



Interview No. SAS4.11.02  
Mrs. Jacqueline Owings

Interviewer: Marsha Peart  
Location: Baltimore, Maryland  
Date: April 11, 2002

Edited by: Mrs. Owings and E. Schaaf

---

Q: Please state your name.

Owings: My name is Jacqueline Owings. I live in Baltimore, Maryland.

Q: Thank you. I'm going to begin by asking you some questions, background information, and most of it will refer to what we discussed in our pre-interview. You stated before that you were born in Cleveland, but you —

Owings: I was raised here.

Q: Raised in Baltimore. You came here at the age of one or so.

Owings: Less.

Q: You had all your educational experience here in Baltimore. You stated also in the pre-interview that music has always been a part of your life. Could discuss what music was like for you at home while you were growing up?

Owings: I guess it probably had more to do with going to church than anything else. My grandmother sang in her church choir, and so I would hear her choir, I would hear music at church.

Maybe its God-given; a love of music and a talent for singing. My mother played the piano, but my mother didn't raise me. Maybe it was in the genes! I don't know.

And then in the early days, without television and some of the other kinds of entertainment, a lot of churches gave concerts. Also at my church, a Methodist Church, we had what was called the Epworth League, which was an organization for young people. On Sunday afternoons there would be programs with discussions, poetry and music.

Very often you might have singers from from Morgan State College and that kind of thing. So that's basically the kind of exposure I would have had at home.

Q: You stated that you didn't grow up with your mom. Was it your grandmother who you grew up with?

Owings: My grandmother raised me.

Q: And she sang in the choir?

Owings: In her church choir. Yes.

Q: Were you also involved in the church choir when you were young?

Owings: No, I wasn't. I can't even remember whether they had such a thing as youth choirs the way they do today. But I'm sure that I probably participated in the Easter programs, you know, Children's Day, things like that.

But we did have music in elementary school. When I went to School 122, it was set up on the platoon system. You had a specific teacher for each subject. That's what made it different.

We had a special teacher for science, a special teacher for math, music, etc. Each teacher taught only one subject. Having a teacher who taught only music meant that we had quite a bit of music in school, beginning in elementary school.

Q: And while you were at home, singing was or music itself was just something that was informal, I guess you could say. It was just always there.

Owings: I couldn't say that it was always there because we didn't have a piano. In those days we had what was called a [Victrola](#) ext. I remember we had a wind-up Victrola. Later on there was radio music. And I sort of remember some records that we had with this operatic tenor singing on it. So it was rather informal at home.

Q: Would you say that your musical talent developed beyond what you obtained naturally from like your mom or your grandmother?

Owings: Well, I suppose I started participating in programs, singing solos in junior high school. Most schools had a big spring musical program or operetta. So I started participating in those

Q: Were these programs open to the public, or was it just for students and their parents?

Owings: I would say that generally the audiences would be made up of parents, relatives and friends.

Q: Speaking of school and performance, how was, I guess, your school environment influenced by racial prejudice?

Owings: At the time, and especially for high school, there were only two schools. If you lived in west Baltimore, you went to Douglass High School. If you lived in east Baltimore, you went to Dunbar. That was it. So it was affected in that way. And the other way, which was very positive for us, I'm speaking now particularly of high school, was that because of racial prejudice our teachers did not have opportunities to teach in certain schools and colleges. So we had some of the best teachers who in another situation might have gone to another state or might have taught in college. We felt that we had some of the best teachers because of racial prejudice.

Q: Do you feel that it served as a limiting factor in terms of your ability to, I guess, develop professionally in terms of music?

Owings: I don't think so. As I say, we had very fine teachers. And we didn't feel that we had missed anything.

Q: Now we'll move from elementary, junior high, and school age to post-secondary education. You went to Coppin State College. Was it called Coppin State at that time?

Owings: No. In the early days it was Coppin Normal School, and then when I went, it was Coppin Teachers College. It wasn't until later that it became Coppin State College.

Q: And there you received your bachelor's in Elementary education.

Owings: That's correct.

Q: Where did the love for elementary school develop?

Owings: I guess like many, many little girls you play school, and you say when I grow up I'm going to be a teacher. I always loved school.

Q: I understand. In our pre-interview you mentioned that with the classes that you did teach once you started teaching in an elementary school, you would incorporate music.

Owings: Very much so.

Q: And why do you see that as something of importance?

Owings: You know, when you really like something very well and you're good at it, it just projects itself. I loved it and I wanted to share it with the children. And as a result, they loved it. Elementary school is difficult in some ways because as teachers we don't have the same strengths in every subject. Elementary school teachers have to teach every subject, and you may be better at one than you are the other. And sometimes we avoid the subjects that we're not good at. You emphasize the subjects you like best.

At one point we had music teachers who came around and taught all the students, but in later years that was not always available. So since I loved music, I just used it, and the children loved it.

Q: Has classical music always been your favorite?

Owings: Yes. It has. However, I enjoy all kinds of music — popular songs, dance music, jazz, hymns, spirituals — all of it.

Q: What about it sets it apart for you from other types of music? I mean, it's obviously different, but what is so intriguing about it to you?

Owings: I just like the sounds. To me, it's majestic. And it can be powerful, and it can have intricate harmonies, and it just pulls on my heart.

Q: Is this a genre that you enjoyed when you were younger?

Owings: My love for it has certainly grown, but as I say, we heard a lot of this in church. And I can remember my grandmother coming home and saying, "We learned a new anthem today". And one of them was one that I heard just a few Sundays ago in a concert — *Inflamatus*. The churches at that time, I would say, many of them dealt with the classical music and the classical anthems. It was only later on that we had more of the gospel music coming in.

