

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on May 15, 2007, the following  
tribute to the life and service of the late Eileen Jackson Southern  
was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

## **EILEEN JACKSON SOUTHERN**

BORN: February 19, 1920

DIED: October 13, 2002

Eileen Jackson Southern, a scholar of Renaissance and African American music, was the first black woman to be appointed as a tenured full professor at Harvard University. She was 82 at the time of her death on October 13, 2002.

Eileen Jackson was born in Minneapolis, attending public schools there, as well as in Sioux Falls and Chicago. She graduated from Lindblom High School in Chicago and studied piano at Chicago Musical College, giving her first recital at twelve and making a debut in Chicago's Orchestra Hall at eighteen. She earned both bachelor's and master's degrees at the University of Chicago (1940 and 1941), writing a thesis on "The Use of Negro Folksong in Symphonic Form." Restricted by the limitations of segregation, she began her teaching career at historically black colleges, including Prairie View A & M in Texas, Southern University in Louisiana, and Claflin College in South Carolina. During the 1940s, she also toured the country as a concert pianist, performing in 1948 at Carnegie Hall after winning a national competition.

Southern moved to New York in 1951, where she taught in public schools while doing graduate work in musicology at New York University. She applied to Harvard, but "ran into a 'quota' problem," as one of her colleagues later put it. At NYU she worked with Gustave Reese, a renowned historian of Renaissance music, and completed her Ph.D. in 1961. Her dissertation, *The Buxheim Organ Book*, was published two years later by Luther Dittmer's Institute of Mediaeval Music.

In 1960, Southern joined the faculty of Brooklyn College (CUNY), hired by Siegmund Levarie, who had been one of her professors at the University of Chicago. In 1969, she moved to York College (CUNY) and was promoted to full professor in 1972, serving also as chairwoman of the music department.

Southern came to Harvard as a lecturer in 1974, becoming the first black woman appointed to the rank of full professor with tenure in 1975. She chaired the department of Afro-American

Studies from 1976 to 1980 and retired in 1987 as professor emeritus. Southern remembered her reception at Harvard as far from cordial. In "A Pioneer," an essay she contributed to the 1993 anthology *Blacks at Harvard*, she observed that she was part of two highly select though unorganized groups in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences: the "black presence" and the "female presence." In this same essay, she recounted years of struggle in gaining respect for herself and the fledgling department she headed. But she invoked her role model, W. E. B. Du Bois. "Like him, I went to Harvard because it was a great opportunity for me as a black female scholar, and I accepted the reality of racial and sex discrimination," she wrote. "In its role as nurturer of scholars, Harvard never let me down!" Among especially congenial colleagues at Harvard, she singled out John Ward and Rulan Chao Pian.

As a researcher, author, and teacher, Southern documented the history and scope of African-American music, utilizing the tools of her traditional musicological training to generate bedrock research. In an introductory essay for a Festschrift published in her honor, Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., called her a "heroine" and "quiet revolutionary," someone who had led a "scholarly insurgency" to overturn "faulty assumptions about black music and black musicians and their place and role in the evolution of American culture."

At the core of Southern's contribution as a scholar was *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, first published in 1971 and now in its third edition (Norton, 1997). Although previous authors had interpreted individual aspects of African American music, this was the first thoroughgoing scholarly treatment of the subject, essentially revealing a vast new area of academic inquiry. She published a string of subsequent books on related topics, including: *Biographical Dictionary of Afro-American and African Musicians* (Greenwood, 1982), *African-American Traditions in Song, Sermon, Tale, and Dance* (with Josephine Wright; Greenwood, 1990), and *Images: Iconography of Music in African-American Culture (1770s-1920s)* (also with Wright; Garland, 2000).

In 1973, with her husband, Joseph Southern, she founded *The Black Perspective in Music*, the first musicological journal on the study of African American music. It was "bold from the beginning," Floyd has written, "both in its audacity to exist and in its content." Southern edited the journal until it ceased publication in 1990. "At the time of *BPIM's* founding," Floyd continued, "there was no . . . core of loyalist, 'generalist,' black-music scholars. *BPIM* and *The Music of Black Americans* have been responsible for the creation of the existing, and still rather small, [such] core." Among her many articles in a wide variety of publications, Southern traced African retentions in nineteenth-century African American traditions, musical practices in black churches of the early nineteenth century, early black musical theater, the evolution of black orchestras, black minstrelsy, and a host of other topics. In an era when White European "canons" ruled the academic study of music, she countered with a list of "five milestones in the history of African-American composition," including major works by Frank Johnson, Bert Williams/George Walker/William Marion Cook, Scott Joplin, William Grant Still, and Duke Ellington. This was a bold, genre-defying list, putting jazz and music for the theater alongside

the concert tradition. Eileen Southern was also editor of *African American Theater: 'Out of Bondage' (1876)*, and *'Peculiar Sam: or The Underground Railroad' (1879)* (Garland, 1994).

Southern's prodigious contribution to the study of African American music was widely recognized during her lifetime. In 2001, she received a National Humanities Medal for being a musicologist who "helped transform the study and understanding of American music." She also received the Lifetime Achievement Award in 2000 of the Society for American Music.

Eileen Southern died at her home in Port Charlotte, Florida. She was survived by her husband of 60 years, Joseph Southern; a daughter, April S. Reilly of Florence, California; a son, Edward J., of Port Charlotte; a sister, Stella Hall of Chicago; and three grandchildren.

Respectfully submitted,

Ingrid Monson

Carol J. Oja

Kay Kaufman Shelemay

Josephine Wright (College of Wooster)

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Chair