

Ulysses Kay Archive: Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library

The following brief essay by Jennifer B. Lee, curator at Columbia's Rare Book and Manuscript Library, contains biographic information on African–American composer Ulysses Kay, as well as a brief guide to his recently acquired collection in RBML.

African–American composer Ulysses Kay (1917–1995) wrote more than one hundred forty compositions in a wide range of forms—five operas, over twenty large orchestral works, more than thirty choral compositions, fifteen chamber works, a ballet, and numerous other compositions for voice, solo instruments, film, and television.¹

Born in Tucson, Arizona to a musical family, Kay was encouraged by both his mother and her brother, Joe “King” Oliver, to study piano, violin and saxophone. He entered the University of Arizona in 1934, receiving the Bachelor of Music in 1938. For the next two years he studied composition at the Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester, with Bernard Rogers and Howard Hanson, and received the Masters in Music in 1940. From 1941 to 1942 he studied with Paul Hindemith at Tanglewood and at Yale University. Compositions from this period include the “Sinfonietta for Orchestra,” the ballet “Danse Calinda,” and “Three Fanfares for Four Trumpets.”

During World War II, Kay served in the U. S. Navy, playing with and arranging for the Navy Band, stationed at Quonset Point, Rhode Island. His most prominent composition from this period is “Of New Horizons” for concert band. Commissioned by Thor Johnson and performed by the New York Philharmonic, its premier took place in Lewisohn Stadium on July 29, 1944.

Upon discharge from the Navy, Kay received the Alice M. Ditson Fellowship for creative work at Columbia University, where he studied with Otto Luening from 1946 to 1947. During the summers, he was a resident at the Yaddo Festival in Saratoga Springs, New York, where he would return six times, later joined by wife Barbara, through 1971. Major works from this period include: “Danse Calinda Suite;” “The Rope” for solo dancer and piano; “Concerto for Orchestra;” and the film music for “The Quiet One,” a documentary film about Donald Thompson, then ten years old, by Janice Loeb, Sidney Meyers, and Helen Levitt, with commentary by James Agee and additional photography by Richard Bagley.

Current Musicology, No. 93 (Spring 2012)

© 2012 by the Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York

Many honors and scholarships followed, including a Fulbright Scholarship, grants from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship. From 1949 to 1952, Kay received two “Prix de Rome” awards that allowed him to travel and study in Italy. The first African–American to receive the prize, it gave him residence in the American Academy in Rome, along with his new bride, Barbara Harrison of Chicago, whom he had married on August 20, 1949. Compositions from this period include: a piano quintet, a string quartet, a brass quartet, “Sinfonia in E” for orchestra, and “Song of Ahab,” a cantata for baritone and ten instruments.

Returning to New York, Barbara taught music in Manhattan, and Ulysses accepted a position with Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI) that would last from 1953 until 1968. Turning down several teaching positions, he obtained a job that gave him a regular schedule, allowing him to compose as much as possible. Compositions include: “A Lincoln Letter,” an a cappella work for mixed chorus and bass soloist; “Six Dances for String Orchestra;” “Fantasy Variations for Orchestra;” and two operas, “The Boor,” and “The Juggler of Our Lady.”

In 1958, Kay was a member of the first delegation of composers to the Soviet Union, a part of the U.S. State Department’s Cultural, Educational and Technical Exchange Agreement. The others in his group were Roy Harris, Peter Mennin, and Roger Sessions. During the month–long trip, Kay appreciated the interest in jazz expressed by Russian composers and he played them recordings of the music of Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, Louis Armstrong, and Johnny Richards, among others. He also attended performances of his own compositions, those of his fellow delegates, and the works of Russian composers. Upon his return, *Hi-Fi Review* published his account of the trip entitled “Thirty Days in Musical Russia.”²

Over the decade from 1958 to 1968, Kay received a large number of commissions, writing a total of forty–one compositions. These included music for the film “New York: City of Magic;” “Phoebus, Arise,” a cantata for soprano and bass soli, mixed chorus and orchestra; “Forever Free,” for band; “Markings,” for orchestra, written in memory of Dag Hammarskjöld; “Aulos,” for solo flute, string orchestra, two horns and percussion; and “Choral Triptych,” a work using Biblical texts, written for mixed chorus and string orchestra. Other vocal works composed during this period include Kay’s settings of texts by William Blake, Emily Dickinson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Stephen Crane, and Walt Whitman.

