

## Akron Roundtable Talk on Julia Perry delivered 8 December 2022

Imagine yourself, if you can, as Julia Perry. Growing up in Akron in the late 1930s and 40s, supremely gifted, winning scholarships and prizes—in voice, violin, piano, and composition—such that, following her freshman year at the University of Akron, she won an award from the Knight Memorial Education Fund—established by John S. Knight—to attend one of the top music schools in the country, Westminster Choir College in Princeton, New Jersey.

Studies in composition and conducting followed at the famed Juilliard School in New York. From there to one of the most prestigious fellowship programs anywhere in the world, the Tanglewood Music Festival, summer home of the Boston Symphony. Residencies at the esteemed MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire... two Guggenheim Fellowships allowing her to continue her studies, and compose and perform, in Italy, where our leading national music journal of day, *Musical America*, declared about a performance of her *Stabat Mater*, “Not since the war has any serious American work received so enthusiastic a reception in Italy.”

This is the Julia Perry who wrote, in 1949:

*Music has a unifying effect on the peoples of the world, because they all understand and love it. In music, they find a common meeting ground. And when they find themselves enjoying and loving the same music, they find themselves loving one another...*

from Harold Rogers “Promising Negro Composer Lauds Peace Role in Music”  
*Christian Science Monitor* August 4, 1949

Following a performance in New York, shortly before her 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, she was interviewed by Aaron Copland. Listen to her voice—it’s confident and modest at the same time—she is determined to be recognized as a composer first. The questioner is Aaron Copland.

Imagine being on that journey. Encouraged by Copland (by far the leading composer in American classical music); then winning the top prize in the class of French pedagogue Nadia Boulanger, the most celebrated teacher of composition of the twentieth century; traveling widely in Europe to perform, conduct, and lecture with the support of the US Information Agency; conducting some of the top orchestras in the world—the BBC Philharmonic in the UK, and the Vienna Philharmonic, arguably the world’s most prestigious orchestra.

Let’s enjoy the moment. It’s 1957. She has just turned thirty-three, the year she renews her passport, and crosses out her earlier listing of occupation, replacing it instead with a single word, “composer,” in bold print.

And yet, that moment was not to last. That halcyon period in her life was shockingly brief. But before we break the spell, let's go back, and talk about who she was... and where she came from.

The important thing to know, is that the whole family was remarkable. Julia Perry's paternal grandfather, Abraham Perry, was born in 1842, in the heart of bluegrass country, in Woodford County, KY. You bourbon enthusiasts know its most famous export. Abraham Perry was born into slavery, and while a still-enslaved man, became a jockey. After emancipation, he moved to Lexington, KY and became a trainer of thoroughbred horses. And he was very, very good at it.

His prize thoroughbred was a horse named Joe Cotton. Joe Cotton won three derbies: the Tennessee, the Coney Island, and the Kentucky Derby, all in 1885. Between 1885 and 1887, he finished in the top three in thirty of fifty-four races, an exceptional winning ratio—part of an extraordinary, underrecognized and undercelebrated, history of Black American jockeys and trainers, dating to well before the Civil War.

Abraham's earnings were substantial enough that, together with his wife, Clara Taylor—Julia's grandmother—he built a two-story brick home two blocks away from the Kentucky Association Racetrack. Their home on Eastern Avenue, still standing today, served three generations of Perrys.

Abraham and Clara raised two children in that house: Abraham Murphy Perry, Julia's father, and Lucie Lois Perry, Julia's aunt. Abe trained in medicine, and began his practice, at home, in 1908, the same year his horse-training father died. But Dr. Perry was also a highly accomplished amateur pianist, skilled enough to accompany the great tenor Roland Hayes on tour. Lucie Lois—his sister, Julia's aunt—graduated from Fisk University, where she majored in music, and likely would have sung with the famed Fisk Jubilee Singers. In 1915, Dr. Perry married America Heath—Julia's mother—also a trained pianist. They brought six children into the world in the house Abe grew up in: five girls—of whom Julia was the fourth—and a son who died in infancy. In 1934, the family moved to Akron.

