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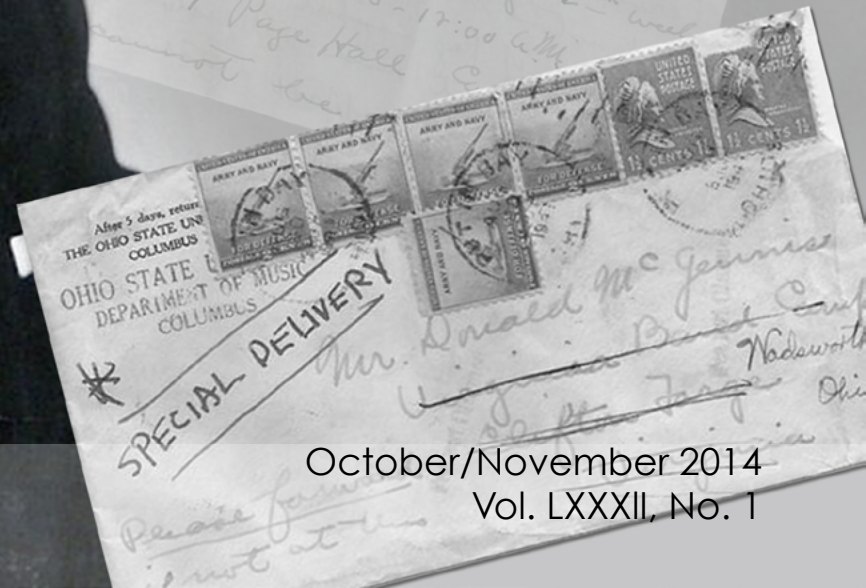
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FALL FEATURE: LIVING LEGENDS

"The wonderful look students have on their faces when something is good makes it all worthwhile."

- Dr. Donald E. McGinnis



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LIVING LEGENDS - A Desire to Succeed: Dr. Donald E. McGinnis

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From humble beginnings, “with no scholarship and no background,” Donald E. McGinnis rose to the pinnacle of the university band director world and the flute and clarinet performance world through his career of over sixty years. He was told that “he would not succeed in music” when he entered the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. His professors Arthur Williams and George Waln “hesitated to let him be a five year clarinet music education/performance major.”

“Both parents were musical. My father played the piano. We gathered around the piano to sing. I fell in love with music from a very early age...being lucky enough to have great teachers who inspired me, that I had the talent, if I worked at it...I had tremendous drive and focus...You don’t take ‘no’ for an answer...One must have a desire to be outstanding...You have to be passionate about music to do it.” Dr. Donald E. McGinnis, throughout every aspect of his career, has had the desire “to be the most outstanding he can be.”

Thousands of musicians have been inspired by Dr. McGinnis in rehearsals, clinics, live concerts where he played and conducted, recordings, private lessons and conducting lessons. His students both cherish and revere him, staying in touch through the decades. Why? Because he challenged them to be better than they thought they could be. A man of high standards, integrity and moral fortitude and a work ethic second to none, he demanded the best his students could give. Why did they do it? Because he demanded the very same of himself. He attended recitals and weddings of his students, showing them love and respect at all times. At his 90th birthday celebration his students came from all over the world to return that love and respect.

A conductor, teacher, composer, performer, administrator, each of the highest level, Dr. Donald E. McGinnis will always be known as the esteemed conductor of the renowned Ohio State Concert Band, which he brought to national prominence over the course of his twenty-six years conducting the ensemble. The Concert Band served as a model for public school programs throughout the state of Ohio and the nation, partially due to fifteen years

(1964–1979) of recordings of the OMEA required contest music, as well as on campus performances, tours throughout the state, and performances at national venues. The Concert Band also released recordings such as the *30th Anniversary Concert, On the Lighter Side, March Masterpieces* (with invaluable help from Sousa biographer Paul Bierley), and *All-Persichetti* (with the composer as guest conductor).

Dr. McGinnis continues to be well known as a teacher of woodwinds, especially the clarinet and flute, having performed extensively on both in the Columbus Symphony as well as having taught numerous private students throughout his long career. Not only has he recorded two solo clarinet albums, but he also recorded music for flute and clarinet, playing both instruments! He presented clinics as a Selmer Clinician throughout the country and at the Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic, among others. He continues to teach private lessons today at the age of 96.

