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Musical Bridges

Tim Obermiller

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

Kim Hill

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

Kate Arthur

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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Musical Bridges

All the things that make IWU's School of Music special were on display in a 150th anniversary celebration of its founding.

A famed aria may be followed by the "Wesleyan Cheer Song" only once every 150 years but it worked at the Gala Showcase Concert presented by the University's School of Music.

The event — one of many Homecoming 2014 events commemorating the School of Music's 150th anniversary — opened with welcoming remarks from Mario Pelusi, director of the School of Music, and University President Richard F. Wilson.

"When asked to describe Wesleyan," Wilson told the audience, "the School of Music is one of the first examples I provide. It is the fabric of the school, one of the premier schools in the country, and that's reflected in these performances."

Only 10 music stands on the stage for the evening's first performance gave no hint of what was to come. There was jazz, winds, choirs and then the Titan Band, which brought the crowd to its feet, clapping and cheering like it was halftime at a football game rather than a darkened auditorium at the Bloomington Center for the Performing Arts.

A few minutes later the audience was giving a standing ovation for baritone Kyle Pfortmiller '92, the 2014 Distinguished Alumnus who has won international acclaim and has appeared with the Metropolitan Opera. He performed a solo from *Barber of Seville*, juggling while singing his aria.

Many other alumni joined in the event, including Sean Parsons '01. A jazz pianist, composer, arranger and educator, Parsons has performed at national and international music festivals and is the recipient of this year's Outstanding Young Alumnus award. On piano, Parsons performed an original composition, *Meraki*, with the IWU Jazz Ensemble. "This is home," Parsons said. "A lot of my lifelong friends are here."

Jamie-Rose Guarrine '00, visiting assistant professor of voice, sang an aria from *Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5*. "I actually performed that song as a student my senior year," the professional opera singer said. "To come back as an adult with vocal maturity was great."

A fitting climax to the gala concert was a pyrotechnic-enhanced performance of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*. At a ballroom reception afterward, School of Music alumni and others who attended the gala gave their critiques of the performances as well as memories from their time as Wesleyan music students.



The Friday night Gala Concert concluded with all performers on stage, including a large number of alumni as well as the Central Illinois Children's Choir.

Class of '64 alumni Linda (King) Robinson and her husband Schuyler, who met in music class and recently celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary, drove from Kentucky to attend the gala and other Homecoming events.

“The concert was wonderful, and there was such energy in the performances. It was a good representation of what’s going on now,” said Linda, who taught music for 37 years. “It’s very, very encouraging.”

“So well done,” concurred Schuyler, who teaches organ performance at the University of Kentucky.

Retired Bloomington city treasurer Allan Horsman '58 said that the concert brought back vivid memories from his student days, trying out for the Bloomington-Normal Symphony. “The first thing they were going to play was the *1812 Overture*. I was playing chimes at rehearsals, and the conductor kept saying he couldn’t hear me so the last time I let everything I had go. I ended up with one chime left on the rack; the others were all over the stage. The conductor came over and said, ‘I heard you. You’re in my orchestra.’”

Victoria Peterson '79 of Rockford — a violinist who chose IWU because of the School of Music’s reputation — described the gala concert as a “once-in-a-lifetime” experience. “How exciting is it to be part of the 150th?”

History in the making

It was in 1863-64 — just 13 years after the University’s founding — that “the earliest music instruction of record took place” at Illinois Wesleyan. That’s according to Robert Delvin, Fine Arts librarian and professor, who investigated the history of music at IWU music prior to the School of Music’s Sesquicentennial.

In a brief written synopsis of that history, Delvin explained how it was actually math professor Harvey C. DeMotte who directed the University’s first Department of Music. In later years DeMotte accompanied fellow IWU professor John Wesley Powell in his explorations of the American Southwest and became Illinois Wesleyan’s vice president.

Within a decade of the music department’s launch, IWU boasted “advantages in musical culture equal to those offered by the best institutions in the land.”

In fact, through the early 20th century, the ‘Wesleyan College of Music’ was only loosely tied to the University, Delvin wrote. “Organized on a conservatory model, music instructors maintained individual studios, recruited their own students and set their own fees, an annual percentage of which was paid to the University, for the privilege of being affiliated with the ‘Wesleyan.’”

Two IWU presidents — Francis Barnes and Theodore Kemp — “sought to consolidate the College of Music and draw it into a closer relationship with the University,” according to Delvin. In the early 1920s, three residences were purchased at the current site of the Memorial Student Center, which were refitted to provide



Relocating to larger quarters in 1897, the College of Music took over two floors of the newly constructed Hoblit Building in downtown Bloomington. It was described as “up-to-date in all respects, with large rooms and modern appointments, sound proofed walls, and the teachers will all have outside rooms.” It also boasted a library and a recital hall.

studio and practice facilities for faculty and students while classes were taught at “Old” Main Hall (later destroyed in a fire).

