

THE MUSICALITY OF FRANCES HUMPHREY HOWARD (1914-2002)

*Remembrance by Wilton S. Dillon, Senior Scholar
Emeritus, Smithsonian Institution, at opening of the La Gesse
Festival at Carnegie Hall, December 9, 2002*

Frances Humphrey Howard's fame as a humanitarian devoted to public service was reinforced by the many obituaries and website testimonials after her death at age 88 in Washington last September 23. Little attention was given to the musicality of her life. She was not a musician. She played no instruments. Her son and daughter attest to her passion for family singing of bits of Handel's "Messiah" at Christmastime in Baltimore. More than the kind of musical experience described by Roger Sessions in describing the interplay between the composer, the performer and the listener, Frances Howard's whole life history can be interpreted by the metaphor of music. One friend compared her conversational gifts to jazz. Her unusual metabolism, shared by her indefatigable brother, Hubert Humphrey, was combined with circadian chemistry which gave her a sense of rhythm in her human relationships. Those of us lucky to be her friends and family remember that we were all caught up in a great chain of giving, receiving and repaying which she forged with charm, grace and intelligence. Her leadership and caring provided a percussion-like beat to help mobilize voluntary cooperation for the common good. (Perhaps I thought of "percussion" because Frances enjoyed a wholesome flirtatious relationship with the National Symphony timpanist and sought personal friendships with various other kinds of performers).

The La Gesse Foundation operating in the spirit of the Florentine Medicis found a kindred soul in the New World when Cecilia di Medici invited Frances to serve on its board at its creation. Her own sense of reciprocity and friendship inspired this series of three musical evenings dedicated to Frances. A video documentary made by Tim White for her 85th birthday party coincidentally borrows from Dvorak's "New World Symphony" as a symbolic soundtrack reminder of Frances' headstart in the Great Plains of South Dakota—far from the musical centers of New York and Europe. Thanks to the Humphrey family's love of music and also to the invention of phonograph recordings, the young Humphreys were exposed to much of the symphonic and operatic repertoires then available on Red Seal records in the 1920's and 30's. These they heard in the family apartment above the famous Humphrey drugstore in Huron, S.D. From Huron, Hubert Horatio Humphrey, Sr. would drive the family to Minneapolis for occasional "provincial" tours of the Metropolitan Opera whose singers were already known to the Humphreys through the famous Saturday afternoon broadcasts.

The world of music opened up even greater for Frances when she arrived as a young woman in Washington to visit a scientist uncle and stayed on for a degree in sociology. Music at the Library of Congress Coolidge auditorium quickened her interest in live chamber music. The cathedrals, churches and temples of Washington resounded

with ecumenical human voices long before the glorious advent of the Kennedy Center . There , Frances would become a faithful fan of opera and other performing arts. She served on the opera board as well as the boards of the National Theatre, the Choral Arts Society and the National Symphony . But it was the mission of La Gesse Foundation that held particular interest. For she shared with Cecilia a passion for providing ways and means of discovering and nurturing talent of the younger generation such as is manifest in the festival launched this evening. Her enthusiasm grew with visits to the La Gesse festivals in France at the Le Gesse chateau near Toulouse. And she took special interest in the collaboration between the foundation and the Peabody Conservatory of the Johns Hopkins University. Frances kept her roots in Baltimore where she lived while working with Eleanor Roosevelt and the United Nations Association.

Though never a residential New Yorker, Frances adored the Big Apple, home to her beloved United Nations and her beloved Eleanor. She would never miss a Democratic Party convention held here . Margaret Mead sought out her anthropological knowledge of political behavior the night of Jimmy Carter's nomination at Madison Square Garden. They watched the rituals from a balcony with Frances serving as Margaret's native guide. Frances loved coming to Manhattan also at springtime to admire the Park Avenue tulips donated by her friend, Mary Lasker. Frances was at home in all kinds of communities, great and small. They were all stages for her musicality, her tuning in to human psyches to celebrate the best in people. The Greek word, *aristos*, meaning "the best" inspired me to use my populist prerogative of anointing her "The Duchess of Huron." We need those kinds of aristocrats in our embattled republic on the brink of war. She was a woman of all continents and all seasons, dancing to all of their beats and rhythms, forever hopeful of finding harmony.