

Music at Atlantic Union College

The oldest Seventh-day Adventist college still located at its original site, Atlantic Union College was founded in 1882, eight years after Battle Creek College (now Andrews University) in Michigan and a week after Healdsburg Academy (now Pacific Union College) in California. Named for the towns in which they were located, South Lancaster Academy (now AUC) and the school in California opened because of the difficulty in traveling the distance to Michigan.

Because Atlantic Union College, like other early SDA schools, was established for one purpose, the training of workers for the new church, music was viewed as incidental, useful only in so far as it could help spread the gospel. Even so, there were students, teachers, and principals from the beginning who had a larger vision for the role of music.

The third principal of the new school, Charles Ramsey, from the start of his leadership talked of the need to develop graduates who, in his words, would leave, "with consecrated and disciplined intellect and cultivated manners, to carry the truth to all classes, high and low, rich and poor."

Unfortunately, while he was admired and loved by the students and teachers, his ideas were met with suspicion and a decreasing level of support from church leaders. As his third year ended, he vacated the his position as principal and left the church.¹

Despite the disastrous outcome for Ramsey, he had set a direction that his successor, George Caviness, who was of the same mind, continued. Accordingly, starting in 1890, students were able to take music lessons in voice, piano, and organ.² Music flourished and under the leadership

of principal Frederick Griggs, who served for eight years from 1899 to 1907, an actual music department was established.³

Edna S. Farnsworth was chosen to head the music program when it was established in 1904. Only twenty years old and an AUC music diploma graduate, she would provide musical continuity at the college for the next 33 years.

Unassuming, and gentle, Farnsworth performed often, accompanied frequently, and taught large numbers of students in piano lessons and music classes, all the while being readily available as a friend of the students.⁴

From the beginning of the school, singers and vocal groups had played an integral role in worship and on high occasions. However, beginning in 1929 with the arrival of Harry Hadley Schyde, choral music would reach a level unmatched by any previous program.

Schyde, a noted singer on NBC radio in New York City who had studied in Paris and Berlin, had presented a lyceum at AUC in May of that year. The school, impressed by his performance and outgoing personality, invited him to come to teach.

During the next six years he and his choirs performed frequently to great acclaim. With his deep resonant voice he was a popular soloist and was often featured on nearby Boston radio stations where he became known as "The Messenger of Cheer."⁵

In those early decades of the century there were also ad hoc orchestras and bands at AUC, led by a succession of students and faculty. These groups performed in occasional concerts and at events such as the school picnic in 1918, when the band played from one of the streetcars as the student body traveled to a nearby park. Some of the leaders of these groups, such as Donald Haynes, John J. Hafner, and Harvey Davies, would become pivotal leaders in SDA music.⁶

This casual approach to instrumental ensembles changed in 1937 with the arrival of Hungarian-born violinist Bela Urbanowsky. A student for six years of internationally noted teacher Eugene Ysaye in Belgium, he had played in Paris for famed composer Georges Enesco.

The composer, impressed with his playing, invited Urbanowsky to return to make music with him. He did return and, while there, was recognized by the French government for his part in bringing good music to the public. It was shortly after this that he met and married his wife, an Adventist, adopting her church as his own.⁷

For the next four years, he thrilled the campus with his virtuoso solos and work with the orchestra. His musical ability, coupled with a fluency in five languages, made him a favorite personality on campus. His engaging manner and performances in the surrounding area, like Schyde's earlier

in the decade, significantly enhanced the school's image in the community.⁸

Located as it was in New England where the work progressed more slowly than in the South, Midwest and West, enrollment at AUC has at times been smaller than at SDA colleges in these other regions. Accordingly, the progression in name from academy to junior college to college and to subsequent accreditation lagged behind that at some of the other Adventist schools.

