

SHINING LAMP

A Bahá'í who served humanity with radiance

Louise Waite (1867–1939):

Song Bird of the New Kingdom By Gail Radley



"**S**hall I take the name 'Bahá'í' off of the book . . . ?" Louise Waite asked 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Bahá'í leader, during his 1912 visit to North America. The book was the songbook she had written. Some Bahá'ís thought the new name and other words she'd used might seem too strange. Louise wanted to teach people the new religion—not frighten them.

Don't change it, 'Abdu'l-Bahá told her. He explained that her songs would help the Bahá'ís understand that they were part of a wonderful new religion. It was the "Great Day of God, long looked for," as one of her songs says. By then, Louise had been a Bahá'í for about 11 years. She had already visited 'Abdu'l-Bahá in what is now Israel, selling her precious piano to make the trip. Born in 1867 in Wisconsin, Louise was living in Chicago when she learned of the Faith. She became a Bahá'í in 1901.

Spiritual Food

Though she had never studied music, she devoted herself to creating music and poetry to praise God. She sang as she composed, and others wrote the notes. Sometimes she signed her work with the name 'Abdu'l-Bahá had given her—"Shahnáz," translated for her as "Melody."

When she began to send her Bahá'í verses to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, he replied that his "heart was attracted" and that he prayed for her to write even "more beautiful compositions" so that she might "be the first to praise" Bahá'u'lláh and speak "His Name among the women . . ." 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged Louise in her work. Over the years, he sent her 41 messages!

"O thou Shahnáz," 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote, "play and sing out the holy words of God with wondrous tones . . . that the listener may be freed from chains of care and sorrow, and his soul may leap for joy . . ." He also told her, "Music, sung or played, is spiritual food for soul and heart."



Louise Waite at the Bahá'í Temple in the U.S. when it was under construction in Illinois. Her music is still sung there today.

Joyful Service

Although thankfulness and joy shine through Louise's work, her life wasn't without sorrow. Her first husband passed away, and her only child, Violet, died young. But as Louise wrote, "The Bahá'í Message is essentially a Message of Joy." She wanted to share that joy through her music. Louise wrote articles and poems for magazines and newspapers, too.

Louise also cofounded North America's first Bahá'í choir, the Vahid Choral Society. In those days, many Bahá'í meetings included singing of her "Benediction." It is still sung today. Peace societies adopted other songs she had written, and one was used in the Chicago schools. Some were translated for the Bahá'ís in Persia (now Iran), at 'Abdu'l-Bahá's request. In time, they were sung all over the world.

Louise found an ideal partner in her second husband, Edgar Waite. Realizing his wife's gifts, he took over many daily chores, freeing her to create. In 1915, they moved to California, where Louise continued to write, compose, and serve the Faith.

Shahnáz Louise Waite passed from this world in 1939, leaving behind much creative work. She was, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, "the song bird of the New Kingdom."