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### Icy Response to a Musical Frost

By Elizabeth Mehern, Times Staff Writer

**Poetry: When a N.Y. publisher licensed three works to be reworked as songs, the bard's loyal followers were appalled.**

WAITSFIELD, Vt.--The hills are alive with the sound of conflict.

One side of this melodic controversy features Elisabeth von Trapp, singing the words of Robert Frost. Opposing her are scholars who study Frost, as well as groups of his admirers. The poet's own granddaughter has expressed doubts.

In the middle, sort of, is Frost's New York publisher. In granting Von Trapp permission to set three Frost verses to music, Henry Holt & Co. inadvertently triggered apoplexy among some Frost purists. Two other poems in Von Trapp's "Frost Project"--due out later this year--are in the public domain.

The great bard is a national treasure and altering his verse through music amounts to poetic sacrilege, many scholars and admirers say.

"There is a lot in Frost's writing to suggest that he would find this appalling," said Robert Pinsky, a former U.S. poet laureate.

As a member of the famous family from "The Sound of Music," Von Trapp herself has a name with worldwide recognition. Her grandmother, Baroness Maria von Trapp, yodeled through the Alps as she led the family out of war-torn Austria. Classically trained, Elisabeth von Trapp, 46, is the only relative in her generation to become a professional singer.

With her haunting soprano voice, Von Trapp has performed folk music in unusual settings, such as the New York subway system, sponsored by the Metropolitan Transit Authority. She has serenaded Red Sox fans with the national anthem at Boston's Fenway Park. She and her husband, Ed Hall, produced CDs of her work.

In one recent CD, Von Trapp sought and received permission to attach her own melody to the 1928 Frost poem, "A Minor Bird." She found a powerful truth in the brief work's final stanza: "And of course there must be something wrong In wanting to silence any song."

Nearly 40 years after his death at age 88, Frost has a robust literary following. The college audience alone accounts for many thousands of book sales each year, according to the publisher. Societies devoted to Frost thrive worldwide. The Poetry Society of America annually awards a Frost Medal, one of its most coveted prizes.

Three New England states vie to claim Frost as their own. Massachusetts notes that he grew up in Lowell, briefly attended Harvard University and taught at Amherst College. New Hampshire counters that he also taught at Dartmouth College and was a chicken farmer in Derry. Vermont rejoins that the peripatetic poet lived in South Shaftsbury, taught at Middlebury College and is buried in Bennington.

An entire social era also attaches itself to the poet, whose white hair billowed in the cold November wind when he read at a memorable presidential inauguration. "Camelot

claims [Frost], because of John F. Kennedy, even though he was a Republican and a friend of Eisenhower's," said Middlebury professor Jay Parini, author of a recent Frost biography.

Parini was prepared to hate Von Trapp's rendition of Frost. He had visions of cheery vocalists in dirndls. But he agreed to listen to Von Trapp's adaptation because he so admired "Frostiana," a 1959 choral composition by Randall Thompson.

Parini played Von Trapp's sample CD and thought: "My God, this is actually better than I imagined." Still, he sounded a skeptical note. Poetry is an internal experience, dependent on "silence around the words," Parini cautioned. "To add another element is extremely precarious."

Fellow Frost scholar William H. Pritchard agreed: "The Frost poems are so idiomatic and so much a product of complicated tones of voice and speech and turnings of phrases, it seems to me they are just destined not to do well when you try to turn them into a song."

Carole Thompson, president of the Friends of Robert Frost, based in Bennington, said emphatically: "Mr. Frost did not like having his poems set to music. He said, 'It spoils my fun.' "

Frost's granddaughter, Lesley Francis, confirmed the poet loathed translation. Francis, a professor of Spanish, said her grandfather relied on what he called "the sound of sense," the rhythm of his own language. Poetry, he often said, "is what's lost in translation."

So in setting his verse to music "you may gain something else, but you lose the poetry," she said. "This is not meant to denigrate [Von Trapp] or her intentions or the product she comes up with. But it is not Robert Frost's poems."

To Von Trapp and her husband--a lawyer and also her manager--the objections are understandable.

"So many people feel as though Robert Frost belongs to them," Hall said. "In the couple of years that we've been working toward this, we've found that you can stop people on the streets and they can quote Robert Frost."

Growing up in Vermont, Von Trapp pointed out, "every child better know a poem by Robert Frost." She studied his life in sixth grade. If Frost had meaning for her then, the poet and his words resonate still. Melody, she maintains, provides another link to Frost.

"I would think that there would be an understanding that I have connected with him--and I have connected with the poem on my level," she said. "Creatively, by having a melody to it, that's my way of interpreting it. And it might not be another person's way of interpreting it."

She returns to the last stanza of "A Minor Bird," the part about never silencing a song. Those words, she said, "brought me to a new level of courage."

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