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Abstract

Tribute to Whitman scholar and composer Robert Strassburg.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

IN MEMORIAM:
ROBERT STRASSBURG, 1915-2003

Robert Strassburg, composer, musician, poet, and teacher—who died October 18, 2003, in Laguna Woods, California—may have been the last true Whitman enthusiast. He admired the great Whitman disciples like Horace Traubel and Richard Maurice Bucke, people who fervently believed that Whitman's poetry would eventually transform the world. Bob Strassburg wrote hundreds of letters to friends around the world each year, expressing his "love for the poet's passion, pulse and power." "For more than 150 years, Walt Whitman has been the voice of joyous self-confidence, women's liberation, and religious tolerance," Bob once wrote; "If any one person can be said to be the prophetic soul of what this nation can be, it is Walt Whitman." He read everything by and about Whitman and memorized a large part of *Leaves of Grass*. He had little patience with what he called "ivory tower" arguments about Whitman's work, though he knew them all and argued with them intelligently and passionately. Within days of the publication of each new issue of the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, I would receive a long handwritten critique from Bob, carefully responding to each essay, challenging some, praising others. In his mid-eighties, facing terrible health problems including a worsening eye condition that nearly blinded him, he would mention that he had nonetheless stayed up most of the night to finish reading the latest issue on the very day he had received it.

And he wasn't just reading *WWQR*. He was running Whitman seminars at Leisure World, the retirement village where he lived and where he organized numerous retirees into an active Walt Whitman Fellowship that met regularly, brought in speakers, and carried on the tradition of the Bolton, England, Whitman fellowship that, in the late nineteenth century, met regularly to figure out how Whitman could guide us into the next century. He edited (and wrote most of the copy) for the *Walt Whitman Circle*, a newsletter of the Leisure World Walt Whitman Circle, and he kept it going from 1991 right up to the Winter/Spring 2003 issue, reporting regularly on Whitman events worldwide, reviewing new books on Whitman, and always quoting Whitman's "words of wisdom" that would lead, Bob felt, to "a world of peace and non-violence." He traveled to high schools and colleges to proselytize on Whitman's behalf, and in his final months he was meeting with a new disciple who wanted to learn about Whitman from Bob, the world's most willing mentor. Last year, Bob mounted a letter-writing campaign to political leaders around the world, urging them to "act now for a new beginning, so that no child, woman or man in the world goes to bed hungry," and listing the things "we must do to stem the tides of poverty, war, hatred and envy." Those letters always contained Whitman's words, "Each answering all, / Each sharing the world with all." Bob proudly sent me a copy of a supportive response he had received from George McGovern, in which the former presidential candidate wrote, "What a won-

derful world it would be if your values and those of Walt Whitman should one day prevail.”

Right to the end, too, Bob continued to compose music, much of it based on Whitman’s poetry. His last years were devoted to finishing *Congo Square*, an opera based on Whitman’s encounter with slave auctions while he was editing the New Orleans *Crescent* in 1848. Bob wrote over thirty settings of Whitman’s poetry, including his powerful *Walt Whitman Trilogy* for piano. His *Leaves of Grass* choral symphony was premiered in Tokyo in 1992 and performed in Los Angeles the same year by the Cal State L.A. Symphony Orchestra, the Pasadena City College Chamber Chorale, and the Cal State L.A. Concert Choir. Much of Bob’s music is available on CD, including Thomas Hampson’s performance (on his 1997 *To the Soul* EMI recording) of Bob’s setting of “Prayer of Columbus.”

At the “Whitman 2000” international conference in Beijing, Bob was honored as the Millennial Whitman Composer, and we had planned an evening concert featuring a performance of Bob’s *Whitman Trilogy* for piano, to be played by one of Bob’s former students, who had become a renowned concert pianist. Unfortunately, she became ill and had to cancel out of the Beijing event, so Bob told me he would play the pieces himself. A week or so before the conference, I called Bob because I had not heard from him for a couple of weeks, and I was worried, because I was accustomed to weekly letters from him and usually phone calls too. When I finally got him on the phone, his voice seemed drained of its usual energy, and I asked if anything was wrong. “No,” he said quietly, “I’ll see you in Beijing.”

And see him I did: as the cab pulled up to our hotel near the Peking University campus, Bob struggled out of the car with his right arm in a sling. While rehearsing the *Whitman Trilogy* at his home, he had gotten up from the piano, felt faint, and fell, breaking his collarbone. But he was determined to play in Beijing, and so he had not told me about his injury, fearing that I might insist he stay home. When I asked him how in the world he thought he was going to perform, he said simply that he’d be fine. Assured by his son, Marc, a physician who accompanied Bob to China, that Bob would be able to make it through the performance, I decided not to cancel the concert.

When I got to the concert hall the evening of the concert, Bob arrived, looking distraught. On the cab ride over, he had lost his glasses and so now could not read the music. He would have to play the difficult pieces largely from memory. So, with broken collarbone and virtually sightless, Bob weakly walked up on the stage of the packed Peking University auditorium, where he promptly popped a nitroglycerin pill to relieve his angina. I introduced him and, with great trepidation, handed him the microphone. It was at that moment the transformation took place: the frail man became the veteran performer, and he charmed the audience with his commentary on the music and with an energetic and memorable performance of his trilogy. He also played a new piece he had written for the occasion, a setting for voice and piano of Chinese writer Li YeGuang’s poem “To Whitman.” It was an unbelievable accomplishment. Afterwards, Chinese students crowded around to get their picture taken with the amazing Dr. Strassburg. That evening, it was easy to see why he had once been named the Outstanding Professor at Cal State L.A. On the way back to the hotel, Bob found his glasses in his coat pocket.

Behind all the many things he was—professor of music for many years at several institutions; student of Igor Stravinsky; founder of the Greater Miami Youth Symphony; scholar of the music of Ernest Bloch; composer of countless documentary film scores and Torah services and Psalm-settings; founding faculty member of the Brandeis Institute—Bob was at heart a poet. He put Whitman’s words to work in his music, his teaching, and his life, and he made the poet’s words sing. He published a book of his own poetry, *Fire and Fret*, in 1977 and continued writing poetry almost to the day he died. His last poem is dated October 2, 2003:

In the sweeping spread of history
We shall never know
all the meaning
All the glow
around us.

This multi-talented man, who believed Whitman’s poetry would change that “sweeping spread of history,” who put a musical glow around Whitman’s words, who approached every moment of his life with passion, will be missed by the Whitman community that he so enriched for many decades.

—Ed Folsom



Robert Strassburg in Beijing, 2001.

