

THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF ROY ANDREW JOHNSON JR.

Marilyn Biery, AAGO

THE POWER of music to transcend human thought and expression is recognized and appreciated by people in all walks of life and musical backgrounds. Music can express joy, sadness, grief, longing, desire, passion, and almost any sentiment known. Music can express the inexpressible. This is one reason why we turn to composers in times of deep emotion, in the hopes that the music composed will express something of what has been experienced, and translate it into tangible expression that will inspire, comfort, and strengthen. Music can promote healing, enable understanding or acceptance of something totally incomprehensible, can honor an individual or an event, or can express homage to a life and career dedicated to serving others.

The life of Roy Andrew Johnson Jr., AMusD, AAGO (1936–95), was one of deep faith; abiding love for his family, friends, church communities, and colleagues, as he dedicated his life to organ performance and teaching. Roy was unassuming, gentle, and kind, and known as something of a “hidden jewel” in the southern Arizona desert as he performed, taught, and guided his students at the University of Arizona—always with a word of encouragement and a smile—in his work as professor of music and director of graduate studies in music.

Professor of organ for 29 years at the University of Arizona, Roy’s life came to a sudden, brutal end when, on February 28, 1995, he was murdered while returning home from a university faculty recital. He was 58 years old. Concertgoers saw Roy enter his car after the program. He was never seen alive again. He was abducted, robbed, and beaten to death. His badly beaten body was found in a desert wash, four days after his disappearance, when helicopter searchers spotted his tuxedo-clad form from the air, his music scattered around him.

The exact details of Roy’s abduction and death are not known. What is known is that the murderer was a methamphetamine addict who stole Roy’s car and credit cards and who then went on a spending spree after beating Roy to death. The murderer was apprehended two days before Roy’s body was found. He was tried for and convicted of premeditated first-degree murder, felony murder, kidnapping, and robbery. He is on death row in an Arizona prison, in maximum security, and is currently going through the lengthy appellate process.

Roy was an exceptional human being. He was kind. He was compassionate. He was witty. He was a scholar, a professor, a consummate musician and performer, a husband, a father, and a friend. He practiced his art with passion, skill, and refinement. Considered the sacred music mentor for the city of Tucson and southern Arizona, he practiced the art of sacred music all his life, both as organist and organist-choirmaster in churches in Michigan, Illinois, and Arizona.

Although Roy was murdered in the prime of his life, he touched the lives of hundreds of students and untold others, and he leaves a lasting legacy, which lives on in the lives of his students, his choristers, the University of Arizona, and the larger Tucson commu-



nity. Just months before his death, he achieved his dream of installing and dedicating a recital instrument for the University of Arizona.

His family mourns him still. Roy’s son, Eric, is active in the organbuilding community as head voicer for Quimby Pipe Organs. His daughter, Jennifer, is an attorney with the Arizona Legislature. He has a granddaughter who was born after his death. His widow, Dusty, retired from an administrative position at the university after 26 years and still serves as director of music at Northminster Presbyterian Church in Tucson, the church where she and Roy served as a team. She is currently dean of the Southern Arizona AGO Chapter.

To commemorate the tenth anniversary of Roy’s death, a conference entitled “Celebrating the Organ” was held in Tucson in March 2005. James Biery was commissioned to write a piece in Roy’s memory. It was requested that the piece be approachable in its harmonic language and technical difficulty, and appropriate for concerts or worship. *Elegy* was first performed by Pamela Decker, professor of music at the University of Arizona, on March 5, 2005, at Grace St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Tucson. Biery is director of music at the Cathedral of St. Paul in St. Paul, Minnesota. He has been an organist and church musician for nearly 30 years. An active composer and performer, Biery has over 100 compositions in print with MorningStar Music Publishers, Boosey & Hawkes, GIA, OCP, Augsburg, and Concordia.

James Biery’s *Elegy* is based on the Swedish folk tune, “Tryggare kan ingen vara,” paired with the text, “Children of the Heavenly Father.” This hymn, reflective of Roy’s cultural heritage and much beloved by the Johnson family, was sung as a lullaby to the Johnson children, and was sung at Roy Johnson’s funeral. It was one of several hymns suggested to Biery at the beginning of

the commission, and he chose it, not knowing its emotional significance until after the piece was completed.

