

A COMPLETE LIFE: RICHARD WAYNE DIRKSEN - THE MAN AND THE MUSICIAN

Start with his majestic height (6' 4") and then with the athletic grace with which he always carried it. I can distinctly remember visiting the Dirksens' 3022 Wisconsin Ave. apartment at age six and having my head barely reach the level of his belt buckle. Then add the great head with the often unruly hair, which, as he grew older, gave him increasingly the look of a prophet and a seer. Mr. Dirksen's athletic ability was definitely in evidence during my choir days in the fifties. He was always the designated softball pitcher at our yearly choir party in early June, held near his house in Bethesda where the family moved after Wisconsin Avenue. We choirboys held his legendary athletic ability and strength in awe. He often participated in our touch football games and was said - we all believed this - to have thrown a paper airplane over the Great Choir of the Cathedral from the area now referred to as the Garth. I can vividly recall his description of a boating trip on the Potomac in the '70s after which he proudly told me, "Well, the Old Man showed them." He had apparently mastered the none too easy art of water skiing. After retiring, he spent a lot of time on the golf course with his sons and friends. I gather his game was quite respectable. He had a great capacity to enjoy himself and focus easily on whatever he was doing.

Mr. Dirksen grew up in Free port, Illinois. I remember he and his wife Jo's laughter when they told my mother, who was from Kokomo, Indiana, and was a kindred spirit, that nothing had ever happened in Free port except a Lincoln-Douglas Debate in which the latter announced his Free port Doctrine. Be that as it may, this deeply rooted Midwesterner grew up with an organ business located in the barn in his backyard and also with a pipe organ IN his house. His extraordinary talent at the keyboard was evident quite early. His mother, Maude, played the organ in church and was an extremely warm, magnetic, tall woman around whom a group of people always seem to gather. His father, Dugan, was the quiet, somewhat withdrawn master craftsman. He was so creative and skillful with his hands that he could construct custom-made model railroad engines from scratch! His model train layout was said to be truly fabulous - an interest which Wayne later pursued avidly with his own Bethesda basement layout, which I thought was magical and a thing of wonder. Wayne, the eldest son, was to have both of their qualities in full measure: the charismatic conductor and spellbinding talker combined together with the composer working in isolation, crafting some of the best church music written in twentieth century America, and the meticulous Canon Precentor - the first layman to ever hold this position in the Episcopal Church - carefully planning a service down to the smallest detail, especially the beautiful Christmas TV broadcasts.

Wayne's sister, Phyllis, told me a wonderful story about life in the Dirksen household in Free port. One night Wayne was having trouble sleeping and went downstairs to the organ and starting playing Bach's Passaglia and Fugue in C Minor at about two in the morning, awakening his mother who said, "What ARE you doing! It's the middle of the night," and ordered him to stop immediately, which he did. The next day neighbors up and down the street inquired, "Maude, did you make Wayne stop playing last night. What a shame!" When I told Phyllis that Wayne was like a father to me as

he was to a great many people, his sister answered, "Wayne was like a father to me too." Despite his incredibly full professional life which was totally centered in his beloved Cathedral, Mr. Dirksen had to a remarkable degree the ability to give easily and freely of himself and to touch the lives of so many students, choirboys, Glee Club members, and endless friends, musical colleagues, and associates. He was very much a family man - totally part of a very warm family circle in a small Midwestern town. The center of his life and his anchor always was his wife, Jo. They were sweethearts in high school and remained so all their lives. They raised a large family of wonderful kids who are all creative in one way or another - their daughter Laura became a renowned street performer and juggler in Baltimore - and also fiercely loyal to their parents. As a creative person in this house of creative people, Jo often collaborated with Wayne by writing the librettos for his operettas performed by the STA-NCS Glee Club in the spring. They were fabulous parents and a great team. In all visits to their house - their oldest son Rick and I have been friends since we were very little -, I never once heard a harsh word between them. Mr. Dirksen was a very gentle person at home - very unlike the public persona of the conductor who could manage any rehearsal easily, no matter how big - he just commanded instant respect. It must have been during one of Rich's birthday parties when lots of little boys were running wildly through the house and someone began banging very loudly on his treasured grand piano; he plaintively said in real, quiet desperation, "Boys, please don't do that to the piano." On another occasion when I had proudly brought my new summer camp fencing sabers and masks out to Bethesda to show Rick, Mr. Dirksen donned a mask and took me on. Jo said from the sidelines, "Come on, Wayne, you've seen enough Erol Flynn movies to do better than that!"

