

Dr. Frank Desby
February 4, 1922 – October 30, 1992



Frank (*Fotios*) Desby was born in Cleveland, Ohio on February 4, 1922. When he was seven years old, his family moved to Greece for two years, living in the coastal village of Koroni in Messinia at the southwest corner of the Peloponnesus, near Kalamata. It was there that he first heard and fell in love with Byzantine chant, and it became a lifelong passion. Upon returning to the States, his family moved to Los Angeles, where Desby spent the rest of his life.

Musically precocious, his first musical studies were on the clarinet. He soon switched to the oboe and became an accomplished virtuoso. He possessed a phenomenal natural musicality and eventually learned to play every orchestral instrument. Along with his virtuosity on the oboe and clarinet, he was also an accomplished performer on the trumpet and string bass, equally adept in both the classical and jazz genres. His musical activities were many and

varied. He played in and conducted the Burbank, Highland Park, and Hollywood Wilshire symphonies. He played oboe in the studios and taught courses in Byzantine music at USC and Mount St. Mary's College. He was well-traveled and his outside interests ran the gamut from photography to Egyptology.

He began composing in his teens, and on the strength of an opera he wrote while in high school, he received a full scholarship to the University of Southern California where he studied composition with the distinguished German composer, Ernst Toch. His studies were interrupted by military service during World War II. Upon returning to civilian life in 1946, he finished his undergraduate studies in music at USC, and was appointed choir director at the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church in Los Angeles in 1948, a turning point in his life.

Strongly supported by The Rev. Anthony Kosturos, Desby began to compose and arrange music for church services and renewed his interest in Byzantine chant. In 1951, his newly-published choral music for the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom was presented under his direction at the annual conference of the Federation of Greek Orthodox Church Choirs of the Western States in San Diego, CA, the first of many performances at federation conferences all over the country. In 1952, St. Sophia Cathedral in Los Angeles opened to great fanfare, and Desby began a tenure as its music director that continued until the end of his life. In 1954, he married Xenia Anton, the Cathedral organist, and they had three children, Neal, Krisanthy, and Dino. Xenia passed away in 1978.

In the late 1950's, Desby went back to USC for graduate studies in sacred music, specializing in Byzantine chant. He also continued his studies in composition with Ingolf Dahl and Halsey Stevens. He completed his Masters in Music in 1958 with a thesis on the signatures and intonations of the Third Mode in medieval Byzantine music, and his Doctorate in Musical Arts in Sacred Music in 1974, with a thesis on *The Modes and Tuning in Byzantine Chant*, considered a seminal work in the field. He had to spend parts of two summers on Mount Athos doing research and photographing manuscripts that were unavailable anywhere else in the world. He had

requested and received permission from the Greek government to do this research, and he considered it one of the greatest experiences of his life.

Desby was a prolific contributor to the music of his Greek Orthodox faith. He transcribed and arranged many hymns in unison chant and also for four-part harmony, further developing a mixed choir, choral movement that had started in Europe in the late 19th century and in the United States in the early part of the 20th century. He also arranged many Greek folk songs for choral presentations. His works were performed across the US, and he was a sought-after guest conductor and guest clinician. He was a co-founder and partner of the Greek Sacred and Secular Music Society, which was responsible for publishing and encouraging the use of his music as well as that of others who were part of the growing number of composers of Greek Orthodox liturgical music.

Desby was also among the founding members of the National Forum of Greek Orthodox Church Musicians, which in 1978 was designated as the official arm of the then-Archdiocese of North and South America (now the Archdiocese of America). He became the chief researcher for the *Liturgical Guidebook*, a resource for parish clergy and church musicians that indicates the hymn changes and readings for the Sundays and Feast Days of the entire liturgical year, a publication he had originally created under the auspices of the Greek Orthodox Youth of America (GOYA) prior to its transfer to the National Forum in 1978. In addition to workshops in choral and conducting techniques, he presented many others about the Typikon's order of services and the tunings of Byzantine chant. Before his death, he completed two other major works published by the National Forum: *The Guide to Transcription of Post-Byzantine Chant* with Alexander Lingas, Jessica Suchy-Pilalis and Nicolas Maragos, and *The Notation, Transcription, and Rendition of Post-Byzantine Chant*. In 1980, Desby received the prestigious St. Romanos the Melodist Medallion from the National Forum for his exemplary national contributions to Greek Orthodox church music.

A man of enormous energy and love and knowledge of the music of his faith, Frank Desby was involved in many church and composing activities until the end of his days. He passed away on October 30, 1992.