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Edmonia Simmons, who once taught as many as 300 students a day, gives Waheed Husain some pointers.

—Louis Sohn/The Chattanooga Times

# A note of appreciation

## Former students, other fans gathering to honor former Howard music teacher

By Carolyn Mitchell

The Chattanooga Times

In some ways Edmonia Simmons was an unlikely heroine.

At less than five-feet tall, she was shorter than most of the teen-agers she taught. Soft-spoken and dignified, she was no flashy classroom showman. What's more, her course was optional.

But during her 36 years at Howard High, Mrs. Simmons was a towering figure who elevated student musical productions to a source of community pride and inspired hundreds of young people to make something of their lives.

"She was one of my idols," says East-side music teacher Glenna Kelley. "I admired the way she played the piano, the way she handled the school chorus and I think basically I just admired her

anyway."

On Sunday, former students and other fans of Mrs. Simmons will celebrate her 80th birthday and enjoy her piano music during a public recital at Cadec Conservatory at 4 p.m.

For the program Mrs. Simmons is practicing her Chopin and Beethoven on a grand piano that gleams like an onyx island in her living room. Her keyboard artistry sprang from her studies as a girl on a Wing & Sons piano in her home in South Carolina.

"After dinner, I would ask if I could go practice piano," Mrs. Simmons recalls. "I'd wash my hands and go practice and then I would happily do the dishes."

Later, she entertained at private parties and accompanied her church choir before entering Hampton Insti-

tute in Virginia as a music education major. After graduating, she taught in South Carolina four years before marrying Peter David Simmons and moving to Chattanooga.

In 1939 Mrs. Simmons joined the Howard faculty, beginning a career that had her teaching as many as 300 students a day and shaping them into polished performers of classical, popular and sacred music.

"I considered the students as young adults," Mrs. Simmons says. "I addressed them as Mr. and Miss. I planned their work each day, so they didn't have time to get anything started."

Mrs. Simmons, who was widowed last year, stays in touch with a number of former students — ranging from professional musicians to others who cherish music as a hobby.

"She was very frank," says Dr. Ro-

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# Teacher

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land Carter, head of the UTC music department and a former protegee of Mrs. Simmons.' "She would tell you, 'That rhythm is wrong,' or 'That note is wrong.' She didn't have any time for people who did not do what they needed to do."

But Mrs. Simmons did have time to offer extra instruction during her students' study hall periods, to take her choirs and glee clubs to state conventions and to put them on university stages and introduce them to college campuses.

Another former student — Roy Mathis of Buffalo — has retired from his job with the postal service, but he still enjoys directing a semi-professional men's chorus.

This past October, Mathis invited his one-time mentor to act as featured pianist with his Royal Seranaders during their annual concert. In another salute, the 1992 program by the Chattanooga Choral Society for the Preservation of African-American Songs was dedicated to Mrs. Simmons — who helped found the organization.

Mrs. Simmons' achievements at Howard are all the more remarkable for the conditions under which she labored during the early years. "We didn't have sheets of music and the students had to learn everything by rote," she says. "I'd put the words on the blackboard and play for them. I taught them section by section, and it was word perfect."

Under Mrs. Simmons' direction the Howard singers developed a diverse repertoire — Broadway musicals, Christmas contatas, Negro spirituals. A community treasure, the student vocalists did radio broadcasts, entertained civic clubs and sang carols in nursing homes and hospitals.

"The songs they would forget," Mrs. Simmons says. "The important thing was the harmony, the working together and the enjoyment of a job well-done. Those are the things I wanted them to remember most, and they have done that."