In 1922, four years after declaring itself Lancaster Junior College, the school was renamed Atlantic Union College and began offering four years of college classes. Although accreditation for a Bachelor of Religious Education degree was achieved in 1926, it would not be fully accredited until 1945.⁹ That status, coupled with the end of World War II and the influx of returning veterans, whose study was funded by the government, caused both the enrollment of the school and music participation to increase dramatically.

During and following the war years the music program had a succession of music teachers, including Alfred Walters and Harold E. Mitzelfelt, who were there only briefly before leaving to serve in the war, continue their education, or accept other positions.¹⁰

One youthful teacher, however, Virginia-Gene Shankel, a violinist and pianist who had come in 1946, would continue into the early years of the next decade. She married Harvey Rittenhouse while there, and then returned two decades later to establish and lead The New England Youth Ensemble.

Wilbur Schram, a musician with fifteen years of experience as a band

and choir director, was hired in 1950 to teach in and chair the department. During his five-year tenure, an annual music festival for academies in the region, which had started in 1948, was strengthened and expanded.¹¹ Also, during that time, Morris Taylor, an accomplished student pianist, completed his degree and then taught for two years before being drafted into military service.¹²

In 1953, the addition of two new teachers, Ellsworth Judy as chairman and Melvin West as organist, set the stage for a new direction in music for the school. Both Judy and West, who had pursued graduate study in excellent schools, were interested in establishing a rigorous music program with high standards. To that end, performance expectations were raised and opportunities for study with members of the Boston Symphony were made available.¹³

In the spring of 1954, when AUC was authorized to grant its first professional degree, a bachelor of science, a degree in music education was created, providing a practical option for music students.

Judy's work with the band was particularly noteworthy. His insistence on authentic performance of the best and latest in band repertoire set a benchmark for subsequent directors. It was a tradition continued by men such as Lennart Olson, Rick Starnes, and most recently, Earl Rainey. Additionally, while at AUC, Judy established the first woodwind quintet at an Adventist college, a group that toured extensively.

Instrument resources were upgraded with the installation of a Moller Pipe organ in 1955 in Machlan Auditorium, a 1000-seat

performance facility with a large stage that had been completed in 1954. The need for a new instrument had become obvious given the artistry of West, the large number of students he attracted, and the availability of an adequate space.

The students' success in raising funds for the instrument was rewarded with an extra day of vacation. The more successful fund-raisers gained free admission to a concert given on the instrument by organist Virgil Fox, a well-known and flamboyant performer of that era.¹⁴

Yet other additions to school instruments came about in an unusual way. In 1955, the college band and a quartet from nearby South Lancaster Academy appeared on Heartline, a popular television program. Both groups performed a number, and then selected members from the band were quizzed.

They all provided correct answers and won \$500 for the group. A caller to the program donated a horn, and then the Ames Brothers, a well-known popular vocal group who performed later in the same show, contributed an oboe. All of this was witnessed with great excitement by the students back on campus who watched the program on a rented television in Machlan Auditorium.¹⁵

The choral program, which had had two different directors in four years, was stabilized with the arrival in 1957 of Norman J. Roy, a charismatic and gifted conductor. In his first year there, he established the Aoelians, a select choir that under his leadership in the next sixteen years would create a tradition in choral excellence that lingers as a legend at the school.¹⁶

Margarita Merriman, another important addition to the music faculty, came to the campus in 1959 from Eastman School of Music where she was completing a Ph.D. in music theory. While there, she had studied with composers who would become noted writers of the 20th century.

During the next four decades Merriman, superbly qualified as a theorist, composer, and pianist would teach, chair the department for six years, and serve as Honor Core Program Director for another six, all the while continuing to compose and play her cello in the college orchestra.

Additionally, her convictions about academic integrity insured the program's validity during the many changes that occurred in those years. Merriman's record in years of service to AUC, both prior to and following official retirement, is matched by few others in the circle of Adventist colleges and universities.¹⁷

Throughout the 1950's and most of the 1960's, the enrollment and number of faculty increased at the college. Financial problems, however, began to surface as the 1970's approached. Additionally, racial tensions in the school escalated, in part due to the civil rights movement that had blossomed in the 1960's.