In 1934, if you stood on Main St. in downtown Akron, at the corner with Central St., and started walking uphill toward campus, after a couple of blocks you would cross the railroad tracks—at the bridge reconstructed in 1981 as the Center St. Bridge (the street renamed University Avenue in 1991). When you come to the intersection with Hill St. today, through-traffic turns left at EJ Thomas Hall. But in those days, the street continued, past where the Polymer Molecule Statue stands today, and into the campus of the Municipal University of Akron, as it was then called. Continuing along Center St, where it merged with Buchtel Avenue, if you turned right on Sumner St., the next cross street would have been Carroll St. Spicer School would be visible to your left. Then, one block ahead, to Berg St. Turning left, you come to the corner of Berg and Scott Avenue. You are now in the heart of Spicertown.

Julia Perry's family lived in two different homes in this neighborhood. It was a mixed neighborhood racially, but principally Black. Many community leaders—doctors like Abe

Perry, business owners, undertakers, teachers—lived in this contained neighborhood just south of the campus quadrangle. The neighborhood no longer exists of course. It was declared part of a newly formed University District in the early fifties, and razed in 1964 to make room for expansion of the campus. The entire neighborhood sits under the present-day athletic fields of the University.

Another important musician and composer—Kermit Moore—grew up on the same block. He developed an important career as a cellist, conductor, and composer, especially of chamber music and music for film. He was also a frequent collaborator with his wife, the eminent composer, Dorothy Rudd Moore.

As it turns out, there was an article just yesterday in the Beacon Journal by Mark Price, reporting on the passing—at the age of 98—of Kermit Moore's sister, Mary Katherine Moore Nelson. Mary—a music teacher—was the first Black woman hired by the Akron Public Schools. Mary taught for more than 30 years here, and helped develop the district's Head Start program in the 1960s.

Another person familiar to many in this room—one of Akron's guiding lights over the past several decades—also grew up on this same corner. She will tell us what it was like to be friends with Julia Perry and her family. Here is the longtime president of Akron's chapter of the... N-A-A-C-P, serving for many years on its national board, Mrs. Ophelia Averitt.

When Julia was 16 years old—and a student at Central High School, tragedy struck. As you heard from Mrs. Averitt, all the Perry sisters were musical. The second oldest girl was an exceptional talent: she shared her mother's name, America Lois, but went by Lois. Already at a young age, she taught piano in the prep division of the Cleveland Institute of Music. Heading home one summer evening in 1940, she took a single-car gasoline-powered passenger train known as the doodlebug. It departed Hudson shortly before 6 pm on its 13-mile run to Akron. As the train approached Cuyahoga Falls—where there was just a single track used by trains in both directions—the doodlebug should have pulled onto a side track at Silver Lake to allow a freight train—with two locomotives and seventy-three cars, travelling from Columbus to Cleveland—to pass in the opposite direction. But the doodlebug pull did not pull into the siding, and the two trains collided head on. None of the forty-three passengers survived. Because the gasoline was stored in the front of the doodlebug, the impact created a particularly gruesome scene. The engineer leapt to safety and survived. He recalled receiving instructions in Hudson to pull onto the siding at Silver Lake, but did not remember passing Silver Lake. A subsequent investigation determined that carbon monoxide poisoning was the likely culprit, as had been suspected in other doodlebug incidents.

The family was shaken to the core by the loss of Lois, as Mrs. Averitt reports, and the national notoriety of what came to be known as the Doodlebug Disaster brought them unending pain. Lois's body was taken back to the ancestral Perry home in Lexington, KY, and she was rarely mentioned again, as friends, including Mrs. Averitt, report.

It is impossible to guess how this devastating loss affected the intensely private Julia Perry. No one ever remembered Julia mentioning Lois again. Did the pain of this loss push her deeper into her music? Did it make her see the world as fundamentally unsafe? For someone so reluctant to enter into confiding relationships, did it cause her to find other ways to share herself: especially through her creative work? There's no way to know.

