

# McDonald thanks the Lord with every note

Dandridge composer  
leads sessions  
across the nation

By Mark Brown

Staff Writer

Mary McDonald is grateful for the way the Lord works, and she says she is likewise appreciative that she gets to work for the Lord in her professional pursuit of sacred music.

Nearing the half-century mark in church music, the composer, arranger, and conductor has more than 1,200 songs in print. Between keyboard, choral, and cantata projects, she writes between 40 and 70 songs annually.

It's clear that she's also grateful for the buzzsaw of an introductory chemistry course when she was a Carson-Newman freshman majoring in home economics. With some doubt about her future in the major for which she had a much-needed scholarship, she found herself one day in the sanctuary of First Baptist Church. A student was practicing for her junior recital, and McDonald wanted to be able to play the instrument sometime for her own enjoyment.

"I asked her if I could play the organ, and she passed a clipboard to me, which I signed," she recalled last week. "Unknowingly, I signed up to play for chapel the following Friday morning."

Serendipitously, C-N Music Department legends Dr. Louis and Mary Charlotte Ball were there and heard what she could do.

"(They) heard me play and transferred my scholarship to music. It changed more than my major; it changed the trajectory of my life."

She certainly had skills and was blessed with innate abilities and parents who loved tunes, melodies, and lyrics.

"Music was prevalent in our home growing up. My dad was a fan of country/bluegrass music, which seemed to play on constant rotation. My mother was a self-taught pianist who played by ear as well as the written score, while my sisters were



Submitted

Mary McDonald is a noted and sought after conductor and was granted the podium of Carnegie Hall's grand stage last November to lead the Festival of Christmas. Her accolades include the John Ness Beck Award, the Paul B. Clark Award for Excellence in Church Music, and the Lifetime Achievement award in Sacred Music.

wonderful vocalists, most of whom played piano quite proficiently."

Her brother used his talents on guitar and stand-up bass, playing for a long time with Pine Mountain Railroad. While she used John Thompson's methodology to get her other children to play the piano, Mary said, "But I was playing well with both hands long before being eligible for lessons.

"I would hear my brother and sisters in their lessons and quickly adapt what I heard onto the keys. I have played piano "by ear" since around the age of five and have never had any professional piano lessons."

Gifted of both ear and mind, she did not read music, as she didn't need to until she became a music major. The breadth and depth of



Submitted

Mary McDonald and Dr. Louis Ball dynamically conclude a piece of music in sync. Several months before he passed away, her professor/mentor asked her to play during his funeral, which is something that continues to mean a great deal to her.



Submitted

Mary McDonald credits God with her musical ability, whether performing, composing or conducting. "It is most fulfilling to be used by the Lord for His Kingdom's work."

her blessing is evident in Mary Charlotte Ball taking on the challenge of equipping a natural talent.

"She had to teach me to read music," noted Mary, "but I found it easier to just listen to the albums in the music library and play the classical music by ear."

The teachers were key to her development, largely because they helped her understand that she had potential.

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**Mary McDonald**

Carson-Newman graduate and composer

far easier for them to give all their attention to existing qualified students, but they saw potential and helped me

to believe in myself.

"(It) was the first time in my life I was encouraged to pursue music. I

was with Mary Charlotte just a few days before she passed (in 2010) and thanked her for seeing something worthwhile in me. She truly was the epitome of a great teacher."

Mary's proficiency in being able to read music came some while after graduation, and she was serving as church organist for Knoxville's Beaver Dam Baptist Church.

"Creating my own music was far easier than reading another's composition. Thus, the beginning of my compositional journey," she stated.

The longtime organist for Knox-

ville's Central Baptist Church Fountain City also served as accompanist for the Tennessee Men's Chorale and was the first woman to be president of the Southern Baptist Church Music Conference. Her partnership with the Tennessee Men's Chorale included tours to Brazil and Europe.

The Lorenz Corporation's senior music editor for more than two decades, Mary chose to leave that work several years ago to work with churches as an independent artist, along with leading conferences and composer events. The much-awarded sacred music writer has taken to the grand stage of Carnegie Hall three times, including leading the Festival of Christmas just this past year.

She lives on Douglas Lake with her husband of some 45 years, Brian, an architect in Knoxville. Their children, daughter Beth McDonald Smith and son Chris McDonald are C-N alumni "and serve God through teaching and

church ministry."

She said their children, along with their spouses and six grandchildren, are reasons for thanksgiving to the Almighty.

Set against the backdrop of the Smokies, Douglas Lake helps inspire her creativity.

"I try to create music every day," she noted. "Most of my writing is done on a computer with an electronic keyboard, but I do most of the creating on the grand piano. I keep a pen and staff paper handy to jot down the idea enough to recall but not let it interfere with the inspirational moment."

At this stage in her accomplished career, the majority of her compositions are pieces that schools or churches commission.

"They will suggest a preferred hymn or scripture, which serves as the catalyst for the composition. I always ask the Lord to be a part of the project because I am merely the conduit for His gift in me. I cannot compose or create music apart from His hand."



Submitted

"My path has been one of submitting to a higher calling," says Mary McDonald. "I knew, even as a young child, my passion was music and, more specifically, church music."



Submitted

For 36 years Mary McDonald was the accompanist for the Tennessee Men's Chorale, and toured internationally with the group, including to Brazil, England, Wales and Italy.