Barbara Kay was no less busy during these years. She participated in the Mississippi Freedom Rides during the summer of 1961. Arrested in Jackson, she was held in three jails including the Parchman Penitentiary for a total of about 60 days, after receiving a six–month sentence for disturbing the peace.

William Faulkner once called Parchman “Destination Doom.” Returning home, she participated in the first sit-in in the North, when Englewood residents took over city hall to protest racial segregation in the schools in 1962. Again arrested, she recalled that the only time that she was shackled was while being transported from the Englewood Jail to the county jail in Hackensack, New Jersey, where she was held for two weeks. During the boycott of the Englewood, New Jersey schools, she held a Freedom School in the basement of the Kay home. In 1966, she joined James Meredith’s “March Against Fear” in Mississippi. Later she continued to be active in the New Jersey chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality. She recorded many of the details of her civil rights work in interviews conducted in 1979 by the Columbia University Oral History Office.³

In 1968, at the age of 51, Kay left BMI to join the faculty of Herbert H. Lehman College, City University of New York, as Professor of Music, where he taught theory and composition until his retirement in 1988. During his twenty years of teaching, he produced three more operas, “The Capitoline Venus,” “Jubilee,” and “Frederick Douglass.” Other works from this period include: “Theater Set,” for orchestra; “Five Portraits,” for violin and piano, commissioned by the McKim Fund of the Library of Congress and premiered in 1974 by Ruggiero Ricci, violin, and Leon Pommers, piano; “Scherzi Musicali,” for chamber orchestra; “The Western Paradise,” for narrator and orchestra; “Jersey Hours,” for voice and three harps; “Tromba,” for trumpet and piano; “Chariots,” for orchestra; “Festival Psalms,” for solo baritone and mixed chorus; and “Visions,” written to commemorate the 80th anniversary of William Grant Still’s birth. It should be noted that Kay conducted many of the premiers and subsequent performance of his own works, including the Suite from “The Quiet One,” premiered by New York’s Little Symphony at Town Hall in 1948, and “Chariots,” premiered by the Philadelphia Orchestra at Saratoga in 1979.

Ulysses Kay died of Parkinson’s disease in 1995 at the age of 78. His final commission, unfulfilled, was to compose a work for the 150th anniversary of the New York Philharmonic in 1992. Barbara Kay died in 1997 at the age of 71. Although health and family obligations resulted in Mrs. Kay becoming less publicly active in her pursuit of civil rights by the mid-1970s, she continued to inspire others, and in her Columbia University Oral History interview she said: “Fear is the first thing that you’re going to have to confront. And what I have learned to do from this first freedom ride is to confront anything that gives me any problem, either my ideas or thinking about them—confront them. Never push them away in my mind. Never try to forget them. And always speak up. The more I’m afraid, the more I’ll speak up. And then after you do that, you lose the fear.”⁴

Ulysses Kay Collection—Rare Book and Manuscript Library; Columbia University

In 2009, the Kay family chose Columbia's Rare Book and Manuscript Library as the repository of their parents' archive. Through the Columbia University Libraries' Graduate Student Internship Program in Primary Sources, Columbia graduate student in musicology, Elliot S. Cairns, completed the organization and housing of the musical scores and related materials for use by researchers. The three series available at this time are: Series I: Diaries; Series II: Music by Kay; and Series III: Programs.⁵ Still in process are the correspondence and business records kept by Barbara and Ulysses Kay.

The bulk of the seventy-nine boxes of material processed to date is in Series II, arranged chronologically by date of composition as much as possible. This series includes Kay's sketches, holograph scores and published scores, augmented by other related materials such as texts and libretti used in his vocal compositions, pertinent correspondence, and notes.

