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In Memoriam Mary Jane Phillips-Matz (1926-2013)

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I first heard the name Mary Jane Matz, as she was then known, in James Hepokoski's legendary Verdi seminar at Oberlin College. In my undergraduate mind I pictured a severe-looking woman rummaging through manuscripts as she pecked at a typewriter. But when I met Mary Jane a few years later, I discovered how far off base that mental image had been. Warm and gregarious, always ready with a recommendation for an out-of-the-way restaurant or private archive, Mary Jane was the antithesis of severe. And while I had imagined her solitary life amid dusty documents, I soon learned that she was, in fact, a devoted mother, as well as a generous maternal figure to countless singers and scholars passing through "Verdi country"—Busseto and environs, where she was regarded as a local.

Mary Jane was always clear about her vocation: she was a biographer, not a musicologist. But "biographer" doesn't do justice to the role that she played in the Verdi community. As one of the founders of the American Institute for Verdi Studies, Mary Jane joined the committed band—Martin Chusid, Claire Brook, Philip Gossett, Andrew Porter, and Patrick Smith—who helped lay the foundation for the explosion of American Verdi scholarship in the 1970s and beyond. Moreover, her friendship with members of the Carrara-Verdi family enabled the AIVS to film precious letters and documents in the composer's own collection. To this day, Mary Jane's inventory serves as the primary finding aid for our Sant'Agata microfilms, which have informed countless scholarly studies.

While she was writing her massive biography of Verdi, Mary Jane frequently called the AIVS to check on a detail buried somewhere in the composer's papers. Decades later, after I moved near the town where her ancestors had lived, she would occasionally call and tell me about her genealogical investigations. It became clear to me that while Mary Jane cared deeply about the objects of her studies, it was the act of research itself that really made her happy.

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