Julia Perry

*Ju-lee-ah Per-ry*

**Born:** March 25th, 1924, Lexington, Kentucky  
**Died:** April 24th, 1979, Akron, Ohio  
**Period of Music:** Modern Era

**Biography:**

Julia Perry was born in Lexington, Kentucky on March 25th, 1924. Her father played piano so she grew up surrounded by music. Perry started taking piano, voice, and violin lessons when she was 6. Her family moved to Akron, Ohio. In high school, Perry began winning regional music competitions in violin and voice. She spent a year at the University of Akron before winning a scholarship that allowed her to transfer to Westminster Choir College in New Jersey where she was most successful. She was the concertmaster of the orchestra and gave the pitch for the choir and went on to get a graduate degree in music from Westminster in 1948.

After graduating from Westminster, Perry took composition lessons with Luigi Dallapiccola. She also took courses in operatic conducting at Juilliard. Dallapiccola liked Perry and invited her to study with him in Florence, Italy in 1952. In the summer of 1952, Perry studied composition with Nadia Boulanger, who believed that Perry was such an accomplished composer, she had nothing to teach her, but Perry insisted. Perry lived in Italy for most of the 1950's. In Italy, she was well known and widely loved as both a composer and performer. During the 1950's, she wrote many songs and orchestral works including her famous *Study for Orchestra*. Orchestras across Italy played her pieces and critics around Europe loved her music.

Perry moved back to the United States in 1959. She wrote most of her orchestral pieces in the 1950's and 1960's. That decade also saw the performance of *A Study for Orchestra* by the New York Philharmonic. During the 1960's, Perry developed serious health problems including a disease that caused her hands and feet to grow abnormally large. In 1971, Perry had a stroke that paralyzed her right side. Perry's letters show that she worked tirelessly to regain the ability to walk, talk, conduct, and compose using only her left side. Her efforts didn't pay off and her later compositions never attained the popularity or renown she hoped for. Perry died in 1979 at the age of 55.

Among black composers who wrote in the 1900's, Julia Perry is considered one of the most significant. She effortlessly wrote in choral, opera, chamber, and orchestral genres. Her most famous pieces are her *Stabat Mater* (1951) for contralto and orchestra, likely written for her own voice, and her *Study for Orchestra* (1952) which premiered in Florence, Italy by the Turin Symphony. Perry wrote in a European neoclassical style and employed several black folk idioms in her writing, heavily influenced by African-American Concert Spiritual, especially in her early and later works. Unfortunately, many of her compositional manuscripts have been lost or are unreadable and only a handful of recordings of her music exists.
Quick Facts:
- Perry translated 78 African fables from Italian to English and wrote a play while in Italy.
- Perry won two Guggenheim Fellowships.
- Perry won a scholarship to attend the prestigious Cleveland Institute of Music, but declined it because her parents wanted her to stay closer to home.
- She wrote twelve symphonies in addition to choral, vocal, band, and orchestral works, yet there is no record of any of her works written after 1963 being performed.

Selected Compositions for Listening:

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Spotify Playlist URL: https://tinyurl.com/perrylisten
- Short Piece (Study) for Orchestra
- Stabat Mater

YouTube Playlist URL: https://tinyurl.com/perrylistenyoutube
- Prelude
- I'm a Poor Lil’ Orphan (Negro Spiritual)
- Homunculus C. F.

Learn More about Julia Perry:
- BlackPast.org: Remembered and Reclaimed: Julia Perry
- Women’s Philharmonic Advocacy: Julia Perry