

Looking Back

Dr. Gary Garner

It's staggering to contemplate the changes that have taken place in the world over the past half-century. And probably nowhere is that better exemplified than in the band profession. If I'd stepped into a time machine in 1954, my first year of teaching at Hutchinson Jr. High in Lubbock, and been transported to 2008, I'd surely have thought I'd arrived at some other planet.

Even that name—junior high—represents change. I still have trouble remembering to say “middle school.” Just another example, I suppose, of what seems to me to be a steady flailing about by the educational establishment as it seeks to find the latest “answer” to cure all its ills, both real or imagined.

The first wave of educational hysteria during my years of teaching was ushered in by the Russian launch of *Sputnik* in 1957. Suddenly, band and all the other “frills” came under assault in a mad, desperate attempt to bolster math and science, since we appeared to have fallen behind the Russians in the space race. Somehow we survived.

Since then, we've seen one fad after another, accompanied by the requisite educational jargon: team teaching; open classrooms; no-pass, no play; site-based

management; block scheduling; four by four. The list goes on and on. And yet we're still here. Perhaps it could be because this music thing has some merit after all.

The last thing I ever imagined myself being was a band director. A fate worse than death, I figured, although at this point I haven't the least idea why. Fate had different ideas, however, and I found myself doing exactly what I thought I would never do and, to my amazement, loving it. My pulse still quickens a bit when I think of those early, exciting days at Hutchinson.

In many ways I couldn't have been more ill prepared. Never a private lesson of any kind in college, no brass, woodwind, or percussion classes, nothing in instrumental music education, nary a music history class or piano, a conducting class that met only one time. And yet, I was better off than most of my contemporaries.

I'd had the good fortune to play with a lot of many wonderful musicians in dance bands, even “going on the road” the summer after my freshman year. I typically

took five instruments on the job: alto and tenor saxes, clarinet, flute, and even a valve trombone. And I'd spent three years in an Air Force band, where I was the assistant leader and the leader of the dance band, which gave me a lot of experience in rehearsing and arranging. So in spite of the insufficiency of my formal training, my informal training was invaluable.

In those days, there were no assistant directors, at least not that I knew

of. Beginning band was just that, a fully-instrumentated band, alto clarinets and all, taught by one director one period a day. Private lessons were virtually nonexistent. There was no such thing as a tuner. That magic machine called a “Stroboconn” came a little later, followed later by a less expensive model, the Strobotuner, with a

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single window. Beginner flutes, clarinets, cornets (not trumpets), and trombones cost \$125.

Women directors were all but unheard of. I knew of only one, Barbara Lovett, in Ralls. Even in my early years at WT, the boys got secondary teaching certificates, since they would be band directors, and the girls got all-level certificates; it was understood they would be teaching grade-school music.

Contest was a one-day affair. Concert, sight-reading, solo and ensemble, and marching all took place on a single day in the spring. All the junior highs marched, too. There were two pieces to sight-read, a march and an overture. There was just one sight-reading judge. We were also allowed two student conductors, who performed following the sight-reading. They were given division ratings, just as in solo and ensemble events, and received a medal if they qualified for a first division. Incidentally, all solos, regardless of class, had to be memorized.

It was generally understood—and I heard this innumerable times—that “a good big band is better than a good little band.” The ideal size of a concert band, with the possible exception of small schools, was around 120. Even larger was better.

While it's true that my generation had nothing like the preparation of today's directors, the preceding generation, people like my high school director (and second father), Clyde H. Rowe, were at a far greater disadvantage. There was no such thing as a “music education” major in college in those days. Directors of his generation were mostly people who had degrees in another area (math in his case) that became band directors by virtue of having played in a military or college band. These guys pretty much had to make it up as they went along and we owe them a great debt. It may be a cliché, but we do indeed stand on their shoulders.

And while on the subject, I'd like to mention the name Albert Austin (A.A.) Harding. He started the first college band in the nation at the University of Illinois in 1905, where he served as Director of Bands for 43 years. He was a superb musician, a prolific arranger, and close friend of Sousa's. I count as one of my greatest blessings the opportunity to have known him rather well. Unfortunately, his name is largely unknown among band directors today, but it's quite possible the school band movement in this country might never have taken root without him.

I've seen several iterations of the marching band in my time. (Incidentally, the marching band at football games originated with Dr. Harding.) “Pageantry” was the name given the early marching band style. The band would draw a picture on the field and play some appropriate piece to go with it—a heart and “I Love You Truly,” for example. There would also be some military maneuvering. In fact, marching contests prescribed a list of required maneuvers: counter-march, increase front and decrease front, flanks, column movements, and the like.

Inspection was also part of the contest. It was usually quite rigorous. Every instrument was to be shined to a high gloss, brass valves and valve and tuning slides working properly, and uniforms were expected to fit well and be neat and spotless with no wrinkles. The band was given a division rating in inspection, just as in concert or marching.

Everything changed sometime in the early '50s when it was discovered that the yard lines were actually there, not for the football team, but for the benefit of the bands. When it was found that five yards could be perfectly divided into six military 30” steps, it was truly revolutionary. George “Red” Byrd is generally credited with having made that momentous discovery. One wonders why it didn't happen years before.

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For the first time ever, a band could march with and maintain perfectly straight lines, even in a company front stretching sideline to sideline. I have never before nor since heard such a deafening roar from a football crowd as when they saw such an unbelievable sight as that.

It wasn't long before someone else (whose identity is lost to history) decided to take eight 22 1/2" steps between lines in order to make hitting the lines conform to the natural four-bar phrasing of the music. This, along with the crossover pivot, made all things possible. Step-twos became *de rigueur*. Controversy over the relative merits of 6 to 5 and 8 to 5 raged for years. In fact, there was a time when TBA, which in the early days was almost exclusively devoted to marching band, featured two marching clinicians, one 6 to 5 and the other 8 to 5.

