

In 1967, Robert Delford Brown, the founder of **FUNKUP**, The First National Church Of the Exquisite Panic, Inc., Sanctified **Florence Foster Jenkins** as a Charter Saint

In the development of The First National Church of the Exquisite Panic, Inc., Founder Robert Delford "Bob" Brown sanctifies friends "who have been important in offering their talent and moral support." His "Ritual of Sanctification" consists of the making of a "collaborative collage relief painting in which the Saint to be is the message and I am the medium."

Several years ago Brown implemented this process by choosing his "charter saints".

"For the requisite saints I chose eight gifted people who were extraordinarily inspiring to me in my adolescence and for whom I have always felt great affection and admiration," said Robert Delford Brown. He cites the jazz musicians Frank Teschmacher, Leon Rapollo, Herbie Fields, Stuff Smith, and PeeWee Russell; the poet Chidioc Tichborne; the comedian Hornsby; and the opera singer manque Florence Foster Jenkins."

Saint Florence Foster Jenkins

"People may have laughed at her singing, but the applause was real," said St. Clair Bayfield, who acted as her manager for over 36 years.

She once told a friend, "Some may say that I *couldn't* sing, but no one can say that I *didn't* sing."

Indeed, she couldn't sing, but the public loved her for it. The considerable sums she earned for her private recitals were redistributed sympathetically to needy young artists, as were large portions of the personal fortune she inherited. "She only thought of making other people happy," Bayfield, who was also her companion, insisted.

She was born Florence Foster, the daughter of a buttoned-up Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania banker in 1868. She was given music lessons and at the age of eight she had a piano recital in Philadelphia. At 17, she announced her wish to travel to Europe and take up music as a profession. But Papa Foster refused to pick up the tab for that.



Then, in 1909, the elder Foster passed away and left his 40-something daughter a more-than-comfortable inheritance. With that, her infamous career was free to really begin an ascension toward the upper registers of absurdity.

Once the diva had successfully attracted the notice of a few confused music critics, she decided that the time had come to move her operations to New York, beginning a path from odd obscurity to celebrity and finally legend. Madame achieved this by singing at least twice a year at "Sherry's" on Park Avenue, and once a year in a private concert at the Ritz-Carleton Hotel—an event to which only an elite assortment of friends, admirers, colleagues and critics were invited. These performances, one newspaper announced, were "awaited with more than the customary gusto." Close to a thousand cheering admirers were shoe-horned into a ballroom

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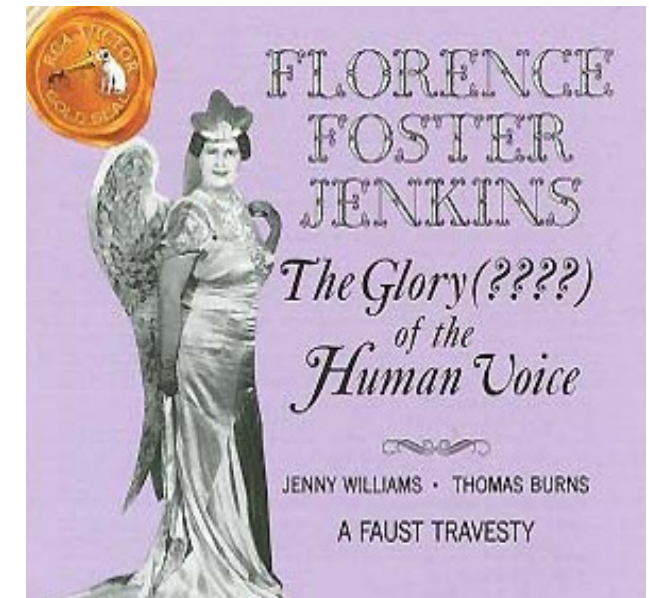
festooned with the formal frou-frous that Jenkins adored. The cops were called in to haul away the clamoring throngs that tried to crash the gates.

At the concert's end, "flushed and happy, surrounded with flowers," she customarily invited attentive audience members to correspond to tell her which of her selections they had most enjoyed. "It is very important to me," she would declare in little oratorical aftermaths to her public.

As the word spread of her notorious audio massacres, it perhaps became inevitable that requests would arrive to record Madame Jenkins for posterity. In four recordings for the ages, she adopted a unique system. "Rehearsals, pitch and volume, acoustics," wrote an official of the recording company, "all were thrust aside by her with ease and authority. She simply sang and the disc recorded." Take One was usually, "excellent—virtually beyond improvement" and she'd then command that these raw documents be immortalized via distribution far and wide.

"When it came to singing, she forgot everything. Nothing could stop her. She thought that she was a great artist," said one accompanist. "To Madame Jenkins, criticism sounded like kudos, ridicule like acclaim," said one biographer. Even the rantings of her most unsympathetic reviewers were interpreted as affirmations by this master of self-deception. But when she could deny no more, she'd decry, "They are so ignorant, ignorant!" Often, when the laughing audiences grew so rowdy that their derision could no longer be ignored, she labeled it "professional jealousy" by her "spiteful enemies" or "those hoodlums." It was denial carried to extremes—charming acts of self-preservation.

In 1944, Florence was 76 and grandiose plans were underway for an appearance at Carnegie Hall. On October 25th, the show took place, with 2,000 heartbroken fans turned away. In the end, the commercial success of the endeavor was overshadowed only by the side-splitting agony of those lucky enough to bear witness to the comical auditory spectacle.



"The stage was invariably smothered in flowers and greenery so their perfumes would mingle deliciously with the trills and arabesques of the voice of Florence Foster Jennings. She appeared in costume. For the song 'Angel of Inspiration,' her rather pudgy apparition appeared in tulle and tinsel, in sturdy golden wings, amid potted palms."

The reviews the next morning said "her singing was hopelessly lacking in semblance of pitch," and that "only Mrs. Jenkins has perfected the art of giving added zest by improvising quarter tones, either above or below the original notes."

On November 26th, just one month after that last public appearance, the distinctive voice of Florence Foster Jenkins was stilled forever.

"She couldn't carry a tune. Her sense of rhythm was uncertain. In the treacherous upper registers, her voice often vanished into thin air," one deft critic described. She was the subject of ridicule. People laughed until they cried. They clutched their sides, they even stuffed hankies into their mouths to try and snuff out the hilarity. When wince-inducing deliveries were met with sarcastic cries of "Bravo! Bravo!" Madame Jenkins always smiled and proudly took a bow.

Jenkins is the comic symbol of all those that have ever been loud, confident and wrong.