Both challenges led to adjustments in life on the campus and in budgeting as the 1970's began. Reductions and changes in faculty occurred which adversely affected all campus programs, including music.¹⁸

Jon Robertson's arrival in 1972 revitalized the music program. The first African-American to chair the department, he was an accomplished musician who was completing his doctorate at the Juilliard School of Music when he

accepted the position. He would prove to be a strong, creative, and charismatic chair.

He envisioned a sophisticated multi-faceted program that would require a distinctive and spacious facility, one larger than the small original college administration building (later known as Founder's Hall) that had housed music for the past twenty years. As a condition for his coming he requested and got Thayer Mansion, a nearby larger and historically famous building owned by the college.

With that accomplished, he set about to establish a comprehensive conservatory-style music program that would, along with the college program, include an extensive preparatory music program and a first-class symphony orchestra. He expanded the staff by hiring qualified musicians living in that culturally rich region. The refurbished mansion was renamed the Thayer Conservatory of Music.

Finally, in the fall of 1974, Robertson presented The Thayer Conservatory Orchestra to the public in an inaugural concert that stunned and excited the community and college. A large symphony orchestra, staffed with qualified students and outstanding musicians from the region, TCO under Robertson and his immediate successor, Mark Churchill, provided many memorable performances of major orchestral works in subsequent seasons.¹⁹

Another group, The New England Youth Ensemble, organized and conducted by Virginia-Gene Rittenhouse was also briefly part of the Conservatory program. This widely traveled group would continue to be associated with AUC until the 1990's, when it relocated to Columbia Union College, now Washington Adventist University.

Robertson's initiatives and inspired leadership transformed the music program, creating an ongoing vibrant, interactive force in the region. His departure in 1976 created more than the usual amount of concern about the future of the music program and orchestra.

While the worst fears about the orchestra were almost realized with its near collapse in 1983, it would revive and continue under Frances Wada, newly appointed conductor. Later, the AUC Chamber Orchestra provided an important orchestral performance outlet for the music students and others on the campus and in the community.²⁰

After Robertson's departure, the college music program experienced times of uncertainty as leadership changes occurred at the college and in the department. Merriman became chair in 1979 and served until 1985. During her tenure she began the process of preparing the program for possible membership in the National Association of Schools of Music

Her successor, James Bingham, continued the process and in 1991 the department achieved accreditation with NASM, a distinction held at that time by only five other SDA music programs and half of the college and university music schools and departments in the United States.

The last decade of the 20th century was a troubling one for AUC. Declining enrollments, coupled with mounting debt, made the school's future uncertain. In spite of these problems, a small pipe organ was installed in 1992 in the college church, a structure built in the 1980's, and a major

renovation of the facility in which music was housed was set in motion at the end of that decade.

In spite of the uncertain status of the school as this century began, music was alive and well at the college. At a mandatory ten-year review of its program by NASM in 2001, the department successfully retained its accreditation.

Even so, the board in 2007 voted to no longer offer music as a major. That decision was reversed three years later in 2010 only to become a reality a year later when the school had to close.

Unfortunately, in that same decade the school had been plagued with leadership problems, increasing indebtedness, and being placed on probation with its accrediting association, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) three times. In 2010, the school was notified by NEASC, that it was ending its accreditation at the end of July 2011 for financial, not academic reasons.

Although the school had recently been operating in the black, it was faulted for not having an adequate financial reserve, properly maintaining its facilities, providing more technologically equipped classrooms, and paying its faculty at a level comparable to teachers in other schools in the state and the denominational system.²¹

With the scheduled ending of accreditation, a merger of AUC with Washington Adventist University was explored that would enable AUC to continue as a branch campus of WAU. The proposal was not approved by NEASC since it had not been made until May 2011, too late to meet the nine to twelve months needed for review.

