

*Memorial Concert*  
*for*  
*Dr. John Francis DeNitto*  
*11/30/1933 ~ 5/18/2018*



*Saturday, May 26, 2018*

*4:00pm*

*St. Philip's Episcopal Church in the Highlands*

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*Featuring the St. Philip's Choir; The Brasiles Ensemble,  
The Mary Powell and Speare Hodges*

# Program

*When Rooks Fly Homeward* ~ Arthur Baynon  
The St. Philip's Choir  
Dr. Woody Entrekin

*The Hills* ~ John Ireland  
The Brasiles Ensemble

Speakers  
Dr. Woody Entrekin  
Reverend Frank Geer

*En Pointe* ~ Dr. John Francis DeNitto  
Speare Hodges ~ piano

*Une Jeune Fillette* ~ Traditional French Folk Song  
The Mary Powell

*Now is the Month of Maying* ~ Thomas Morley  
The Brasiles Ensemble

Speaker  
Speare Hodges

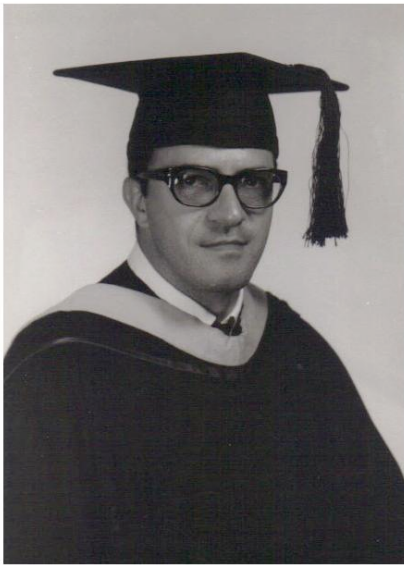
*The Blue Bird* ~ Charles Villiers Stanford  
The Brasiles Ensemble

Speaker  
*The Dorm Note*  
Madeleine DeNitto

*Baci Soave e Cari* ~ Claudio Monteverdi  
The Brasiles Ensemble

Speaker  
Meghanne DeNitto D'Agostino

Two Excerpts from *The Gaeta Suite* ~ Dr. John Francis DeNitto  
~ *Lamento*  
~ *Valzer Grazioso*  
Speare Hodges ~ piano



In 1921, the DeNitto family boarded a ship, taking a very long journey from Old Algiers, Algeria straight to Ellis Island. It was on July 4th when they reached the New York City harbor and to the delight of Madeleine DeNitto, the Statue of Liberty was the first thing she saw from the bow of the ship. Madeleine and Salvatore were the proud parents of Algerian born Clothilde, who was very ill at the time of their arrival. Once she was well, they set out to venture to the city, which they felt was too noisy and filthy, infested with bedbugs. They made plans to relocate south of Buffalo, in Jamestown. It was during their years spent in Jamestown, that Salvatore was able to work on the Eerie Canal. Two sons, Raymond and Robert, were born in Jamestown and Salvatore was somehow able to save a good bit of money and plans were made to head to Florida to escape bitter winter snowstorms.

In the early 1930's, the train they were aboard heading south had a layover in Savannah, Georgia. To their delight, Savannah reminded them of Europe with its cobble stone streets and old architecture. It was at this moment when a local man said that there was no need to continue their trip to Florida because there was so much land for sale just north of Savannah with rich soils for farming, which was Salvatore's plan. They found hundreds of acres ready to be purchased and along with several other DeNitto and Strozso families who ventured down with them, they all settled on farmland and began farming.

It was in 1933 when John Francis DeNitto was born in the home upon that land with its soils reminding them of Italy. Salvatore was successful in growing tobacco and many other crops. Madeleine held Catholic services in their home until enough money was raised to build a church in a local town to support a growing Catholic congregation. In later years, Clothilde became a nurse, Raymond and Robert were both in the military and worked for the US Postal Service while John was the only child who led a life in academics, scoring four degrees, after first being called to serve for three years in the army.

Starting out on the traditional accordian instrument found in French and Italian cultures, John excelled with music to the point where he became a highly accomplished pianist. He was able to perform with the Savannah Symphony Orchestra in the 1960's as well as with the Roswell Symphony Orchestra in New Mexico. It was in New Mexico where he accepted a job teaching elementary students in the 1960's when he married Merlyn Gautreaux Jenkins, a talented singer from Morgan City Louisiana, who he had met in Savannah. The mother of six children already, John was happy to become a doting stepfather.

