

History of Pennsylvania Music Education—Part I

“Music is the shorthand of emotion.”
—Leo Tolstoy

Pennsylvania followed the same historical path to music education as the rest of the United States. Singing schools were the first establishments with the goal to improve singing in church. These schools were common in almost every community. Frequently the choir leader of the church was the community singing school teacher. The positive aspect of this was outstanding music education taught by talented individuals though they were not completely educated. A large effort was formed to cultivate musical talent in the students. The interest in music developed primarily when the schoolmaster was musically inclined. In 1756, programs of vocal and a scarce scattering of instrumental music were given in these schools.¹

The earliest record of teaching music in Pennsylvania public schools is in Pittsburgh, where a special music teacher was introduced in a school for higher grades in 1844. In 1859, Harrisburg followed in the same fashion as Pittsburgh. Philadelphia and Reading introduced music teachers in 1860 and, six years later, Erie also added these special programs as a trial basis. In only a short time, these cities made music a subject in all of their schools. Introduction of music in other school districts outside of the large cities followed closely. By the opening of the Twentieth Century, with the addition of music in public schools across Pennsylvania, its educational, cultural, and social influence was beginning to receive fair recognition.²

Public school music grew so much in the next few years that in 1915 there was a need for an appointment of a state supervisor. Paul E. Beck of Lititz, PA, was the first supervisor of

music in the State Department of Public Instruction. Beck stimulated the work in the schools and teacher-training institutions.³ In 1920, Beck reported on the progress of Pennsylvania to the Music Supervisors National Conference:

“The present condition of music in the public schools of Pennsylvania is good. Three hundred and seventy-two supervisors are listed in the office of the State Supervisor of Music. The outlook for improvement and co-ordination is good. Music is not a required subject in the schools of the State. The state requirements for supervisors of music are as follows. ‘No person shall be licensed to teach and supervise music in the public schools of the Commonwealth unless he presents evidence of the satisfactory completion of the standard four-year high school course, and , in addition thereto, not less than forty semester hours of further training which shall include twenty semester hours in music.’”⁴

Music was written into the law by the 1921 General Assembly as a required elementary school subject. This same year, Dr. Hollis Dann was selected as State Director of Music to succeed Mr. Beck. Dann’s primary action was the setting up of a new and adequate standard for supervisors and the establishment of higher education schools for the training of supervisors.⁵

In September, 1926, M. Claude Rosenberry, of Reading, PA, was selected for the newly adapted position of Director of Music Education. In the years that followed, continued significant and noteworthy progress in the development of music education has been encouragingly evident. School children of the Commonwealth were challenged and given opportunities in the field of music education. Public school music in Pennsylvania is one of the outstanding jewels in America’s crown.⁶

Pennsylvania music education could be found throughout the Commonwealth in an unstructured fashion for years prior to the establishment of an organization called The Pennsylvania Music Educators Association. This organiza-



tion was founded in 1933 when a small group of men, including school band directors, players in professional bands and directors of town bands, met in Reading, Pennsylvania. They formed the first state-wide organization for music in Pennsylvania, first named the Pennsylvania Bandmasters Association. The following year the organization sponsored an All-State High School Band Festival in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania. The festival's band included 150 students representing 47 schools from across the Commonwealth.

During this festival, the name Pennsylvania School Band Association was adopted to be more appropriate to the organization's purpose of promoting and advancing instrumental music in public schools. During the Eastern Division convention in Pittsburgh in 1935, the pioneers met with Claude Rosenberry, Chief of Music Education in the Department of Public Instruction to firm up the organization's creation efforts. The "founding fathers" are the first five presidents – A.D. Davenport, Aliquippa; A.S. Miescer, Mt. Lebanon; Fred Orth, Coatsville; Charles Aikey, Johnstown; and Cyrus Thompson, Hollidaysburg. These five along with Maurice Taylor, Paul Slater, Gordon Williams, Porter Huntington, Maynard Wettlaufer, Bruce Beach, and David Haupt helped begin the original association with ideas and membership. There are no doubt important names in the founding years lost through time and faulty memory.⁷