Biery used the form of a passacaglia, a form he has used several times to great effect, because it lends itself beautifully to a steady building of emotional tension. In a musical way, *Elegy* tells a story of a life full of love and dedicated service—beginning with the inevitable unfolding of the theme, continuing through a triumphant and confident crescendo intertwined with the anguish of a terrible tragedy, followed by heartrending, plaintive statements of longing and sadness, and culminating in a sweet, sorrowful, yet eternally hopeful presentation of the tune.

The theme of the passacaglia is the bass line of Biery’s original, three-voice harmonization of the tune, found at the end of *Elegy* (Ex. 1). *Elegy* begins with four notes, the first four notes of “Tryggare kan ingen vara”; a first statement of the theme in the pedal follows—in a departure from the traditional passacaglia exposition, there is no solo statement of the theme. The theme, presented in a crescendo through seven repetitions, builds to a climax in the traditional manner, using gradual registration changes and progressive intensity of rhythm. The climax of the seven variations, however, unexpectedly shifts at the last minute to modulate to the relative minor, bypassing a triumphant cadence and expressing instead a feeling of sorrow (Ex. 2).

Elegy’s structure provides a mechanism for the music to convey spiritual beliefs and convictions, obvious to any listener who ponders the dramatic and heartrending story of Roy Johnson’s death and his family’s unending grief. The opening four notes of the hymn tune could be understood to represent the presence and guidance of God, followed by an exposition of building confidence and grace as the music ascends through motifs that rise higher and higher. Toward the middle of this section a pedal point (A) conveys stability and strength (Ex. 3), followed by an explosion of intensity as the music crescendos to a magnificent statement of faith (Ex. 4). However, just as the high point of the piece is reached, an *Allargando*, with a change to the minor mode, provides an emotional shift to the contemplation of inexplicable tragedy.

Three statements in the relative minor follow; the first two contain a solo on the Swell Oboe, conveying an almost unbearable sweetness and tenderness after the intensity of the crescendo. A third statement, on the 8’ foundations, speaks to the global, basic human need for reassurance and hope. Then the complete statement of the hymn tune appears, on an 8’ flute, set off from the rest of the piece by a grand pause as well as a slower tempo and change in registration (again, see Ex. 1). *Elegy* concludes with a restatement of the first presentation of the theme—and from this repetition we can be reassured that all life, even throughout such a dramatic and terrible story, is always in the hand of God, and that the beginning and the end are always the same—we are, indeed, “Children of the heavenly Father,” as Roy Johnson so fervently believed.

1. Children of the heav'nly Father safely in his bosom gather; nestling bird or star in heaven such a refuge ne'er was given.

2. God his own doth tend and nourish, in his holy courts they flourish. From all evil things he spares them, in his mighty arms he bears them.

3. Neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever; unto them his grace he showeth, and their sorrows all he knoweth.

4. Though he giveth or he taketh, God his children ne'er forsaketh; his the loving purpose solely to preserve them pure and holy.

Marilyn Biery, AAGO, DMA, is associate director of music at the Cathedral of St. Paul in St. Paul, Minn., a position she has shared with James Biery since 1996. An ardent supporter of composers and performer of new music, she has collaborated with Libby Larsen, Stephen Paulus, David Evan Thomas, James Hopkins, Pamela Decker, and others. She is editor of the new Concert Organ Music Series at MorningStar Music. Biery earned bachelor and master of music degrees in organ from Northwestern University, and a doctorate from the University of Minnesota. Her texts and music are published by MorningStar, GIA, Oregon Catholic Press, Alliance, and Augsburg.

Stardust (Dusty) Johnson is director of music at Northminster Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Ariz., where she has served for 30 years, 14 of those as part of a musical leadership team with her late husband, Roy, as organist. She held several administrative positions at the University of Arizona during her 26-year tenure there. She is a board member or officer in several organizations, including the University of Arizona School of Music Advisory Board, the Retirees Association, the board of directors of Homicide Survivors, and the American Guild of Organists. She has given frequent presentations locally and nationally on the devastating impacts of homicide. Her family includes a son, who is a pipe organ builder, a daughter, who is an attorney with the Arizona Legislature, and a granddaughter.

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Example 1

Slower; Reflective

Example 2

Example 3

Example 4

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