The History of the Ball State Symphony Orchestra

Compiled by Douglas Droste (2021)

Orchestral activity has existed and thrived at Ball State University since the very beginning of the Indiana State Normal School Eastern Division in 1918. Thirteen different conductors have led the program, each possessing various additional job responsibilities. The orchestral program has mirrored the growth of Ball State University as well as the School of Music, from modest beginnings as a regional teachers college, to the comprehensive university it is today. The Ball State Symphony Orchestra, the School of Music's flagship orchestra, has developed into one of the nation's premier collegiate orchestras, having received national honors in addition to sharing significant collaborations with organizations on and off campus.

Ball State University Music: The Beginning

Music instruction was a core subject at the beginning of the Indiana State Normal School Eastern Division, with evidence that a Department of Music existed in 1918. The current Ball State University School of Music has its origins as the Department of Music within the Ball State Teachers College. As the college transitioned to a university in 1965, the Department of Music briefly became the Division of Music within the College of Fine and Applied Arts. By 1972, the music academic unit had expanded into the School of Music and remains a part of the College of Fine Arts today.

The Ball State Symphony Orchestra

While it is uncertain as to the founder of the orchestra, **Elsa Jennings** served as the first Professor of Music at Indiana State Normal School Eastern Division. For many of the early years, the orchestra was under the leadership of a student, **Harry Gradick**, who eventually became an instructor at the school.

Claude E. Palmer (1886-1945) was hired in 1925 by Ball State Teachers College as the Dean of Men, Director of the Music Department, and conductor of the band, orchestra, and glee clubs. He led the orchestra from 1925-1945. Within his roles, he was very involved in the lives of Ball State students, in and out of music. Palmer was born in Spring Green, Wisconsin, worked briefly as a secretary in the YMCA of Minnesota, and served from 1917 to 1919 as second lieutenant and band leader in 333rd Field Artillery in World War I. He received his Master of Arts degree from Columbia University and served as head of the music department at Shortridge High School in Indianapolis from 1919 to 1925 prior to his arrival at Ball State. Professor Palmer was also co-founder and executive vice-president of the Muncie Civic Music Association, and was a member of the executive planning committee for the annual Community Christmas Sing, which continues as an annual event at the Muncie Fieldhouse.

Robert Hargreaves (1914-2000) served as Director of the Ball State University School of Music from 1945-1981 and conductor of the Ball State Symphony Orchestra from 1945-1968 (and as acting music director from 1980-1982). He was also the founder of the Muncie Symphony Orchestra and served as its conductor from 1950-1982. Hargreaves believed that a nationally recognized school of music could be created at Ball State, and is "really credited for building the School of Music, basically from scratch." (L. McWilliams, personal communication, May, 27, 2021).

Dr. Hargreaves was born in Lancashire, England, and moved to Michigan as a child. (D. Hargreaves, personal communication, May 28/29, 2021). He held degrees from Albion College and the Eastman School of Music. Hargreaves served as chairman of the Ball State Faculty Senate (E. Mueller, personal communication, May 26, 2021) and was awarded the Outstanding Faculty Service Award. The Governor of Indiana presented him with a Sagamore of the Wabash honorary award in 1998. To mark his retirement after 36 years of service, the university renamed the Music Building (completed in 1958) to Hargreaves Music Building, and conferred on him the title of director emeritus of the School of Music.

Orchestra recognitions during the Hargreaves era include a performance of the Ball State Chamber Orchestra at the Music Educators National Conference in Cleveland (1955) and the Ball State String Sinfonietta performance at Expo 67 World's Fair in Montreal (1967). Hargreaves had built the orchestra program to offer several opportunities for students: The Muncie Symphony Orchestra, Ball State Symphony Orchestra, Concert Orchestra, Sinfonietta, Training Orchestra (or "Lunch-Time Philharmonic"), Summer Symphony, and Arts Festival Orchestra.

Charles A. Ansbacher served as director of orchestras from 1968-1970. He studied conducting with Pierre Boulez, Max Rudolf, Pierre Monteux, Richard Lett, and Bruno Maderna. Ansbacher had studied at the schools of music associated with the summer festivals at Tanglewood, Massachusetts; Aspen, Colorado; and Salzburg, Austria. Mr. Ansbacher was invited to guest conduct the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra in 1968 and 1969 by conductor, Max Rudolf. In 1970, the BSSO performed at the Music Educators National Conference in Chicago, Illinois as part of a spring tour that included stops at three Indiana schools.

Arthur D. Hill, Jr. (1925-1984) served as director of orchestras from 1970-1980 and retired from Ball State in 1981. (A. Hill, personal communication, May 27, 2021).

His widow, Kitty Johnson, wrote:

> There were two student orchestras at that time and during the entire time that he was at BSU. The Ball State Symphony Orchestra performed great orchestral literature and occasional new compositions in several concerts each year at the university. As the premier orchestra, the BSSO played occasionally for special events such as commencements, a university performance of the Brahms Requiem, or the Muncie Community Christmas Sing. The second group, the Concert Orchestra (primarily graduate students) served as an accompanying group for operas, ballets,

musical theater, concerto nights, cantatas, etc., as well as performing chamber music and classical symphonies in concerts.

