



“Musing from the Hill” by Susan Crossett

as seen on the *Dunkirk Observer* on Fridays
and the *Jamestown Post-Journal* on Saturdays



The Rum Pum Pum Pum Lady

Published June 11, 2021

Readers know I'm a long-time opera fan. That includes having favorite singers, baritone Thomas Hampson definitely among them. Tall and quite good-looking, Hampson has a robust voice which serves him well in any role he chooses.

I almost stopped driving, however, when I heard him singing “The Little Drummer Boy.” I've quickly gotten used to it so no longer find it quite as jarring but, on first hearing, I could almost hear his torment with the repeated (and repeated) rum, pum, pum, pums. Was it equally difficult for him to sing those words? The rest of his Christmas album is quite as lovely as one would expect.

WNED-FM's announcer went on to tell us listeners that “The Little Drummer Boy” was written by Katherine K. Davis who, not surprisingly, turns out to have a story of her own worth knowing.



Originally titled “The Carol of the Drum,” this was written in 1941 and premiered by the Trapp Family Singers. The song didn't really catch on, however, until the Harry Simeone Chorale's recording in 1958, a version that sailed to the top of the Billboard charts. I thought it intriguing that Simeone insisted on a writer's royalty for his arrangement. Miss Davis (nowhere can I find any information that she was anything other than a miss during her long life) claimed it came to her while she was trying to take a nap. It hardly surprised me that she claimed the words “practically wrote themselves.” A later rendition, the duet by Bing Crosby and David Bowie, popped back into the charts in 1977. Quoting now from the Bach Cantatas Website (I don't know why except I'll search anywhere for interesting information): “Arrangers Harry Simeone and Henry Onorati are often given coauthor credit but this has been widely disputed, as have assertions that David Bowie borrowed the melody from an old Czech tune.”

I have no idea when I first heard this piece (probably later than 1958 but certainly before 1977). I know I loved it from the first hearing and continue to love it now . . . depending somewhat on who's doing the singing. And how often it's played. Admittedly, by the time Christmas nears, the poor thing has been drummed far too often. Even Miss Davis was heard to quip that it “... had been done to death on radio and TV.” But then so are some others, thinking now particularly of “Rudolph.” (Gene Autry anyone?)



Miss Davis was born in St. Joseph, Missouri, on June 25, 1892. Piano lessons did not begin until she was a first-grader but by the time she was fifteen she was writing music of her own. "Shadow March" is considered her first composition. Her younger brother played the violin so I'm certain plenty of music rang throughout that house.

I recall the years my brother and I spent at the piano or singing away. We too played "anything and everything" we could get our hands on. There wasn't a heck of a lot though I suspect we probably doomed "Whispering Hope" in my family forever. Lovely sounding duet with close harmony – if one is part of the song.

Anyway, you want to hear about her, not me, right? From a business trip, her dad brought home the score of "Madame Butterfly" which quickly became one of her favorites. I found this strange – anyone try to play an opera score on the piano? It's felt that may well have inspired her to use her own texts to write the seven operas she composed.

Graduating from St. Joseph High School in 1910, she attended Wellesley College preparing to major in literature. Like many of us, she switched majors, hers into music, winning at the end of her sophomore year the Billings Prize for Musical Composition. After graduating she stayed on at Wellesley to teach theory and piano in their Music Department. At the same time, she continued her studies at the New England Conservatory of Music. Nadia Boulanger became her teacher during the time she spent in Paris.

Returning to this country she taught music at the Concord Academy in Massachusetts and at the Shady Side School for Girls in Philadelphia. It was there that she grew aware of the lack of appropriate music for female choruses. The need for any arrangements made for mostly untrained voices was particularly dire. She ultimately composed over six hundred pieces in an attempt to meet some of those requirements.

Miss Davis fell ill in the winter of 1979-1980 and died on April 20, 1980. She was eighty-seven years old.

Her vast collection of compositions which included operas, choruses, children's operettas, cantatas, piano and organ pieces and songs were left to Wellesley College. All royalties and proceeds from her pieces continue to support the instruction of various musical instruments at that school.

Written February 9, 2021