

# A Trio for Margaret

## Program Notes

In 2015 I was delighted to receive a request from flutist Sarah Schettler of the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra to compose a new work for flute, alto saxophone, and piano. It was to be premiered by Sarah, alto saxophonist Gail Levinsky, and pianist Jackie Edwards-Henry as part of a project to celebrate the lives and accomplishments of women through music. I immediately accepted and then hastened to ask my wife, Sharon, to help me with ideas. Without hesitation, Sharon said, "You should write a piece about Margaret." "And just who is this Margaret?" I inquired. Margaret, it turned out, was Margaret Haughery, whom Sharon had found out about because her brother, broadcast journalist Dave McNamara, had recently done a piece about her. I wound up doing a good bit of research about Margaret and found myself more and more fascinated by the life and work of this astonishing woman. Some of what I learned is encapsulated below.

Margaret Gaffney was born in Ireland in 1813. When she was five years old, her parents brought her and her two siblings to the United States, seeking, like many Irish immigrants, relief from economic hardship and religious persecution. They were bound for Boston, but landed at Baltimore after a harrowing sea voyage during which most of their meagre possessions were lost. Several years later, when Margaret was about 8 years old, her parents and younger sister died in a yellow fever epidemic and her older brother set off to seek his fortune. Margaret, now alone and an orphan, was taken in by a family in Baltimore where she likely grew up doing household chores for her keep. She was given no education. When she reached the age of twenty-one, she married Charles Houghery.

Charles was a good bit older than Margaret and in ill health. The couple moved to New Orleans on the advice of doctors, but Charles's health did not improve. After the birth of their only child, a daughter named Frances, Charles was advised to travel to Ireland for his health, but shortly after arriving there he died, leaving Margaret, who had stayed behind with the baby in New Orleans, a widow. This, however, was not to be the last blow, for shortly afterward little Frances also died. It is said that Margaret stayed up the whole night, singing to the dead baby in her arms.

Once again alone in the world, Margaret turned to the Church. Feeling that she had a mission to help orphans, she began to work with the Sisters of Charity, who ran an orphanage in New Orleans. Although still unable to read or write, Margaret possessed industry and thrift, a

talent for business, and a knack for talking easily to all kinds of people and making good bargains. She borrowed money to buy two cows to provide milk for the Sisters's orphanage, and soon, through her diligence and thrift, built up a substantial dairy business. She donated most of her profits to support the orphanage, but from time to time she would also make small loans to local businessmen, and when one of these loans went bad, she found herself the owner of a bakery. Sensing opportunity, she sold her dairy and invested in the newest equipment for breadmaking. Within a year, "Margaret's Steam and Mechanical Bakery" had forty employees and provided bread for substantial parts of the city and a steady stream of profits to support its orphanages. Even during the Civil War, when New Orleans was occupied by Federal troops, she managed to keep her bakery supplied and running. It is said that she convinced the Union commander to allow this by reminding him, "I feed both sides." After the war, her business expanded into neighboring states. Her product was known as "Margaret's Bread," and she herself as "The Bread Woman of New Orleans."

Although Margaret had prospered, she lived simply. It is said that she owned two dresses, one for every-day and one for special occasions. It was her habit to get to work early and then take a break in the middle of the day, when she would sit in the doorway of her bakery, fan herself against the heat with a palmetto fan, and talk to passersby. New Orleans was now crowded with orphans due to disease and the war. She provided enormous support for the building of new orphanages, including St. Elizabeth Orphan Asylum, the Louise Home, St. Vincent Infant Asylum, and an orphanage on the present site of St. Teresa of Avila Church. Her charity was interdenominational; she supported Episcopal and Jewish orphanages as well as Catholic ones.

Margaret Houghery died in 1882. In her will, which she signed with an "X," for she was still unable to read or write, Margaret left most of her estate to support orphanages in New Orleans. She was by now widely beloved for her charitable work. Hundreds of people attended her funeral. The mayor of New Orleans walked at the head of her funeral procession and her pallbearers included two governors of Louisiana. Shortly after her death the citizens of New Orleans erected a handsome statue in her honor which still stands today at the intersection of Prytania and Camp Streets. This monument, which is inscribed simply with the name "Margaret," was only the second municipal statue to be erected in honor of a woman in the United States.

Today, this sagacious, intrepid, and faithful woman's legacy lives on, refracted through the issues of our time. In Ireland, the land of her birth, her remarkable accomplishments in charitable work have led to popular calls for her canonization in the Catholic Church. In New Orleans, there have been calls for the removal of her statue because of her association with slavery. (Like many successful businesswomen in the antebellum South, Margaret owned slaves.) Modern-day feminists would see much irony in her life story. The only reason she was allowed to own property and conduct business in New Orleans is that she was a widow, since those rights were denied to married women as a matter of law. Business dealings were difficult

for her because of her illiteracy, and because she was a woman; court documents show that she was sometimes ill served by those she hired to represent her interests. She knew the immigrant experience first-hand; after the death of her husband and baby, her first job was as a laundress in a New Orleans hotel, employment associated then, as now, with immigrants on the lowest rungs of the economic ladder. Though she liberally supported orphanages of all faiths, she was probably a victim of anti-Irish and anti-Catholic prejudice when she was young.

In writing music about the Margaret of legend and the more complex, historical Margaret, I found myself drawn to moments in her life that offer a window on her character. Margaret was known for her friendliness and her enjoyment of simple conversation with all kinds of people. An old Southern expression for this is “passing the time of day,” and that became the title of the first movement of my trio. The music represents the leisurely flow of conversation, at times quiet, at times animated. I think of Margaret seated in the doorway of her bread factory, always gregarious, quick with a story, laughing at a good joke, or talking to her friends among the Sisters of Charity, discussing the orphans, charting the next path. I believe talk was like food and drink to Margaret; it gave life.

The title of my second movement leaves a lot of questions hanging in the air. Who is singing this “Orphan’s Lullaby,” and to whom? Did Margaret remember lullabies her father sang to her during the perilous ocean crossing? Did anyone sing lullabies to her when she was young and an orphan? Did she sing them to her little baby Frances through that long, terrible night? Did she sing them to the many destitute children she later loved and cared for? Did anyone sing a lullaby to a young slave girl, name unknown, after Margaret sold her mother, Nancy? My second movement seeks to conjure up all these sung and unsung lullabies. The melody is drawn from a lullaby I made up to sing to my second son when he was a baby.

The last movement represents Margaret’s energy, her positive attitude, her courage, her indomitable spirit. Margaret must have been someone who had faith in the virtue of work, someone who thrived on work’s challenge, who lived in rhythm with work’s sheer activity. To accomplish what she did, she must have been filled with confidence that problems *can* be solved, impediments *can* be overcome, through faith and diligent effort. In this last piece I imagine Margaret whistling, amid the clatter of her bread factory, some old, half-remembered Irish tune, confident that her work will pay off and lead to good.