A. R. Casavant, band director at Chattanooga High School, was the undisputed guru of the new style, precision drill. Casavant was indeed a true genius in the marching band field. He published numerous books on precision drill.

No one had heard of a "drill designer" at that time. The director "charted" a show himself and there was generally a complete new show every week. We all lived in terror of losing a rehearsal because of bad weather.

The so-called "corps style" was much later coming to Texas than most of the rest of the country, but when it finally arrived, it was embraced with great fervor. It has since been through a few incarnations of its own. I vividly remember making the "switch" at WT in 1977.

Most of us had section rehearsals once a week and almost never an extra rehearsal except perhaps for a single concert clinic before contest. In the pre-House Bill 72 days, incidentally, many clinics were all-day affairs, with the students excused from all their other classes.

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Parents were quite a different breed from those of today. Almost all students had two parents at home and they were very much involved in their children's' education. On those rare occasions I found it necessary to call a child's parents regarding a problem, I invariably got the same response: "Don't worry, Mr. Garner, we'll see that it gets taken care of." And it always was. Much of the discipline was handled with a paddle and I blush to admit that I used it from time to time, but on the boys only. The girls had to clean the band room windows.

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I look back at the '50s as something of a watershed in band literature. Before that time, it was largely transcriptions of orchestral music, some of which was well suited to band, much of it not, and much of it of dubious quality to begin with (some things never change). But for the first time, composers of high repute began writing for band. Two of the first "big" pieces in my experience were the *Persichetti Symphony* and *Reed's La Fiesta Mexicana*. The latter seemed almost unplayable and actually cost an unbelievable \$100! I was not even aware of the *Hindemith Symphony* or the *Schoenberg Theme and Variations*. There were many other first-rate works from that time, many of which have sadly fallen into neglect.

Of course there was nothing like the resources for professional development that we enjoy today. Most of what I remember learning came from other directors, J. R. McEntyre and Ted Cramer, especially. A few of the instrument makers had periodicals—the *Leblanc Bandsman* and *ConnChord* come to mind—and there was helpful information to be found in *The Instrumentalist* and the now-defunct *School Musician*. TMEA and TBA were then, as now, important vehicles for dispensing information, though to a much more limited degree than is the case now.

Another huge change affecting bands has come in athletics. The boys had football and basketball, but there was never a conflict in my experience. This was long before Title Nine, so athletics for girls was no factor at all.

One of the other biggest changes I've seen is in percussion. At Hutchinson, we had cymbals, bass drum, an army of snare-drummers, and two timpani.

The timpani put us on the cutting edge because most junior highs had none. When I moved on to Monterey High School, however, we had chimes, xylophone, and a glock. Marching band was exclusively bass drum (usually two), snares, and cymbals. Later on, in the '70s, I believe, many began using marching xylophones. The only pit we knew of came in a peach.

There were precious few recordings of artist wind players. Today, they exist in profusion, available to sample on *iTunes* and buy for 99 cents and a couple of key clicks. I greatly regret that so few students take advantage of this wonderful opportunity and so few directors encourage them to do so.

With the passage of years, it's inevitable that one develops some dearly-held (if not always accurate) beliefs, so I'd like to close, if I may, with a few of my own, presented in no particular order.

- Our mission, at its most basic, is to enrich the young lives with which we are entrusted and to make them lifelong consumers of music. I read an abstract of a doctoral dissertation quite a few years ago, in which the writer had conducted exhaustive research to determine just what it is that music teachers can do to ensure that happens. The number one thing, by far, was to teach them to be proficient music readers. I believe that.
- We should never lose sight of the fact that the band exists for the students and not for the aggrandizement of the director. To that end, it's important that we keep competition in the proper perspective. And we need to remember that students have lives outside band.

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- Learning can't take place without order. Students may not always be consciously aware of it, but they want order as much as you do.
- The greatest challenge in teaching is not in having the necessary information to impart (though that's obviously essential) but in being able to convey that information in a way that it can be easily understood by those to whom it is directed, and that they process the information and act upon it. Unless a change of behavior takes place, there has been no education.
- There is no substitute for consistency (what's unacceptable today will not be acceptable tomorrow either) and fairness (every student is treated exactly the same way).
- The director's musical growth should never end. It's a lifelong pursuit and it encompasses a wide variety of areas.
- Always tell the truth, even and especially when you think you may suffer in some way for it.
- Don't become so consumed by your job that you neglect your own family.
- Be your students' friend and advocate, but not their buddy.

I've a great many other pet theories and peeves I'd love to get to, but I'm afraid I've already far exceeded my limits. I'll simply conclude by wishing you all the very best in this wonderful profession. As for myself, I only wish I could do it all over again.

Dr. Gary Garner retired in 2002 after 39 years as Director of Bands at West Texas State University. He holds a bachelor's degree from Texas Tech and a master of music and DMA from the University of Southern California. He began his teaching career in Lubbock at Hutchinson Jr. High School and at Monterey High School. From there he went to the University of Southern California as marching band director for four years before accepting a position at WTAMU. During his tenure at WTAMU, the Symphonic Band performed twice at Carnegie Hall, twice before the College Band Directors National Association, and a record ten times at the Texas Music Educators Association convention. Among the awards and honors he has received are the WTAMU Faculty Excellence Award, the WTAMU Phoenix Club award for teaching excellence, the Minnie Piper Stevens Award, Texas Bandmaster of the Year, Bohumil Makovsky Award for outstanding service to college bands, Gene Hemmle Award as outstanding music alumnus from Texas Tech, Phi Beta Mu national bandmaster of the year, and Honorary Lifetime Member of TBA.