The earliest preserved work of Julia Perry's is the Prelude for Piano, composed when she was twenty-one or twenty-two. One thing to notice right away is that her manuscript is precise, clear and easy to read, with straight lines—which on close inspection are drawn freehand, not with a ruler. This is worth remembering when we look at later manuscripts. Like all of her music, the Prelude for Piano is richly layered, yet extremely concise. At the top of the page, you can see she's added something interesting: in square brackets: "arrangement for string orchestra available."

Here is a reading of the Prelude for Piano arranged for string orchestra—this was the first performance ever by a professional orchestra. And it's the only work I'll play for you in its entirety today, because it's just two-and-a-half minutes long. This is a performance by the Akron Symphony from October 16, 2021.

That is Julia Perry's essential voice: craftsmanship; concentration of feeling and form; her material distilled to the highest degree. The orchestration is actually not by Julia Perry, but by composer, violinist, educator, and conductor Roger Zahab—a University of Akron graduate—who remembers Julia Perry. Here he explains how his arrangement for strings came about.

Now we're getting into the nitty-gritty: the real challenges we've faced in getting to know Julia Perry's music since her death in 1979. We haven't had access to it; it's been hiding in the shadows.

Very few works have been recorded: you'll find only a smattering of performances on YouTube, Spotify, or Apple Music; and the pieces that have been performed or recorded are only those that have been published, which is a total of about 18 works. The vast majority of her hundred-plus works have not been published. Which leads to the biggest problem of all. By US copyright law, all creative work—published or unpublished—is protected for the life of the author (or composer) plus seventy years. That means Julia Perry's music is protected through the year 2049. It cannot be published, performed, or recorded without permission of the heir (or heirs) of her estate. After Julia died in 1979, the representative of her estate was her next-older sister Lucie, herself a talented musician, and a longtime teacher in the Akron Public Schools. Royalty checks collected from the purchase or rental of Julia Perry's music were mailed to Lucie. When Lucie died in 1991, the trail went cold. No heirs came forth, and the publishers didn't know who to send checks to. They've been sitting on those royalties—modest though they may be—ever since. But worse, because no heirs had been identified, there was no way to secure permission to publish or perform any more of her music. or to call in manuscripts or papers that may exist in libraries and in publishers' archives around the country without the authority to do so.

It's been a hot mess. And a terribly sad one, because the quality of her work is so high. But there is good news; thrilling news, actually, that will resolve the frustrations that have persisted for decades. We have just recently had a major breakthrough, and all of this is about to change. This talk today couldn't have been timed better.

But before I pick up the intellectual property thread, let's return for a moment to Julia Perry's life and her music. We left her last in Florence, Italy—flying high, well received as a composer, admired as a soloist and lecturer—everyone called her *Maestra*—full of promise, full of confidence about her own future. *Life Magazine* came calling, having chosen to include her in an article on American women overseas. They sent their top photographer based in Italy, David Lees. The image shows her with a calm but intense focus, uncompromising and self-composed, somehow fierce and placid at the same time. Those are also terms to describe her music.

It was the time of her *Stabat Mater*, which was receiving many performances throughout Italy, and in America too. Its composer was praised for her sensitivity to the text—a 13<sup>th</sup>-century Christian hymn to Mary—for the expressive economy of her musical phrases, and for her arresting delivery as mezzo-soprano soloist. No recording of Julia Perry's singing voice has ever surfaced. I still imagine—hope—that one day one will. Here is an excerpt from the *Stabat Mater*, a passage with an English translation of the text that the composer made herself. In her translation, she introduces a word that is not in the original Latin text; the word is “love.” Her version is, “Here inflamed I stand, in the fire of love. Through thee, Virgin, protect me on the Judgement Day.”

This was a performance of a year ago by Orchestra Now, Leon Botstein, conducting; Briana Hunter, mezzo-soprano. You hear that concentrated intensity. No wallowing or self-indulgence, moving straight through her phrases with purpose and force.

