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The Spirit of Richard F. French '37

Christoph Wolff

OUR MUSIC LIBRARY CANNOT CELEBRATE ITS JUBILEE without paying tribute to its greatest benefactor. I don't want to do this in a formal manner because this is neither the place for it nor would it be in line with his wishes. Dick French was not at all fond of stiff and official customs, though he always liked to dress rather stylishly. Therefore, some personal recollections about a friendship of thirty years seem more appropriate.

I became acquainted with Richard F. French '37 several years before joining the Harvard faculty. Dick was then the Tangeman Professor of Sacred Music at Union Theological Seminary, an institution in the immediate vicinity of Columbia University, where I taught from 1970 to 1976, and literally around the corner from where I lived on Riverside Drive. Harvard, of course, was not on the horizon when the two of us first met, so back then we never talked about Harvard or libraries. Subjects of our discussions were sacred music, choral and organ literature, i.e., the areas where our scholarly interests most closely intersected, but also early music in general. Dick had been a board member and important supporter of the once highly influential but now long defunct ensemble, the *New York Pro Musica*.

I was approached by Harvard in the spring of 1975, when I was on leave from Columbia and serving as visiting professor at Princeton. My very first visit to the Harvard Music Building included—how could it have been different—a tour of the Eda Kuhn Loeb Music Library. And surely, when I went through the stacks I was absolutely overwhelmed by the Library's impressive holdings. I focused primarily on the older materials that I had never seen in such completeness in an open-stack area elsewhere, especially books, periodicals, and editions from the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries. At the same time, I was quite taken aback to discover that the library was unimaginably weak in the area of recent musicological and musical materials, notably new critical editions (the new Wagner edition, for example, was missing) and scores of contemporary music. The comparatively small music libraries at Columbia and Princeton were far better equipped in this respect.

I shared my surprise and considerable concern with Elliot Forbes, who was then chair of the Music Department. It happened that only a few weeks later and by total coincidence I ran into El Forbes on the streets of Manhattan, near Columbus Circle, around noontime on a crisp and bright spring day in 1975. El was accompanied by Dick French, a close friend from his Harvard College days, and they were on the way to lunch at the midtown Harvard Club, but not in a hurry. So we chatted for a while on the spacious sidewalk at the corner of Central Park. Among other things, I learned

Harvard Library Bulletin 25



This photo was given to Virginia Danielson by Richard French for public display. "Here is the dope on this picture," French wrote. "I like it first of all because it's really me in a typical quizzical, half-disgusted mood, in a position where no one can see me, in the last row of a classroom at Yale where something was being said that wasn't sitting well, obviously ... I like it because it was taken by Eugene Cook ... a master photographer."

that Dick French, whom I knew much better than El Forbes at that time, chaired the Visiting Committee of the Harvard Music Department. He had heard from El about my report on the Library and was appalled when he found out that the Music Library's budget (the Library was at the time an integral part of the Music Department) had been rather significantly cut in recent years and that the money was spent in other ways.

I had by no means made up my mind about Harvard's invitation, but Dick's position was very clear regardless of whatever decision I would make: the Library's acquisition budget had to be fixed and stabilized. Therefore he decided more or less immediately to put up a challenge fund of \$40,000 to be matched by the Dean of the Faculty of Arts & Sciences. This way Henry Rosovsky, then Dean of the Faculty, became directly aware of the problem—a fairly small problem compared to others facing the Faculty. Nevertheless, Henry took it seriously and insisted on a thorough review of the situation when I joined the Music Department. The result is history. The review committee, which I chaired and which also involved an outside consultant, Ruth Watanabe of the Sibley Music Library of the Eastman School of Music, recommended the administrative separation of the Music Library from the Department and its full integration into the Harvard College Library—a move that was swiftly executed, and well in time for the appointment of Michael Ochs as the new librarian.

Dick French had set the wheels in motion that clearly defined the Library's future course, but he also kept an eye on further developments even after he had completed his term on the Visiting Committee. One of the projects in which he took an immense interest was the expansion and renovation of the Isham Library, our special collections unit. He remembered from his own college years its pathbreaking if modest beginnings at Harvard's Memorial Church as a collection of photocopies of primary sources of historical organ music. After World War II the Isham Library quickly grew into the largest academic microfilm collection of musical sources in a wide spectrum of historical repertoires, first with an emphasis on pre-1600 materials and eventually expanding broadly into later periods. The collection became a sub-department of the Music Library in 1972 and received an urgently needed upgrade of its facilities in the early 1980s.

Dick French did not have to be persuaded that the Isham Library played an important part in the scholarly lives of our musicology faculty and students, so he quickly decided to put up the bulk of the funds necessary to convert Isham into what at the time could be called a state-of-the-art facility. He tremendously enjoyed watching our graduate students' enthusiastic response to a completely refurbished facility with comfortable work stations, new microfilm readers, and reader-printers. He no less enjoyed walking proudly into the new Isham Library through a newly created exhibition gallery, appropriately named after the principal donor, for he had always strongly advocated that the library should create a more inviting atmosphere in order to attract students and visitors to its great variety of riches.

Harvard Library Bulletin 27

After the successful completion of the Isham project Dick stressed that he was less interested in the “brick and mortar side” of the Library’s future than in the well-being and adequate support of its staff and principal patrons. This led to two extraordinary gifts: first, a prize fellowship for our most dedicated and accomplished doctoral students that would become available after his lifetime; second, an endowed chair for the music librarian that would become effective in 1988. He was certainly aware of the fact that he thereby initiated the first endowed music librarianship in the world and he very much hoped that it would send a signal. To this effect Harvard organized in 1989 a symposium in celebration of the Richard F. French Music Librarianship that deliberately put the spotlight on the role of music libraries in nourishing musical scholarship.

None of us, however, were prepared for the final gift that made Dick French the greatest benefactor of the Eda Kuhn Loeb Music Library in its first half century. His will specified that the bulk of his estate would be added to the Richard F. French Library Fund he had established nearly thirty years before his death in May 2001. Hence, at the end of fiscal 2005 the Fund stood at well over \$6 million—an extraordinary legacy made by an extraordinary friend of Harvard, whose spirit of generosity enriched its Music Department and Music Library in perpetuity.

After Dick’s death on May 18, 2001 a letter addressed to me was found on his desk, inside an unsealed and stamped envelope. The letter of a very personal nature reads at the end, “You may have heard already that my companion of 50 years, Carl Miller, has pancreatic cancer and is dying slowly—probably 3-4 weeks more. It is not a happy time nor easy for me...” The letter, dated 21 April, two days before Dick went to Yale New Haven Hospital, never to return, represents a wonderful testimonial of Dick’s character. First, it shows that he, not realizing that his own days were numbered as well, was primarily concerned about others. Second, he apparently didn’t post the letter because of an inadvertent mistyping of my name on the envelope, “Woolf”—he always wanted things to be right. And, of course, he clearly knew that what he had done about the Harvard Library for him was the right thing to do.

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