As with many organizations, changes and additions were to follow. In 1935, the first All-State Orchestra Festival took place with an ensemble of 150 students representing 55 schools. The increase in school participation seemed to indicate the original Pennsylvania School Band Association would be evolving and would need to change to meet the needs of its members. This same year the organization became the Pennsylvania School Band and Orchestra Association.⁸

Following this change, high school choral directors requested a similar opportunity and recognition for their students. This required yet another name change in order to include all who were

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involved in Pennsylvania school musical activities. Soon after 1935 the name of the organization was changed to The Pennsylvania School Music Association and the title would remain until 1947.⁹

The first All-State Chorus Festival was held in 1936, in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. It included 202 students representing 91 schools. This is a significant increase from the previous year's orchestra festival consisting of 55 schools.¹⁰ Being able to significantly increase the number of schools participating in only four years of organized All-State festivals suggests a positive effect on Pennsylvania music education. Schools and students were eager for festivals like these and the initiative of a small group of directors helped increase All-State participation significantly.

The year 1940 marked the affiliation of The Pennsylvania School Music Association (PSMA) with the Music Educators National Conference (MENC). But as this affiliation became permanent, one more name change was required by the MENC board. During the years leading up to World War II little was holding the organization together apart from the publication of the sporadic PSMA News every few months. In November 1941 the small group gathered at Pennsylvania State University for "how to" sessions and a bit of inspiration to lift sagging energy and spirits of band directors.¹¹

With the outbreak of World War II, there were a few district festivals before the Office of Defense and Transportation suggested canceling all festivals. It was reasonable; gas rationing made travel untenable, and food rationing made food services an impossible task for festivals. Morale was down and MENC adopted a new slogan, "American unity through music," and the state units followed the trend. Its primary function was utilitarian in that it had a two-fold purpose: 1) to raise morale; 2) to promote patriotism. Many music teachers were in the armed services or were putting in long hours in defense occupations after their school day. This made any additional efforts to increase the PSMA organization very difficult and nonexistent.¹²

Following the war, Hummel Fishburn, Music Department Head at Pennsylvania State University, and Dr. Rosenberry took over as president and secretary-treasurer and got PSMA back on track. In 1947 the association name was changed for the final time to The Pennsylvania Music Educators Association (PMEA).¹³

There was a period of continued growth from 1950-1956. Evidence of growth was found in the hiring of approximately 200 additional supervisors and

teachers of music; a minimum requirement of one period of general music per week for all children in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades; an expanding school orchestra program with an increase of approximately 7,500 students in the study of stringed instruments; and better facilities for music education in the planned construction of new buildings.¹⁴

For three years prior to 1960, PMEA was the primary spokesman for music education. When forced to act alone, PMEA had become a very real force in music education.¹⁵ Dr. M. Claude Rosenberry, Chief of Music Education for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, regrettably passed in 1957. His post was unfortunately left vacant for a period of three years. In that time, significant things happened and there was no one voice to speak up for music education. One specific event was the advisor for Earth and Space Science in Pennsylvania felt that students in the ninth grade could elect or be given an academic subject in preference to a music course. Unfortunately, there was no state spokesman for music education to block this action, and the importance of the music programs in the public school system appeared to diminish.¹⁶ To be continued next issue.

Alyssa Britten graduated from Allegheny College on May 14 with a BA in Music. She will be attending Edinboro University in the fall in the Master's Program and Teacher Certification Program. This project was Alyssa's Senior Comprehensive project at Allegheny. She chose this topic because she wanted to research music education in Pennsylvania and the history of Music Education in the US. She was particularly interested in where music came from, the important names and benchmarks and what was happening here in District 2 and what might be helpful from an advocacy point of view.

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