The first Bachelor of Music degree was conferred in June 1921; the Bachelor of Music Education degree followed in 1927. Chapters of the national music service fraternities Sigma Alpha Iota and Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia were established at IWU as early as 1924, with Delta Omicron following suit one year later.

In 1925, President William J. Davidson was approached by the Theodore Presser Foundation with a matching offer of \$75,000 for the construction of a new music building. Within the next three years, a capital campaign raised an additional \$92,000 to complete and furnish the new building. Dedicated in 1930, Presser Hall contained a small recital hall and an auditorium with a seating capacity of 800, as well as 25 studios and 30 practice rooms — all soundproof and equipped with musical instruments, including 58 pianos and five pipe organs.



Presser Hall in 1930.

Delvin described the decades of the 1930s through the 1960s as “boom years for the School of Music, both in terms of enrollment and the prestige of its faculty.” A graduate program (1932-1975) was added, and the study of contemporary music grew in prominence “to play an important role in the curriculum of the School of Music.”

On a May night in 1970, a devastating fire set by juvenile arsonists “precipitated a major renovation of Presser Hall,” wrote Delvin. “Out of the ashes of this tragic event came the dedication of the Alice Millar Center of the Fine Arts in 1973, which greatly enhanced the facilities of the School of Music.”

Throughout its history, Delvin wrote, the School of Music “has played a major role in the cultural life of Bloomington-Normal, partnering with neighboring academic, civic and religious organizations to foster the art of music in our community. The Collegiate Choir and the Wesleyan Civic Orchestra are but two examples of musical ambassadorship to have originated from Presser Hall.”

Delvin summed up the long-standing success of the School of Music: “[The] University has consistently attracted music students from all regions of the United States and beyond. Its faculty and graduates have achieved and continue to earn wide recognition as performing artists on the concert and operatic stage, as music educators and administrators, as church musicians, as composers, as music theorists and music historians.”

A dose of Titan spirit



A tuba line forms to entertain at the Titan Band reunion held on the Quad.

Alumni like Kyle Pfortmiller and Grammy-winning soprano Dawn Upshaw '83 have helped solidify the School of Music's academic reputation internationally. But it's the school's ability to generate fun and excitement that has endeared it to generations of Wesleyan students of all majors.

Mark Bressler '91 played tuba in college and was one of Pfortmiller's fraternity brothers. "We founded the Phi Mu Alpha intramural basketball team, and we actually won a few games. And then we started serenading. We went around to all the sororities," says Bressler, who credits Wesleyan for preparing him for his career as college choir and band director.

For many alumni, it's IWU's Titan Band that provides their most vivid musical memories. Consisting of approximately 85 students from all majors, the band provides music and entertainment at football and basketball games and has urged the Titans on to some of their greatest victories, including national championship games.

Titan Band alumni representing classes from 1964 to 2013 shared those memories and joined in a performance with current band students during the annual Saturday Homecoming breakfast on the Eckley Quadrangle.

"This is both our rehearsal and our performance," joked Titan Band Director Ed Risinger in introducing the alumni group. One of the approximately 50 alumni who returned, Autumn (Winsor) Lake '10 confessed she hadn't played her tuba in the four years since graduation. "I was really worried it was going to be rough, but it's amazing how muscle memory all comes back to you," she said. "Plus, it's not hard to get into it when you are around the energy of the Titan Band. They've always had a lot of spirit."

That energy was on full display as the 126-piece combined band of current members and alumni roared through a repertoire that included "Seven Nation Army," "Sir Duke" and "Hot! Hot! Hot!" complete with audience sing-a-long and G-rated pelvic thrusts. Their rendition of the Bruno Mars hit "Runaway Baby" got the children at the breakfast swaying and dancing, and James McCauley '09 led the line of tuba players in an impromptu parade in front of the band as they blasted "Hey Baby" (If You'll Be My Girl!).

The pep band's repertoire of popular songs contribute to its "fun factor," according to Brent Bogen '08, who played saxophone in Titan Band all four years and also served as equipment manager for three of them. "It's one of the most fun groups to play in," said Bogen, a political science major who is now an attorney practicing in Moline, Ill. "The crowds sing along, and it was just a lot of fun to support the sports teams, too."

At Saturday's tailgate for Titan Band members and alumni, Lake greeted friends and proudly showed off her four-week-old daughter Felicity swaddled in a baby sling (green, of course). Lake joined the military right after graduation and remains on active duty in the Washington, D.C. area, so she had not returned to campus since graduation.

"I'm excited I was able to come this year," she said. "Playing in the [alumni] band made me want to get an instrument and start playing again."

A music education major, Lake said her best memories of IWU were playing with the Titan Band and also singing in Collegiate Choir. "Music students become very close, so most of my memories here are from the music department. Getting to see Ed Risinger and all the other alumni again has been incredible."



