

## REMEMBERING MARY TILTON BLEMF GALA 2.11.2007

Remarks by George Van Arsdale

Good evening.

I have been asked to speak for a very few moments about that remarkable woman, Mary Coffman Tilton, who is no longer with us.

There is a great deal of affection for Mary in this room tonight -- as well there should be. She earned your respect and affection in full measure. Plenty of people here can tell you how and why. They may share some Mary stories at your tables tonight. When reservations almost doubled over last year's memorable Mozart Birthday Party, we felt that your regard for Mary explained why many of you wanted to be here.

Her former students are here; former teachers; choir director, other choir members and others from her church, neighbors who treasured her, university colleagues, her son Andrew, and many BLEMF leaders. BLEMF was blessed indeed that she accepted the challenge when Alain Barker asked her in 2000 to join the board and to lead it. She redefined our Board President's role during these past half-dozen years. She helped BLEMF grow, helped it develop its mission, helped attract more community members to its board and helped it become a more professional and widely respected arts organization, a "community crown jewel" to quote Peter Jacobi who could not be with us.

Hear what Sophia Travis, a former student, wrote about Mary:

*She was a very important figure . . . at a significant turning point in my development as a musician . . . she was the most devoted teacher . . . I was so fortunate that she was the person I had my last long teacher-student relationship with before venturing out on my own. Even though I have studied music with countless teachers, several harpsichordists, Mary stands out for the extra care she took in teaching me about harpsichord.*

Others can tell you how she managed, starting as a single mother raising two children, to return to school for graduate degrees in music, both as performer and as scholar, how a dream that her completed doctorate would lead to an academic career faded before uncooperative circumstance and hard reality. Yet she did finish her scholarly study of a 17th c. French keyboard composer. It'll be published this year. Les Coyne assessed her years as Patten Foundation Executive Director simply: "Mary was the Patten Lecture Series."

Her commitments were broad and many – church, choir, service; gardening, flower arranging; charitable good works quietly undertaken when her circumstances improved. For example, she became a major underwriter of the local Habitat for Humanity and a supporter of many other charities & arts organizations. And always she was a devoted parent to Andrew and Anna, a beloved harpsichord teacher, and an enthusiastic performer.

Mary's diverse accomplishments were a solid apprenticeship for BLEMF leadership. Alain's judgment that she would be the right person to lead BLEMF to a more certain and secure future has been repeatedly validated ever since.

But Mary doubted herself and spoke about it often. Kathleen Boggess, her neighbor for more than 35 years, observed that Mary really was not a very gregarious or outgoing and social person. She really preferred working on her 'own stuff' and often found BLEMF a distracting interruption. There were also sacred times when no BLEMF business could ever be scheduled – her summer afternoons at the University pool spent swimming and reading.

The affection we feel for dear friends includes observing their idiosyncrasies and foibles, accepting them, perhaps while sharing knowing smiles. We often smiled at Mary and she was not unaware of some of her quirks. For one, she was always too busy to talk. She just teased me endlessly about "trapping her in long phone conversations" or sending her "interminable emails" that she did not have time to deal with. She would say to Kathleen Boggess, "Oh, I can't talk to George now. I don't have time to listen to him." While I accept the accusation, I will tell you – and Kathleen would confirm this too – it could be very difficult getting Mary off the phone. She thought she wasn't a talker but she was. She could hold her own with anyone, including me.

Her other quirks and idiosyncrasies always amused those who were fond of her. She could be very organized but often could not find a piece of paper and would email me asking that I send it to her again. On telephone calls, no matter who was the caller, she would begin speaking very fast immediately, oblivious to a "hold the line a minute while I shut off the radio." Then, two or three sentences later, she'd suddenly brake like she'd just missed her turn. You'd hear an sharp "what?" or an irritable "huh?" that indicated she had just become aware a question had been asked and she was backing up but getting confused and losing her train of thought at the same time. You had to laugh.

In the summer she joined the Board as President (we elect now), she said she knew absolutely nothing about non-profit organizations or boards. She quite clearly never came to enjoy attending or running meetings. And a certain lack of skill often showed. Yet as soon as she joined the board, she waded through a bunch of books on non-profit management, board roles and responsibility, the staff roles and managing executive directors – the whole education in a nutshell. Soon after she came on the Board, she accompanied me to an all-day workshop in Indianapolis, the first of many she attended, to learn the practical knowledge of being an arts organization board member and leader.

Let me close by recalling a passage often read in churches on All Saints Day to commemorate those who have died during the year. It begins "Let us now praise famous men" and comes from Ecclesiasticus, or *Sirach*. The writer does speak of the famous and the notable, but most movingly, I think, he speaks of ourselves and those dear just to us, those who leave he says "no memory," who "have perished as though they had never existed . . . as though they had never been born." Although mention of "those who composed musical tunes" may recall Mary writing out those keyboard continuo parts, his general point, though solemn and sad is really affirmative. Though "Their bodies are buried in peace," he says, "their name lives on generation after generation./ The assembly declares their wisdom . . . and proclaims their praise."

Tonight, I think we are that assembly, whether we know or not, come to praise all that Mary Tilton accomplished in her too brief life, but especially what she accomplished for BLEMF.

So as we begin to celebrate this wonderful Gala tonight, join me in raising your glasses in tribute to Mary Coffman Tilton.

Thank you.