Of course, I remember at my church when I was young, there was a gospel choir. I can't really remember what they sang, but I don't think it was anything like what we have now. When you say gospel, it has to do with the personal. You have in your gospel music the words "I" and "me". It's very personal - what your feeling is about God.

Q: So just to paraphrase, gospel music was more testimonial than the classical that you would hear in church?

Owings: Yes. Yes. But I don't remember it being as rhythmic and danceable as it is today.  
[Laughter]

Q: Right. Today it's very different! We can move now to your own family life outside, like with your husband. You all met in high school?

Owings: Our families knew each other. That's when we really started seeing each other.

Q: And you met when you were fourteen?

Owings: I suppose thirteen or fourteen.

Q: Eventually the both of you ended up performing together. Correct?

Owings: Yes. Well, I'm going to touch on that when I get to some things about high school, because we were in programs together in high school. But later on, when we were married, and we had three children, living in the Gilmore Projects, we gave recitals at our church, formal recitals. I wore my evening gown, he wore his tuxedo. I still have copies of some of the programs on which we performed.

We had a friend who played for us, a couple of friends. Ruth King was one and Joe, Joseph Neil was another, who would accompany us. And this was in the '40s. We sang at teas at churches. We sang at regular afternoon church programs together.

Q: I'm going to ask you to describe your perception of the music culture here in Baltimore while you were growing up.

Owings: As I say, most of the music that we were exposed to at that time came through the church. So we did have a lot of classical music, both by choirs and by soloists. I remember, I think I was in high school, the first stage play I ever saw. My mother took me to see *Porgy and Bess* because a friend of hers Avon Long was playing Sportin' Life — Sportin' Life, the rascal. That was my first, and for a long time, only actual stage play that I saw. This was my first experience with the kind of music called show tunes.

Q: Do you feel that the church was the most influential body in terms of music while you were growing up? Not just for you, but in general.

Owings: Not just for me. I would say for a lot of people it was. And also programs at schools would be one of the influences too. There were so many other places that we could not go. To certain theatres, or if we went, we had to sit in the balcony. And besides that, people didn't have the money to spend on certain kinds of entertainment. They just didn't have the money. So I would say it would be basically your churches and your schools. However, I would also include music heard on the radio, at dances, stage shows and movies. There have always been places where popular music could be heard.

Q: The distinctions between black music and white music, do you feel that that is or that was in the past, and if so, how do you see that it has changed if at all?

Owings: I suppose it has always existed, and especially, as I say, with things being so separate we did develop some forms of music that were special to us. But I think there have always been people who have enjoyed both. It's such a personal thing. There are always people who may enjoy one more than the other. And then there are people like me who can enjoy a variety of things. Also, sometimes the lines between the two can become blurred and less distinct — each can borrow from the other — and we do. Sometimes it's called "cross over music".

Q: Just for clarification, how would you differentiate black music versus white music? When I say black music, what sets that apart from white music?

Owings: Of course you have the spirituals and work songs which we identify with. And then long ago you may have had the music of minstrel shows which blacks participated in as well as whites with black face. We've had the blues, which came out of the experiences of Blacks and jazz was an outgrowth of that. Whites had Dixieland, Bluegrass and so on. Those are some ways that music could be different.

Q: Now, since most of your exposure to music was in the church, how did you get involved with non-church affiliated organizations, or community-based organizations? Were they still heavily tied to the church?

Owings: I guess, as I say, it would have started in high school with the musical programs that were presented there. But most of the choirs that I've been affiliated with were associated with a church or came out of a church. So still much of my musical experience has been through church, and some through school. That's basically it.

Baltimore has a very rich musical history, and particularly as it pertains to musicians of color. Some of them have enriched the local music scene here in the city, while others have often become renowned across the nation, even around the world.

People like Cab Calloway, Ellis Larkins, Billie Holiday, Eubie Blake, their names and their music are widely known. I'm going to mention a few of these in passing, but most of my recollections will be of musicians with whose choirs I was personally associated.

The musicians I'm going to mention now were popular primarily during the late '30s and the early '40s. Bubby Johnson was a bandleader who played at most of the high school events during the late '30s and '40s. The music that we call swing was popular during that period. He played for moonlight excursions on Captain [George] Brown's boat. That was a favorite pleasure thing to do.

Another musician was Tracy McCleary. His band was Tracy's Kentuckians, and all these years I never stopped to think why they were they called the Kentuckians. We just accepted that they were Tracy's Kentuckians. Now they were the house band for the famous Royal Theater. I don't know if you're familiar with the Royal Theater. At the Royal Theater for, maybe a quarter, you could see a movie, a cartoon and a stage show.

These stage shows were called vaudeville. And they would have some of the bands that became very famous later on — Count Basie, wonderful bands like that. There would be singers and dancers and comedians. The house band would accompany the singers and dancers and play any other incidental music that was needed. Tracy's band was very well known throughout Baltimore.

And a few years, several years ago, a plaque was dedicated in commemoration of the Royal Theater, which no longer exists, and it was placed on the site where the Royal Theater was on Pennsylvania Avenue.

Gerald Burks Wilson was an organist. He directed the Baltimore Singers. It was a group of male singers. They sang for almost a decade to church audiences. Mr. Wilson also composed a number of songs. At one of Morris Queen's concerts, he honored Mr. Wilson as one of Baltimore's notable musicians.

Another popular group that appeared in many churches and other places was the Baltimore Boys Choir, organized and directed by Meredith Birch. This group came out of Samuel Coleridge

Taylor School, which was my elementary school. Mr. Birch was a public school music instructor, and he started the group with the boys from his school. They did broadcasts, they did stage appearances, and every year they would tour the USO centers and the army camps of Maryland. And maybe that's why on this particular copy of a program that I have, that was performed in 1945, it was dedicated to men in the service. So that was another very popular musician, a very popular group.

