

Road is taken to sing Frost

Von Trapp's musical plan stirs poet's fans

By Stacey Chase, Globe Correspondent,, 4/16/2001

WAITSFIELD, Vt. - Elisabeth von Trapp, part of the celebrated family that inspired "The Sound of Music," is about to score a nearly unprecedented coup: winning permission from Robert Frost's famously reticent publisher, Henry Holt & Co., to sing parts of the poet's closely held oeuvre.

Yes, *sing*.

And as two of Vermont's foremost cultural icons collide, some of Frost's fans and family are aghast that the hills may soon come alive with the sound of ... iambic pentameter.

Von Trapp, a singer-songwriter who blends folk, classical, and pop, will set to music some of Frost's most beloved poems, including "Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening" and "The Road Not Taken."

"Sometimes ... the form that the artistry had earlier on is meant to take on a new shape. To bring back its vitality," von Trapp, 46, said in a recent interview. The granddaughter of Baroness Maria von Trapp - who led her family through the mountains out of Nazi-occupied Austria - Elisabeth is the only von Trapp of her generation to emerge as a professional singer. Supporters say her sensitive soprano will illuminate and interpret Frost in a new and surprising way.

But traditionalists - including Frost's granddaughter - say they're certain the poet would have turned a cold shoulder to von Trapp's initiative.

"Robert Frost disliked having poems set to music. Not because he objected to the music - he objected to what it did to the poems," said Frost's granddaughter, Lesley Francis, 69. "Frost, himself, would have objected. He would have strenuously objected."

Winning approval from Henry Holt, which is besieged with requests for permission to use Frost's work, will be a huge triumph for von Trapp, who has three self-produced albums to her credit but no national distributor.

"We fiercely protect the image of Frost, and these decisions are made very carefully with the approval of the executor," said Elizabeth Shreve, a spokeswoman for the New York publishing house that acts on behalf of

the Frost estate on matters of the poet's copyrighted work.

Though the deal hasn't yet been inked, the project is already gaining legitimacy. Von Trapp has been invited to debut her album, tentatively titled "The Frost Project," on July 1 - Robert Frost Day in New Hampshire - at the last working farm owned by the poet, The Frost Place in Franconia, N.H.

"The Frost Project" was conceived five years ago, when von Trapp was putting together her second album, "One Heart, One Mind" - which includes a musical adaptation of a lesser-known Frost poem, "A Minor Bird."

That poem was included on a demo tape von Trapp sent to Henry Holt executives to secure copyright permission to use it. Apparently, they were charmed. Soon, talks were underway for an album's worth of Frost lyrics.

"It just begs to be done," von Trapp said. "It just has all the elements that I think are inspirational, that people can relate to, that they can love." Von Trapp has requested permission to record 10 Frost poems; Henry Holt appears ready to approve three.

"The Frost Project" album will probably include "Acquainted With The Night," "Come In," and "Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening," as well as "The Impulse" (a segment of the dramatic poem "The Hill Wife") and "The Road Not Taken," the latter two both considered part of the public domain.

Because five Frost tracks won't fill an album, von Trapp is composing instrumental interludes - or tone poems - thematically inspired by Frost's old haunts, including Ripton, Vt., Amherst, Mass., and Franconia.

Von Trapp, who does gigs in coffeehouses and has been tapped to sing the national anthem before Celtics and Red Sox games, plans to wrap up the recording sessions for "The Frost Project" later this month.

With the von Trapp name, she said, "comes the understanding that my family chose this part of the world to live in and make their life in."

"And it's very similar to Robert Frost's choice of where to live and where to make his life. Often, I don't have to work to understand his imagery," said von Trapp, who lives with her husband and executive producer, Edward Hall, about 35 miles from the Trapp Family Lodge in Stowe.

At least one skeptic has been won over by von Trapp's cello-laden rendering of "A Minor Bird. " "I thought it would be kitschy, and it's not," said Frost biographer Jay Parini. "I was stunned ... the music amplifies and interprets the poetry in an interesting way."

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Galway Kinnell, who succeeded Frost as Vermont State Poet, says he believes Frost would have objected to the musical adaptation of his work only if the words were muffled by the music. "If the poem is put forth audibly as a poem, I think he would've been greatly pleased," he said.

Donald Sheehan, executive director of The Frost Place, was so impressed with what he heard that he asked von Trapp to sing - in lieu of a speaker - for the first time in the 23-year history of Robert Frost Day festivities at the farm. "She doesn't try to overwhelm the text with music," Sheehan said. "There is a complete absence of pretension to the thing."

Still, doubters insist that a poem is a poem, an art form unto itself. "It's a clever, nice thing for the work of people to be set to music ... but we don't need that," said Amherst-based Frost scholar William H. Pritchard. "Poetry has its own music; it doesn't need to be fooled around with. I really believe it's not translatable in any good way."

Carole Thompson, founder of a group of 70 of the poet's devotees called The Friends of Robert Frost, is more blunt. "I think it bastardizes his work," she said. Thompson is horrified at the thought that a young generation could be introduced to Frost in music rather than on paper.

"I just don't like my poet being dragged into this with her," said Thompson, who lives in Bennington, the town where Frost is buried. "The man's not a songwriter. To take 'Stopping By Woods' and set it to music is a heartbreak to me."

Von Trapp isn't the first to set Frost's poems to song. In 1959, Randall Thompson composed a choral arrangement of Frost's poems to celebrate Amherst's bicentennial. He called it "Frostiana." Frost, who taught at Amherst College, attended the first performance - but never said, at least not publicly, what he thought of it.

Von Trapp is keenly aware of the expectations and frustrations of Frost's many fans. But by the sheer act of publishing his poems, she says, Frost bequeathed them to his public.

"The essence of doing that is to let it be free. And allow the recreating of it to take shape," von Trapp said. "He knew, and understood, how to take the darkest of experiences and find the light in it. When I take a poem, my hope is that I could help clarify that beauty, not diminish it."

"The freedom of being able to sing it," she added, "is the beauty."

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