

That Michigan Band

A History of the University of Michigan Band

By Joseph Dobos -71

Chapter One

“A New Athens” 1837-1880

When the territory of Michigan achieved statehood in 1837, the ambitious citizens of Ann Arbor made a bid to the state legislature to make their prosperous village the site of the new state capitol. The state politicians had other plans, and the seat of the state government was awarded to Lansing; the people of Ann Arbor were given the consolation prize—the state university.

When the first students arrived in 1841, the University of Michigan consisted of a few “rural” buildings situated on forty acres of grassy fields east of State Street. So rural was this “New Athens” as it was called by its faculty that a fence had to be erected around the campus to keep out wandering livestock that grazed on the surrounding fields. (The fence also protected those innocent animals from the student pranksters.) From the start, this proud institution proclaimed itself to be a “university”—a title that had been in use from the days of its beginnings in Detroit when, in 1817, the school was known as the “Catholepistemiad of Michigania.” (The Latin name was dropped when Territorial Governor, Lewis Cass, could not pronounce it and referred to it as the “Cathole-what’s its name.”)

The move from Detroit to Ann Arbor was not popular with everyone; many were displeased with the “dreary site” of the University’s new campus. It was predicted that the school would never thrive in such a unsophisticated place as Ann Arbor. The pessimists were soon silenced when, in 1845, the “new” University of Michigan held commencement exercises for its first graduating class. To ensure that proper decorum would prevail during the ceremonies, the University’s Board of Regents announced that there would be no “military parade, bands of professional musicians, illuminations or fireworks, balls [or] parties for feasting by the students on the occasion of the Commencement.”

By 1857, attitudes concerning the place of music at the University had changed, and the City Band of Detroit was hired to furnish music at commencement exercises, which were held in the Methodist Church. Attending that 1857 commencement was a student who recorded that "in the church, they used stringed instruments which was something new and proved very agreeable." For several years thereafter, the University continued to hire professional orchestras— usually the City Band of Detroit— which enlivened the graduation ceremonies with operatic overtures, quicksteps, and national airs.

During the latter half of the 19th century, the appearance of the campus underwent considerable change as several impressive buildings were erected in order to meet the needs of an ever increasing student population. At the same time, there was a growing awareness among students and some faculty members that there was a need for music on the campus

Based on the classic curricula of the established collegiate schools in New England, music was not offered as a discipline in the educational program of the University of Michigan. Because of this situation, musical activity was left to the initiative and resources of students. These student musical ensembles— glee clubs, mandolin clubs, harmonica clubs— were often small; organization and operation was informal and sometimes haphazard.

One of the earliest known of these student musical organizations was a group called *Les Sans Souci*— the "carefree"— which was a sextet that included flute, guitar, mandolin, violin, and cello. Organized in 1858, this popular group played at many social events on and off the campus. By 1860— due to the Civil War and the graduation of most of its members— the group disbanded.

One of the first student musical groups to use a large number and variety of *wind* instruments was an orchestra— the University Sodality. The Sodality's instrumentation in 1876 included cornet, horn, flute, clarinet, and bassoon as well as a full complement of strings. In addition to the Sodality, there were other student ensembles that used wind instruments— most notably, a brass "quartette" founded in 1878 by members of the Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity. The DKE's "quartette" consisted of one trombone and three cornets pitched E-flat, B-flat, and alto.

Dependent on the resources of students, the year to year continuation of these musical groups depended on the chance that there would be enough interested and capable student musicians who were willing to participate. For this reason, campus musical ensembles flourished only as long as members remained in school. When members graduated, replacements were not always available, and for this reason, these musical groups were often short lived.

By 1882, the problem of finding enough student musicians to support the musical life of the campus received special attention when the student newspaper, the *Michigan Argonaut*, lamented the "scarcity of distinctly student organizations" and called for the "reviving among the students the interest in college music." The *Argonaut* also reported

that the demand for concerts has increased with the improved advantages of the town a reference to the newly opened Ann Arbor School of Music. The privately run conservatory would be the origin of what would become the University's School of Music.