Another very striking thing about Mr. Dirksen was his wonderful hands. He had an enormous reach of 1/10th and the incredible coordination that great organists need. Of all the organists I have known, Mr. Dirksen was by far the best pianist. Many years of accompanying Choral Society rehearsals and concerts had made him an incredible sight reader, as Day Thorpe, the Washington Star music critic once pointed out in a column. Throughout his life, Mr. Dirksen was active well beyond his core area of sacred music in the greater Washington musical community. He played chamber music with members of the NSO and even made some records with them. It was an incredible experience for young kids to be exposed to such a great musician. One incident is fixed in my memory. There was a hymn in 1940 book (# 598 with the tune titled Ely Cathedral) which had a particularly rich, full and demanding piano part. Mr. Dirksen played it so beautifully and so powerfully that I, as a junior choirboy in training, was simply so stunned and thrilled that I have never forgotten it. Like many composers, Mr. Dirksen was a great improviser. Dr. Callaway, who would rarely give up his place on the organ bench in my choir days, would willingly surrender it to Mr. Dirksen, an acknowledged master of improvisation, during communion, whereupon we would be treated to an incredibly varied and fascinating flow of musical ideas and tonalities. Mr. Dirksen had a great advantage as an organist, since he understood the instrument so well, having grown up the son of an organ builder. Wayne served the cathedral again and again in the capacity of in-house organ consultant, helping to totally redesign the organ in Bethlehem Chapel, with his father the portative organ often used in Choral

musicians and friends from all over the country last August. Mr. Dirksen was truly a uniquely American composer with his own distinct voice and idiom, who, although he spent his entire professional life at his beloved cathedral in Washington, was still, like Dr. Callaway, a man deeply rooted in the Midwest and in the broader American musical language and heritage. That musical imagination and that piano of his, which he so dearly loved, was the birthplace of a rich, varied legacy of sacred choral music which has earned him a place among the highest ranks of contemporary American church composers.

Mr. Dirksen was always quick to see the creative possibilities of new technologies. In the early '50s, he owned the first tape recorder that I had ever seen, and I was fascinated by it. It was used in part to record nightly radio broadcasts of the "Lone Ranger," which could then be replayed the next day; Rich's bedtime was just before the show came on, and it was every boy's favorite in those days. No account of Mr. Dirksen's creative activities or interest in technology would be complete without mentioning his lifetime friend and collaborator, Tom Nelson. They had first linked up, as I heard Tommy tell it, at the Carter Barron Amphitheater where RWD had been commissioned to write the musical score for the opening dedication extravaganza called "Faith of Our Fathers. I can remember attending a performance and spotting a red light moving around behind the audience and way up in the air. Mr. Dirksen was conducting the chorus while standing on top of the roof of the overhanging structure at the rear of the amphitheater. Tom Nelson was also there working on lighting the show. He was a genius with anything electronic, and the two of them collaborated on many stage productions over the years. Mr. favorite by far was the Christmas Pageant with the musical score written by RWD and the text by an NCS English teacher named Madeline Hicks. Wayne and Tom somehow mounted lights all around the building, but especially on the great piers in the crossing. This was, I truly believe, the Christmas Pageant to end all Christmas Pageants, and it utilized all of the spaces of the Cathedral, as Mr. Dirksen was later to do so often and well. For me as a child, it was pure magic. Tom Nelson later served as the recording engineer for all cathedral musical performances and finally as the pro bono cathedral choir librarian and verger. RWD gave a moving eulogy at Tom's funeral as he also did at the funerals of Verger John Kraus and Paul Callaway. I once heard Dean Baxter say something to the following effect: "Don't ever give up your pulpit to this man (RWD); he will preach you out of a job!" RWD's latest technology project was by far his most ambitious. Several years ago, I encountered Jo Dirksen in the NCS library, where she was donating hundreds of hours of her time to the huge project of computerizing the collection. I was worried about how RWD was handling retirement and inquired about it. She answered, "He happy as a clam and is working away all the time at his computer." Wayne was, in fact, typing ALL of his manuscript scores into a Macintosh Music editing program so that they could be printed out for any future musicians who wanted to use them. He also completed a catalog of his works, which was widely circulated. After Jo died, Wayne felt for quite a while that he could never compose again. But eventually, he began to accept commissions. One was for a major work - A Te Deum with orchestra and chorus for the cathedral in Lexington - commissioned by Bruce Neswick, later to be the founding director of the Cathedral Girls Choir. At the end of

this score was a note from the composer, dedicating this work with the phrase "Jo's Song." Reading that made me cry a lot. What a beautiful triubute to his steadfast partner in life! What more wonderful gift could be given! This man expressed his complex feelings, thoughts, and deep faith through his own unique musical language. And that musical legacy will endure. Check out the 1980 Episcopal Hymnal and you will find many wonderful works by Mr. Dirksen, amply testifying to his remarkable melodic gift.

What a man! What a complete life! What a legacy those of the cathedral family and beyond have been given!

(John S. Wood spent ten years of his life singing as a boy and as a man in the Cathedral Choir over four decades, beginning in 1950 at age eight. He has taught history in the upper school at NCS since 1972. Rick Dirksen helped me to get my facts right and also with the editing of this piece.)