The Illinois Wesleyan University Ukulele Club was among many campus musical groups that formed in early 1900s.

Across the generations

Alumni attending Homecoming 2014 were treated to many more musical events, including the traditional All-Campus Sunday Service in Evelyn Chapel that includes the University's Collegiate Choir under the direction of Professor J. Scott Ferguson and joined by several of the choir's alumni.

Alumni also performed at the Camerata Orchestra and Chamber Music Reunion Concert, held Sunday afternoon in Presser Hall's Westbrook Auditorium. The performers were back at the invitation of Vadim Mazo, associate professor of violin and viola. Mazo founded and directed the Illinois Wesleyan Camerata, an ensemble he created in 1987 to provide students with the opportunity to study and perform the intricate art of chamber music.

Erica (Joncich) Bondarev '97 said the concert — as well as the chance to show IWU to her young daughters — compelled her to attend her first IWU Homecoming. She also credited the subtle-but-persistent arm-twisting of her longtime friend Jaime Rukstales '98, who was a driving force behind a reunion of the Camerata chamber music group.

IWU's Camerata performed in Germany, England and the former Soviet Union — along with numerous appearances in the Midwest and along the East Coast. Mazo and Rukstales have remained in contact through the years, and the two felt it was important to bring string chamber music to the Homecoming commemoration of the School of Music's 150th anniversary. The Camerata reunion concert brought alumni from five states to play alongside current students and even a few community members.



Vadim Mazo speaks to the audience at the Camerata Orchestra and Chamber Music Reunion Concert.

Both Bondarev and Rukstales said Camerata was a big part of their lives at Illinois Wesleyan. “We traveled to Prague, and before my time at IWU, the group had played at Carnegie Hall,” said Rukstales, a healthcare marketing consultant who still plays violin in a string quartet. “I’ve noticed that chamber music reaches across the years and across the ages, whether you were a music major and play for a living, or you are a lawyer and play only for enjoyment.”

Bondarev agreed. “I see music as a great equalizer. The arts bring people together who might otherwise have communication challenges. So it doesn’t matter that some of the other musicians (playing in the reunion concert) are 17 years younger than me.”

The two said they now realize how the love of music inspired the late Minor Myers, jr. to take time from the demands of a university president to play with the Camerata on occasion. “I can still see him hurrying across the Quad on his way to Presser, probably running late but determined to sit in our rehearsal and play harpsichord,” said Rukstales. “To me, he was a perpetual advocate of the arts. He and Vadim were a force behind chamber music. Minor cultivated the spirit of what we did here in Camerata.”

Myers’ support was acknowledged at the Camerata reunion concert, when Mazo honored his close friend by conducting the musicians to play on the “Finale” movement of Tchaikovsky’s Serenade for String Orchestra, Op. 48. The selection paid homage not only to Myers, but to others who are no longer living and to those Camerata alumni who could not attend this year’s Homecoming.

In the concert’s program notes, Mazo wrote that “performers in the Camerata speak directly to the heart and soul of the listener through music, the international language.” Bondarev learned this lesson first-hand while assigned to Russia during a two-year stint in the Peace Corps.

Although she was a Russian language and literature major (along with a second major in international studies), Bondarev constantly struggled to communicate while living in Russia. She felt most understood, she said, in the company of musicians after she joined the Volgograd Philharmonic Orchestra. She eventually brought the group to the U.S. and Bloomington, where they played a joint concert with the Illinois Wesleyan Civic Orchestra in 2001.

Bondarev, who is an arts executive in Silver Spring, Md., admitted she hadn’t played violin in seven years before Homecoming weekend. She actually had two opportunities to perform — the first was as part of the

Illinois Wesleyan Civic Orchestra's Friday night gala performance. However, it was the intimacy of the Camerata reunion that compelled her to travel halfway across the country to take part.

“Because the chamber group is my passion; this is where my heart is. It's the community of an ensemble like this that's amazing.”

Across the generations, alumni who attended the Sesquicentennial celebration shared similar stories about their strong feeling of connection to the School of Music and its profound impact on their lives. Amanda Mendez '12, who first experienced Wesleyan as a high school cello camper, now teaches other youngsters on the instrument. “All of my skills grew at Wesleyan,” she said. “Dr. Nina Gordon was probably the single biggest influence in my life as a cello performer and as a person.”

That influence extends beyond music majors, according to Robert Bergquist '84, who was a member of the Collegiate Choir. “Even though I was an econ/business major, I was lucky to be part of that illustrious organization.”

“And the best thing,” he added, “is my daughter Kiersten is now a freshman in the choir.”

Read a [related story](#) on Presser Hall renovation campaign

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Contributing to this article were Tim Obermiller, IWU Magazine editor; Kim Hill, assistant director for University Communications; and freelance writer Kate Arthur.