

Narcissa Williamson: Musical dreamer with a practical side

Narcissa Williamson, founder of the Boston Camerata, died May 29 at age 81. Joel Cohen, artistic director of the Camerata, who brought the group to international prominence, has written this tribute to his mentor.

By Joel Cohen
Special to the Globe

Her appearance was anything but charismatic. Short, bespectacled, somewhat disoriented and uncertain in her relation to mere physical reality, softspoken and occasionally hesitant, she could have been mistaken for the stereotypical, timid museum employee or archivist. And the dark, unattractive basement space where the Museum of Fine Arts had seemingly dumped both her and the Galpin Collection of musical instruments did not seem a likely place from which to shape and influence America's cultural history.

Yet Narcissa Williamson, convinced of the importance of her cause, undaunted by physical discomfort, financial penalty, institutional rigidity and public indifference, persisted in her ambitious project: to make the sounds of early instruments live again and to make Boston a world center for the recreation of medieval, Renaissance and Baroque music.

Valued old instruments

When Narcissa founded the Camerata in 1954, the music she loved and believed in had not yet become fashionable. When you heard Bach or Vivaldi, it was on modern orchestral instruments, and you probably did not hear music written before Bach very much at all. Yet Narcissa knew the beauty and importance of early music. As an employee in the MFA's education department, she had pestered the museum hierarchy into taking the magnificent Galpin Collection out of storage, performing important restorations and making the instruments available for study and even performance. Those were the bad old days when European antique dealers were taking old organs and harpsichords, discarding the innards and producing bars or TV consoles with the remaining cabinetry.

She knew about the archival value of old instruments, and in that respect she was ahead of the general ethos of her time; but she also knew that instruments were meant to produce sounds. She encouraged a whole generation of young instrument-makers to set up shop around Boston. The Hubards, Dawds, von Huens and Warnocks of that time learned from the Galpin Collection. They restored instruments from the collection to playing condition, and they even made reproductions, especially for the MFA's growing archive of modern copies — instruments that Narcissa liked to lend to students or scholars or to members of the Camerata.

That is how I, for one, came in 1963 to play the lute. Still in col-

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lege, still a classical guitarist, I was recruited by Victor Mattfield, the Camerata's music director, to play some late pieces at an MFA concert of Elizabethan music. I remember my first visit to that basement sanctuary. Narcissa's look as she sized me up through her bifocals and the Warnock lute she finally decided to place in my hands. It was the first time I had ever held an instrument of that kind and quality.

The Camerata at that time was anything but a professional concert ensemble. It was more a collection of friends, passionately dedicated to a worthy cause. That the music we loved and rehearsed in the MFA's lower depths was to be made public was an essential part of our collective project; but the nature of those public presentations was at times more symbolic or ritual than artistic. For one thing, the instruments we played were as yet imperfectly mapped by their practitioners. Restored lutes and harpsichords and crwthes were eccentric and crinkety, as ancestors often are; the techniques of making good modern copies were still evolving, singing styles were still rooted in 19th-century precepts. And let's face it: Not everyone in the Camerata of yore was a seasoned onstage performer.

I remember a public concert in 1964 of Franco-Flemish music, during which we valiantly attempted to perform Josquin's "Allez-moi" at least three times before we finally succeeded in reaching the final cadence without a performance breakdown. So many stops and starts, of course, made for longer-than-average evenings in the museum's cramped and uncomfortable lecture hall.

Courage and gusto

Narcissa's presence onstage was an extension of her inimitable self. Surrounded by rebec, vielle, viola da gamba and violin, she would attack whatever piece was at hand in a slightly dizzy, off-centered way, yet with great courage and gusto. In the face of an ensemble problem, bad tuning, poor coordination among the parts or whatever, she would simply plow forward, heedless of the wind and weather. It was her way of refusing limits, hers or anyone else's. She knew the music was wonderful, that it had to be heard and that someday many people would grow to love it.

And she was absolutely right. Offstage, it was her refusal to

be fazed or daunted that allowed the Camerata to persevere. Music directors came and went in the early days: the audience was small. (I remember 90 people showing up in the lecture hall for a series concert in 1964 or '65.) At \$5 a rehearsal, \$25 for a concert, performing as a Camerata musician was basically a labor of love. "Upstairs" in the museum hierarchy, no one seemed to have a very

clear idea of the ensemble's current role or future potential.

But Narcissa held on to her minuscule budget, making sure the season's brochure was produced, that the programs were beautifully printed and designed and that the notes were intelligent and literate. (She sometimes wrote them herself.) She kept in touch with her colleagues in other museums, attended performance workshops,

provided untiring support for her friends the instrument-makers, organized a "Friends of Early Music" to help the Camerata and maintained and expanded the museum's instrument holdings.

From her basement office, she observed the goings-on of the music world. I used to enjoy visiting down there, even when no rehearsal was scheduled, because Narcissa, seated behind a messy pile of paperwork, would enjoy gossiping to me about this or that development in our little circle. You had to talk with Narcissa one-on-one to get a real sense of her.

No vagueness or shyness in those conversations; her observations were inevitably sharp, witty and to the point. The legacy she has left was fully evident in those chats. "A flash in the pan," she said of one briefly eminent performer; as predicted, that career was soon on the wane. "Marvelous, elegant playing," she opined

of another beginner, now famous. Best of all, she loved to talk about the beauties of music none of us had yet experienced adequately. "Can you imagine how luscious that must sound!" she would ask about some still-unperfected medieval French music of some unwieldy example of Venetian polyphony. In her mind's ear, she could imagine the beauty of the unheard sound, like a curator of painting reconstructing some lost canvas from notebook sketches.

"The essential is invisible to the eye," wrote Antoine de St. Exupery; so much a dreamer, Narcissa must surely have understood that remark. Yet she was a dreamer with a practical side, and she worked with all her might to make some essential things visible — and audible as well. For her gift of beauty and joy to our generation, and for her own precious self, we remember her with love.

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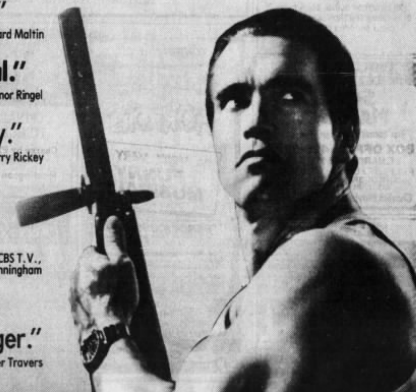
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