One of Art's greatest contributions to the Ball State School of Music was his talent for recruitment. He was a public school orchestra director and teacher for many years, and he kept in contact with teachers all over the Midwest. The BSSO went on tour nearly every year, performing in school auditoriums in three or four different cities in Indiana or nearby states. (One such tour was to the Terre Haute area in the mid-1970's that included jazz faculty member Larry McWilliams and a jazz combo. They performed pieces from the 1966 album "Bill Evans Trio with Symphony Orchestra.") Art knew the benefit of this kind of exposure for both the BSU School of Music and the local school orchestra programs. (K. Johnson, personal communication, June 2, 2021).

Due to Hill's declining health, Robert Hargreaves returned as acting music director of university orchestras during the 1980-1982 academic years. **Guillermo Bonet-Müller,** served as interim conductor of the BSSO in the 1981-1982 school year as a visiting professor while a search was performed for a full-time successor. (D. Blakely, personal communication, June 8, 2021).

Leonard Atherton (1941-2021) served as the conductor of the BSSO from 1982-2003**.** He was born in England and earned his MM at Oxford University, where he held the Holroyd Music Scholarship. He was an associate of the Royal College of Music and a licentiate of the Royal Academy of Music in England. Atherton also studied conducting at Tanglewood Music Center in Massachusetts. Before coming to Muncie, he served as music director of the New Bedford (Mass) Symphony Orchestra, the Greater Boston Youth Orchestra, the Niagara (Ontario) Symphony, and the Toronto Symphony Youth Orchestra. During his career, Atherton guest conducted orchestras and choruses in Japan, Bolivia,

Argentina, Taiwan, U.S.A., Canada, Thailand, and Mexico. Mr. Atherton was awarded the Sagamore of the Wabash by the Governor of Indiana in 2003.

In the late 1980's, Atherton established the annual Mukogawa Concerto Competition Exchange Program partnership between the BSU School of Music and Mukogawa Women's University in Nishinomiya, Japan. (E. Mueller, personal communication, May 26, 2021). Still in existence today, the first-place winner of each school's annual Undergraduate Solo/Concerto Competition is awarded the opportunity to travel and perform at the other university.

After Atherton's retirement from the BSSO in 2003, the orchestra saw a succession of conductors: **Tomasz Golka** was a visiting professor from 2003-2004, **Bridget-Michaele Reischl** was Director of Orchestras from 2004-2005, **Kirk Trevor** from 2005-2006, and **Bohuslav Rattay** from 2006-2012. **Michael Hall** served as the interim conductor from 2012-2013 before **Douglas Droste**, 2013-2022. (J. Powell, personal communication, May 24, 2021). (B. Rattay, personal communication, May 25, 2021). (B. Yoder, personal communication, May 27, 2021).

Current Day

The current Ball State orchestra program consists of two all-student orchestras: the Ball State Symphony Orchestra, comprised primarily of music majors; and the Ball State Campus Orchestra, comprised primarily of non-music majors.

The BSSO performs music from all genres and time periods that support an intense and relevant orchestral program through symphonic and opera experiences. The BSSO typically performs seven to ten times a year, including the annual main stage opera production and for winners of the annual Undergraduate and Graduate Solo/Concerto Competition. Within an academic setting, the BSSO strives for professionalism and achievement of the highest possible level of performance.

The BSSO was selected to perform at the 2019 College Orchestra Directors Association National Conference in Boston, Massachusetts and the 2021 CODA Virtual Symposium. Significant School of Music gala performances include *Beethoven Symphony No. 9* at Hilbert Circle Theatre in Indianapolis, and *Orff: Carmina Burana* at The Palladium in Carmel. Other highlights include performances at the Indiana Music Education Association Conference (2016, 2019) and performances at the Music for All National Choral Festival (2018, 2019). Members of the BSSO will perform in a European festival tour to Prague and Vienna in June 2022.

The BSSO participates in unique and innovative collaborations, including a full production of *The Nutcracker* and Peter Boyer's *Ellis Island* with the BSU Department of Theatre and Dance, Sensory Friendly concerts with the BSU United Sound chapter, Oliver Nelson's *The Kennedy Dream* and a concert of Nutcracker Suites (Tchaikovsky and Duke Ellington) with the BSU Jazz Ensemble, Ball State University's 100th Anniversary Gala performance and documentary recording in 2018, Ron McCurdy's *Langston Hughes Project, "Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz"* for speaker, jazz quartet, and orchestra, and a College of Fine Arts-wide CD recording project with Tony Award winner, Sutton Foster, on the Ghostlight Records label.

The Ball State Symphony Orchestra has performed in several venues on campus: the former Assembly Hall in the current North Quad Building (built in 1926), the Recital Hall in the Fine Arts Building (1935), Pruis Hall (formerly University Hall, built in 1972), and Emens Auditorium (1964). Since 2004, the BSSO's home has been Sursa Performance Hall in the Music Instruction Building on campus.