

Lest We Forget...

BY DAVID W. LEVY

Thomas Carey: *You could have heard a pin drop*

When OU first signed baritone Thomas Carey for the 1969-1970 academic year, the Music School asked its new voice teacher about his outside commitments, and Carey sent his upcoming schedule. In early October, he was to sing “Rigoletto” at the Paris Grand Opera; in early November he was to make recordings with the Bavarian Broadcasting System. Then, back to “Rigoletto” in Lyon, Nice, and Toulouse. In late December, he was to tour Europe with Handel’s “Messiah” and “Judas Maccabeus.” In January 1970, he was slated for a Kurt Weill opera with the North German Broadcasting System. He had promised February to his Italian agent and March to his Spanish agent. April was verbally promised for German concerts, including performances in Stuttgart and Frankfurt. On May 20, there was his annual concert in Munich. Looking ahead to the following year, Carey reported that he was scheduled at Covent Garden from November 11 to December 17.

Clearly, OU had acquired the services of a star. To the surprise of many, however, the star stayed and taught at OU for the next third of a century—an active, honored, and beloved figure in Norman until his death in January 2002.

Tom Carey was born in South Carolina in 1931, but raised in Brooklyn, N.Y. After military service, he began serious musical studies in New York. In 1959, he won the Marian Anderson Award and both the John Hay Whitney and the Martha Rockefeller awards, which enabled him to study voice and languages in Europe. He spent the next decade winning prestigious prizes and performing in Europe’s leading concert halls. His specialty was German lieder, but he was also accomplished in Italian and Spanish songs. His renditions of African American spirituals were widely acclaimed.

In 1968, after years of building a promising career in Europe, Carey was urged by a friend to apply for the job at OU. Since he had already crossed the ocean for his New York Town Hall debut, he agreed to a Norman interview. “The weather was nice, and everyone was so friendly,” Carey recalled. “People treated me with respect—as if they really wanted me to come.” He took the job and agreed to arrange his teaching around his performance schedule.

Also in 1968, Carey met Carol Brice when the State Department asked the two to tour George Gershwin’s “Porgy and Bess” through France and Portugal. Brice was thirteen years older than he, recently widowed and the mother of two, and at the height of an illustrious career. She was the first African American hired by the Metropolitan Opera, the soloist at Franklin Roosevelt’s 1941 inauguration, a celebrated recording star and performer on three continents. She was more widely known than her co-star. Carey and Brice became identified with “Porgy and Bess” and performed it together across the world. In December 1969, they married. Carol began to get paid for teaching at OU

in 1973 (because of the school’s nepotism rule, she had covered Tom’s classes without pay). The pair settled down in Norman, where they lived and worked together until Carol’s death of cancer in February 1985.

Perhaps the most striking thing about Tom Carey—a celebrity who knew Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall, who had sung with Europe and America’s leading symphony orchestras and on their most prestigious stages—was the astonishing energy, enthusiasm, and talent that he poured into the artistic and cultural life of the community he adopted and that had adopted him. He was famous for the care he took in training and shepherding his students. In 1988, he and his students performed at twenty-four venues in Norman and Oklahoma City, including every elementary and middle school in Norman. In 1989, the number was thirty-three. For eight years, Tom Carey sang the national anthem at home basketball games (when he stood to sing, the noisy crowd at Lloyd Noble fell silent and “you could hear a pin drop.”) Knowing that the basketball program could never afford his usual performance fee, he requested for compensation two tickets to home basketball games for the rest of his life. Perhaps the Careys’ best known legacy is the Cimarron Opera Company, founded by the couple in 1975. That enterprise has a dual purpose: to provide valuable stage experience to OU voice students and to introduce the beauty and power of first-class musical performance to audiences across Oklahoma and beyond.

His last years were filled with honors. He received the University’s Distinguished Service Award in 1986, was made Regents Professor in 1994, and was inducted into the Oklahoma Higher Education Hall of Fame in 1997. In December 1999, he married Carol Renner.

David Boren had known Tom Carey since 1975, when Carey sang at his inauguration as governor. At his death, Boren said that “instead of pursuing what could have been a highly successful concert career, he chose instead to be a teacher and to invest his life in the next generation. He leaves a great legacy through the lives of all of those students who have known him.”

In this column, David W. Levy, Professor Emeritus of the OU History Department, recalls a person from OU’s past whose name is not attached to a building or other prominent campus feature, but who, in most modest, but in no less admirable ways, helped make this place what it is.

