



In the early years of the 17th century, at Nipe Bay in northeastern Cuba, three fishermen weathered a tumultuous storm and prayed for deliverance. When the skies cleared, they found a statue of a girl floating in the water, with an inscription saying *I Am the Virgin of Charity*. As a tribute to this miracle, *La Virgen de la Caridad* became the patroness of Cuban Catholics. Three and a half centuries later, thousands of Cubans would take to similarly stormy waters to flee **Fidel Castro's** revolution; many died at sea, others were borne by still waters to a new life in a new land. One of those immigrants was Yda Garcia Lence, whose granddaughter **Elena Lence Talley** — clarinetist and founding member of Our Town's Lyric Arts Trio and principal music librarian of the Kansas City Symphony and the Lyric Opera of Kansas City — wanted to honor the memory of her courageous grandmother, who died in 2009 at the age of 98.

It was these images of water, the protective Marian patroness, and immigrants seeking a better life that piqued composer **Jean Belmont Ford's** imagination when she began composing *En la Memoria: Yda Garcia Lence*, on a commission from Elena and her Trio with the assistance of a grant from the Arts Council of Metropolitan Kansas City. The 10-minute chamber piece receives its world premiere on August 29 at Grace and Holy Trinity Cathedral, on the final concert of the Summer Music at the Cathedrals series. The members of the Lyric Arts Trio are clarinetist Elena, soprano **Sarah Tannehill** and pianist **Dan Velicer**.

"My grandmother was an unusual woman for her generation," says Elena of Yda, a strong, independent woman who earned a doctorate and taught English while still in Cuba — before her immigration to Wisconsin in the late 1950s with her husband, Ramón and two sons. "In her youth she was a bit of a pistol, she had a lot of fire in her," Elena says. "She was a very strong woman. I remember her saying once, 'Don't worry, if a bad man comes into the house, I will hit him in the head with a rock.'"

As a child Elena always felt safe around Yda, whom she remembers both for her cooking skills ("she was fierce in the kitchen") and for the clothes she would make for her and her sister. "She made beautiful things. I always had a new dress for the beginning of school, she made my prom dresses. She had excellent taste." These and other aspects of Yda's personality sparked Jean's imagination, as she decided to use excerpts from Alfred Lord Tennyson's great epic poem *In memoriam A.H.H.* for the piece. "Calm on the seas, and silver sleep, and waves that sway themselves in rest," sings the soprano, in verses that highlight rest and comfort but also "the larger hope," Jean says, "the glory of the sum of things." "Grandma was both Catholic and spiritual," Elena adds. "She held to traditional Catholic faith but also had that spiritualism, that sort of magical realism. Any time a family member was traveling or sick, she would say, 'I'm sending you white light.' She talked a lot about angels, too, they were a big part of her faith."



"I really admire the spirit of all these different people," Jean adds, "the spirit of the Trio, the spirit of the Arts Board that supported them, and the spirit of a woman who would take her own family and flee her country. All she had was her faith. This is a tribute to that spirit." Jean, who recently turned 70, is one of America's most respected compositional voices. She resides in the Kansas City area and still composes steadily — about two works a year on average. Locally her works have been performed by the Kansas City Chorale and the Kansas City Chamber Orchestra, and in 2009 her *Electa* was on the Grammy Award-winning CD *Spotless Rose: Hymns to the Virgin Mary*, with Our Town's Charles Bruffy conducting the Phoenix Chorale.

An unabashed Romanticist, Jean has written a piece for the Lyric Arts Trio that is both lush and delicate, Elena says, and beautifully written for the voice. She cried the first time Jean played through it for them. "It's a very powerful piece, I had an almost visceral reaction to it. Jean's music is so dense and layered. It's not minimalist: If there's such a word, it's *maximalist*."



For her own part Jean experienced some challenges of her own while writing the piece: The removal of a squamous cell carcinoma on her right hand made composing into a difficult process. "I had to retrain in order to be able to operate again as a composer, to train my hand to play the piano. ... Every single aspect of this was written with that healing hand. The piece became a motivational force." Appropriately, for the final lines of the piece Jean has used an ex-voto prayer to the Virgin that Elena's father, Julio, helped her translate from the Spanish:

Salve, salve! Delicias del cielo, / Salve, salve! delicias de la tierra ... Madre Hermosa de la Caridad! ("Hail, delight of the sky, hail, delight of the earth" ... Beautiful mother of Charity!"). The

final prayer unites beautifully the strong images of water, sky, Charity, healing, the Virgin Mary — and of the strong woman who fled her homeland to build a new life for her family.

The Lyric Arts Trio's program, which is at 2 p.m. August 29, also includes music of Mozart, Vaughan Williams, Gordon Jacob, Gottfried Herrmann, Srul Irving Glick and Stella Sung.

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