The McGinnis legacy is apparent today through the many successful students who are world class performers, teachers, and conductors throughout the world in public schools, colleges and universities, orchestras, and military bands. His *Symphony for Band*, praised by Percy Grainger, written before the Hindemith *Symphony*, remains a testament to his compositional expertise. And his military service is an inspiration to all. A proud father of two, and grandfather, he has been married to his wife, Ruth for over sixty years.

It has been my privilege to know and study with Dr. McGinnis since 1970 when I came to Ohio State as a graduate student in flute, studying with him privately as well as performing with the Concert Band, including at Carnegie Hall. Dr. McGinnis has been my mentor, friend, and inspiration ever since.

I have had the pleasure of interviewing Dr. McGinnis over the course of many months. What follows are some of his many ideas that may prove helpful to all of us in the music field. I have used the DMA document, *The Professional Life of Dr. Donald E. McGinnis* by Dr. Jaime Rowe Titus, as a guide. Her document, available on OhioLink, contains much information that cannot be provided here.

MCGINNIS ON CONDUCTING AND REHEARSALS

“At Ohio State my rehearsals were 48 minutes in length. There was not much time for a warm-up. I had to assume students came to rehearsal prepared and ready to play.

If you have a warm-up, you must ask yourself, ‘Why do you have one? How long should it be?’”

“I would try to gauge the players in the group. Flutists could go right into it, but I would think about the brass and double reed players. I know that young school players benefit from Bach chorales. We would have benefitted from them, but I felt I had to use every second of time doing the music. I would choose what we needed to do most in every rehearsal.”

“A conductor’s mission is to know what is good and bad.”

“You have to have a concept of what you want the group to sound like, or in some cases what you have to settle for...Your ear must be the judge...The first time I ever heard Revelli and the Michigan Band, they



1936 - McGinnis at age 19

played the J.S. Bach *Toccatto and Fugue in D minor*. I was overwhelmed with the beauty of that sound, it was life changing. I knew I would not have the audacity, patience, or control of players to get that sound. So I decided to go for a different sound. The clarity of my sound was a goal. The cleanness.”

“I tried not to mention other bands in rehearsals, but would talk about the Berlin Orchestra under von Karajan or the Concertgebouw orchestra. I was always salivating to get that sound. I took recordings out of the library to continually learn.”

“I wanted to know what was going on. I recorded most of my rehearsals and studied them, even if just on my cassette player in my car. I wanted to know where we were with a piece of music. This listening helped me to analyze what I needed to do next. I was constantly thinking about what to do with a piece of music.”

“As a conductor, don’t always look in the same place, in the same way. Use all kinds of expressions.”

“Another factor is the fact that you don’t hear back in recordings what a great hall gives you, like a Carnegie Hall or Philharmonic hall.”

“I was listening to an opera with Levine, and it was just like Szell. So clear, everything was exactly there. I never saw him conduct, but I’ll bet his stick technique is marvelous.”

“I spent a great deal of time and emphasis building my ability to conduct. Good players get bored with hearing conductors talk. If you watch what I am saying with the stick, facial expressions, and left hand, you won’t have to hear me talk. That was how I was able to get a lot done with the conducting. I also made it obvious how much I cared about the music.”

“I am told by Richard Blatti, Bob Reynolds, and Craig Kirchhoff, three of the truly great wind



March 1998 - Grandpa with 4 year old granddaughter Erika



2007 - 90th Birthday Concert/Dinner Celebration

conductors of our time, that they had an encounter with a composer who said he was so motivated by playing in a regional band that I conducted, by how much I cared about the music, that the experience made him become a composer.”

“It is a good fortune for a conductor to be an excellent, superb performer. I labored hard and long hours to become a superior technician on the clarinet. So I was constantly thinking about how to do it easier without going through everything. You must perform and observe outstanding conductors.”

“I studied, observed rehearsals of others, asked questions and, used Max Rudolf’s *Grammar of Conducting* and Elizabeth Green’s *The Modern Conductor*. Elizabeth Green taught a looping technique. Horizontal movements. I spent every hour learning what I could so that if you watch what I am conducting you can play it!”

“A lot of it was from reading, attending concerts, believing that conducting technique is the best rehearsal technique.”

“And I kept my own performance career going, performing in the Columbus Symphony and playing chamber music with piano, woodwind quintets and string quartets. Inspiration comes from great music

and great performers...If you don’t have the good fortune to play with great musicians, you must listen to great recordings. Play in as many fine groups as you can to enrich. I was constantly reaching out for something else that is better. Learning is for a lifetime.”

