

Funeral Services

for

Thomas H. Kerr, Jr.

January 3, 1915 - August 26, 1988



Wednesday, August 31, 1988

11:00

ANDREW RANKIN MEMORIAL CHAPEL
Howard University

Thomas Henderson Kerr, Jr.

Thomas Henderson Kerr, Jr., teacher, performer and composer, was born to Geneva Lyles and Thomas Henderson Kerr, Sr., in Baltimore, Maryland. The musical lineage of his family includes a grandfather, Charles Kerr of Cambridge, Maryland, who played the organ and several band instruments. T.H. Kerr, Sr. was a pharmacist, but he also played the violin and led a dance orchestra through which he earned money for his tuition at the Howard University School of Pharmacy.

Thomas Kerr, Jr. graduated as valedictorian of the Douglass High School class of 1931. He then began his formal musical studies with a brief residency at Howard University. He was to return there, after several detours, to spend most of his life as a professional musician. At the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, he received the Bachelor of Music in Piano and Theory (1937), graduating with the highest average in his class, and the Master of Music Theory (1938).

Following studies at Eastman, he was appointed to the music faculty at Knoxville College, Knoxville, Tennessee. In 1942, after a short period of employment at the Library of Congress, he was awarded a Rosenwald Fellowship in composition. Kerr joined the music faculty at Howard University in 1943, the first appointee of Dean Warner Lawson.

Shortly thereafter, in 1944, a piano composition by Kerr won a contest sponsored by the Composers and Authors of America. Kerr considered himself basically a performer and teacher. In his words, he "used composition to gain greater insights as to balance, sonorities, and timing in performance." Nevertheless his contributions as a composer were considerable. He wrote for piano, two pianos, organ, voice, woodwind ensemble, and choir. His organ works have been performed at the National Cathedral, the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, the Mormon Tabernacle and in European cathedrals and churches. An example of the critical acclaim accorded his arrangements of Negro Spirituals is found in this excerpt from a review of a performance which took place at the Piccolo Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina.

The almost obligatory set of spirituals at the end contained, nevertheless an additional gem from another Black American musician of major stature - a splendid and riveting arrangement by Thomas Kerr of "Doancho Wanna Go?" Here, Kerr drew out the best of the musical drive of the spiritual while commenting on it harmonically and rhythmically in the keyboard as Ned Rorem, or, say, Aaron Copland have done. But Kerr may do it even better. (*Evening Post*, Charleston, June 1, 1988).

As Professor and Chairman of the Piano Department at Howard, Kerr felt a deep responsibility to provide a model for his students. He presented recitals at the National Gallery of Art and the Phillips Collection and appeared twice as concerto soloist with the National Symphony orchestra. For nearly thirty years he was organist and choir director at Plymouth Congregational Church.

After retirement from Howard University in 1976, Kerr continued to compose and perform, despite diminishing eyesight. A tribute from the Department of Music at Howard University in 1982 and a musical tribute by the Evelyn White Chamber Singers in 1988 are among his more recent honors.

Kerr will be remembered by his students for his example, encouragement, and assistance. Those closely associated with him will remember also his keen sense of humor, often expressed in notes and letters and in "Outrageous Program Notes" (as he termed them) which he occasionally supplied for his recitals. He summed up his career thus: "I have spent practically all of my waking hours since 1931 trying to earn the designation MUSICIAN." He considered himself "a *complete* musician, one who is deeply involved in performing, teaching, arranging, composing, etc."

He is survived by his wife, Hortense, of Adelphi, Maryland; a son, Thomas H. Kerr, III, of Lexington Massachusetts and a daughter, Judith Elaine Kerr of Tokyo, Japan, both from a previous marriage; Judson Haynes Kerr, Sr., and a sister, Louise K. Hines, both of Baltimore; two grandchildren and many other relatives and friends.