

Robert Graham

1912 – 1992



Robert V. Graham was born in El Dorado, Kansas on September 5, 1912, one of six children born to Ora and Catherine “Kate” Peterman Graham. The family lived at 1137 West Central. His siblings were Ira, Mabel, Mildred, Ralph, and Paul.

Following high school, Robert hoped to attend the Curtis Institute of Music at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania for advanced training. The foremost school of its kind in the world, connected with the Philadelphia Grand Opera Company, its purpose was to provide opportunity to those with the ability to go far in music who were handicapped by the lack of funds.

He got his opportunity to audition for a scholarship at the school with funds raised by a local benefit performance of an opera he had written during high school.

Upon arriving in Philadelphia, he learned that the Curtis Institute had temporarily closed due to the recent death of its founder. He was advised to go to Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, with its greater opportunities for training in composition.

Awarded a scholarship, he attended Eastman from 1933 to 1936, working in the girls’ dining hall and coping music for the Sibley Library for money to live on. He also worked as an accompanist there for several years. He dropped out after three years to teach privately.

Through attending Eastman, he met and married Jeana Ardath Black in 1936 in Albion, New York. Jeana was a 1937 graduate of Eastman. A gifted poet, over the following years she provided the lyrical settings for a sizeable segment of her husband’s musical works. The couple had five sons: Robin, Ross, Thad, Paul and Jerad.

Graham moved to Wichita in 1942, to take a job in a war plant in Wichita during World War II. He entered the U.S. Army in 1944, where he served as an assistant to Chaplain Willi Frey in Camp Hood, Texas and later with the Army of Occupation, Eighth Army Headquarters in Yokohama, Japan. Frey had been a concertmaster of the Houston Symphony Orchestra.

When opportunity arose for Robert to fly home at the end of his tour of duty, he turned it down in favor of a month-long sea voyage. As it turned out, the plane he would have flown in plowed into a mountainside, killing everyone on board.

He was discharged in 1947, and returned to Rochester, New York. He spent part of 1950 at Mount McGregor Sanitarium in New York, undergoing a major operation for a lung ailment. After several years of study interrupted by periods of hospitalization, he received the degree of Bachelor of Music with Distinction from the Eastman School of Music in 1950.

The Graham family then took a camping trip across the country, moving from New York to Redlands, California, where Robert received the Master of Music (in Composition) degree one year later from the University of Redlands.

From 1952 to 1954, Graham worked as a missionary teacher at St. Margaret's Episcopal in Tokyo. One of the family's friends in Tokyo was Rev. Christopher Morley, Jr., son of the famed writer-editor of the same name.

Returning to California in 1954, Graham was a piano and organ teacher for private students, and church organist for St. Paul's Episcopal in Pomona, California. Robert continued work for the overseas missions of the Protestant Episcopal church, making a lecture tour, and acting as liaison between American and Japanese music publishing houses.

In 1956, he was again a hospital patient, at Long Beach Veterans Hospital, suffering from a lung condition. After six months in Long Beach, the family moved to Tucson, Arizona where he spent time recuperating from the long siege of hospitalization. This, he stated, was a blessing in disguise, for he was able to devote all his time to composition.

In 1961, the family moved to Waianae, Hawaii. Later, they moved to Escondido, California, where Graham continued to compose music and travel to judge music contests in the southwestern states.

Around 1951, he was elected to become a member of Pi Kappa Lambda, an honorary music society. Robert Graham died on December 9, 1992 in San Diego, California.

CONNECTION TO BUTLER COUNTY

Graham graduated from El Dorado High School with the class of 1933. While other boys were engaged in sports, Robert's forte was music. He was encouraged and assisted locally in his composition work by Mabel McCarty; he was a pupil of Wesley L. Farner of Wichita.

Outstanding work in music during his high school years proved Robert to be not only an extraordinary pianist, but also a composer of remarkable ability. Besides accommodating all who asked his assistance on programs and carrying on his schoolwork, he wrote four operas, a piano suite and a symphony.

One of the operas was presented locally during his senior year, to a large, appreciative and awed audience. The entire county showed great support and interest in helping this young musician during this benefit given in the early days of the Depression. Several unsolicited cash donations were made in addition to the proceeds. His two sisters were among those in the cast of over sixty performers, and a brother helped with the scenery.