Responding to this call for more support for music on campus, a group of students from the School of Medicine announced the formation of a "University silver cornet band." Apparently, they were unable to enlist other musicians to join, and the venture was dropped. Two years later, 1884, the same students made another attempt to organize a musical group, and this time, they were successful. Known as the Chequamegon Band and Orchestra, this new campus group consisted of nine men from the Schools of Medicine and Dentistry. The nine musicians were able to "double" on both string and wind instruments; the group could perform either as a string orchestra or as a brass band whatever was needed for the occasion. A versatile group, the Chequamegon Band and Orchestra were much in demand for campus dances and social events. During the years 1884-87, the Chequamegon groups retained their original personnel although a percussionist and a clarinet player were eventually added. During summer recess, the group played at the Chequamegon Hotel in Ashland, Wisconsin.

Led by Homer Drake, and later by his brother, E.L. Drake, the ensemble often performed at Ann Arbor's St. James Hotel and was advertised as the "famous Chequamegon Band" appearing "every evening at the Rink." In 1885, the Chequamegon Band played at the welcome home celebration for a fellow medical student who was the star of Michigan's track team. As with so many other campus musical groups, the activities of the Chequamegon Band came to an end after 1887 when most of the original members graduated. A few of the string players continued to play well into the early 1900s.

Musical activity, of course, was not restricted to the campus; even in its pre-university days, there was an active musical life in Ann Arbor. In 1827, seven brothers of the Mills family, one of Ann Arbor's pioneer families, organized a wind band with an instrumentation that included a flute, bassoon, "outboy", drum and clarinet. By 1841, a group called the Ann Arbor Band played at many town celebrations such as the Fourth of July and exercises in honor of President Harrison.

Town bands began to flourish in many Midwestern cities and villages during the years following the Civil War. Having been exposed to the thrilling sounds of military bands during the war, returning soldiers brought home an enthusiasm for band music. In Ann Arbor, the large, growing German community proved to be fertile ground for the growth of local bands. These bands were sponsored by businesses, families, and churches. In a sense, bands became status symbols of the city's progress and prosperity. By 1880, Ann Arbor had grown to population of 8,000, and it could boast that it had two bands, the City Band and the German Cornet Band. During the next few decades, there was a proliferation of bands in the city, the Palace Rink Band, the Ann Arbor Infantry Band, the Washtenaw Times Band, the Otto Band, and Allmendiger Band.

In Ann Arbor, as in most places, the town band provided the only means for instrumental music instruction. As famed march composer, Karl L. King, remembered of his boyhood exposure to music during the late 1890s: "I think I first became interested in band music when I was a boy in Canton, Ohio. There were quite a lot of parades and celebrations with a lot of marching bands, and we had an exceptionally fine band, a Grand Army Band. I was greatly interested in band music from hearing so much of it."

According to King, learning to play an instrument was not an easy task and required a great deal of perseverance: "The only way a young fellow could get into a band in those days was to take lessons from some private teacher and try to work his way into an adult organization such as the town band of that period. It wasn't easy, because as a youngster, you would go among those older players, and they would ignore you or push you around a bit for quite a while before you could cut the giblets."

The musical training Karl King had in Canton, Ohio no doubt was similar to what young men experienced in Ann Arbor.

It should be remembered that until the construction of student dormitories in the late 1920s, nearly all University students lived in boarding houses throughout Ann Arbor. As a result, there were close ties between "town and gown"; the affairs of the campus were closely linked to the average household. Certainly, many of Ann Arbor's town bands included University students.