My husband I were associated with a musician named James Young. He was an instrumentalist. He played the violin, the woodwinds, the brass and percussion instruments. He loved and directed several choruses. He made personal appearances as a violinist. He produced and directed musical programs, some of which were quite elaborate. One such program in which my husband and I sang was the *Musical Tea of All Nations*, with costumes, drama, an all girl string and choral symphonette, the Morgan College male ensemble and numerous soloists. This program was in celebration of National Music Week, and was given at the Madison Avenue YWCA in May of 1947. Mr. James Young was also one of the pioneers who felt that music could be used as a therapy for some people who had certain problems. That was the first time I had ever heard of music therapy.

Those musicians that I just mentioned were recalled by my husband, James Owings, who we call Mickey. We have been enjoying as well as singing music together since high school in the late 1930s and continuing to the present.

Q: What was your first performance like in high school with your husband?

Owings: Well, I'm going to get to that.

The next musician I'd like to talk about is W. Llewellyn Wilson. My husband I met Mr. Wilson when he taught us music at Douglass High School in the late '30s and early '40s. But we found later that he had also taught in elementary school. He had taught math and history before he became a music teacher. During his tenure at Douglass High School, he was also a highly respected organist at Bethel AME Church.

In addition to our association with Mr. Wilson in assigned music classes, my husband and I were also members of the Choral Club, which put on spectacular operettas each spring. The one I remember best was called *Chonita*, and it used the music of Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsodies. This is where my husband I first met and were attracted to each other. So rehearsals were so enjoyable because it gave us more time to be together.

Another teacher who taught English or speech, Miss Miller, also gave plays in the spring. She was not a music teacher. She would select a play that she thought had appeal, and then she would use popular songs interspersed in her play. I also appeared in some of her plays. And my husband enjoyed watching me do that! [Laughter]

My husband also played the bass drum in the school band.

Mr. Wilson conducted a City Colored Orchestra and a City Colored Chorus. And at one time, near the end of the season, there was dissension between the members of the orchestra and the union. Some of them who were union members did not want to play with non-union members. So in order to fill out the rest of the season, Mr. Wilson used some of the members of the school band. As I say, my husband played the bass drum. His friend Casper played the cymbals. They were playing in rehearsal a song called *Londonderry Air*, which we also know as *Danny Boy*. When it gets to the climax, the drum and the cymbals are supposed to clash. My husband and his friend missed the beat. And they clashed when they were not supposed to clash. Well, I know Mr. Wilson was in shock. My husband says the tuba player almost fell off of his chair.

Mr. Wilson also had a dry sense of humor, and during one of the rehearsals, one of the members would make a mistake, and Mr. Wilson would correct him, and he would pull his music stand closer. And when it happened again, he'd pull his stand closer. So about the third time, Mr. Wilson said, "why didn't you tell me you were blind?" [Laughter] That's the kind of person that he was.

He also conducted the National Choral Colored Symphony, which performed on radio station WBAL, which was then on the sixth floor of the Gas and Electric Building. He let some of the members of the Choral Club sing with adults from other church choirs. The broadcast was on Tuesday nights. And if we were lucky to be chosen — because it was a large number, so he couldn't always use all the singers, but if you were lucky enough to sing for the actual broadcast, you received payment in the grand total of two dollars.

Q: Wow! Was that for the performance?

Owings: That was the performance, the actual broadcast. This broadcast was sponsored by National Bohemian Beer, and some listeners, some of our parents and neighbors, protested that school children such as ourselves should not be singing on a program that advertised beer. But it didn't seem to have any effect on stopping the broadcasts.

Mr. Wilson inspired and was a mentor for people like Cab Calloway, Anne Wiggins Brown, and Ellis Larkins, who became a world-renowned, jazz pianist. We were at Douglass High School along with Ellis, and our association has continued all through the years. We remember when teachers from Peabody came to Douglass to teach Ellis because colored students were not accepted at Peabody. Later on, sometime ago, the school gave him an honorary degree.

We could fill a book with information about Ellis, and I'm sure that many books have been written about him. I'll leave that to someone else. But I would like to tell an amusing personal story about Ellis. I often say that I might not be at the Waxter Senior Center still trying to learn how to play the piano if the outcome of this story had been different. I was fourteen or fifteen years old. Ellis said that he would teach me to play the piano, and I was just delighted.

The day that we were going to start happened to be one cold winter's day. In those days we walked a lot. We didn't have bus fare, carfare as we called it, anyway. I lived on McCulloh Street near North Avenue, and Ellis lived way over on Lanvale Street. I walked all those miles over to Ellis's house to start piano lessons.



We went in the room where the piano was, and he had some younger brothers and sisters who were playing and making noise. So we closed the door so that they wouldn't disturb us. Well, his father came storming in. I don't know what he thought was going on behind the closed door, but nothing was going on but the beginning of a piano lesson. His father ranted and raved about the door being closed. I was so puzzled and humiliated that I quickly left.

Ellis was so upset and embarrassed that he insisted that his father come later that afternoon through the snow to apologize to me, which he did. However I did not go back. So I never got any more piano lessons from Ellis Larkins. That's why I'm still trying today.

Mercedes Douglas is the next musician that I would like to speak about. She formed the Girls Choir in 1941 in Grace Presbyterian Church, when the late Reverend John Colbert was pastor. I must have joined the choir in the mid to late 1940s. And at this time, I was married with children, but I joined the Girls Choir. And under Mrs. Douglas's excellent leadership, the girls choir sang so beautifully that we were requested to give numerous concerts in churches all over the city. This continued until the late '50s. Some of our accompanists included Medford Campbell, Floyd Adams, Audrey McCallum and Ruth Knox.

