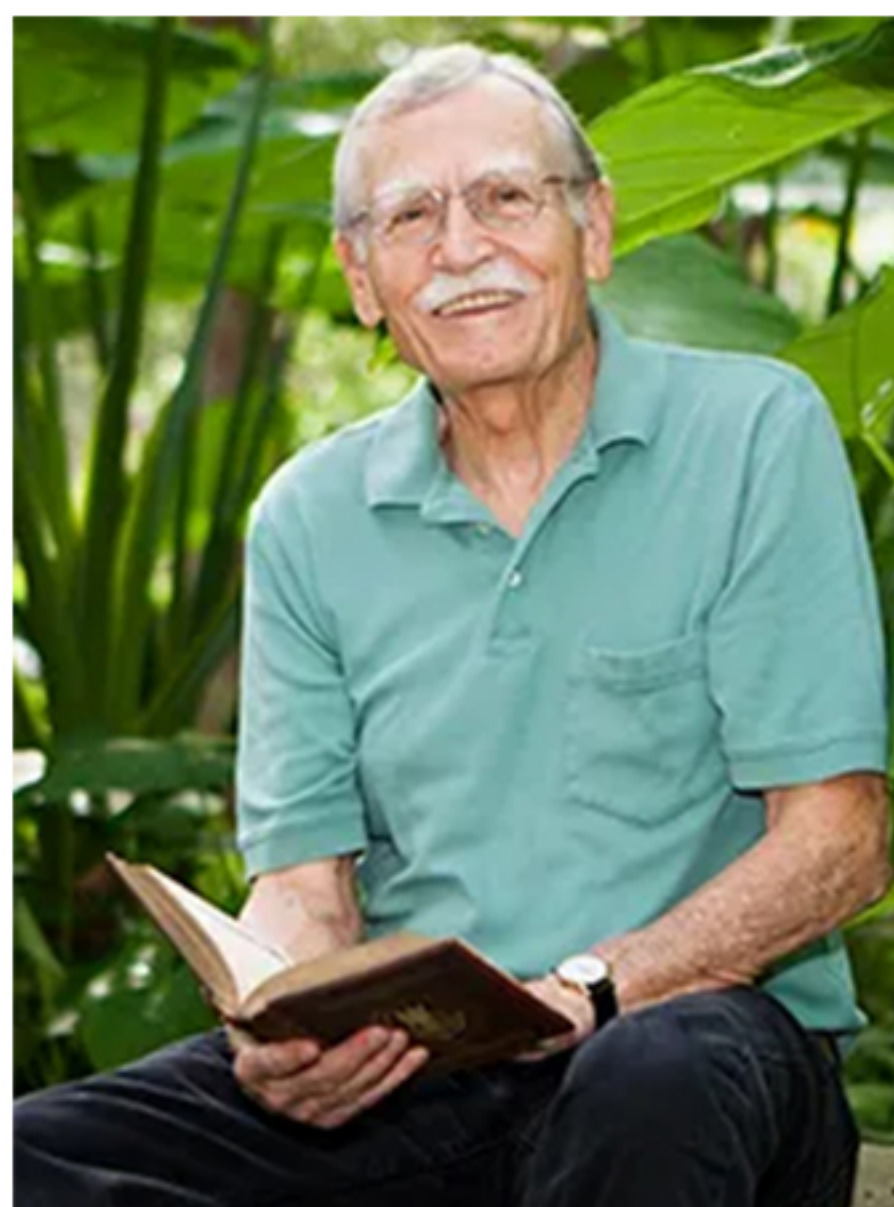


Local composer sets Florida poet laureate's words to music



“It blew our heads off,” Florida Poet Laureate Peter Meinke says about hearing his poetry put to music.

He and his wife, artist/illustrator Jeanne Clark Meinke, were sitting in composer William Dawson’s car. Mr. Dawson had just played them a song he’d composed, using the poet

laureate’s verse as lyrics.

The reason they were listening to it in the car, Mr. Meinke says, is because he and his wife are “not very tech-y. We listen to the radio, basically. We never use our computers.” They don’t listen to CDs unless they’re traveling in their car, he explains.

Mr. Dawson, a fan of Mr. Meinke’s poetry, had asked if he could put music to the poet’s words. Mr. Meinke was very receptive. No one had ever done that before, he says, except for a college student here and there over the years who had strummed a guitar and sung his poems.

When Mr. Dawson eventually drove up from Fort Myers to St. Petersburg to meet with the Meinkes and play them the music he’d composed, the 82-yearold poet was surprised to hear opera soprano Steffanie Pearce singing his words.

“It was so different from singing words with a guitar, a totally different version,” the poet says. “But we liked it. We like the idea of mixing the arts.”

