

Music was her First Commandment



At age six, Carleton Cunningham stood on a stool next to a piano in a church in Georgia and sang. At eleven, she was sitting at the piano playing for the church.

For Mrs. Newton Cunningham, the retired music director of the Blackstone Presbyterian Church, music and God are as inseparable as her piano and its sound. To think of one without the other is inconceivable for her.

She would never forget the first commandment of her life. As if God had spoken to her through the lips of her father, he told her, "I am giving you music and I want you to give it back to those who enjoy it."

The implication in the commandment was that if she didn't give her gift away, music would some day cease to play. From

then on music and giving were inseparable.

Since that chord was heard Mrs. Cunningham's life has been like a Bach concerto of unending variations of that original theme. The small Georgian girl—whose knowledge of the world stopped at the limits of her town—would discover that as long as her fingers were touching the keys of a piano, she could unlock every door and speak to anyone.

"I decided to branch out into other areas," she said after graduating from high school, and she reached into her piano seat full of musical adventures and pulled out a new sheet to play.

Why not try this one? She became a piano teacher in the public schools in Georgia for four years where she taught as many as 40 students a week.

This one looks interesting. I wonder how this will sound? She next worked as Teenage Director in West Palm Beach, Florida. By now she was beginning to teach more

than technique. Music also meant discipline. And the kids who gathered around her piano would wish that they had “studied music as my mother wanted me to do.”

Just as she was willing to stretch her hands to reach the difficult chords of a Rachmaninoff concerto, she found herself playing in the psychiatric wards of a Tennessee Veterans Hospital during the war. As far as she was concerned there was no piece of music or place she couldn't play.

After two years playing in the wards of the naval hospital, she turned the next page of her life and there was New York City. She felt liberated from the somber strains of war's devastation, and her dreams soared. She got a job with Macy's Department Store as recreation director so she could study at Julliard School of Music, something she had always dreamed of doing.

The commandment to give music had never topped revealing new themes: Giving, Discipline, and now Reverence for the teachers and the master of music. She underscored with a double line her opportunities to hear Rachmaninoff and Paderewski play in concert.

But every book of music needs a binding, and Carleton's life would find support in Newton Cunningham, a young Virginian tobacco inspector who heard her play the first night he met her in Georgia where he was working. He said his hands trembled when he turned the sheet music for her.

He brought his bride to Blackstone in 1946 and built her a home that backed up against the woods. Her music there would have the effect of coming from a secret place in the forest-enchanted, sweet and powerful.

They would have two children: first Walker, who would earn four degrees in music and become the organist in a San Francisco church, then Joy, who would let her love of singing take her to Texas, where she is a teacher, and actress.

The Cunninghams house would give music a permanent home. And the Presbyterian Church would have a music director for 30 years. But most important, countless Blackstone children would have a piano teacher from whom they could hear that First Commandment:

“I am giving you music and I want you to give it back to those who enjoy it.”

And many have come back to Carleton Ellis Cunningham to say: “Thank you, for I cannot imagine my life without music.”