He was able to take his parents to Europe in 1965 to visit family. As John drove Salvatore and Madeleine from France to Italy, an idea came to mind that as long as they were so close to Algeria, they should take a boat from Italy to Old Algiers so that Madeleine could see her home one last time. It was during this trip that the family was detained and John's passport was held. Madeleine pleaded with the Algerian officials in French that she was an Algerian native, but that John was a citizen of the United States and after many, many frightful hours, the officials finally allowed them into the country for a short visit.

In 1967, John and Merlyn welcomed a seventh child, Madeleine, who was born in Artesia, New Mexico. Missing Savannah and the DeNitto family, they later returned to live downtown in Savannah at the time when John was offered a job at Georgia Southern College in 1969. After commuting to the college for some time, John decided to use the land that was given to him by his parents and set out to build a new home for his family. This home was completed in 1974 and it was here where John and Merlyn finished raising Madeleine and John completed his doctorate.

Over the years, John had become so popular with his friends, colleagues and fellow musicians, that it seemed that there was always a concert happening or a social event. There were even special hostings held at his home for famed musicians he had booked to perform at the college when he served as chair for the Campus Life Enrichment Committee.

As time went on with his life always filled with his love of music and his love of teaching, he was one of the most respected members of the community and there didn't seem to be a soul who didn't love his academic brilliance or musical gifts. He and Merlyn also enjoyed traveling, however, in the late 1980's, Merlyn was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease from which she suffered for twelve long years. John was there for her in all of those years until she passed away in his arms in 2002.

It was in 2003 that John first began to suffer from health issues of his own, but kept his vow to Merlyn to take care of all seven of her children and to also travel. John bought a large conversion van and with the exceptions of Hawaii and Alaska, he visited every state in the US at least once over a period of nearly fifteen years. It was during these years that John sought adventure, flying up in a helicopter over Manhattan, a hot air balloon in New Mexico and even went hang gliding over Tennessee while in his early 70's. The only adventure he never got to experience was his dream of riding in a blimp. He was very disappointed in not having that pleasure.

By 2015, he began to have more health issues which caused him to be concerned about continuing his travels. He made his final cross country trips in 2016 and early 2017 before becoming more ill, being diagnosed with renal failure in late 2017.

As he had moved in with his daughter, Madeleine and her husband Clay in 2014 in Fishkill, New York, he lived his final years, which had again been filled with many concerts and parties. He entered Hospice in January of 2018 and passed in May. Of his three siblings, he was the only one not to have been born in New York or Algeria--- while also, he is the only one not to have passed away in Georgia.

His passing was felt across the north to the south with much heartbreak, but also with the knowledge that he had lived a very full and very rich life of love and admiration.

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Cover photo is of John's composition *En Pointe*, written in 1997 for his granddaughter, Meghanne DeNitto D'Agostino, who was seriously studying Vaganova ballet at the time.

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## ***Acknowledgements***

Thank you, Reverend Frank Geer and St. Philip's Church, Dr. Durward Entrekin and the St. Philip's Choir, in helping to make this memorial concert happen.

Thank you to the members of The Brasiles Ensemble and The Mary Powell for being available to perform, as well as being so kind, patient and understanding over the past five months of Hospice care.

To Speare Hodges, thank you for being prepared to perform pieces written by his grandfather and to Speare's sister, Meghanne DeNitto D'Agostino for remembering some hilarious moments of his life. Both Meghanne and Speare traveled long distances to honor their grandfather today.

And to Hudson Valley Hospice Care of Dutchess County— namely, Jolene Gaer, RN, BSN, Sylvia Francis, health aide, Alicia Ponessa, LMSW and Patricia Costanzi, LPN for their tireless hours of care, advice and counseling over a period of nearly five months.

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My father did not wish for flowers or other gifts to be sent to the family, but suggested that donations be made to a charity. Due to the wonderful care he received in our home, it seems that Hudson Valley Hospice of Dutchess County would be perfect to consider. [www.hvhospice.org/foundation/donate](http://www.hvhospice.org/foundation/donate)

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Thank you all for coming today. Please visit The Brasiles Ensemble website for more information on the group and dates when we will premiere more compositions written by Dr. John Francis DeNitto in the coming years!  
[www.thebrasilesensemble.wordpress.com](http://www.thebrasilesensemble.wordpress.com)

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