

The Woman on the Wall

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On a wall of a Marietta, Ohio, bar there is a mural advertising the bar's own microbrew, the Gilt Lily. The brew is named after the deceased Miss Lillian E. Cisler, a native of the town. However, Miss Cisler never went to the riverside establishment; it opened after her death. Furthermore, she had no love for alcohol, locally brewed or not. What she did love was Christian theology and the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. It was this love that fueled the Marietta Bach Society, which she presided over for virtually her entire adult life.

The Bach Society was started by Miss Cisler's father, Mr. Thomas Cisler, in 1923.¹ They met in the Cisler home on last Sunday of each month and performed, for themselves, one of Bach's works related to that point in the ecclesiastical year. Then, for several hot afternoon hours on 30 July, the anniversary of Bach's death, the society held their annual Bach Festival. They journeyed through the entire church year via Bach's music.² When Thomas Cisler died in 1950, Miss Lillian Cisler filled his role as the society's chief coordinator and continued its meetings in the Cisler home.³ The structure of the society remained true to its original purpose—the enjoyment of the participants as members of a music-reading society; not a performance group. It was based on the Philadelphia Bach Society, which had no conductor. Because of this, all members had a say in what the society did, although Miss Cisler possessed an unspoken executive power.⁴

When Miss Cisler died in February 1993, The Marietta Bach Society had approximately twenty-five members.⁵ The society was open to anyone who enjoyed Bach's music. Sometimes, Miss Cisler sought out people she thought should be members, even though they did not. Despite their initial reluctance, once involved, most of Miss Cisler's recruits remained in the society. Robert Hill, a retired History Professor at Marietta College, was one of Miss Cisler's recruits. He was acquainted with Miss Cisler because they both sang in the local Messiah Chorus at Christmas. Miss Cisler felt that Dr. Hill should sing with the Bach Society and "kept on [him]" until he agreed to attend a meeting. Joining the Bach society was "the best thing that ever happened to [him]" and he only once missed the Annual July Festival since he first met with the society in the late 1960s.⁶

Barbara Beittel also became a member of the Bach society out of Miss Cisler's initiative. When Beittel and her husband moved to Marietta in 1973, Miss Cisler found out about her background as a pianist and music professor and asked her to join the society. Beittel first went "out of curiosity," but

then continued attending, singing for a while, and then as the piano accompanist.⁷ Miss Cisler chose Beittel to perpetuate to Bach Society when she herself was no longer able to do it. When Miss Cisler moved into the nursing home directly behind her house, she insisted that the Bach Society continue to meet in her home. The Bach festival was also held there. Miss Cisler's physical absence, however, did not prevent her presence; Beittel coordinated the 1991 and 1992 Festivals with Miss Cisler. The society played and sang the same pattern of musical selections that it had for the past fifty years: the reading of the program, a "call to order" by a brass choir, organ music, choral music, organ music again, then the brass choir again, and finally, a closing hymn.⁸

The brass choir necessitated, of course, brass players. Miss Cisler enlisted members of the High School Band. One of those students, Bill Thompson, Jr., described his involvement by saying that "you were involved [with the annual Festival] if you played in the High School band and Lillian had a way to get to you."⁹ When the students would rehearse, they had to play each piece in its entirety; if a song had four verses, they played all four, even though the music was the same for each. Yet Thompson must not have minded having been "got to" because he participated for three years, as did many of the students.¹⁰

The Bach Society's annual Festival "was kind of like the Addams Family; it was kind of an adventure."¹¹ With the society meeting in Miss Cisler's turreted house that stood alone up on the hill and Miss Cisler always dressed in black,¹² that description seems just. However, this easily remembered strangeness nor Miss Cisler's eccentricity should not overshadow her devotion to Bach. No one can say for sure why Miss Cisler ordered special copies of Bach's music from Germany when she could not afford it. It may be a little easier to understand why she would call renowned theologian, missionary, and Bach expert, Albert Schweitzer, in Africa, when she could not pay the phone bill, due to of Schweitzer's knowledge and similar beliefs.¹³ Yet, the music and knowledge that Miss Cisler gathered were a great contribution to the Marietta Bach Society.

Following Miss Cisler's death, most of her music collection went to Marietta College. The Bach Society lingered on for another year, but no one single member was able to devote the time and space that Miss Cisler had.¹⁴ Miss Cisler nurtured something very strong in a section of Marietta society. Beittel and other members hope to revive the Bach Soci-

ety in the near future. Hopefully, now several years after her death, natives of and visitors to Marietta will remember Miss Lillian Cisler for what she loved, rather than what she abhorred.

Endnotes

Authors note: The Gilt Lily and the related mural existed as I have described when I wrote this essay. After I researched for and wrote this, the Marietta Brewing Company announced that they would be discontinuing the Gilt Lily and replacing it with a more appropriate, non-alcoholic drink.

- 1 Roger Kalter, "Bach Comes Alive In Marietta," *The Marietta Times*, 6 August 1981, 12.
- 2 Barbara Beittel of Marietta, Ohio, interview by author, 27 January 1998, tape recording.
- 3 Tom Hrach and Connie Cartmell, "Cisler's Love of Music Remembered," *The Marietta Times*, 6 February 1993, A3.
- 4 Barbara Beittel of Marietta, Ohio, interview by author, 27 January 1998, tape recording.
- 5 Tom Hrach and Connie Cartmell, "Cisler's Love of Music Remembered."
- 6 Dr. Robert Hill of Marietta, Ohio, interview by author, 27 January 1998, tape recording.
- 7 Barbara Beittel of Marietta, Ohio, interview by author, 27 January 1998, tape recording.
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 William Thompson Jr., interview by author, 27 January 1998, tape recording.
- 10 *ibid.*, and Barbara Beittel interview.
- 11 Barbara Beittel interview.
- 12 The mostly likely reason Miss Cisler always dressed in black is an economic one. Both Beittel and Thompson recall Miss Cisler going to the dry cleaners and exchanging the dress she was wearing for the newly cleaned one, the only other one she owned. After Thomas Cisler died, Miss Lillian Cisler had a limited stipend. However, the choice of black is more obscure. Beittel's understanding is that Miss Cisler always wore black to mourn her father's death. Hill and Thompson recall the always present black, but were never aware of a specific reason for it.
- 13 Barbara Beittel interview and Robert Hill interview.
- 14 Barbara Beittel interview.

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- "Lillian Cisler Dies at 90." *The Marietta Times*, 2 February 1993, 1.
- "Program of Music by J. S. Bach, 1685-1750" from the private collection of Barbara Beittel.
- Apparently written by Miss Lillian Cisler between 1989 and 1992.
- Thompson, William Jr. Interview by author, 27 January 1998, Marietta, Ohio. Tape Recording.

"The Marietta Bach Society: An Anniversary Tribute," speech written by Narcissa Williamson of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 1973. Private collection of Dr. Robert Hill.

Washington County Historical Society. *Washington County Ohio to 1980*. Dallas: Taylor Publishing, 1980.