

Martha Whiting Davidson --Remembrances



Martha Whiting Davidson (1931-2021) grew up in Framingham, MA. She received a BA from Smith College and an MLS from Simmons College, where she worked professionally as a librarian for many years. She developed a strong avocation as a player and supporter of early music, choosing to focus on the viol by the 1970s. She studied with Sarah Cunningham, Grace Feldman, Jane Hershey and most recently Emily Walhout. Over the years she hosted frequent sessions of viol consorts, and amassed a significant library of viol consort music as well as other books and scores on early music topics.

Martha served on the boards of the VdGSA and, for many years, the VdGS-NE. She gave open-handedly to numerous early music organizations, teachers and players. No surprise, she will be greatly missed.

~Hannah and Elizabeth Davidson

Martha Davidson, born in 1931 in Framingham, MA grew up in a family enclave of close relatives with her father

Frederick William Whiting, mother Katharine Rich Whiting and brother Peter. Martha's love for music started in her childhood when she studied violin and piano. She told stories of listening to the Metropolitan Opera on Saturday afternoon radio, following along with a libretto borrowed from the library.

Martha attended Smith College and graduated with a BA in English in 1952. While earning her library degree, she moved to Cambridge, MA and met her future husband Bruce Davidson at Harvard's Lamont Library. Introduced by mutual friends, they immediately formed a strong bond. Bruce, drafted into the US army, shipped off to Germany. He wrote Martha asking if she'd like to come along and get married. Martha soon sailed, accompanied by her parents, to get married in a civil ceremony in Ludwigsburg.

With military service behind, they returned to the Boston area where they started a family. Hannah was born in 1958 and Elizabeth in 1961.

Martha had a deep interest in studying and preserving history. As a young woman, with infants around, she took on a project annotating and transcribing the Baptist Debate (The Baptist Debate, April 14-15, 1668). Family trips to the UK and France weren't complete without a full schedule of mornings touring cathedrals and afternoons traipsing through cow fields, hopefully avoiding the cow flops, in search of barrows and other druidic remains. She made the giant stones of Stonehenge come alive and conjured up images of Woodhenge.

Encouraging her children to learn music, Martha took up the recorder, and generously opened her home to the nascent Belmont Music School (now Powers Music School) which initially relied on families hosting music lessons. She expanded her musical interests to the viola da gamba, a

lifelong avocation. She volunteered in the Belmont Public School library system and at the Mackey School in Boston before returning to full time work at Simmons College library.

She served on the boards of the Viola da Gamba Society of America and the Viola da Gamba Society - New England. For many years a dedicated attendee of the annual VdGSA Conclave, as well as the thrice-yearly New England workshops, Martha actively participated in and supported a range of early music organizations; the VdGS-NE Scholarship Fund is dedicated to her.

The pandemic has presented challenges for in-person ensemble playing, but Hannah and Martha continued to play bicinia every afternoon until Martha was no longer able.

Martha always brought a level of no-nonsense competence and organization to every project. Her family and friends greatly miss her quiet, thoughtful wisdom.

~Elizabeth Davidson

Martha has been an astonishing presence in the lives of all who know her. For me, musical appreciation began with her teaching rounds for us to sing in the car on the way to and from the family home in Framingham. Martha, early in my life, expressed a preference for early music, and encouraged me to take up recorder, then a little piano, bassoon as a high school orchestra student, and – most excitingly and magically, lessons within the early music Collegium, Quadrivium, under the direction of an extraordinary teacher, Marleen Montgomery. It was here that I first encountered the viola da gamba, played most memorably by Sarah Cunningham and Jane Hershey on their return from studies in Holland with Wieland Kuijken. I realized at

once that I would need to be playing this instrument! Martha was enthusiastic about my choice, and soon joined me in pursuing lessons and consorting in the viol world.

I will always remember that I cut my teeth on Renaissance rhythms by playing bicinia with Martha, first on recorder and later on viols. The books of Rhau, Lassus and later Coprario and Gibbons formed a fundament for my listening/hearing ear. In the recent pandemic, Martha and I were able to play together, on a regular basis, these same pieces that we had studied together so long ago.

I will also always be very grateful for the gift of keyboard music that Martha and my father Bruce bestowed on me. I found piano inscrutable, but the two of them decided to put together a Zuckermann harpsichord kit. When I sat down to play the harpsichord, all the things about piano that made no sense suddenly fell under my fingers -- although it has taken many, many years to plumb the some of the difficulties of figured bass!

~Hannah Davidson

I first met Martha in 1996, after my move from New Jersey. She was very welcoming, and was always gracious, patient, generous, and kind.

Over the years I had the pleasure of playing with Martha in a number of groups. She was a founding member of Mezzo Forte and A Musically Dreame and in recent years she joined A Joyful Noyse. Several of the groups met weekly at Orchard St. – Sunday morning consort, Monday trios, and Friday afternoon quartets. She also opened her home for play-ins and provided space for lessons in the Davidson Conservatory!

Martha had a fabulous library of early music, carefully arranged in boxes.

