



In Memoriam: Johana Harris (1913–1995)*

Stephen Fry

I SAW THE piano movers wheeling one of the huge black Steinway grands off the concert stage in Schoenberg Hall, out of the building, down the outside stairs, out to the center of the quad, and onto the brick and concrete oval where the sidewalks forming a web to the bordering buildings converge. This was on the UCLA campus, and it was about 1978. I asked one of the many music faculty members rushing out to the expanse of lawn surrounding the piano what was going on. He said, “Lady Jo is giving a concert. Come on. You’ve got to hear this!” Since he was a terrific pianist himself, I went out with him and found a spot on the lawn near the piano.

“Lady Jo” was the affectionate name everyone had for Johana Harris, and it was what she called herself in the many notes I had received from her—about finding a piece of music for the Music Library’s collection, or humbly apologizing for having received one of the overdue notices kicked out by the computer to remind her to renew a piano piece. I was “her” music librarian, and, like most of her colleagues, would do anything for this charming, self-effacing woman.

With great dignity and energy and a wry sparkle

in her eyes, she strolled out to the piano, bowed to the applause, and sat until you could hear a squirrel chattering and a few birds singing in the trees. The sun was bright at this noon hour, but she wore no hat. Her long silver hair, a kind of trademark for her, cascaded down over her shoulders. She began to play, and the noisy campus was suddenly still. She began with the thundering opening of the Grieg piano concerto, deftly modulated into Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue,” then Tommy Dorsey’s “Getting Sentimental Over You,” Debussy’s “Clair de Lune,” a Shostakovich prelude, a Chopin étude, Rodgers and Hammerstein and Harold Arlen with modern jazzy chords, Rachmaninoff with full powerful chords. The shorter numbers she played completely, and of the larger works she played only a portion—the most musical and beautiful portion. All the works were treated as equally precious by her skillful and sensitive fingers, and using amazingly inventive improvised modulations, the melodies flowed non-stop from one to another creating their own logic and relationships.

The audience was mesmerized by her performance, delicate here, powerful there, and always with consummate musicianship and exquisite touch. And then she stopped. There was silence. She looked up, finally, from the keyboard, and there arose a deafening applause from the more than 300 students, faculty and staff who had gathered, attracted

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by her music, during the lunch hour. Fifty-five minutes had gone by. I thought I was a handy piano player with both jazz and classical works in my fingers, but this had been a *tour de force* by a master. From then on I attended all her concerts that I could, up to her final musical soirée less than a year before she succumbed to cancer at the age of 82 on June 5, 1995.

Johana Harris was born in Ottawa on New Year's day in 1913. Over her career of about seventy years she performed on more than 200 recordings, participated in television productions, composed piano works and accompaniments for folk song collections (one of her special interests), and was a devoted and beloved teacher for literally hundreds of advanced piano students.

She attended conservatories in Canada, New York and Berlin. She was the youngest student to be accepted at Juilliard in the mid-1920s, and was appointed a faculty assistant in 1928, before her 16th birthday. She taught piano at the University of Sewanee, California Institute of the Arts, Cornell, and other institutions, and in 1969 she came to UCLA. She met and married Roy Harris at Juilliard. Their marriage lasted 43 years until his death in the Los Angeles suburb of Santa Monica in 1979.

What happened next, indicative of her life which seemed as improvised as her concert on the UCLA lawn, is described by her biographer-in-progress Louise Spizizen:

"[S]he was still teaching full time at UCLA, the only music faculty member ever to win that university's Distinguished Teaching Award.

"My questioners nod politely, but only archivists are truly interested in a chronicle of this sort, so I throw them the first real hook: that Johana composed a good amount of the music that has always been attributed to Roy, and—then the clincher—that 11 years ago (Roy had been dead for three years and Johana was a week away from her 70th birthday), she proposed to her most talented student, an Adonis who was barely 21 when they married."¹

She was born Beula Duffy. Do you wonder at her name Johana? Her friend Nicolas Slonimsky describes her name thus: "[S]he assumed her profes-

sional name Johana in honor of J. S. Bach; the single 'n' is used owing to some esoteric numerologic considerations to which Harris was partial."²

Charlotte Wolfe, a music librarian at the University of Michigan, recalls meeting Johana:

"I knew the Harrises in the early 1950s when they were on the faculty at George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville, Tenn., where my father was head of the Music Department at that time. I first met Johana on a Sunday afternoon when the Harrises were concluding a quick trip to Nashville to finalize arrangements before taking up residence there. My dad and several music faculty members escorted them to the airport and planned to have dinner with them there before putting them on the plane. My younger brother and I were tagging along that day because our mother had another commitment. When we got to the restaurant we discovered that no table was big enough to accommodate the entire party. Johana immediately suggested that she and I, 'the ladies,' should occupy a small table by ourselves while 'the men' took the large table. During the entire meal she chatted and drew out a very shy 12-year-old with perfect good humor and genuine interest, making me feel like a real grownup. I was her fervent admirer from that time on."³

Charlotte also related to me the story of Johana's recital at Peabody College during the summer of 1954. Shirley Watts, another music librarian colleague remembers that "her encore at this concert was an improvisation on the themes of all the music she had programmed that evening. It must have been another of her concerts I was remembering where I was trying to identify the composer of her unannounced encore when I realized I was hearing a richly developed fantasia on 'April Love,' a current pop hit."⁴

At UCLA Music Department faculty meetings, when Johana Harris spoke everyone listened. Not because she was powerful, or erudite, but because

²Nicolas Slonimsky, rev. *The Concise Edition of Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*. 8th ed. New York: Schirmer, 1994, p. 397.

^{3,4}Charlotte Wolfe. Electronic mail message to the author, June 15, 1995.

¹Louise Spizizen. "Why Are You Writing About Her?" *Belles Lettres: A Review of Books by Women*, v. 10, no. 1 (Fall, 1994), 20-25.



she spoke with love in her heart and good will in her mind. Amidst the bickering, ego clashing and politics within the Department she was universally loved and respected by her colleagues. She was especially adored by her students, for whom her feats of assistance are legendary.

As I, from time to time, strolled by her studio deep in the recesses of Schoenberg Hall, Johana would nab me, tell me to sit down, and say, "Steve, listen to this. Real music!" Then she would take a breath, sigh, and play a newly discovered folk song, improvising a delicate accompaniment. The simple song, in her hands, would bring tears to my eyes. This was a part of her magic.

Her friends, colleagues and admirers crowded into the beautiful St. Augustine By-the-Sea Episcopal Church in Santa Monica not long after her death, to pay their respects to her memory, which will endure at UCLA and in the Los Angeles musical community.

Obituaries summarizing Johana Harris's career and accomplishments appeared in both *The New York Times* (June 15, 1995) and *The Los Angeles Times* (June 8, 1995). Louise Spizizen's article "Johana and Roy Harris: Marrying a Real Composer," *The Musical Quarterly*, v. 77, no. 4 (Winter, 1993), 579-606, describes the courtship and subsequent enmeshed careers of these two musical personalities.