

Carpenters Have Transformed the Laughter Into Bravos

BY CHUCK THEGZE

• A cool night wind was blowing through the trees above the Hollywood Bowl. Beneath the trees a group of high school kids, including Karen and Richard, were quietly sneaking up to the rear of the outdoor amphitheater to catch a long-distance view of Sergio Mendes and Brasil '66. The kids leaned as close as they could to the back row without being spotted. But as Karen recalls, "We could still hardly see the stage."

At another time, several years later, the members of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra were disgruntled and some of them were outright angry. The viola player stood there shredding a piece of Kleenex and wadding it into his ears. Other musicians were muttering under their breath as Karen and Richard came on stage to rehearse.

That night the same orchestra mem-

bers had laughed and refused to wear tuxedos gave Karen and Richard a standing ovation, shouting bravos from the orchestra pit.

These two scenes illustrate moments in the careers of two musicians from Downey, Karen and Richard Carpenter, 22 and 25, who together have become one of the most popular musical groups in the country, selling more than 16 million records in the past two years.

At the same Hollywood Bowl where the Carpenters sneaked in in the early 60s, they filled to capacity in 1971, with another bunch of high school kids up in the trees straining their eyes down toward the stage. This week they are doing the same at the Greek Theater.

And in addition, as the incident with the Minneapolis Symphony demon-

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strates, the Carpenters have become professionally respected, mainly due to Richard's arrangements.

Such wide-ranging talents as Isaac Hayes, who dug the "waa-waa" clusters on "Close to You"; to Art Garfunkel, who liked the clean mixing of the songs, and Jim Guercio, producer of the big Blood, Sweat and Tears album and the Chicago albums, who liked the arrangements on the songs—all of these men consider the Carpenters heavy-weight musicians.

Thus, fronted by Karen's subtle beauty and backed by Richard's sense of musical perfection, the Carpenters are not, it seems, quick flashes in the musical world, but a lasting creative force.

Richard attended Yale music school while he was still in high school in New Haven. When the family moved to Downey in 1962 he continued piano at USC and started his senior year at Downey High.

But it was his gym class that really launched his career. He discovered that he was required to take it unless he joined the band.

"Piano isn't in the marching band," he shrugged. "So I bought a trumpet at an auction for \$4. I didn't play it. I just held it at the audition. Then I went to the piano and played some arpeggios. That's the quickest way to impress people."

"He said he could use me in his dance band," Richard said, "and maybe we could do 'Rhapsody in Blue.' I studied my piano all year and it was great."

Karen followed in Richard's footsteps—also to avoid gym.

"There was a big solo drummer in the band and Karen immediately got turned onto drums. She came home and got out some chopsticks and arranged some barstools we had and she was playing time synchronizations, Brubeck, anything. Dad bought her a drum set, a good one, and immediately she could play it."

By that time Richard was at Cal State Long Beach and had connected with a tuba major, Wes Jacobs, who now has a seat in the Detroit Symphony. With Karen on drums, they formed a trio.

The Carpenters' first break came in 1966 when they won the annual battle of the bands at the Hollywood Bowl. At that time they were a jazz instrumental group.

"It gave us encouragement," said Karen, "but nothing really developed from it as far as a career was concerned."

"We would spend almost every evening," she said, "in the garage of bassman Joe Osborn which we had rigged up as a studio. We worked on new songs and arrangements of our own as we listened to the Beach Boys' 'Good Vibrations' and the Beatles'

'Eleanor Rigby.'"

On Mondays at Santa Monica Blvd. and Doheny at 4 p.m. the Carpenter station wagon would drop off one sibling to wait in line while the other went back with friends to get the amps and instruments ready to play at the Troubadour's hootenanny.

"You had to wait in this huge line to play," Karen recalled. "I often stood there talking with kids, along with people like Jackson Brown and Brewer and Shipley. Once we got in, however, the audience loved us. We got standing ovations but still no recording contract."

Then in 1969, a friend of a friend of a friend, as Richard described it, brought one of their tapes to Herb Alpert, head of A & M records. He liked their work and signed them.

They were mildly successful until one day Burt Bacharach brought Alpert a song entitled "They Long to Be Close to You" which he wanted the singer-trumpeter to record on his own. But Alpert decided against it because he didn't want to sing the line, "sprinkled moon dust," and gave the sheet music to the young Carpenters working in his studio.

"That sheet sat on my electric piano for weeks," said Richard. "I would play the first few notes and never follow it up. Until one day I arranged it and Karen and I sang it with our own harmonies. A & M released it and the ballad became a smash amidst all the hard rock around it."

"And then everything turned to gold," recalled Karen with a smile. "All our albums and every single from then on. We are still doing what we did in Joe Osborn's garage, but now we're getting paid for it."

The pair has also donated a large sum of money (over \$100,000) to the American Cancer Society and was recently feted at the White House by President Nixon for that philanthropy.

Karen said that their whole lives are devoted to music, but, when she does get a chance, she works on her needlepoint or reads an occasional novel like "The Godfather" or "The Carpetbaggers."

"My hobby," said Richard, "if I have a hobby or anything like that, is listening to top 40 records on the radio. I can remember back in New Haven I would listen to WINS or WMGM beaming across Long Island Sound from New York City. I would dream about being a deejay. I guess you could say I'm an oldies-but-goodies nut."

"In fact," added Karen, "when we were on tour one station set up a quiz with Richard pitted against three deejays. He beat them hands down. I bet he knows every label and flip-side and top 10 record since 1955."

Who had the No. 1 song in July, 1970?

"That's easy," said Karen and Richard together. "The Carpenters."