what music to represent and celebrate Mary Jane's life. One of the works she choreographed was **Aaron Copland's Quiet City**. This seems to me the perfect piece to share with you. And, Mary Jane, I hope you are dancing away up there!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_MxTZIYL14