The *Stabat Mater* is one of only two orchestral works that have received more than isolated performances over the years. The other is the Short Piece for Orchestra, composed just a year later, also in Italy. Here, that concentrated intensity is apparent again, with a high-pressure energy that releases like the rapid uncoiling of a spring. But also, so clear here is the fact that she is completely at home with the orchestra. Motor rhythms up and down the strings, mid-range wailing in the horns, fanfares moving in the opposite direction in oboes and muted trumpets, all converging on a charged insistent rhythmic idea that is the motto of the work. Here is an excerpt from Short Piece for Orchestra, in a performance of a year ago by the Akron Symphony.

For some years, Julia travelled principally between Italy and New York, with residencies and performances at Music Festivals, artist retreats, the MacDowell Colony, and making appearances in Europe both as lecturer and conductor as an ambassador of the US Information Agency.

Shortly before her thirtieth birthday, she composed a work based on the writings of Saint Catherine of Siena, a beloved figure in Italian literature. It was bought by a major publishing house shortly after she returned to the US. But performers showed no interest

in it. The first and only performance ever of this piece took place last month—that's right, in 2022—in EJ Thomas Hall, by the Akron Symphony and soprano Louise Toppin.

In crafting the text for this work, Julia Perry extracted short lines from letters that Catherine wrote to elders in the catholic church in the 14<sup>th</sup> century: *Fragments from the Letters of Saint Catherine*, Perry called the piece. I can't help examining the word-fragments she chose, and wondering what they reveal about her. All creative work is autobiographical to some extent. It always says something about who you are, what you value, what you want to say, and who you're writing for. This young composer, who preferred to be alone, who revealed so little about herself, who never had an intimate or truly confiding relationship that we know of, chose these words: *Be silent no more!... Cursed be you who kept silent!...* and *Love, love, love—as you are loved beyond words.*

I think of this music as expressionist, emotional in the extreme, almost to the breaking point. You might think of Edvard Munch and *The Scream*—or should I say Macaulay Culkin and *The Scream*—or another mid-century American reference point: the music of Bernard Herrmann, who wrote the music to almost all of Alfred Hitchcock's films.

Here is just a “fragment” of *Fragments*, with the words: *amate, amate, amate... love, love love...*

I would call Dr. Louise Toppin—soloist in that performance—the nation's leading voice for music of the African Diaspora. Her non-profit organization, *Videmus*, oversees an enormous on-line resource called the African Diaspora Music Project. It has transformed how instrumentalists, chamber ensembles, choruses, and orchestras are able to program music by Black composers. Our Julia Perry Project will become one facet of that organization's work. By sheer coincidence, Dr. Louise Toppin was born in Akron. Her dad, Dr. Edgar Toppin, was the first Black professor hired by the University of Akron. He taught history, with an expertise in the era of Reconstruction. He also helped to integrate the campus in the early 1960s.

1954 was as busy year for Julia Perry. She returned to New York for the premiere, at Columbia University, of her opera, *The Cask of Amontillado*—based on the work of Edgar Allan Poe, but originally written in her own adaptation in Italian. The *Stabat Mater* was published by a major house, along with a few songs and choral works. She also won two successive Guggenheim Fellowships, allowing her to continue her work in Italy off and on for several years.

But over the next five years, she found that doors were not open to her as they had been in Europe. Although she had told Aaron Copland in 1954 that she did not want to teach—not if she could “get around it.”—she began giving private piano lessons in New York.

She returned home to Akron in 1960, where she composed a fascinating work for harp and ten percussionists. She called it *Homunculus C.F.* She worked in an apartment over her father's doctor's office, and described her inspiration for the piece this way: “These clinical surroundings evoked memories of the medieval laboratory where Wagner, youthful

apprentice to Faust, made a successful alchemy experiment, fashioning and bringing to life a creature he called homunculus. Having selected percussion instruments for my formulae, then maneuvering and distilling them by means of the Chord of the Fifteenth [thus the C.F. of the title], this musical test tube baby was brought to life.

Also in 1960—at long last—one of her large-scale works was released as a recording. Another followed in 1961, and a third in 1965. These were recordings by well-respected performers and on a well-regarded label—Composers Recordings Inc—but still, they were specialty releases on a niche label. Nonetheless, what finally became available in recorded form were: *Stabat Mater*; *Short Piece for Orchestra*; and *Homunculus C.F.* The fact that it is these three works—and only these three—that have been performed with any frequency in all the years since shows the power of recordings in generating interest in new music.