In some instances, Kay's notes include the basic structure of a work. For "Five Portraits," this includes his 12-tone matrix. For the opera "The Juggler of Our Lady," there is his "sequential analysis," and for the opera "Frederick Douglass" his notes regarding "centers" (i.e. key areas). Examples of related correspondence include that with Vladimir Ussachevsky, who wrote the libretto for Kay's one-act opera "The Boor" (1955), Donald Dorr, his librettist for four of his vocal and opera works, and with John Solum, the flutist for whom Kay wrote "Aulos" (1967).

The works in the archive are comprehensive with a few exceptions. For instance, only Kay's preliminary sketches and notes for his "Concerto for Orchestra" (1948) are present. For his "Aulos" for flute and chamber ensemble, and for his opera "Jubilee," full sketches are present but not his holograph full scores.

The location of some of the missing material is known. For instance, the commission from the McKim Fund for "Five Portraits" for violin and piano, written in 1971–72 and premiered in 1974, stipulated that the original manuscript be given to the Library of Congress.⁶ A photocopy of the holograph full scores, with markings, is in the RBML Kay Papers.

Unpublished compositions in the archive include many of his early works, such as his "Concerto for Oboe and Orchestra," given its premier by Robert Sprenkle with the Rochester Civic Orchestra in 1940, Howard Hanson conducting; "Harlem Children's Suite" for school orchestra (1973); and a late work, "Two Impromptus for Piano" (1986). Series II also includes Kay's transcription of "The Waves," (1978) with words and music by Hillary Kay. The youngest of their three daughters, Hillary Kay is a composer who performs her own music with Kate Freeman as Wildsang.

The ongoing work of processing the correspondence and business papers of Barbara and Ulysses Kay has turned up further important material, such as an inscribed copy of Langston Hughes' libretto "Soul Gone Home." Other ongoing work includes a Kay online exhibition featuring images of his sketches and scores, supporting documents, programs, photographs, audio excerpts of his works, and audio interviews with both Barbara and Ulysses Kay. We encourage performers and conductors to reexamine Kay's large and wide-ranging output for new repertoire and we welcome all researchers to make use of this important new collection.

As stated by Constance Tibbs Hobson and Deborra A. Richardson in *Ulysses Kay: A Bio-Bibliography* (1994): "Kay's contribution to America's cultural life and to its contemporary music scene is outstanding. His distinguished career, reflecting personal industry, discipline, and will, sets an encouraging, honorable, and inspiring example for all who follow. His message to aspiring composers strongly advocates continued study and growth in order to better express one's vision and individuality."⁷

Jennifer B. Lee
Curator, Performing Arts Collections
Rare Book & Manuscript Library
Columbia University

Notes

1. For this information and much of what follows, I am indebted to Constance Tibbs Hobson and Deborra A. Richardson for their indispensable *Ulysses Kay, A Bio-Bibliography*, Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, [1994].
2. Ulysses Kay, "Thirty Days in Musical Russia," *Hi-Fi Review*, 2 (February 1959): 35–38, 53. Kay's daily account records his impressions of concerts, meetings with composers and musicians, social gatherings, and their tours through the arts and political centers of the Soviet Union.
3. The link to the record for Barbara Kay's Oral History transcript is available through:
http://oralhistoryportal.cul.columbia.edu/document.php?id=ldpd_4076977
4. Barbara Kay, "The Reminiscences of Barbara Kay," Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, 1980, pp. 12–13.
5. The link to the Ulysses Kay finding aid is:
http://findingaids.cul.columbia.edu/ead/nnc-rb/ldpd_7341105/summary
6. The link to the finding aid for the McKim Collection at the Library of Congress is:
<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/service/music/eadxmlmusic/eadpdfmusic/mu2005.wp.0053.pdf>
7. Hobson and Richardson, p. 25. Quoting David N. Baker, Lida M. Belt, and Herman C. Hudson, *The Black Composer Speaks*, Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1978, p. 142.

