

## The little Lock Haven girl who became 'Queen of the Flute'

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Imagine you're walking down West Church Street, not far from the Helt Funeral Home in Lock Haven, on a spring day in the early 1940s. Perhaps your mind is troubled by thoughts of the war raging abroad, and of loved ones fighting in battle-torn Germany and Japan.

Just as you're passing the home of Rex Shaffer, a Nabisco executive formerly of Altoona, your heart is suddenly lifted by the cool, melodious tones of a classical flute. You pause for a moment and take in this beautiful sound, floating majestically through the early afternoon air.

You glance around, and perhaps peek behind the fences and brushes of the stately old homes lining the neighborhood. There, in the backyard of the Shaffer place, you catch sight of a young girl, not yet 17, whose shining silver flute extends almost as comfortably from her lips as a part of her own body.

Congratulations. You've just experienced an early performance by an artist who would one day entertain the crown heads of Europe, headline victorious world tours and have music critics from New York to Oslo straining for superlatives to describe her rare and extraordinary talent.

Elaine Shaffer was, in the decades before her early death in the 1970s, known by classical music lovers all over the world as The Queen of the Flute, a title bestowed upon her by Time magazine. That publication, then near the height of its influence and popularity, with a circulation in the millions, devoted its entire music section to the release of what is now probably Shaffer's most famous recording, a duet on flute with composer and piano legend Aaron Copland.

"Duo, for Flute & Piano" is still available today, on a CD called "A Copland Celebration: Vol. 2."

"Pastoral and elegiac in mood, Duo for Flute and Piano is a chamber-music gem that should become a staple of the scant flute literature," wrote Time. "In it, Copland returns to the comparatively simple harmonic and melodic world of 'Appalachian Spring,' though the piece is far from simple to play. 'Ai-yai-yai-yai-yai!' Copland cried out repeatedly at the recording session as he missed one or another of his own notes. A few feet away, Shaffer smiled sweetly back, having nothing to swear about, since she misses a note about as often as the sun fails to come up."

The sun first came up on Elaine Shaffer's remarkable gift in the comparably humble setting of the rehearsal rooms of the Lock Haven High School music department, where she began in the school band and orchestra as a tympanist. According to her own account, she was beginning to tire of the instrument.

"There wasn't much to do there behind the kettledrums," she told Time. "Then I noticed that the flutes were always busy, and gee, they got to play in the band at football games."

So, under the tutelage of her first flute instructor, Garth Kleckner, then-director of the LHHS band, she took up the instrument that would one day bring her accolades beyond the wildest dreams of the average teenager.

She was an apparently popular girl at LHHS, and many locals of a certain generation remember her fondly today.

"She was a very nice girl," said Mill Hall resident Frank Cree, 84. "She had a nice personality. She was a typical high school girl."

Cree also played flute in the band, and said he even went out on a few dates with the future Queen of the Flute. Asked if he had an idea at the time that Shaffer had a special musical talent, Cree said, "Yes, I think we all did. It wasn't only that she was a budding flutist but that she was something of a musical prodigy... She was musically gifted."

Prior to graduation from LHHS, Shaffer moved to Williamsport, Cree joined the Army and the two didn't see each other again for over 20 years.

"My life was interrupted by World War II, and while I spent three years winning World War II, she went on and completed her musical education," said Cree.

For Shaffer, there were sporadic visits to Lock Haven, however. On one memorable occasion she provided a brief, free concert for a few folks who happened to be at the Lock Haven train station one day in the early 1940s.

"Garth Kleckner, Lock Haven High School band director, under whose baton Elaine Shaffer first played the flute as a school girl in this city, remembered one unheralded concert played by the now world-renowned musician, in the most improbable of settings, the American Railway Express office at the Lock Haven station," The Express reported in 1963.

Shaffer had only recently graduated from high school in Williamsport during the war years, according to Kleckner, when her father investigated the purchase of a silver flute for sale in Vermont. The seller told Rex Shaffer that the flute would be shipped to Lock Haven for the young girl to try out. If it suited her, the flute could be hers for \$200.

"For an hour, the young woman who would later play before world dignitaries, played her concert to the small audience at the station," The Express reported. "She was satisfied with the quality of the instrument. Her father made the purchase. A noted musician had bought her first silver flute."

That noted musician continued her education at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, where she attended on a scholarship. There she came under the wing of William Kincaid, for 39 years first flutist of the Philadelphia Orchestra. She became one of his prized pupils, and when he died in 1967, he left his platinum flute to her in his will. She played it for the rest of her life.

After graduation from Curtis in 1947, she joined the Kansas City Symphony Orchestra, then directed by Efram Kurtz. She later joined the Houston Symphony, and Kurtz became musical director and conductor there. He also became her husband.

From there Elaine Shaffer rose higher and higher in the ranks of classical music, making her debut at New York's Town Hall in 1959 and earning the praise of critics wherever she performed.

"She can mold a beautiful, perfectly controlled phrase," wrote New York Times music critic Harold Schonberg. "She excels in long cantilena passages."

Now hailed as the world's top flutist, Shaffer moved to Gstaad, Switzerland with Kurtz, where Shaffer kept in shape by skiing in between triumphant international tours.

In January of 1965 she returned to central Pennsylvania to perform at the Capital Theatre in Williamsport, her first visit to the area in over 20 years. There she received thunderous applause and was buffeted with bouquets of roses at the close of her performance with the Harrisburg Symphony.

"From her slender gleaming instrument, which seemed to be an extension of her graceful figure, fell torrents and cascades of birdlike noises, sometimes in single shimmering whisper of sound and again a golden rush of melody," The Express reported.

"The orchestra provided a magnificent background, never too much and always enough in volume and support to enhance the lovely music of the flute but never to obscure it."

In the audience that evening was Cree, along with Shaffer's parents, former teachers and many old friends and acquaintances.

"I remember I very much wanted to hear her, because I had known her," Cree said, adding that he was only just recovering from a serious operation at the time, which he refused to allow to prevent his attendance. "Subsequent to the concert I stood on a receiving line, and eventually I shared a few words with her."

It was the last time Cree would see his old high school friend. Soon after the Williamsport engagement, Shaffer moved on to New York for some television guest spots before returning home to Gstaad.

She made one more appearance in Lock Haven, according to her Express obituary, when she performed in a concert at Lock Haven State College's Price Auditorium in January 1971.

Two years later she was diagnosed with cancer and entered a London hospital for treatments.

She died on Feb. 19, 1973 at age 47.

During her tragically brief but stellar career, Elaine Shaffer became the first flute soloist to appear at Helsinki University Hall in Finland, played with the Vienna Symphony as a soloist during the opening of the 1963 season, performed for royalty and heads of state and was acclaimed by music critics as "first lady of the flute," and an "inspiring artist."

One reviewer wrote that "the tones she produced were as golden as the 14-carat flute she uses."

Despite these platinum honors, however, there are those in Lock Haven who remember her as a charming school girl who spent her summer afternoons at story time at Ross Library, a young woman who made one of her first public appearances as a flute player before the Lock Haven Civic Club.

Those are memories music enthusiasts around the globe who still buy her classical CDs in large numbers will likely never know about.

But for many locals, they're worth more than the price of a solid gold flute.

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Two of the original "Peek at the Past" books are on sale at Ross Library. A book-length collection of "Peek at the Past" stories by Matt Connor will be available in the spring.

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