



Ysaye Maria Barnwell Honored as Fellow by The Hymn Society

Dr. Ysaye Barnwell leads a double life. Artist and scientist, singer and researcher, performer and lecturer, she is living proof of the strength of the oral tradition in music, demonstrating in living sound what cannot be conveyed through the printed page. Best known as a member of the a cappella vocal ensemble Sweet Honey in the Rock, she is now an independent singer, song leader, composer, author, and lecturer. She has introduced thousands of people to communal singing through her workshops on “Building A Vocal Community: Singing in the African-American Tradition.” This tradition is based on song as a prime social bond. It unites the participants through folk hymns of unparalleled faith and intensity.

Barnwell’s musical life began at age two-and-a-half when she started violin studies with her father, who had named her in honor of the great Belgian violinist Eugène-Auguste Ysaÿe. But her higher education was in the sciences, particularly the study of verbal communication. Her professional degrees include a Master’s Degree in Speech Pathology, 1968 (The State University of New York [SUNY], Geneseo), a Doctorate of Philosophy in Speech Pathology, 1975 (University of Pittsburgh), and a Master of Science in Public Health from Howard University, 1981.

Settling in Washington, DC, in 1976, she founded the All Souls Jubilee Singers, teaching spirituals and gospel songs to audiences unaware of their existence. When the founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock saw her at work, she immediately invited her to join the group. Ysaye’s distinctive three-octave voice provided the bass sound for their improvisations. She began composing and arranging as well as singing, changing her life radically as she toured and recorded with this ground-breaking, phenomenally successful women’s ensemble.

Throughout these years Barnwell won acclaim not only for her singing, but also for her research into spirituals and gospel hymns, as well as related work songs and protest songs. In addition to fulfilling commissions for professional and amateur choral ensembles, she has worked with dance companies and symphony orchestras and at children’s hospitals and folk festivals. An accomplished actress, she has appeared in the television show *A Man Called Hawk*, and in the film *Beloved*. Her credits include voice-overs and narration for documentary films.

Her achievements were recognized in 1998 with the awarding of an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from SUNY Geneseo. This has been followed by six additional honorary degrees. As well as the publication of numerous anthems and arrangements, four charming children’s books have appeared in recorded form, as befits their oral heritage.

Since Barnwell’s retirement after thirty-five years with Sweet Honey in the Rock, she has continued traveling as a sought-after clinician bringing hymns and spirituals, civil rights and protest songs in the oral tradition to audiences in the United States,

Canada, Great Britain, and Australia. Within minutes of being introduced to an audience she has them singing in four parts, recreating these powerful songs with people who had never suspected their ability to make such music. She has served on the faculties of Gallaudet University and Howard University's School of Dentistry. She has presented workshops on computer technology in the arts and required that a Sign Language interpreter be present at all her concerts.

Barnwell lives out her conviction that singing is a basic human activity which serves both artistic and social needs. She has studied the science of both the human voice and the hearing ear which enables it. She is a contemporary griot, an elder who shares with new generations the history and culture of her people. She reminds us that human beings have sung together since the beginning of time, uniting in mutual celebration and mourning, working and playing, loving and worshiping together. The Hymn Society is delighted to honor her extraordinary achievements today.

This information was prepared by Alice Parker, FHS, and is provided for release by J. Michael McMahon, Executive Director of The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada, 5 Thomas Circle, NW, 4th floor, Washington, DC 20005-4153. For more information, please contact Dr. McMahon at mike@thehymnsociety.org or 800-843-8966.

Founded in 1922, The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada is an ecumenical organization of people who are passionate about hymns and congregational song. The Hymn Society community, open to all, is made up of scholars, church musicians, poets, composers, choir directors, choir members, clergy, worship planners, song leaders, music publishers, music educators, and people who love to sing. We believe that the holy act of singing together shapes faith, heals brokenness, transforms lives, and renews peace. Our mission, therefore, is to encourage, promote, and enliven congregational song.