Not only did she know the contents of the many containers, but she also remembered the instrumentation, keys and other characteristics of each piece. She always prepared the music room with stands and suggested music for each playing session.

Martha's breadth of knowledge was extraordinary. She shared information about all sorts of subjects, ranging from such different topics as early music history to the behavior of ravens and details about flowers and plants. I appreciated her many book recommendations, including intriguing mysteries set in foreign lands.

Through the years, Martha offered many useful suggestions for ways to build the VdGS-NE chapter and worked tirelessly to bring about improvements and change. She served generously, collegially, and with great dedication.

I had so many wonderful hours, days, and years of music making with Martha. I will miss her.

~Susan Potter

After taking lessons for a full year, I was finally ready for my first workshop -- on the In Nomine, with Alison Crum. For the lecture-dem, I sat near the front, but not in the front row, feeling that pride of place did not belong to me, a newcomer. My husband Doug, sitting next to me, pointed out the people in the front, Martha among them, and said, "These are going to be your people." He was right.

After playing in a Silbiger grant gig, I came to Martha's attention, and soon was asked to sub at the weekly Sunday consorts led by her and Hannah. I eventually graduated to being a full-time member, and

those Sunday mornings became a cornerstone of my life.

There was not much time for chit-chat, but the music was glorious, and challenging. Among other things, it was my intensive introduction to the five- and six-part literature. Without fanfare, Martha programmed our repertoire with a varied diet, including her or Hannah's occasional arrangements of music that would otherwise be inaccessible to us. And she was sensitive to our needs. For those of us who liked to practice and mark up our parts, she sent out the play list in advance. And if someone was injured and couldn't play for a time, or could come back to playing for just half a session at first, Martha kept their place open for them, a real kindness.

Martha had great knowledge of the period, and of the music. Who knew that Lawes's Set à 6 in c minor was based on a psalm, "I am Weary of my Groaning"? And, of course, ever the consummate librarian, Martha had a vast and perfectly organized library of music. Any number and combination of viols might turn up, depending on who was visiting from out of town, and Martha would have the music for us to play.

As with everything else Covid-related, our Sunday sessions were suspended in March last year, with no chance to say good-bye. I am grateful for all those years we had together, under Martha's quiet and beneficent leadership.

~ Margo Stark

I was deeply saddened when I read of the loss of [Martha] in the newsletter. I never felt that I had truly arrived at a workshop until I was greeted by your

mother's smiling face. I do not ever recall ever seeing her without that smile, including when she was playing viola da gamba. She was always the person to consult whenever you had a question and she always knew the answer. Although I hope for the return of in person workshops when Covid ever is under control, it is difficult to imagine attending without being welcomed by your beautiful mother.

Recently, a man from Portland contacted me with questions about starting viola da gamba. I referred him to your website (vdgsne.org) for his search for a rental instrument and a teacher. I'll forward the information about the offer of free introductory viol rental through the Martha Davidson Scholarship Fund.

~Barbara Oliver

Martha Davidson was one of the first people I met when I moved East after grad school. Though I'd grown up outside of Boston, I hadn't begun to play the viol until I moved away. Now, in my mid-twenties, I wondered how I would find a way to break into the active early-music community. At Grace Feldman's urging, I attended a workshop, and was amazed by the open-armed embrace of the gamba-stalwarts who all knew each-other - and the repertoire - so well. Of those who first welcomed me into their community, including Joan Boorstein, Lari Smith, George Hunter, and Ellen Powers, Martha Davidson was the last to leave us.

House-sitting for my parents in Newton, recently married and still just getting our adult plumage, Mack and I decided we should have a dinner-party. We invited Martha and Bruce [Davidson], along with Lari Smith and her husband Donald. I can imagine now their bemusement at being hosted by two kids the age of their own

offspring, but they were the most gracious and entertaining of guests, and we remember that evening as the start of over forty years of connection. During the stressful times of young parenting, Martha was there with quiet good advice. On cold winter nights the workshop afterparties at the Davidsons' house were a bright haven. And consorts in their dining room, the laden table pushed aside to accommodate a raft of players, were always a delight.

Martha was an endless resource - as a librarian, a musician, and a friend. Her quiet demeanor hid a sparkling mind. I will always remember the two-day workshop where I had sent home the players with the assignment of imagining a few syllables of text for each of the major thematic elements in an English fantasy... and the next morning Martha came back with the entire piece underlaid in cleverly rhyming poetry.

So grateful to have had Martha in my life for all these years.

~Sarah Mead

The first time I remember seeing Martha was at a Quadrivium musical gathering, sometime in the 70's. She was a beginning viol player, with a warm smile, her long dark hair coiled on top of her head. After this, over many years, the Davidson home at 54 Orchard Street was a congenial refuge for me, where I coached consorts, and taught Hannah and Martha and other active members of our community - Chester Pearlman, Gail Biggar, and others. There, I could stay in touch with our community, and consult with Martha on local VdGS-NE activities such as workshops and the administration of our Gian Silbiger Grant. Martha's excellent musical taste, historical knowledge and curiosity, and generosity always informed her advice and help on all

gamba-related matters. Her own fine playing - combined with her profound respect for others, clear thinking, honesty and hard work - created a basis for the tone and success of our long-lived VdGS-NE chapter. She is, and will be, profoundly missed. Martha will be in my thoughts as I continue to take part in our musical gatherings - both formal and informal - which she fostered, and so enjoyed.

