

Julia Perry: a brief biography
by Christopher Wilkins

Born: March 25, 1924, Lexington KY

Died: April 24, 1979, Akron OH

Julia Amanda Perry was born in Lexington, KY into a talented family of musicians, teachers, and horse trainers. Her father, Abraham Perry, was a physician and an amateur pianist, skilled enough to accompany the great tenor Roland Hayes on tour. In 1915, he married Julia's mother, America Heath, also a trained classical pianist. The Perrys moved with their five daughters to Akron, OH in 1934.

Trained in the Akron Public Schools, Julia excelled in voice, piano, violin, and composition, winning numerous awards before entering the University of Akron in 1942. A year later, she earned a scholarship from the Knight Memorial Education Fund to attend Westminster Choir College in Princeton, NJ, where she earned both bachelor's and master's degrees. She received her first offer to publish a work—"Carillon Heigh-Ho" for chorus—at the age of twenty-three. She attended the Berkshire Music Festival at Tanglewood on a scholarship in 1951, where she met Aaron Copland, and began her studies with Italian composer Luigi Dallapiccola.

With generous support of an Akron patron, she traveled to Italy to continue her work with Dallapiccola. She enjoyed enormous acclaim there as a composer and vocal soloist, especially in performances of her signature work, the Stabat Mater for mezzo-soprano and string orchestra. She won two successive Guggenheim Fellowships, allowing her to remain in Italy off and on for several years. She also traveled throughout Europe as a lecturer and conductor, with support from the US Information Agency. Several of her works were published by major houses, including songs, choral works, orchestral pieces, and an opera based on Edgar Allan Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado*.

Returning to New York in 1959, she found that doors were not open to her as they had been in Europe. The New York Philharmonic did perform her Short Piece for Orchestra in 1965, and a smattering of other performances took place throughout the 1960s, mostly through the advocacy of friends. But after 1966, she received no further offers from publishers. Even among her few published works, several have remained unperformed until recently. She suffered a series of strokes beginning in 1970, resulting in her inability to speak and paralysis on her right side. She continued to compose by writing with her left hand, but professional opportunities all but vanished. She died on April 24, 1979, and was buried in Glendale Cemetery in Akron.

The vast majority of her work has remained unpublished, a situation that several groups working in tandem seek to rectify. [The Julia Perry Project](#)—an initiative of the **Akron Symphony**—and [Videmus](#)—a not-for-profit organization founded in Boston by Vivian Taylor, led since 1997 by [Dr. Louise Toppin](#)—have worked closely together to make her previously unpublished work available. [Conductor James Blachly](#) and the **Experiential**

Orchestra have also been instrumental, especially through their comprehensive [Julia Perry Centenary Celebration and Festival](#) held in New York during the month of Perry's centennial, March 2024.

The principal obstacle to access to Julia Perry's music has been the problem of rights. She died intestate. According to US copyright law, her work is protected for the duration of her life plus seventy years. Without a legal process in place to grant permissions, no publication, performance, or recording of her unpublished work could take place. Beginning in 2020, step-by-step progress has been made. With the approval of the Probate Judge of Summit County, Ohio, an estate in Julia A. Perry's name has now been opened. Soon, a worldwide publishing agreement will be announced, with an agreement allowing distribution of the complete works of Perry worldwide.