



Gary Karr: Life on the G String. By Mary Rannie.
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Canada (retired)

In April 1962, Leonard Bernstein, in a Young People's Concert at Carnegie Hall, introduced the twenty-year-old Gary Karr to a television audience of seven million people. During the concert with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, the young bassist played arrangements of Paganini's *Variations on Rossini's Moses Fantasy*; *Prayer*, from Bloch's *Sketches from a Jewish Life*; and *The Swan*, from Saint-Saëns' *Carnival of the Animals*. All three pieces illustrated the lyrical style of playing that Karr would later fully embrace. He was coached for this early

performance by the cellist Zara Nelsova and by the renowned soprano Jennie Tourel, who introduced Karr to Bernstein. His mentors' expertise helped Karr to secure a promising launch to his career. A recording session was arranged in June 1962 and the resulting album, *Gary Karr Plays Double Bass*, was released by Golden Crest (7012). This recording has served as an important milestone for several generations of double bass players. Karr would go on to release more than 60 recordings which are listed by Rannie in the book's comprehensive discography.

To finish off the dynamic year of 1962, on October 30, Karr gave a recital at The Town Hall in New York. In the audience was Olga Koussevitzky, the widow of conductor and bassist Serge Koussevitzky, who was so moved by Karr's playing that she gave him her husband's 1611 Amati bass.

In 2004, Karr donated this bass to the International Society of Bassists (ISB), through which members continue to use it for performances and recordings. The ISB itself is one of the most enduring aspects of Karr's legacy. He founded the Society in 1967 (as the International Institute for the String Bass) to stimulate the growth of knowledge about the double bass. It has



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published newsletters and organized conferences. Held every two years, the ISB meetings bring together over 1,000 double bass enthusiasts—performers, teachers, students, and luthiers.

Throughout his career, Karr had the generous need and desire to cultivate a new generation of bassists. He taught at the University of Wisconsin, Indiana University, Dalhousie University, and at the University of Hartford. Between 1972 and 1994, he also spent summers at the Johannesen International School of the Arts, in Victoria. In 1994, he moved permanently to Victoria and in 1996 opened “Karr Kamp”, a four-week teaching session in July of each year. The final Karr Kamp *Basses Loaded XX* concert was performed July 26, 2016.

Karr has commissioned compositions, basses, and bows. Composers such as Hans Werner Henze, Paul Ramsier, Vittorio Giannini, Alexander Brott, Alex Wilder, James Niblock, José Serebrier, and Gunther Schuller have all written pieces for Karr to perform. Luthiers such as Lawrence La May (Madison, Wisconsin) and James Ham (Victoria) have designed and constructed basses and bows to Karr’s specifications.

Over the past 56 years, Gary Karr has transformed the landscape of the double bass world. In her extensive biography of Karr, Mary Rannie reveals the highlights of his life along with his wit and bubbly sense of humour. Her narrative is based on interviews, letters, and scrapbooks, interspersed with Karr’s recollections. The book is illustrated with photographs of early family life and of Karr’s friends and associates, all from Karr’s collection. A bassist herself, and a friend and colleague of Karr, Rannie describes his personal and professional life eloquently and in a style that will connect with all readers. She also provides a brief overview of the very few double bass soloists preceding Karr and gives insights into the barriers of a solo career. A lack of solo bass repertoire is presented as a major restriction that left bassists to rely heavily on transcriptions.

Gary Karr has retired from the world’s stage and left behind his heavy schedule of international concerts. He performed one of his final recitals at the 2001 ISB convention in Indianapolis, Indiana. Nevertheless, for the lucky music lover, every so often, if he doesn’t have to travel far, Karr can still be heard in concert. Born in Los Angeles, he has been a Canadian citizen since 1997. He lives in Victoria with his musical and life partner, pianist Harmon Lewis.