



Composer and NCS alumna Betsy Hendry Vercoe '58.

## Composing A Life

by Elizabeth Hendry Vercoe '58

In the summer of 1985, I found myself in Paris for my third and shortest stay in many years, with ideas for a commissioned vocal work in mind and two deliciously empty months in which to begin work on them. However, a chance trip south of the city took me to the ruined Chateau de Chinon where Joan of Arc had first asked for command of troops to lift the siege of Orleans. Earlier thoughts for the new piece evaporated as I was engulfed with the sense of place and person and seized with the notion of a staged monodrama on the life of the young girl who changed French history. Four months later, reading and research had produced a collage of texts - from Joan's contemporary, Christine de Pisan, to Shakespeare, Shaw, Mark Twain, and the gripping trial records. And two intense months of writing allowed me to meet my deadline.

The piece, called *Herstory III: Jehanne de Lorraine*, seemed like a dream project, and in many ways it was. The terms of the commission allowed me to choose my subject and gave me latitude as to length, style, and choice of staging. The performers were superb and experienced professionals with whom I had worked well before. But the actual writing was anything but a smooth and easy course. For me, it never is.

Because the research took so long and was delayed by my involvement in directing a festival of women's music, there were periods of near-panic as the deadline loomed and the performers began asking when the score would be ready (typical composer/performer interaction in the early stages of a project). Hoping the two performers would bear with me as I stretched the deadline, gave them more and more percussion instruments to play and more and more text to be spoken, shouted, declaimed and sung, I let the subject have its way, much as a novelist finds characters running her instead of the other way around. Preparing a fair copy of the score took almost another month, and by then the piece was double the requested length. Fortunately, nobody objected.

The Joan of Arc monodrama was typical in what it demanded beyond the composing of some music. There was a deadline to meet, a contract with which to comply, text permissions to clear, particular performers to consider, lighting designers to work with, rehearsals, a premiere and panel discussion to attend, newspaper pictures to be taken, program notes to write, and reviews to worry over. Later, there were grants to write for a recording, more contracts, corrections to make for publication of the score, radio interviews for broadcast performances, cuts to be made for a shortened version, sound engineers to be chosen, and cover art selected for the recording.

Much of the time spent on matters pertaining to the music had little to do with artistic inspiration. Just before production of the recording, for example, the Museum of History in Orleans informed me that the handsome sculpture of Joan of Arc that I had selected for the CD cover was now thought to be a likeness of St. Maurice. The cover designer gamely responded with longer hair and fuller lips to give us a newly-minted "antique" statue.

For me, *Herstory III* was not only a chance to make a living while writing for fine performers who would give a stunning premiere, but also an opportunity to make a feminist statement, to give a twentieth century woman's view of an important historical woman, while attempting to create a musical drama from an inherently dramatic life story. Although one is always full of self-doubts, the final three minutes of the piece are as good as any I have written. And whether or not the piece as a whole is a success or failure, the journey in writing it was memorable.