

Elisabeth von Trapp Makes Her Music From Frost's Poetry

November 28, 2004

By ROSS SNEYD The Associated Press

WAITSFIELD — The view from a house high on a hill above the Mad River Valley was the quintessential Vermont vista.

Hills dotted with farms undulated in the near distance and they were framed in the background by the distinctive peaks and ridgelines of the Green Mountains.

It could have been a scene from "The Sound of Music."

But for Elisabeth von Trapp, descendant of the famous family that inspired the musical, her view from a house where she and her husband were living as caretakers was equally the stuff of another symbol of New England: poet Robert Frost.

Long inspired by Frost's close connection to the New England landscape and views such as the one outside her window, von Trapp began setting some of Frost's poetry to her own original musical compositions.

Nearly a decade later, she has begun a national tour to promote the CD that resulted, "Poetic License." It contains five Frost poems set to song, as well as a Shakespeare sonnet, a 17th century Japanese Haiku, and her own arrangements of music as diverse as Sting's "Fragile" and Franz Schubert's "An Die Musik / Ode to Music."

It was the Frost, though, who was the inspiration for the CD and, ironically, for von Trapp's choice to pursue music as her passion and her avocation.

"What a wonderful way to meet a poet (who) lived in Vermont that I grew up with," she said of the better than five years she spent studying Frost poetry and writing music to accompany it.

Von Trapp, 50, dates the inspiration of the poet to sixth grade, when her class saw a documentary film of Frost's life.

She distinctly remembers "scenes of him walking through beautiful meadows and pathways that are very much Vermont," she said. "I was in total rapt attention of who was this man, and as a child thinking what an interesting thing to do in Vermont, to have an artistic life and actually make a living. Because in those years, this was a total farming community."

Music, of course, always has been a central part of von Trapp's life. As all the world knows, her grandmother Baroness Maria von Trapp led her

family through the mountains and out of Nazi-occupied Austria, eventually settling in the scenic beauty of Stowe because it reminded her of her homeland.

Elisabeth von Trapp's father became a dairy farmer in Waitsfield, about 35 miles south of the family's New World homestead, and married a fellow Austrian native.

Both parents cared deeply about music and Elisabeth and her four brothers and a sister all developed their own passions for music. Von Trapp has family photos in her studio of herself and her siblings gathered around their father at home singing as he strums a guitar and they play a variety of instruments, ranging from a plastic guitar to a small accordion.

The music of her youth was also that of her parents and her grandmothers, steeped in the folklife of the Austrian mountains they had fled. But she grew up in the 1960s and 1970s and her music is influenced by her own times, as well.

The best term she's heard to describe her music, which is built around her strong, soulful vocals and typically features her playing guitar and often includes accompaniment by cellist Erich Kory, is "acoustic chamber music."

Ed Hall, von Trapp's husband and executive producer, has a simple description: "It's beautiful music."

Von Trapp does not sing folk, although there are hints of it. Neither is it classical, but a listener can hear that, too. And it's not rock, even though that has clearly been another influence.

"When it can't be categorized you're on the right track. I don't want to be put in a box," she said.

Throughout, though, she has been heavily influenced by the written word. Her first CD, produced in 1994, features the Bible's Psalm 121 set to music.

"When I listened to the Psalms I tried to stay very true to the essence of the inspiration that those words contain that would carry my own faith experience a little bit further," von Trapp said. "What I learned was to listen very carefully to the nature of the actual words, to find a musicality."

Not long after recording Psalm 121 on a CD in 1994, von Trapp saw her career begin to blossom. Her husband decided to give up a career as a prosecutor to become her full time manager and producer. She gave up a clothing design business that she had run for about 25 years and devoted herself to her music.

She toured New England extensively and eagerly took up any project that came along. One of those was an invitation by a host at Waterbury radio station WDEV to set some Robert Frost poetry to music.

Von Trapp took on the assignment and crafted music for "A Minor Bird." It was well received after the radio program, so she decided to record it for a 1996 CD.

But she needed permission from Henry Holt & Co., the book publisher that owns the copyright to much of Frost's work. After months of negotiations and after sending several demonstration tapes to the publisher, Hall and von Trapp got the permission and recorded the song. They sent a copy of the resulting CD, "One Heart, One Mind" in gratitude.

"A few months went by and we got this wonderful letter ... and a large volume, a full unabridged collectors' edition of Frost's total work," Hall said.

"I greatly enjoyed your CD. I think your music would be a beautiful complement to the poetry of Robert Frost," Hall said, reading from the letter from Mimi Ross of Holt & Co. "They sent this book strewn with paper clips stuck in all these different poems that they thought would make good (songs)."

Ultimately, von Trapp and Holt & Co. settled on five poems that they thought would work well musically. Recording them and creating enough other songs to fill a CD took more than three years.

Early on, von Trapp and Hall worried that they were off on the wrong track after publicity generated by her efforts at setting Frost poetry to music.

"Robert Frost disliked having poems set to music. Not because he objected to the music — he objected to what it did to the poems," Frost granddaughter Lesley Francis told *The Boston Globe* in 2001. "Frost himself would have objected. He would have strenuously objected."

Similar complaints were raised in *The Los Angeles Times* and in poetry periodicals.

Then Don Sheehan, director of the Frost Place, invited von Trapp to an annual poetry festival at the Franconia, N.H., museum where Frost lived from 1915 to 1920. He asked her to serve as the 2001 poet in residence and to sing one of her Frost compositions.

"She does not seek to overwhelm Frost's words, to seize the stage from him," Sheehan said in explanation. "Instead, she gives all her considerable art all the way over to Robert Frost's art, as an act of homage. The result is fresh and beautiful."

That's just how von Trapp wants her music to be interpreted. To be able to combine forces, as it were, with someone else who felt so connected to the New England land that she loves, is powerfully satisfying.

"When I was looking down at the view I thought, 'How could fate be so beautiful?' ... One day I thought, 'Would you stop looking at it and start making something of it,' she said.