The city directory of 1931 showed that even as a youth, Robert was involved in teaching music to others in El Dorado. At a young age, he consistently won first place in area and state music competitions. Considered by teachers and members of the local Music Club to be a creative genius, they marveling at the ability in both composition and rendition of such a young artist.

Robert's father, Ora Graham, was musical in his own right. At an early age he learned to play the melodeon and was interested in recording musical sessions. He also studied the beneficial properties of fruits, vegetables and nuts long before it was popular. A partner with his two brothers in real estate, two streets in El Dorado bore the names of Ora and Kate.

Ora died in 1921, leaving Kate to raise their six children. Each of the children grew up to make significant contributions in their own chosen fields, from contracting and business to football and music.

LEAVING THE AREA

A native of El Dorado, Robert left following high school graduation to study music back east. He never again lived in this area, but came home often to visit his boyhood home.

During a visit 1971, Graham gave his entire collection of manuscripts, scrapbooks, copies of published works and other valued memorabilia to the Butler County Historical Society for safekeeping.

ACHIEVEMENTS

A gifted composer, Graham has more than 300 published works to his credit. Among them are two violin-piano sonatas, a flute-piano sonata, a piano concerto, a symphony, an orchestral suite and numerous choral works and teaching pieces.

He introduced himself to the public while still in high school, as composer, musician, and director of *The Sister of Mercy*, an opera he wrote in 1931, presented by the El Dorado Music Club in his senior year. Minnie Marie Williams assisted Robert in writing the words.

The music was so superior to a majority of its kind that when another talented musician was asked to play the piano during the production, he bowed out, replying, "Graham's music starts where mine left off." As a result, Robert both played the piano and directed the opera.

The two-act opera told the story of Rosalind, a beautiful young girl sent to a convent because of her love for a young man. After years of seclusion, she learns of the death of her lover. Grieved, she is torn between reality and living in a dream world.

Robert's work received high praise, along with constructive and encouraging criticism, from nationally known critics across the nation, who all encouraged him to continue his study of musical composition. Among these was Rosario Scalero, director of composition of the Curtis Institute of Music at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Offered scholarships at several colleges and universities, young Graham hoped to enter the prestigious Curtis Institute. The El Dorado Music Club sponsored the presentation as a benefit, hoping to raise funds to enable this.

While later attending the Eastman School of Music in Philadelphia, some of his compositions were played by the Philharmonic Orchestra of Rochester, New York, as well as by some of the leading orchestras of New York City. Many were broadcast on the radio.

In 1947, while serving as assistant to the Eighth Army chaplain in Japan, Graham taught music in Rikkyo Jo-Gakuin (St. Margaret's) and at St. Paul's University, both Anglican schools in Tokyo. There, he found students to be hungry for learning, and also highly appreciative listeners when Robert played for them. During stay in Japan, he was also a guest soloist with the Nippon Symphony Orchestra.

Like many G.I.'s, he often attended Christ's Anglican church in Yokahama. The famous church on a bluff overlooking Roky Bay was heavily bombed during the war. Robert took part in the 1947 Easter dedication service, with 1000 in attendance and another 1000 turned away for lack of room. The congregation of many denominations gathered to worship in the bomb-shattered church without roof or windows.

Bishop Todomu Sugai, who suffered in a Japanese concentration camp four and one-half years rather than disband the church, led the service. The central altar was adorned with a four-foot Crucifix created by famous Japanese sculptor Nobumichi who had adopted the Christian faith while executing this work.

After returning to college to complete his degree, followed up by earning his master's degree, Graham attended a six-month's course at the Far Eastern Language School at the University of California in Berkeley.

In 1952, he and his family left for Japan to serve as a missionary teacher of music for the National Council of the Episcopal Church. He also served as an advisor of church music at Episcopal Church Schools. While teaching on the faculty of St. Margaret's Episcopal school, he became the head of the music department, and a lecturer on church music at St. Paul's University, Tokyo.

While lecturing at the All Japan Church Music Institute and Tokyo Theological Seminary, he also was an analyst for the Sei-Kwo Kai Hymnal Revisal Committee, and a critic for the Japanese Contemporary Composers Society.

The family returned to Southern California in 1954, where Graham served as Choirmaster-Organist for St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Pomona. He also served as Music Therapist at the Pacific State Hospital for Mentally Retarded Children at Spadra, California.

