

Songs for my Mother

Carol Ann Weaver tours new song collection

STORY AND PHOTO BY DAVE ROGALSKY

Eastern Canada Correspondent
WATERLOO, ONT.

More than 20 years after the death of her mother, Miriam (Lehman) Weaver, Carol Ann Weaver, emeritus music professor at Conrad Grebel University College, turned her mother's journals, letters and later writings into her latest song cycle, *Songs for my Mother*, which she toured recently through Virginia, Ontario and Manitoba.

Weaver says of her mother, "A natural musician, she was limited in her expression because, as the child of an Eastern Mennonite College faculty member, musical instruments were not allowed in the home." After marrying Melvin Weaver, they set out under the Virginia Mennonite Conference to "a highly challenging area in Appalachian Kentucky to work under the Virginia Mennonite Conference, teaching, establishing a church and doing 'community development' long before the term existed."

During these years she kept a journal, keeping a detailed record of living without many modern amenities, living among Hard Shell (Primitive) Baptists, carrying water, using flat irons to smooth wrinkles in clothing, all of this far from her nearest neighbours.

As to why it took so long for her to look at and set her mother's words to music, Weaver says that they seemed so heavy after her mother's death in 1996. She was afraid to be overwhelmed by the emotions. But finally the timing was right and, sitting in her backyard, she read the journals, saying the words "fell into songs" immediately, and those who listened were enriched by the outcome.

The nine-song cycle includes three works from her mother's early journals, a poem of her mother's written at the birth of Weaver's daughter Myra, three soundscapes with piano and vocalizations from a mother-daughter trip to Africa, and two based on her mother's last words as she

died from an aggressive form of leukemia.

The lullaby-like "Lately Sprung," catches the emotions of joy at a new birth, gently played and sung: "So lately sprung / my little one / In the dark you journeyed the dark tunnel / further joys and sorrows still to come / in care of newly named guardian angel / to watch you day and night / kept by love of God / of Father / of Mother."

The songs based on the early journals speak of isolation, of the grinding work of ironing with wood-stove-heated flat irons, of sewing feed-sack curtains, and of the interminable singing and preaching at a Hard Shell Baptist funeral. The latter two songs describe physical aspects of their

house and the distance from neighbours while portraying "a sense of starting life from scratch."

While all the songs are associated with her mother, the three African ones, with their significantly different style, give a break in the intensity of Weaver's mother's last words. Beautiful and lyrical, they include nature sounds from Africa recorded by Weaver and vocalizations by sopranos Mary-Catherine Pazzano and Margaret Elligson Hull.

In "Crossing Over" and "To the End," the grief of impending loss by someone who very much enjoyed living is matched with music that heightens the emotions. "Hoping they [her family] go as far as they can for me / Hoping that they can be there for me," speaks to Weaver's mother's fear on this new journey: "Death is the hardest thing that I ever had to face / nothing can take away the sense of sadness at giving up life, very precious to me." ❧



During the Nov. 30, 2017, performance of Songs for My Mother at Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ont., Carol Ann Weaver, left, describes the flat irons like those used by her late mother, as Catherine-Mary Pazzano, soprano, looks on.

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