After all, he adds, his wife has illustrated many of his books with her pen and ink drawings. (Her work has also appeared in The New Yorker, Gourmet and Bon Appetit magazines.)

Mr. Dawson says he suspected the poet laureate was initially “put off” by the recording because it was operatic. “I don’t think he thinks of his poems as high art, like opera,” the composer explains. “But Steffanie really knows how to deliver his poems,” he adds. “She is a consummate singer, a world-class opera singer ... For her to be championing my songs is an extra honor for me.”

This was a couple of years ago. Since then, the composer has brought baritone Christopher Holloway and concert pianist Richard Bosworth with him on return visits to the Meinkes.

Having a baritone sing some of the works puts “a different style and different interpretation to the poems,” says Mr. Dawson. It’s also a contrast with Ms. Pearce’s singing.

In total, Mr. Dawson has set five of Mr. Meinke’s poems to music.

The world premiere of this song cycle for soprano, baritone and piano will be presented at 7 p.m. Tuesday, Aug. 15, in Beverly Hall at First United Church of Christ in Naples. Ms. Pearce and Mr. Holloway and soprano Nadia Marshall will sing, accompanied by Mr. Bosworth. They will also perform other new vocal music, including songs Mr. Dawson composed from the work of Mexican poets. Mr. Meinke will read some of this work, talk about poetry and sign books.

“What attracted me to his poems and made me want to put them to music is his love of words,” Mr. Dawson says about Mr. Meinke. “He’s an astute poet in that regard. He loves the sound of words and the juxtaposition of words against other words. And his imagery is so creative and so interesting. He’s also a very rugged American. There’s nothing of artifice about his poetry.

Mr. Meinke grew up in a blue-collar family in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, N.Y., and says he kept his love of poetry a secret while a child.

Like every other boy, he wanted to play second base for the Brooklyn Dodgers. But the appeal of words lured him.

“I’d tell my students, I was not precocious. I came out of a blue-collar family. I loved poetry right away and kept it a secret. I came out now and then to show a teacher and get some encouragement. I was so ignorant. Even when I went to college, I didn’t know of literary magazines.”

So he submitted his poems to The Ladies Home Journal and Cosmopolitan, and they were published.

Early in his career, he taught high school English, then earned his Ph.D. and taught on the college level. He and his family moved to Florida in 1966, where he founded and became the director of Eckerd College’s creative writing program, one of the first in the country.

Now retired, he’s been writer-in-residence at several dozen colleges. He’s written 18 books of poetry and short stories and received numerous awards, including two NEA Fellowships and three prizes from the Poetry Society of America. His first book of short stories, “The Piano Tuner,” won the 1986 Flannery O’Connor Award for Short Fiction.

Mr. Meinke was appointed poet laureate of St. Petersburg in 2009, but stepped down to become poet laureate of the state.

One of his roles as poet laureate is to be an ambassador and an advocate for poetry.

Poetry has various ways in which it appeals to people, he says, adding that one definition of poetry is “the emotional history of the world.

“A response to poetry frequently is recognition,” he says. “Someone reads a poem and says, ‘I thought that, but didn’t know I knew it, or didn’t know how to say it.’ If more people read poetry, they’d have more experiences like that.”

“Americans are generally not fond of poetry. It’s a little too French-y, or European or intellectual,” he says. “We’re practical, we’re tough. (Poetry) is something that the elite did, and we know what a lot of Americans think of the elite.”

Yet, he says, when people feel something important is happening to them, they often turn to poetry — even Americans.

“I’ve read that after 9/11 happened, more poems were written in America than any point in our history,” he says. “It’s because at important times in our lives — when a baby is born, when we get married, when someone we love dies or a terrible disaster occurs — in those special moments, Americans know that prose doesn’t cut it, regular language doesn’t cut it.”

It’s intense, he says, and demands more time than usual.

“You can’t speed-read a poem,” he says. “You read it slowly, if you’re going to get anything from it at all. You don’t just read it once; you read it over and over. Poems are written in a denser way, so there are surprises in there. This is true of almost all good poetry: It has secrets buried in there, in the rhythm and in the meaning.

“That’s another thing poetry does: It gives life; it has a depth that recognizes the depth in our lives. Poetry says we are connected and we do have meaning.”

Poetry is also subversive, he says, which is why so many dictatorial governments have thrown poets in jail or exiled them.

“Whatever it is, they don’t want any of it around,” he says. “They can’t control it. It’s subversive. It’s not the regular message, it’s a kind of deep truth that is not controllable.” †

‘Poetry & Music Unite’

>> What: World premiere of a song cycle using Florida poet laureate’s words

>> When: 7 p.m. Tuesday, Aug. 15

>> Where: First United Church of Christ, 5200 Crayton Road, Naples

>> Cost: \$40

>> Info: 646-734-8179 or www.grandpianoseries.com