By far the best biographical information available on Julia Perry appears in Helen Walker-Hill's book, *From Spirituals to Symphonies*. In it, she claims that Julia Perry developed a rare medical condition known as acromegaly, likely beginning in her late twenties. The ailment causes the body to produce too much growth hormone, enlarging bones and tissues; it can be painful and fatiguing. No one commented on any changes in her physical appearance, but they did generally agree that her disposition changed dramatically around this time. In an interview with Helen Walker-Hill, writer Patricia Sides—who had gotten to know Julia at MacDowell, and later visited her in Italy—commented that her friend seemed, “peculiar, difficult” and that she was “quick to take offense.” Her conductor friend Piero Bellugi, reported something similar, noting too that she had become religious in a rather obsessive way.

In 1965, the New York Philharmonic performed her *Short Piece for Orchestra*. The performance is available on YouTube. It ended up being her last high-profile engagement.

The extensive correspondence between Julia Perry, Carlos Moseley, the Managing Director of the Philharmonic, the orchestra's librarian, and others, reveals the strain she was under. The materials she sent for the orchestra members to play from were deemed unusable, impossible to decipher—we will speak more about the handwriting question in a little bit—and filled with errors. She also neglected to inform the New York Philharmonic that the work was controlled by its publisher, not by her. In addition, she asked for travel money to get from Akron to New York, and received it. But then decided not go. And yet, requested additional funds. At about the same time, the assistant manager of the Philharmonic wrote a letter of recommendation on her behalf to the New York Public Library, where she had applied for a part-time job, which, it appears, she was not offered. All evidence points to the fact that her financial situation was dire.

In 1967–68, she taught for a year at Florida A & M University. In the same year, she completed her Violin Concerto, a work that was picked up by Carl Fischer, a major publishing house; but it never received a single performance. That is, until Roger Zahab and the University of Pittsburgh orchestra gave the world premiere in February of this year. After the publication of the Violin Concerto, she received no further offers from publishers for the rest of her life.

The next year, 1969, she was for one week a visiting lecturer at Atlanta University Center, a consortium of historically Black colleges and universities. By the end of that year 1969, she had also written a three-act play, two essays, a three-act “dramatic ritual,” and her Eighth Symphony. She sent the symphony off to her primary publisher, who decided not to accept it for publication, and returned it.

In the spring of 1970, while living here with her mother—on Euclid Avenue—she suffered the first of a series of strokes. It paralyzed her on the right side, leaving her unable to speak, and confining her to a wheelchair for the rest of her life. She learned to write with her left hand and continued composing at a remarkable clip. She wrote to publishers about her new work, and to prominent conductors about existing work, hoping for any performances of her music. She wrote a number of pieces of chamber music; an additional five symphonies; and several works for marching band, hoping to earn some income from high schools and universities—even while she was in and out of the hospital, and experiencing great mental and physical strain. What she didn’t do—very regrettably—is organize her papers and her vast catalog of music, and give it, or copies of it, to any library or university.

None of this later music has been available to the public. Few of these pieces have ever been performed, certainly not the orchestral works.

Remember that the last known representative of her estate was her older sister Lucie. When Lucie died in 1991, no family members came forward as rightful heirs. And Julia Perry’s principal publisher—now known as Peer Classical—has reported to me that the company made repeated efforts to identify heirs so that royalty payments could be distributed. Eventually, they resigned themselves to the idea that no heirs would be identified, and they have been escrowing those performance royalties ever since.

And now, the world has changed. There has been a dramatic surge of interest in the music of Julia Perry in recent years. But without a mechanism in place to negotiate publishing rights, none of the close to one hundred unpublished works are available to anyone.