“The conductor’s musicianship, knowledge of the harmonic series and intonation tendencies, knowledge of pitfalls, sounds of the instruments, the temperature of the room, all of these things matter. School conductors must know how the instruments work. Biggest problem is a lack of breath.”

“Use catch-phrases from great teachers...I was fortunate to have great faculty teaching applied music at Ohio State.”

“One of the huge problems that outstanding band directors of middle and high school bands face is clarinet reeds. Despite all the research, there is no huge solution to it, although it seems that plastic reeds may be a solution. David Thomas of the Columbus Symphony uses them. Helping the reed players is essential.”

“Rhythm and intonation are the two essential items to be a principal player. Good breath support is a given.”



The last Family picture taken 5/11/07 - Erika, Martha, Rebecca, Ruth, and Don

“One of the things that is important to me—and I don’t know where I got it—is grouping. Grouping is one of the most important things in phrasing. Claude Monteux, the great conductor and flutist, said that Papa, his father, Pierre, talked about taking a Long Island phone book and tearing it. This demonstrates the tension of the musical line. Musical line is one of the hardest things to teach.”

“How did I get good intonation? I constantly analyzed in composition study, and at the piano. Determine what key you are in, what is the tonic, where are the seventh chords and where do they resolve? One of the hardest chords to tune is the dominant seventh. Teach students to use their ear. Don’t go down the line tuning each student to a tuner. That could be a waste of time. Listen!”

“Apparently someone came up to Brahms after a performance of one of his symphonies and said, ‘You can tell people loved hearing your symphony.’ Brahms said, ‘That is fine. I had hoped it would change their lives.’ When you step on the podium, like my family doctor said, the moment you start thinking about the money you make, you lose your artistry. The wonderful look students have on their faces when something is good makes it all worthwhile.”

“When I hear back performances, I think you get certain things that you go for and then it is difficult on the other side of the coin. Attack, staccato, integration of sound. Clarity.”

“When you listen to my recordings, you will hear great direction of line, my pushing for support of the tone. The sound was direct, always air pushing.”

“My rehearsal style was greatly influenced by great orchestra conductors. Early on I fell in love with Toscanini. I couldn’t imagine how anything could be any better. I sat in the front row for a rehearsal of Toscanini with the NBC Symphony and was amazed. Later I went to study flute with Maurice Sharp of the Cleveland Orchestra and thus had the opportunity to hear the orchestra. I became such an admirer of their great conductor, George Szell.”

MCGINNIS ON MOTIVATION

“No substitute for private lessons.....Show students how much you care for them.....We are inspired, we are motivated, we are thrilled, we are turned on, we are turned off by various teachers; we have our own particular choices for listening (orchestras), in reading.....I hear someone do something great. I want to emulate that.....It is a fine line between success and failure.”

MCGINNIS ON PERSONAL PREPARATION

“Analyze your background. Find your deficiencies and go to work on them.....You must have the unrelenting need, or feeling of inferiority, to continue to learn. I went about doing something about my deficiencies..... The conductor has to gradually work with what they have in the group. And then work with a concept of the sound you want. Music must prevail. Must have tremendous work ethic, listening involvement,

constantly listening.....To be really outstanding in what you do, you constantly compete with a standard of ‘what if.’ I had, great men that I was trying to emulate—William Revelli, Frederick Fennell. I was constantly working, trying to be myself, but as good as they were.....As a conductor, do not feel challenged or defensive about how good someone else is; instead, emulate what they do well.....No matter how old you are, if your mind is still okay, you never stop competing with standards. I hear somebody do something great, I wish I still have some life so I can emulate that.....You aren’t a great teacher unless you have great students. Cooperation is a team effort between a great ensemble director and great studio faculty or private teachers.”

For more information about Dr. Donald E. McGinnis, including a timeline of his career, conducting catch-phrases, and photos, visit: <http://omea-ohio.org/legends/index.html>



About the Author

Katherine Borst Jones, Professor of flute at The Ohio State University, is co-principal of the Pro-Musica Chamber Orchestra, principal of the New Sousa Band and a member of the Columbus Symphony Orchestra and the flute, viola, harp trio, COSMOS. She is past-president of the National Flute Association and recipient of their 2011 Distinguished Service Award.