~Jane Hershey

I got to know Martha almost 40 years ago, following a hiatus in my music making due to children, when she came over to me at a party and said “word on the street is that you're playing again.” I had actually been trying to rustle up a string quartet, but she invited me to her house to play viol consorts. So I restarted the viols instead of the cello, and that invitation was the beginning of my viol renaissance. Through Martha I met the viol-playing community of Boston, where she was such a pivotal person. I remember Sundays of carrying my viols up the stairs to the second floor and sometimes, at holidays, into the dining room of the Belmont house; the wonderful feeling of warmth and welcome of entering her music room with its waiting circle of stands and chairs, her incredible music library, the wealth of knowledge she brought to playing. Over many years I played with her in reading groups, performing groups, workshops, reunions, hung out in her kitchen talking, and worked with her on the Board of the VdGS-NE. Martha was always cheerful and steady, no matter what was going on. It is difficult to imagine the viol community in Boston without her. Her passing leaves a very large hole; she will be sorely missed.

~Mai-Lan Broekman

Around 2011, as a relative newcomer to the viola da gamba, the VdGS-NE and the board, I had the pleasure to learn about the true spirit and history of the Society through interaction with Martha, who had been on the Board for decades. I soon noticed that whenever there was any question about protocol, history, or former decisions on the board, Martha was the go-to person. She would have the answers or would know where to find them in her records, and be ready to produce them on very short notice. Knowing I could count on the support of Martha and other board members who had been there so much longer than me, it was possible for me to step into the role of president when it suddenly was left vacant by the untimely and tragic death of Janet Haas.

Martha was completely unassuming and modest. Living at a distance from Boston, I regret that I never got to know her well beyond our connection on the board. But I got many glimpses of her as a smart, down to earth, and dedicated person, with a phenomenal knowledge of the consort repertoire. Having at one time (long before I came on the scene) been the president of the VdGS-NE, for all the years I knew her she fulfilled the role of Corresponding Secretary. Her enjoyment at workshops and her love of playing were a joy to perceive, and at the welcome table she had a friendly smile for everyone to whom she handed a name tag.

We lost a most precious person and resource in Martha. She gave so much to the Society and never asked anything back. I would encourage our members to remember Martha by giving a donation in her honor to the Martha Davidson Scholarship Fund. And some day in the future when we can safely

get back together, we will celebrate her life in a way she would have enjoyed.

~Anne Legêne

Martha has a continuing presence in the New England viola da gamba world. I can't remember a time when she wasn't involved - gathering people together at her house for consort music, VdGS-NE board meetings, and post-workshop potluck dinners, [following Ellen Powers example - ed.]. Her music and book collections were/are legendary, and her great wisdom and organizing skills proved invaluable to all who served on the board of the Viola da Gamba Society of New England. I will always be thankful to her for her calm, competent support when I began my tenure as president of VdGS-NE. When I think of Martha, what comes to mind is her gentle kindness, her steadiness, and the brilliant clarity of her mind.

~Rosalind Brooks Stowe

I knew Martha Davidson before I started playing the viol. Like many, I came to early music as a recorder player, and first met Martha's multi-talented daughter Hannah (thanks, June, god bless you! I will always remember our joint effort on the same line of the jaw-breaking Renaissance rhythms of the Introit to the Pierre de la Rue Requiem Mass, 1974 -- Hannah) via Marleen Montgomery's Quadrivium. Having grown up as a cellist, I don't know why it took me so long to discover the viol, but once I did, and started taking lessons with Jane Hershey, I was hooked, and happily turned my back on the cello. I recall in those early days standing in awe of our Great Ladies of the Gamba – Ellen Powers,

Martha, Lari Smith, probably others, plus of course one Great Gentleman – Chester Pearlman – and wondering whether I'd ever be able to match their achievements. But it was Martha with whom I felt a special affinity. As an academic myself, I took much vicarious pleasure in her amazing level of musical and historical scholarship. Our playing sessions were more than just playing sessions – they were often almost mini-workshops, from which one emerged steeped in the atmosphere of 17th-century England, or wherever the day's repertoire took us. I simply cannot express how much I'll continue to miss her.

~June Matthews

I am grateful that I had the experience of playing in viol consorts with Martha. She always had something interesting to say about a piece: such as where the melody originated from, various settings of the original melody, the composer, and musical ideas. I learned a lot from her.

Martha was everyone's Go To person for any information about the viol, references for information about music, workshops, summer programs, books, and much more. She was always so gracious about sharing information and so dependable in getting back to everyone.

I enjoyed her company, whether it was simply to stop and pick up coffee for a workshop, greet each other after a concert at a reception, run into each other on The T, and especially at a weekly coached consort that we were in together for a while. She had a wonderful sense of humor and a kind heart. Martha will be greatly missed and remembered always.

~Alexandra Hawley

