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Laurie Guttormsen remembered

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Laurie GUTTORMSEN: IN MEMORIUM

“Beauty Was Her Sword”

pure (*pyoor*) 1. Having a homogenous or uniform composition: not mixed. 2. Free from foreign elements. 3. Containing nothing inappropriate or unnecessary. 4. Complete: total. 5. MUS. Free from discordant qualities. 6. Articulated with a single unchanging sound. 7. Laurie Guttormsen.



Well, there's probably some kind of lawsuit here for my having altered Webster's dictionary, but the point is that if I were compelled to summarize the professional approach of our late colleague and my friend Laurie Guttormsen with one word, for me that word would have to be pure. She was so driven by her excitement for choral music, particularly in the realms of the male changing voice and of the expressive potential of the conducting gesture, that it was often impossible to get her to change the subject. She read voraciously, attended every workshop she felt might be of value, put herself on the line in conducting workshops in order to learn more and more. Some of us fear the exposure of our shortcomings or blind spots, but with Laurie there simply was no such concept as personal ego. Nada.

Honestly, it could be exhausting rooming with her at conferences and workshops, which I joyfully did for many years. She literally never let up: plane rides, walks, meals, early-morning makeup times, the slightest pause between pieces in a concert, after lights-out in the hotel room: every spare moment was full of her eager exploration of theories. Mere mortal that I am, I wasn't always that curious or passionate, especially after midnight. But Laurie was. She was a pure learning machine. Oblivious to what people might think, she'd stop in front of a mirror or store window to try a few cutoffs or a difficult transition to a new meter. I well remember a seminar in Baroque performance practice in grad school, with the Bach motets as subject matter. All of us in the class were

hopeless overachievers, yet Laurie stood out: during her presentation she literally buried us in handouts, huge graphs, comparative recordings, and treatises on text painting. When she discovered something great she was a tireless, infectious evangelist.

Laurie came rather late to choral music, having spent years as an English teacher. When she made the transition to music she brought her protective love of kids and her equally protective love of the English language, and added a quest for better understanding of vocal technique which soon became a pure obsession. The astonishing international success of her Young Men's Vocal Ensemble is a unique testimony to her search for knowledge and skill, as well as her commitment to her students.

Lest anyone think she was one-dimensional, may I hasten to add that Laurie dearly loved her husband Gary and daughter Karli. Of course there was more than just music in her very full life: They shared a love of camping and hiking, and of travel, since Laurie's background also included a proficiency in French. Theirs was a normal happy family, it's just that the sauna was stacked high with octavos...

These last ten years of her life were incredible. She was so busy, so focused, so positive after receiving the news that cancer had invaded her spine after five free years since her breast cancer. It seemed there was never a time she wasn't undergoing treatment of some kind, but her spirit was always enthusiastic and her involvement in music as pure as ever. Many people were part of her life during this time, and they undoubtedly have their own stories, but for me there are at least two indelible memories: watching her sleep fully upright in a suffocating dorm room in Minnesota, since she could no longer breathe lying down; giving her careful back support as she struggled to climb the stairs on the way to her presentation at Chicago ACDA. Make no mistake, this woman was a resolutely pure lover of life and its expression in the choral art.

Need more proof? While in the hospital, undergoing painfully invasive treatments for the tumor in her brain, she worked out lighting cues for the musical she was directing.

Here's how strong her sense of mission was: the city of Eugene actually gave her a surprise tribute concert, feeling she didn't have any time left — and she lived another two years, preparing her choir to win first place in international competition in Vienna.

Laurie died on December 7, 2000. This poem, written five months before her death, appeared in her memorial service brochure. If you knew her, you'll easily picture her. If you somehow missed the honor of her presence, here it is.

A Setting of Grace
(For Laurie Guttormsen)

*She sits in her wheelchair, full in her cancer,
letting the strains of "Agnus Dei" wash over her.
Sacred waters lifted from the stream of God
and the heart of Oregon State's Chamber Choir.
Daughter Karli, mother-trained, sings in the first row.*

*There are stories which cannot be told, even stories one has watched for
a long time.
Our daughter has stood near Karli in choirs for almost ten years, and I
have taught with Gary for nearly twenty. But tonight time dies.*

This is about cancer and tranquility.

*For years the cancer came, and for years she fought evil back by directing
choirs of her own in harmonies of grace.*

Beauty was her sword.

*Again and again, on the canvas of her life death would swipe a broad,
black stroke, and each time she would paint again a miracle of
grace, bright flowers across and above menacing lines.*

*Such artistry made her a saint, and her face was a place where the glory
of God could rest.*

*Tonight, ancient hymns pour as light through stained glass and Jesus
steps from the frames of mosaics into the cathedral to attend her. I
watch, sitting in my shallow faith as she fills with God.*

*Dusk plays through the glass, and the colors come as if to the beginning
of the world.*

*I cut my eyes from conductor to Karli, from patterned tiles flooded with
sunset to Gary and to Laurie, all the while love and glory and
beauty and music unfold.*

*And then, in a wheelchair, full in her cancer, she smiles, and I cannot tell
whose face it is.*

There are certain stories which cannot be told.

Paul Halu