That’s where this journey began a few years ago. The Akron Symphony—together with a group assembled by Louise Toppin—have been working to sort this out. Judge Stormer and her office conducted a complete search of the probate record, and came up empty. “We tried,” she wrote to David Lieberth in February of this year, “but have nothing on her... She did not probate any property. We don’t even have a certificate to transfer any property, which can happen without a will.” And then the judge added a telling comment, “It is very odd, as you would think a woman of her experience would have owned something in her own name. On the other hand, as a Black, single woman in the 1970s, she probably had limited access to property without a male co-signer.”

We sought information from publishers, Akron General Hospital, the church where her memorial service took place, and people who knew the family, like Mrs. Averitt. Then, in May of this year, came our breakthrough.



A key player in all of this has been Angela Hammond, a musician, musicologist, and writer, who has been working for years on a book about both the Perry family, and the family of Kermit Moore. Angela lives in Lexington, KY, but came to Akron last year spring to hear the orchestra play some of Julia Perry's works. She spent many hours poring through Summit County records and archives. She wrote to me with great excitement one afternoon, saying, "Lucie's daughter, Rhoda, is alive. She may be in ill health, because she is a ward of the state, but we have the name of her attorney; it is Kevin Davis." Dave Lieberth told me had known Kevin Davis well for many years, and that he would be happy to contact him. We just needed to state the situation, and what it was we were looking for. By the time I responded with the information, and Dave and Kevin were able to connect, Mr. Davis reported to us, "Yes, I have indeed been representing Lucie Perry Bigby's daughter, Rhoda, but I regret to inform you, that she passed away last week." Several emails and Zooms have followed, and—to cut to the paper chase—an estate in Julia Perry's name has now been opened with Judge Stormer's approval; Judge Stormer has appointed Mr. Davis as administrator of Julia Perry's estate. We received a confirming email from Mr. Davis the day before yesterday, explaining that "the next step is to gather and identify assets, and determine and confirm the heirs."

Today we launch *The Julia Perry Project* website. It lives at [akronsymphony.org/juliaperry](http://akronsymphony.org/juliaperry). The site will grow over time, but for now, it contains biographical information; links to online resources and recorded performances; videos from our oral history project, which currently consists of interviews with Mrs. Averitt and Roger Zahab; and a listing of all published and unpublished works. In a short time, this information will become part of—or work in parallel with—Dr. Toppin's *African Diaspora Music Project*. Most importantly and excitingly, there is now a legal process in place to help accomplish what Julia Perry worked so tirelessly—and fruitlessly—to achieve: publication, performances, and recordings of her works.

Significant challenges remain. Among them, trying to decipher and understand her handwritten scores, especially post-stroke. Here's the final page of Symphony No. 10 "Soul Symphony." It's a far cry from the clear hand, the straight lines, and even spacing, of her earlier manuscripts. In fact, it's so unclear, that she resorts to writing the letter-names of the notes over the noteheads. It is definitely hard to decipher.

In March of this year—without publishing it, or performing it publicly—the Akron Symphony read a number of Julia Perry's unknown works, including the hauntingly beautiful "Soul Symphony." It was the first time the music had ever been heard.

The vast majority of her music is today completely unknown. Even among people steeped in our rarefied field, most don't know Julia Perry's music. I am embarrassed to say that, a few years ago, after serving this orchestra for more than a decade, I too did not even recognize her name. No current project is timelier than our effort to make her music known throughout the world.

Hers is an Akron story through and through. Raised, educated, celebrated, supported—and ultimately ignored—in Akron, it is likely that no more important figure in classical music

has ever emerged from this city. At the Akron Symphony, our mission can be summed up by the following aspirations: to make meaningful human connections through great music; to give voice to the whole community; and to celebrate the contributions and talents of the artists who live here. Nothing we can do will support those goals better than *The Julia Perry Project*.

I'll leave you with the final bars of the "Soul Symphony." It's emblematic of the further refinement of her writing typical of her later works. That direct, unfussy, unapologetic voice simply leaves off at the end, without any need for a grand statement. When she's done saying what she has to say, she just stops. You could compare it to a writer's economy of expression. I think of a question T. S. Eliot asked himself: "What in modern life is the particular function of poetry as distinguished from other kinds of literature?" His answer: "Takes up less space."