In the late 1940s, a music school, the Baltimore Institute of Musical Arts, was founded. The school was housed in the former WCAO radio station on Lanvale Street. They offered the choir a much-needed study and practice space. Because of our association with the school, very often the choir was listed as the Girls Choir of the Baltimore Institute of Musical Arts. This affiliation moved beyond a mere tenant landlord arrangement.

Felix Robert Mendelssohn, a descendant of the composer Felix Mendelssohn, was concertmaster of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. He took a great interest in the choir. He had such high regard for the choir that he spoke of it as the Girls Choir of the century. At the time of his sudden death, he was planning to take the choir on a European concert tour.

Another affiliate, Mr. Herman Schwartz, composed a lullaby specifically for the choir.

An enjoyable departure from the usual church concerts came in 1949, when an organization called Le Cercle de Musique, sponsored the choir in an operetta, *Kathleen*, to raise funds for musical scholarships for the students of the Girls Choir. This was performed at the Royal Theater on Pennsylvania Avenue. It was exciting and great fun for me to sing the role of Bridget, Kathleen's nurse. I was also privileged to sing a number of solos with the Girls Choir, and well as with the Grace Presbyterian Choir and the Knox Presbyterian Choir in presentations such as *The Holy City*, the *Saint Cecilia Mass*. Mercedes later directed choirs in those churches.

Singing in the Girls Choir gave me such pleasure. We had a wonderful sound and such a wonderful repertoire of lovely songs especially suited to our voices. There are certain songs that I will always associate with the Girls Choir. If I listen carefully, I can hear them now.

A special love existed between the girls and Miss D. That's what we always called her, Miss D. She was a lady with a capital L. Soft spoken, lovely in feature and personality. A fine musician dedicated to the cause of presenting fine music at its best. She was unforgettable. I will always

remember her with great joy for the pleasure of singing beautiful music with a beautiful lady. I've maintained contact with her all through these years.

In 1992 we held a reunion of the Girls Choir. The girls choir was in existence from 1941 to 1951.

Now the most joyous, the most satisfying, the most unforgettable experience for which I will forever be grateful was being a member of the Morris Queen Chorale. Morris was a gifted, highly trained organist of Sharp Street Church, and a product of Howard University, where he met his revered Dean Lawson of the music department. He quoted Dean Lawson all the time. He thought of him as one of the finest choral directors that existed.

This choir was organized in 1953 or '54 by Francis Tillman. We started with twelve voices and grew at one time, to fifty members. Morris was a very serious, no nonsense person who got results. But this association was not only musical, but with love and friendship included. We worked hard, and we loved it. We never wanted to leave rehearsals.

Rehearsals were on Saturday nights, and we just didn't want to leave each other so we went to different members' houses every Saturday night. Sometimes we would end up singing half the night as well as having fun. But we always ended up singing. We sang songs of great composers, we sang melodic contemporary songs, and always the wonderful soulful spirituals. Morris was also a composer. Among his compositions are three songs in the addendum music hymnal called The Songs of Zion. He also wrote a song called *A Thought*, which he dedicated to the Morris Queen Chorale. It was premiered at Sharp Street Church in 1964. He dedicated to the Baltimore Chapel Choir, which followed the chorale, a piece called *Adoration*.

The choir was well received by the public with accolades from professional musicians and music critics like Ada Killian Jenkins of the Afro-American newspaper. She used words like "velvet smooth blending", "careful phrasing, a rising star, a choir that showed high ideals of musicianship".

Some of the highlights of the Morris Queen Chorale were a concert at the Great Tindley Temple in Philadelphia, and a performance on a United States battleship. We also had the honor of singing under the direction of Mr. J. Winship Lewis, who was director of the famous Handel Choir.

We sang when Martin Luther King appeared here as a speaker for Maryland Freedom Rally Committee in 1963. I suppose our highest honor was singing a concert version of *Porgy and Bess* with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra conducted by Herbert Grossman, in February, 1960, at the Lyric Theater with soloists Junetta Jones and Robert Mosley. It was most exciting. The Sun critic Weldon Wallace said that "the chorale sang with fine ensemble and warm spirit". Another critic said, "the chorus, which numbers some remarkable contraltos and basses, was powerfully effective".

We got a taste of musical theater. We appeared in two productions of the musical *Showboat*. The first was a local theater group called the Alamedians, and this was in 1959 at Mergenthaler High School. But we got really into the spotlight on our second appearance with the Baltimore Actors

Theater, directed by Helen Griegal. We were in *Showboat* with a TV star of the time, William Bendix, as Captain Andy, and Joseph Eubanks on the music staff of Morgan College as Joe, singing the immortal *Old Man River*. One of our own chorale members, Dolores Stokes, played the part of Queenie.

It was fun, but it was hard work. Long, long hours. Many of us were teaching at the time, and I remember that we had to bring our class report cards to rehearsal in order to get our work done on time. The most dreaded words you could hear in rehearsal were "take it from the top". That meant start all over again. And we would be so weary, but we did it.

One of the funniest things was Helen Griegal, a Caucasian, teaching us Black folks how to shuffle. That was really funny.

By the second night of the performance — there were two performances — we were pros. We were ready for Broadway. This was at Ford's Theater, March 22, 1963.

We continued appearing in concerts, but around 1968, due mostly to changing life circumstances, the Chorale took a hiatus until 1972. Then we began again. We sang for a few more years, before closing a marvelous chapter in the musical life of Baltimore. And what Morris Queen himself has labeled as the greatest choral period in his life.

Q: I was wondering how you got involved with the Morris Queen choir initially?