It was in 1955 that he first began publishing his music, with seven works, several being church anthems with works for one choral for women's voices written by Jeana Graham. After writing serious music for years, he had discovered that publishers were interested only in easy teaching pieces unless they came from very well known composers. When requested to simplify a piece from his "Children's Suite" for a forthcoming collection, he decided to write a group of eight easy pieces for piano using Aesop fable titles. These sold very well, leading to his writing more compositions aimed at piano instruction.

In 1958, "Drop, Drop, Slow Tears" was published, a work for Passiontide in a free, flowing style. According to the composer, it was "a direct effort on my part to set this tragic text of Phineas Fletcher, which moved me so deeply when I read it, to music in a controlled and dignified manner." It was written in one day, copied the next, and sent to Canyon Press where publication followed immediately. Receiving very favorable press notices, it was performed at the twenty-eighth Annual Festival of American Music held at the Eastman School of Music, and also chosen for performance by the Moravian Music Festival in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

"Premieres: Lyon County Suite for Orchestra" premiered in March 1959, played by the University of Wichita Symphony. Eventually Graham had hundreds of secular and religious works published by twenty-one different publishing houses.

Graham served as judge for the National Piano Auditions in Redondo Beach and at Escondido, judging more than 200 students for the Guild. He gave several choral workshops in Los Angeles for the Keynote Music Service, where a number of his choral compositions appeared on the best-seller lists. He was appointed as judge to evaluate pianists for six of the national piano tournaments held across the United States.

While living in Arizona, Robert's Christmas cantata, "Dawn of Redeeming Grace," was presented at the Music Leadership Conference at the Ridgecrest Baptist Assembly in Ridgecrest, North Carolina. Broadman Press recorded the performance for release to the public.

Graham's composition, "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go", was dedicated to Miss Toyoko Kurokawa, the 80-year old matron of St. Margaret's School in Japan. During the war, when the Japanese military attempted to confiscate valuable religious articles from the school, she amazingly resisted them, causing them to leave empty-handed. Graham's song is now sung at the annual memorial services to this remarkable woman. Graham once received a recording of the memorial event.

Living in Hawaii, Graham was looking for new ideas for an oratorio, preferably one with a “missionary theme”, when he came across the little book, *The Memoirs of Henry Obookiah*. So moved was he by the story of the young Hawaiian whose life and death had inspired the coming of missionaries to Hawaii 150 years earlier, he wrote an oratorio based on the story of Henry Opukahaia (Obookiah), the first Hawaiian Christian.

Sixteen-year-old Obookiah, having seen his family slaughtered in tribal warfare, joined the crew of a passing ship. Through his friendship with the captain, he was taken to New Haven, Connecticut, where he attended Yale University. There he became a Christian; his earnest desire was to take the gospel to his native islands. However, he died of typhus fever in 1818 at age twenty-six without ever returning to Hawaii.

The premiere presentation was given in February 1969 in Kawaiahao Church. The music, in the form of Hawaiian chants and mission hymn tunes, was also performed as part of the 1970 Hawaiian Sesquicentennial. It had received enthusiastic acclaim in the press since its premiere the previous year.

In April of 1970, Graham was one of three judges for the San Francisco Opera auditions for Hawaii and Australia.

On July 18, 1976 his cantata, “The Lord’s Prayer”, had its premiere performance at the Butler County Community College Theater in El Dorado, under the sponsorship of the El Dorado Bicentennial Committee. It was published by Broadman Press of Nashville, Tennessee. His wife, Jeana, supplied the libretto. According to Darryl Patten, who conducted the performance, the libretto is alternately whimsical, even amusing, exalted and spiritually uplifting, with the composer catching the varying moods of the libretto in a gem of musical excellence.

AWARDS, RECOGNITION

His first opera, performed while still in high school, won Robert Graham an award from the Kansas Federation of Music Clubs. He was later awarded the Hubert Prize for outstanding work in the field of musical composition in 1951.

In 1956, he was chosen as one of the top twelve outstanding composers of educational music for piano in America. Among the others chosen was Vincent Persichetti of New York City’s Juilliard School of Music, who also had ties to El Dorado, being married to El Dorado’s pianist, Dorothea Flanagan Persichetti.

The National Choir Guild chose Graham as one of the best composers of choral music in America. A biography of Robert V. Graham was published in the March 1970 edition of *Journal of Church Music*.

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