

"Work premiered at Library of Congress"

Wendi L. Baker

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A Central Michigan University English professor is receiving national attention for writing the text to a song cycle titled "From the Diary of Sally Hemings."

Sandra Seaton premiered her work at the Library of Congress March 16 for an audience of 500 enthusiastic supporters, including CMU President Michael Rao.

"It was a very gratifying and special experience," Seaton said of being recognized by the audience after the 50-minute performance was finished.

Because Thomas Jefferson's mistress Sally Hemings left no diaries, "From the Diary of Sally Hemings" is truly a feat of Seaton's imagination.

"I did historical research and read everything I could about the time," Seaton said, "and then I imagined what it would be like to be Sally Hemings--her character, her personality.

"The fictitious diary entries that formed the text of the song represent my attempt to give a voice to Sally Hemings by the only means available--that of imaginative re-creation."

It is known that Hemings, who was one-quarter African American, traveled to France as a young woman and her brother was Jefferson's chef. It is likely that Hemings knew French cooking and the language very well.

"Hemings and Jefferson were together for 38 years," Seaton said, "and there is no record of him having a relationship with another woman during that time."

Seaton imagined that Hemings was a very intelligent, complicated woman who could think beyond her "station" as Jefferson's slave and mistress.

"She never accepted slavery as inevitable," Seaton said, "and she was determined to have her children be free."

Hemings' children were freed from slavery in Jefferson's will. It was opera singer Florence Quivar who took an interest in Hemings' story and asked Music Accord Inc., a consortium of concert presenters such as Lincoln Center and the Library of Congress, to commission a song cycle. Quivar and Music Accord enlisted William Bolcom, the Rose Lee Finney Distinguished Professor of Music at the University of Michigan to compose the music. It was Bolcom who contacted Seaton in May of 1999 to write the text. "He had seen my work and several of my plays and he thought that the subject matter fit right into my area of interest," Seaton said.

Though hesitant at first to tackle a much written about subject like Hemings, Seaton quickly decided to immerse herself in the project.

"I didn't want to do something commercial or sensational," Seaton said. "I decided to bring something fresh and original to the topic of Sally Hemings by going back and looking at the times and tapping my own family history, which I can trace back to the late 1700's. "

The collaborative end result with Seaton's text, Bolcom's music and Quivar's mezzo-soprano voice captivated listeners at the premiere.

"The theater was packed and there was not a sound to be heard while the performance was going on," Rao said. "When Sandra and Bolcom came on stage afterwards, there was thunderous applause. The west coast premiere of "From the Diary

of Sally Hemings" is in September at San Francisco's Herbst Theatre, and there are 10 performances scheduled for 2002. Seaton's text will also be published in the Fall 2001 issue of the Michigan Quarterly Review.