Owings: A friend of mine, Francis Tillman, who organized the group, came to my house and asked me if I wanted to be in it.

Q: Were all the members invited to participate, or did they have to audition? And how did that work?

Owings: At first we were invited. In later years, when new members came, Morris would audition them. But Francis knew a lot of people who sang and who sang well. So that's how she got members. As I said, we started out with a small group, and then as more people heard about it they wanted to join. We knew many people who could sing well, and we would invite them to join.

Q: How do you think that Morris Queen, I mean in speaking about the chorale you praise it very much, influenced the music culture here in Baltimore?

Owings: As I say, it was a very popular group. Always in demand to give concerts. The fact that we were invited to sing *Porgy and Bess* with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra proved that we were highly respected. I think, if I'm not mistaken, one of the news articles stated that we were the first Black choral group that up to that point had sung with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. The word goes around. You sing, and people put the word out. And as I said, with music teachers complimenting us, and Mrs. Jenkins who was a musician and a music critic publishing positive reviews about our concerts, the word goes out.

Q: So referring to that question that I asked before about racial prejudice, do you think then that, with the Morris Queen Chorale performing with the BSO, would you say that the music had the ability to transcend racial boundaries?

Owings: I think so. It's just seems to take time for people to acknowledge that the excellence of the performance is the important thing — not the race of the performer. I don't know any other way to explain it. Because we've certainly had fine groups before that time. And then every once in a while, there'll be a break maybe for one person here and one person there. When Peabody initiated the exhibit, *The Storm is Passing Over* about Black musicians in Maryland in 1999, I was happy to hear the director [Robert Sirota] say that not accepting Black students was Peabody's loss. It's always their loss when they deny us. Because we have wonderful talent, and we always have. So people lose when they restrict things to any particular group. They're the ones who lose.

Q: What were some of the struggles that black musicians had to face here in Baltimore?

Owings: I think everybody loses when you have restrictions and separations and you can't share culture together. Also some of the musicians lose as Ellis [Larkins] did, not being able to attend a prestigious school right here in Baltimore. One of the results of that kind of segregation, as it was evidenced toward musicians, was that a great many black musicians went abroad to Europe — France especially. Josephine Baker and performers like that went where they were accepted for their art and not excluded because of their color. I had read about a group of entertainers in the '20s who even went to Russia and at that time were accepted there and entertained with no problems and some of them even stayed. So everybody loses when things are separate and segregated in that manner.

Q: I wanted you to discuss a little about the music history of Pennsylvania Avenue.

Owings: I touched on the Royal Theater on Pennsylvania Avenue, which was very famous in its day — where we saw, as I said, the big bands, the singers, dancers and comedians like Moms Mabley.

There were also numerous nightclubs all along "The Avenue", many of which featured live bands and singers. There were a number of movie theatres. There were also dance halls, like the New Albert and The Strand where clubs and other organizations could have social affairs with live bands. "The Avenue" was the lively, vibrant center of musical entertainment — The place to be — for Blacks for many, many years.

The Royal is long gone, and some people say we should not have let it die. My husband says that when segregation and separation end, there are going to be some losses as well as gains. At the time that the Royal was in its heyday, we could not go to other theatres like the Hippodrome and the entertainers that we loved could not always play at other places. So when segregation ends, we are no longer restricted — we have many more choices of places to go. That's how we lost the Royal. But which is the greater gain or the greater loss?

Would we still want the Royal Theater and still be confined to only go to the Royal Theater?

The same is true of Provident Hospital that is no longer in existence. A wonderful Black hospital. But when segregation ended, doctors could practice in other "white" hospitals. We could be treated at "white" hospitals and so when a certain period ends the segregation, it may seem like we have lost something precious. That is one of the results — one of the costs.

Q: Previously you mentioned that the Morris Queen Chorale performed for a visit that Dr. King made to Baltimore. I was just wondering, in terms of other historical events - such as you said that your husband was a war veteran - how did these aspects, surrounding these historic events that aren't related to music impact your music experience.

Owings: I don't know that it did. I'm not sure that I know how to answer that.

Q: You performed with your husband and with him having to leave to serve in the army.

Owings: Yes, well as it was at that time, I hadn't really started singing with various choirs. It really started when he came back from the army. As I say, we performed in high school and when he was here we did some singing together around churches. So during the period when he was in the army — and he wasn't really gone that long — I had small children to raise and I wasn't participating in choirs then. This was in the early 1940s.

Q: Okay. He never joined the Morris Queen Chorale?

Owings: Oh yes, yes! Oh, absolutely! I am sorry. Yes indeed! Yes, he was one of our best tenors. Absolutely! I am sorry I didn't make that clear. I said earlier that we had been singing together from high school all the way up to the present. Yes, he was in the Morris Queen Chorale. I think I joined the year before he did. But he became a member and he has been a member of every choir to which I have belonged. As I stated, the Chorale began in 1953-54.

Q: So you guys are still able to perform together?

Owings: Um humm. Yep! He's a tenor and I'm an alto. [laughter]

Q: Well, if you want to continue..

Owings: All right. Now we just discussed the Morris Queen Chorale. There's a connection between the next choir, the Baltimore Chapel Choir and the Chorale. The Chorale ended in the early '70s.

Q: Before you continue, why did it end?

Owings: One thing is, just different life circumstances. For instance, one of our best sopranos moved to Detroit. People's family situations change — their families were growing and they might have had other commitments. It had been a long time since we started the Chorale in 1954. That's a long time for a group to stay together. So it's just that time changes things sometimes.

Q: Did the city see the ending of this choir as a setback? How did the city react to the dispersal.

Owings: I can't really say. I can't really speak to that. I am sure that there was a lot of regret. I am sure that people who had enjoyed it through the years were sorry to see that happen. But it wasn't too long after that that we had the Baltimore Chapel Choir. The Baltimore Chapel Choir began at a time when a number of outstanding choirs in the city had been discontinued. One was the Great Hymns Choir. They had been singing together for a long time. The Morris Queen Chorale had discontinued and perhaps there were some other groups whose names I can't remember right now. But people who had been members of these groups still wanted to sing the music of the great composers. So recognizing this need, Laurence Draper organized the Baltimore Chapel Choir and after much insistence, persuaded Morris Queen, who had been the director of the Morris Queen Chorale, to become the director of the Baltimore Chapel Choir. So we had some members who had been members of the chorale. We had some members who had belonged to the Great Hymns Choir and to some other churches around the city. So as I said, the Chorale ended maybe like around 1974 so here this is 1977 when the Baltimore Chapel Choir had its first rehearsal and David Moore who is associated with a very musical family, is a singer and a pianist, became our assistant director and our accompanist.

One of our primary functions was to sing the *Messiah*, Handel's *Messiah*. One of the choirs that we were trying to incorporate was The Great Hymns Choir. That was another outstanding group of singers that had been led by Rev. Daniel Rideout. And after his passing, Murray Schmoke, the father of our former Mayor, Kurt Schmoke, directed the Great Hymns Choir but they had disbanded at that time. So Morris felt that since we had members from the Great Hymns Choir who had sung the *Messiah* for so many years, that we would try to incorporate these groups and we would present — especially at Christmas — the *Messiah*. We did it at Easter a few times but basically we did the Christmas *Messiah*, always on the first Sunday in December and always at Sharp Street Church. We always had two very gifted accompanists: Mack Statham, whom I'm going to discuss a little later, on the organ, and Audrey McCallum who I had met in the Girls' Choir. I call her the Girl with the Golden Hands because she plays piano so beautifully.

I met Mack Statham, an outstanding organist, when I joined Metropolitan Church. The friendship between Morris and Mack made it possible for the Baltimore Chapel Choir to be combined with the Metropolitan Choir of Metropolitan United Methodist Church in a number of performances. These two choirs did a lot of performances together. We did Mendelssohn's *Hymn of Praise*, we did *A German Requiem* by Brahms, and we did *The Seven Last Words of Christ* as well as some other general concerts. In 1997 the Chapel Choir was invited to sing at the commencement exercises of St. Mary's Seminary at the Cathedral of Mary our Queen. I consider the Baltimore Chapel Choir to be an extension of the Morris Queen Chorale, continuing the tradition of presenting great music and great performances to Baltimore audiences. I believe that this past December, 2001, was the first time since the inception of the Chapel Choir that they did not perform the *Messiah*. So I'm not sure what that means for the future of the Chapel Choir. I understand that this month, April 2002, Morris Queen will retire after nearly 60 years as organist of Sharp Street Memorial United Methodist Church. That is an unusual and enviable record and that makes it all the more important that we record and remember his singular contributions to the music of Baltimore, and I am pretty sure is being interviewed for this project.

Q: How would you describe the essence of his style.

Owings: He's highly trained out of Howard University. He was so well trained and he had a great love of music. Morris always says the words are most important in choral music. If you really think about the words you are singing it will help to interpret the song the way it should be presented. With this combination of a natural love of music and his excellent training, Morris was able to bring out the best in us. After we learned the music and we were going to present it in concert, we were not allowed to hold the music score in our hands. We were required to learn the music by heart. That way Morris believed that you would really look at the director, pay attention, and follow his directions in order to produce the music the way it should be.

Historically, Metropolitan United Methodist Church has had a number of outstanding organist/choir directors. Among them have been Evelyn Dyson Johnson, Shellman Johnson and Maurice Murphy. When my husband and I joined Metropolitan Church in 1982, that tradition was continued by Mack Statham, an organist of the highest order. Under his leadership the choir presented such works as Vivaldi's *Gloria*, Festival of Lessons and Carols, Haydn's *Achieved is the Glorious Work*, John Rutter's *Gloria*, and music of that caliber. Mack is very low key and easy to work with — a very likeable person for all of his talent. So many churches — numerous churches call on Mack to serve, to dedicate their organs, or as an accompanist for major musical events and Mack couldn't say no.

Whenever I asked him, "Hi Mack, how you doing?" His response was always, "Jackie, I'm so tired." I would tell him that he needed to slow down — say no! sometimes. So one day, just to be funny, he responded, "I feel fine, Jackie". But the way he said it and the way he laughed, I knew it wasn't really so. On one occasion, Mack played the organ accompaniment to the *Messiah* at two churches back to back. That is a long concert. It takes a lot of muscle strength. Mack was so tired his muscles were painning him so he had to stop the car, pull over, and rest a while before he could drive home to Laurel, Maryland.

Mack has been hailed as an outstanding composer. The music for the cantata, *Whence We Came and Where We Are* was composed in 1962 and had its first performance at the Lyric Theatre in 1963. The cantata was performed by the combined choirs at Metropolitan Church in 1984. In that same year the Hampton Institute, Mack's alma mater, gave a special presentation of the cantata. At this performance Dr. Statham was honored as alumnus of the year. Also in 1984, Mack wrote a composition called the *Heritage* dedicated to Metropolitan United Methodist Church and commemorating the church's heritage. His composition, *Trilogy of Dreams*, is based on the life of Dr. Martin Luther King. The premier performance featuring a choir of over 100 voices, local pianists and organists, as well as an orchestral ensemble, was presented at Metropolitan U.M. Church in March 1989. *Trilogy of Dreams* has also been sung at other churches in Baltimore and surrounding areas. I was highly privileged to sing the solo to the spiritual "Oh Freedom" in the *Trilogy of Dreams* at its premier and I was deeply flattered to hear Mack say that he thought of my voice singing that piece when he was working on it. This was a singular honor and a very humbling experience. Mack signed and personally inscribed copies of his work *Whence We Came* and *Trilogy of Dreams* for the Metropolitan Choir for each member. As a gift he gave each member his own handwritten copy — a handwritten copy of the music of another composition called *Dialogue*, a spiritual conversation, in 1991. (The only problem was that sometimes we had to ask him to translate his handwriting and tell us what this or that word was. We all laughed together about this.)

*Dialogue* had its premier in Dayton, Ohio, the former home of then Metropolitan Church minister Louis Shockley and was dedicated to the eight church choirs who had sung in the premier of *Trilogy of Dreams*.

In May, 1996, at the 5th Annual Live, Gifted and Black concert by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, the With One Voice Choir sang the *Trilogy* at the Meyerhoff [Symphony Hall]. What an extraordinary experience to be so closely associated with such an outstanding musician! To be part of so many musical firsts and to feel that the love and respect we felt were mutual.

Hugh Carey personifies precision, innovation, drama, and diverseness in music. He followed Mack Statham's term at Metropolitan U.M. Church around 1992.

I became acquainted with Hugh and his music in the late 1980s when he taught at Community College of Baltimore, or CCB as it was known then. It was my understanding that former Mayor and Governor William Donald Schaefer expressed the idea of having a multi-generational multi-racial chorus to promote the idea of brotherhood and harmony in the city of Baltimore. This group, Citizens Celebrating Baltimore, performed for organizations all over Baltimore and surrounding areas. Citizen's programs were always vibrant and exciting, combining music and dance and having productions highlighting the popular music of our times, of Broadway, of the Royal Theatre and so forth.

Hugh had also served as organist/choir director in a number of churches in Baltimore so we were aware of his reputation for producing fine music. The Metropolitan Choir's repertoire had consisted mainly of classic anthems, spirituals and, in the later years with Mack, a few more contemporary pieces.

Hugh stretched this to include more gospel selections but there was always variety. He believed that within each church service there should be variety. Within a church service you would have traditional hymns, your classical anthems and your spirituals and/or your gospel, providing variety in mood as well as types of music. This was done in all the concerts and programs that we presented. But whatever kind of music Hugh chooses, it will be the best that it can be done in the most and effective and appropriate style for that particular kind of music. Hugh constantly reminded the choir that we were providing a ministry, an important ministry for the church.

Some of the programs we presented were the *Messiah*, Festival of Lessons and Carols and a jazz worship service, programs in celebration of Black history, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. And I'll come back to some of those in a minute.

Hugh Carey has a way of being so precise and specific about the sounds he wants you to produce — the enunciation, the style, the phrasing, the dynamics — he literally puts the sound in your mouth. You have no doubt about the exact way every word, every note is to be sung.

I have known Hugh to spend two hours on three pages of music so the results he gets are stunning. He is a brilliant musician. I have sung the *Messiah* for many years. I know the Christmas part and some of the Easter portion practically by heart — I could sing it with my eyes



closed. I couldn't believe I had any more to give to the *Messiah* until I sang it with Hugh. But I did.

Hugh asked me to write the narration and story line for the Black history program we presented in 1994. He never once questioned me about what I was doing. He just left it to me and accepted the finished product just as I wrote it. He was pleased with the result. I thought that showed great respect and faith in what he saw as my ability to do the job. This program, which included selections of African-American vocalists and musicians, was excellent. (My husband and I were also privileged to sing solos with the Metropolitan Choir under Hugh Carey.) The jazz worship service with instruments and choir was a first for Metropolitan. The service was outstanding, drawing a capacity audience.

My husband and I and my daughter, Juliette, were also privileged to sing solos in the Metropolitan Choir under Hugh Carey.

Imagine an audience of 1,000 school children filling Metropolitan Church sanctuary - spellbound as they received a Christmas gift by way of a production of *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. For some of the children it was their first time being in a church. One seven year old boy thought he was in a castle! We have such wonderful architecture and magnificent stained glass windows at Metropolitan Church. One boy said, "I'll never forget this!" I know he was not alone in that feeling. This program demonstrated Hugh's belief that the music ministry of the church is vital to the community — a gift to the community from the church. That's Hugh Carey. A man of vision.

That same vision continued and expanded this past December 2001, when Hugh Carey, who is now director of choral activities at Coppin State College, fulfilled a long-time dream of producing Handel's *Messiah* as a staged production, with scenery, costumes, narration, dancing, and instrumentalists, as well as the core music so beloved by all.

My husband, James, or Mickey as I call him, and I had joined Hugh's Coppin Community Choir and we sang in a number of programs right along with the Coppin Choir which has become so great that they have been asked to perform in Korea three years in a row.

The *Messiah* — he called it the *Messiah for a New Millenium* — was presented to a capacity audience at the James Weldon Johnson Coppin Auditorium. It was proclaimed as magnificent — awesome! President Burnett [Calvin Burnett, President of Coppin State College] proclaimed that "it was a remarkable new way to tell a new story." But that typifies exactly what Hugh Carey is all about and always about. A new way to tell an old story.

Q: That gift that you mention in discussing Hugh Carey, do you feel that musicality is a part of you? And do you feel that you and your husband were able to pass that gift along to your own children?

