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Master Musicians

Meet 12 Noted Composers,
Conductors, and Arrangers

Plus: Virginia-Gene Rittenhouse
Ministers Through Music

Virginia-Gene & Rittenhouse hope & glory (*& Oratorios*)

Kara S. Watkins



Above: Virginia-Gene, 1946.

The Shankels, at home near Atlantic Union College in the late 1940s, hosted popular musical evenings for students, which often featured the trio's performances of African music.



Fine-boned hands lift from the piano as the final notes of an oratorio's opening movement linger a moment more. The audition over, the pianist senses her effort has failed to impress Mademoiselle Nadia Boulanger. The revered composition teacher—who for decades presided over a select roster of students in

pianist, she proclaims: “This music *must* be heard.”

And heard it has been. Already an acclaimed musician and composer when she first played for Boulanger 40 years ago, Virginia-Gene Rittenhouse, DMA, has been sharing her gift for nearly 90 years. The distinguished Seventh-day Adventist musician, composer, and conductor is also the founder and director of the well-traveled New England Youth Ensemble based at Columbia Union College (CUC) in Takoma Park, Md.

The Prodigy

Born in Canada in 1922 and raised in South Africa, Rittenhouse's innate talents flourished under the tutelage of her pianist mother, Win Osborn Shankel. With an extraordinary affinity for the language of music, the toddler immersed herself in its possibilities, inspired by Mozart, Bach, and Schubert. By her early teens, she had performed her own compositions for international audiences, written her first oratorio, and debuted as a soloist with the Cape Town Symphony Orchestra.

When her father, history professor George Shankel, returned the family to North America, Rittenhouse completed an undergraduate degree at the University of Washington. She began teaching violin and piano, first at Walla Walla University (Wash.), then at Atlantic Union College (AUC) in Massachusetts, where she lived with her parents and devoted husband, Harvey Rittenhouse, MD, whom she married in 1950. While at AUC, she commuted to New York City to perform at high-profile venues and study with top instructors at the Juilliard School of Music.

She continued her studies, earning a doctorate from the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, along with prestigious awards and the admiration of audiences, critics, and musicians. But Rittenhouse, always tenacious, optimistic, and fearless, remained firm in her decision to dedicate her immense talents to God.

her Fontainebleau studio outside Paris—could intimidate even the most accomplished musician.

The elderly woman sits in silence, eyes closed and head bowed. A stately clock counts time and the pianist, terrified, prepares herself for rejection. Slowly, Boulanger raises her head, focusing her intense gaze on the younger woman. “I do not know how I can teach you,” she begins quietly, in accented English. “This music has been *heard*, not manufactured. It is like Schubert’s music; it is music that has come to you from. ...” She pauses, waving an elegant hand heavenward. And then, looking directly at the

The Ensemble

This desire to serve the Lord led Rittenhouse in the late 1960s to found the New England Youth Ensemble. Her fresh-faced students often performed at venues and events near AUC, moving audiences with their skillful renditions of Bach and Handel. “There has to be some great possibility here,” she recalls thinking, realizing the youngsters represented the best of America—and Christian youth. The students began performing at larger venues, including New York’s Radio City Music Hall, and in 1973 the fledgling ensemble embarked on its first international tour. Today the ensemble, a group of more than 40



Rittenhouse’s single-minded devotion: “She has nurtured hundreds of musicians over the years. She teaches through example the life lesson of never giving up.”

Rittenhouse’s boundless energy, love for her students, and commitment to her work is inspirational; the music that flows out of every pore—her life’s blood. In May she tuned up her violin for the ensemble’s weekend performances at Carnegie Hall, and this summer she led the group through Europe to perform, along with the classics, her second oratorio, *The Vision of the Apocalypse*. The Revelation-inspired oratorio—from which the first movement Mademoiselle Boulanger insisted had come from God—received a standing ovation after its 2004 Carnegie Hall debut.

“My life has been a series of miracles,” reflects the petite, demure dynamo. The most satisfying of these, certainly, are the doors that have opened for the ensemble to share God’s love through music, to lift the audience’s eyes and ears heavenward, and to give *hope* to all who listen.

Kara Watkins writes from Columbia, Md.

young musicians, continues to perform classical and sacred music worldwide, often with the CUC’s Collegiate Chorale. The chorale’s director, James Bingham, PhD, chair of CUC’s music department, bears witness to Rittenhouse’s visionary talents.

“Virginia is a demanding and strong-willed lady; one that looks far down the line to reach her goals,” says Bingham, who has worked with her since the early 1970s. “It is these very characteristics that have given her the drive and determination to dream beyond the obvious, making her, and all those associated with her, reach for greater success than was thought possible.”

Single-Minded Devotion

One of Rittenhouse’s first piano students at AUC, Dorothy Minchin-Comm, retired professor of English at La Sierra University (Calif.), became a fast friend. Together, they have written two books: *Encore!* and *Curtain Call*, which document the history of the ensemble. “Virginia inspires her students and grows their self-confidence with a positive touch,” notes Minchin-Comm. “Through it all, however, she has this sense of mission. All—all—is done to the glory of God.”

An ensemble member since 1993, Maryland attorney and violinist Renee Battle-Brooks appreciates



The Rittenhouses celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary.