

Remembrance: Judith Nelson (June 6, 2012)

It is unlikely that I can slot in a trip to Berkeley [for a memorial concert on June 7] into the last week of classes here, but as a co-founder of HW, as the moderator of the first HW program, and as a long-standing friend of the Nelsons, I would like to add my condolences to those that will be expressed.

I met Judy at a concert at 1750 Arch in Berkeley in the early 1970s. She struck me as the most natural singer of early song I had ever encountered. At that time many performances of Baroque music sounded strained and voices seemed thin, but Judy's voice negotiated all the intricacies and subtleties with stunning grace. I never had cause to revise this opinion. Judy, Ilana, and I came to be good friends at the Aston Magna Academies (Humanities West's primogenitor) in the early Eighties.

Judy's insightful interpretations of works by Benedetto Marcello and her lively presentation with Susie Rode Morris of some risqué Venetian boat songs for a HW program remain memories worth savoring. Rehearsing music with Judy was always an experience enriched by her ability to notice word-tone associations that went unnoticed by many others. Her genuine feeling for poetic texts was one of her many strengths.

One of Judy's most remarkable performances was as a last-minute stand-in for an ailing singer in a Philharmonia Baroque performance of Haydn's Creation. She made it seem as if the music had been written especially for her. Even when one is familiar with the score, achieving the right blend with other soloists, chorus, and orchestra is hardly trivial.

Judy was long a mother figure to the early music community, nurturing other singers and instrumentalists, hosting the temporarily displaced, and encouraging the aspiring. The Nelsons' home in Berkeley and apartment in London (or any other quarters they happened to occupy) were important hubs of several early-music social networks. Despite the fact that we have been deprived of Judy's active participation in recent years, I'm sure that her performances will remain one of the high-water marks in early music interpretation for a long time to come.

Sincerely,

Eleanor