AUC students were encouraged to attend WAU that fall and WAU hired some of AUC's faculty and staff. Those not hired were encouraged to apply elsewhere for work and/or offered severance packages as almost all positions were terminated on July 31.²²

On June 2013, AUC was approved by the state to offer Bachelor of Science in Health Science/Biology and Bachelor of Arts in Theology/Religion degrees. Beginning in the fall of 2015, students were able to pursue these degrees as well as programs and certificate offerings in other areas.²³

During this time of uncertainty for the college, the Thayer Performing Arts Center program established by Jon Robertson in the 1970s has continued to operate as a successful community music school. Although music offerings associated with AUC are more limited than in the past, the story of music at AUC continues with its preparatory program.

If the success of any music program is validated by its graduates, AUC can be justifiably proud of its record. For over a century, many of its students have achieved recognition for their performance and contributions at all levels of music education.

Dan Shultz 2016

¹² *The Lancastrian*, 12/11/53, 1

¹³ *And There Was Light*, 241; *The Lancastrian*, 7/3/53; personal knowledge

¹⁴ *And There Was Light*, 1/24/56, 2/10/56

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 5/8/55, 1

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 8/23/57; *And There Was Light*, 243; *LAMA Notes*, Spring/Summer 1999, 8-13; personal knowledge

¹⁷ *And There Was Light*, 251; Margarita Merriman Interviews, March, 2003; personal knowledge

¹⁸ *And There Was Light*, 248; personal knowledge

¹⁹ *And There Was Light*, 251, the 1975 *Minuteman*; Joan Francis, "Yet With a Steady Beat, Blacks at AUC," *Adventist Heritage*, Spring 1994, 31,32; Margarita Merriman Interviews, March, 2003; personal knowledge

²⁰ *LAMA Newsletters*, Summer 1987, 29-33, reprinted from the *Nashoba Valley Magazine*, March/April 1987; Margarita Merriman Interviews, March, 2003.

²¹ *LAMA Notes* magazine, Summer/Autumn 2010, 11, personal knowledge.

²² WAU press release, July 15, 2011; Memo sent to AUC faculty and staff by AUC board chairman and AUC president July 14, 2011; Mary Carmichael, "College Drops Out," *Boston Globe*, 7 September 2011.

²³ AUC Website, 2015-2016 bulletin

¹ *And There was Light*, Myron Whetje, 1982, 63-84

² *Ibid*, 85, 104

³ *Ibid*, 148

⁴ *Ibid*, 149, 156, 182, 228; the 1929 AUC Yearbook; *The Lancastrian*, 10/27/32, 3;

2/8/35; 5/15/37, 3. Farnsworth's reason for departure as stated in the last reference was to complete a music degree. It is probable, given the school's push for accreditation and the need to have teachers with degrees, that her "leave of absence" was unavoidable. She did not return, but instead, following completion of her degree, was hired by La Sierra College, now University, where she taught for another 22 years.

⁵ The Walla Walla College *Collegian*, 10/21/37; 10/28/37; *The Lancastrian*, 10/25/29, 1

⁶ *And There was Light*, 213; *The Lancastrian*, 1/24/30, 1; 9/30/32, p. 3; 5/5/33, 1;

12/21/33, 1; 1/26/34, 1; 9/24/34, 4; personal knowledge

⁷ *The Lancastrian*, 3/4/37, 1, 2

⁸ *The Lancastrian*, 4/29/37, 1; 5/6/38, 1; 2/17/39, 1; 11/17/39, 1; 2/2/40, 1

⁹ *And There Was Light*, 201, 202, 217-219; the 1942 *Minuteman*, Sixty Years of Service, an historical overview of AUC

¹⁰ *The Lancastrian*, 4/8/49, 1; *The Minuteman*, , 1947, 1948, 1949

¹¹ *The Lancastrian*, 4/8/49, 4/22/49, 5/7/51