Owings: Yes, I'm sure that we have. All of our children sing. They all sing in their church choirs. My grandson, son of my youngest daughter, Juliette, is a member of a very popular R&B group, Dru Hill, that has recorded top hits and won Billboard awards, among other things. I think it is a gift, as I say. I have gained a lot of knowledge and experience from working with these

musicians but I think, within me, I have a gift also. I believe I have shared it with a lot of people — audiences to which I sang — but especially with the children that I taught. Some of them may not remember the math that they had but they are never going to forget the music. I've had children come up to me and say, I played the witch in your play or I played the bells. Other teachers at the time have said to me, "you put John Jones in that play and he did well! I was surprised." I just put it out to them and they accept and do it. I just believe they can do it. This is why I am so concerned that these days many children are not getting music education in schools. I think I said to you, I heard a statement that someone made that we should not expect that because the children have music that they are going to turn out to be musicians. You teach them physics but you don't expect them to turn into physicists. You teach them chemistry but that doesn't mean they're going to be chemists. But it adds such an element to your life to be part of music - to be able to appreciate a gift like music. So I feel very happy that I have shared it. I don't know whether I told you what happened at the dedication of the commemorative plaque for the Royal. I forget what year that was - it was a number of years ago, but not way back in the past - I met one of my former students who had been in my class when I had the students compose a school song for Belmont. And he told me that lesson point for point, the way I had done it. This is important. This means that something really captivated him and I'm sure he's not the only one - if not that particular experience, then some other musical experience. But they always remember.

In conclusion, I would like to say it has been very exciting to be part of this oral history project — to bring alive and keep alive the story of some of Baltimore's outstanding and influential musicians. I think the best part for me has been that preparing for the project, looking over my memorabilia, thinking about these experiences, sometimes practically re-living them, has made me realize how fortunate I am. I am so fortunate. I am so blessed to have experienced the wonder, the joy, the beauty of music through my association with so many gifted musicians. From my early years to the present, my life has been so wonderfully enriched because of them. They have added a dimension to my existence that I cannot imagine being without.

Q: Thank you very much for all the research that you did and everything that you had prepared for this interview. It was truly enlightening. Would you agree with the statement that Baltimore was in the vanguard for music with its rich history, its having had such wonderful musicians who were very much willing to share their music and their abilities.

Owings: I believe that. And I would say, as far as music is concerned, in many times and many places, that Baltimore has really been on the map! This person came from Baltimore — that person came from Baltimore. I heard this in Baltimore — I saw this in Baltimore. I think we really have a rich history in music and I believe it is still going on. We all have the things that we can appreciate. No matter what style or classification, we all have our own personal tastes in what we enjoy. Some people like this and I like that. So it is still going on.

Q: How do you think that music has changed?

Owings: In a myriad of ways — style, content, harmony, rhythm, presentation. Perhaps there have been more changes in the styles of popular music than any other classification, or it may be that we notice those changes more because we hear popular music more. Changes have occurred

in all types of music, classical as well as popular and religious. When I spoke of the variety that Hugh insisted on, in church music that is to me the key word — variety. As I read John Abbington's book, *Let Mt. Zion Rejoice*, a book about music in the African-American Church, on every page I was saying "Amen." He was saying that if you like the anthems, you should not have to wait for the first and third Sunday to hear the anthems and if you like gospel, you shouldn't have to wait 'til the 2nd or 4th Sunday to hear Gospel. I agree with Abbington that church music should be more inclusive. That way, I think you can capture everyone. There will be something for everyone. And I think that's the key word. I think in many churches today — and as my grandmother would say, "this is their prerogative", but to me church music is too one-sided. I feel that within each church service, there is an opportunity to be prayerful and meditative. There is a place for the traditional as well as the contemporary. Anthems and traditional hymns can be spirited, uplifting and rousing as well as quiet and prayerful.

There's a lot of gospel. I can enjoy some gospel, but I don't want that all the time, and I resent people telling me in so many words, that if I don't respond to it in a certain way, then there is something wrong with me. I really resent that. I remember one time Morris Queen said, you could take a storefront church where the people may not have been exposed to so many different kinds of music. But you bring in somebody like Jessye Norman or Marian Anderson or Simon Estes, no matter what the audience's background, when people hear singing like that, they will recognize its beauty and power. They won't say "oh, I don't want to hear that stuff." If you have your heart in the music and you present it well, people will recognize its greatness. That's what I think we should do. I think that's what we need to do — to not put things into so many little pigeon holes and say, we won't do this, we won't do that.

I went to a concert at Union Baptist several Sundays ago. That church has a music committee that plans concerts, and they still present the classical performers — choirs, soloists, instrumentalists — and it's always packed. So don't tell me people don't want to hear it. Rev. Dobson was being very sarcastic a Sunday or so before that. He said they were going to do a piece called *Stabat Mater* in Latin. He said, "What! Your choir is going to sing something all in Latin! Nobody wants to hear that." He was being facetious, because he knew that the church would be packed — as it always is. So if you present things to people, they will accept it, if it's done well. At least they will recognize that that have heard something great. And especially, as Morris says, "listen to the words. Listen to what it's saying." And don't be so quick to say I don't want to hear it.

Q: If there's one thing that you want people to take from this interview, what would that be?

Owings: I want them to become acquainted with these wonderful musicians that Baltimore has, and I hope that they can sense some of the joy that I have experienced by being associated with some of these musicians. I hope that they will see some of the exciting things that these choirs have done. The appeal that they have had over the years and some still have. I just want them to be aware that something beautiful has gone on with Black music in Baltimore.

Q: Thank you very much. It is wonderful talking to you and listening to your stories. I've learned so much, because I'm not from Baltimore. This interview has really shown me a different side of

Baltimore. You can drive around the city and see that it's an old city, and it has a lot of history, but you don't know what it is.

Owings: You have to know somebody who will give it to you.

Q: Thank you for being that person.

Owings: I've enjoyed it. I've enjoyed it. I'm happy for the opportunity to share some of my joys with the public.

END OF INTERVIEW