

Dorothy DeLay - Historic Violin Instructor

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

She taught the masters. She became one of the most famous, sought-after teachers of professional violinists in the world. Her name was Dorothy DeLay, and she came from rural Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Dorothy DeLay was born in 1917 in Medicine Lodge. Her parents were musicians and educators. She later described her upbringing as strict and religious. The family moved to Neodesha where her father became school superintendent, and Miss DeLay grew up there.

Her musical talents surfaced early. She began studying the violin at age 4 and did a recital at her church at age 5. She was such an advanced student that she graduated from Neodesha High School at age 16 and enrolled at the Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio. Miss DeLay later transferred to Michigan State.

Dorothy DeLay was an outstanding violinist. After her graduation in 1937, she moved to New York to continue her violin studies at Juilliard. She also used her musical talents as part of a musical group that she formed called the Stuyvestant Trio. This consisted of a pianist, Dorothy on the violin, and her sister Nellis on the cello.

Dorothy toured Latin America as a member of Leopold Stokowski's All-American Youth Orchestra. After that tour, on the cross-country train trip back home, she met a young writer named Edward Newhouse. Apparently it was true love. Four months later they were married. The marriage lasted 61 years until her death in 2002, but she was always known professionally as Miss DeLay.

As do many students, Miss DeLay pieced together a handful of invitations for part-time teaching and assistantship positions to support herself during school. She taught part-time at the Henry Street Settlement, the Juilliard School and Sarah Lawrence College. In the process, she found that she enjoyed teaching more than she enjoyed performing. After graduation, she accepted a full-time teaching position at the prestigious Juilliard School where she spent the rest of her career.

By the 1970s, she became a highly sought-after violin instructor. According to the New York Times, she became the first woman – and for that matter, the first American-born violinist – to be regarded as a master violin teacher in the tradition of the great ones.

Eventually she would teach and mentor at least two generations of students. Her pupils included such prominent violinists as Itzhak Perlman, Sarah Chang, Midori, Nigel Kennedy, Albert Stern, Anne Akiko Meyers, Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, Gil Shaham, Shlomo Mintz, Cho Liang-Lin, and many others whose names I can't even pronounce. Some of her pupils became founders of the world's great chamber groups, such as the Juilliard, the Tokyo, the Cleveland, the Vermeer, the Takacs, and the Ying Quartets. Others became conductors or played in orchestras around the world.

In 1997, she was appointed the first person to hold the Dorothy Richard Starling Chair of Violin Studies at Juilliard. She also taught at Meadowmount, Aspen, Sarah Lawrence College, the University of Cincinnati, the Philadelphia College of the Performing Arts, the New England Conservatory, and the Royal College of Music in London.

A 2002 book about Miss DeLay was titled "Teaching Genius: Dorothy DeLay and the Making of a Musician." In addition to many honorary degrees, Miss DeLay received the National Medal of Arts, the National Music Council's American Eagle Award, the Sanford Medal from Yale University, the Artist Teacher Award from the American String Teachers Association, and the Order of the Sacred Treasure from the Japanese Government. She was later named one of the great women artists who shaped music.

Dorothy DeLay passed away in 2002 at age 84. At the time of her death, the Juilliard faculty included 14 of her former students.

It's an impressive record for someone who grew up in the rural community of Neodesha, population 2,319 people. Now, that's rural.

She taught the masters. She was known as one of the world's most famous teachers of the violin. We salute Dorothy DeLay for making a difference with her creative talents and with her teaching of the world's best violinists.

And there's more. A current music teacher in her hometown is carrying on her musical tradition today. We'll learn about that next week.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.