Thus, it was not surprising to find town bands present at important campus events. In November 1879, the University's football team returned to Ann Arbor by train after a scoreless draw with Toronto—the game was played in Detroit. At the depot, the team was met "by a delegation of students with a brass band and escorted to the court house where a jollification meeting was held." A few years later—during the fall of 1885, the Michigan Rugby Association sponsored a Field Day at the fairgrounds. According to the *Argonaut*, "excellent music" was "furnished by the Huron [sic Haydn] Band, composed of a number of high school boys."

After nearly four decades of the University's presence in Ann Arbor, the city began to deserve the epithet: "New Athens." While not a large town, Ann Arbor nevertheless was included on the concert circuits of well-known orchestras, bands, and performing artists. The creation of the University Musical Society and the Ann Arbor School of Music enhanced the city's image as a center of culture. Within the University, inroads were being made to establish music as part of the curriculum when, in the fall of 1880, Calvin B. Cady was hired to teach two music classes in the Department of Literature, Science, and the Arts.

Notes

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1 By 1857, attitudes: It is important to understand the broad meaning of the word *band*. Often, in the 19th century, the word *band* was used to designate almost any type of musical ensemble—string orchestra, choir, harmonica ensembles, and of course, ensembles of wind and percussion instruments. Misunderstandings about the meaning of this word has led to inaccuracies in the tracing of the history of the University of Michigan Band.

1 They used stringed instruments: MA, Vol. 35, p 257.

2 One of the earliest known: *Palladium*, 1876. In 1934, the University of Michigan Band made the claim that there was a University of Michigan Band in 1859—and that there has been a band in continuous existence for seventy-five years. The basis for this (incorrect) historical assumption was the existence of a “dusty, worn picture of bewhiskered individuals” that hung on a wall in the office of faculty band manager—and also Mayor of Ann Arbor—Robert Campbell. Bearing the inscription, *Les Sans Souci-University Band 1859*, the old sepia photograph pictured men holding flute, guitars, mandolin, violin, and cello. At the onset of the Civil War, the group disbanded and was not revived; it did not foster any significant interest in instrumental music on campus. In 1927, the *Daily* noted that *Les Sans Souci* was “more an orchestra than a band.” (There is no evidence that *Les Sans Souci* ever called itself *University Band*; the lettering on the photograph was attributed to S.W. Parson, a teacher of penmanship.)

Further proof about the absence of a University band during the 19th century came from Irving K. Pond, who, in 1934, wrote that the only music on campus during the years following the Civil War was when Speils Band and Orchestra from Detroit was brought in for special occasions. A native of Ann Arbor and himself a musician—he played drum in the University Orchestra, Pond declared that he knew of no “instrumental organization prior to the University Orchestra” in the season of 1878-79. He discounted any relationship to *Les Sans Souci* to the present day University of Michigan Band. (Besides being one of the University’s first percussionists—his “Prussian” style drum can be seen in the Stearns Collection of Musical Instruments, Pond also made Michigan’s first touchdown in its inaugural football game on May 30, 1879. He later became a distinguished architect in Chicago. He also designed the University of Michigan Union and League buildings.)

Even after the Michigan Band had been active for several years, little of its history was passed on generation to generation: In 1927, the editors of the *Daily* stated that they were not certain if there was a Michigan Band prior to 1910! (A perusal of their back issues of the late 1890s would have provided the answer.)

Old campus yearbooks of the 19th century list all types of *bands*: In the program *Burning of Physics*, 1861, engineering students celebrated their ritual “Burning of Mechanics” with “Ye Hornnes, emitting ye dolorous strains” followed by a “dismal dirge by the Band” which led the participants to a “funeral pyre” with an Indian war dance. (Providing the music for this festivity was the Ann Arbor Fireman’s Hall-Dutch Band.) In 1866, a *Rock Band* visited Ann Arbor. (It was an ensemble that performed on musical rocks!) An advertisement for a *University Brass Band* appeared in 1873 campus yearbook, the *Palladium*, which featured an engraving of musicians holding over the shoulder brass instruments. Listed in the “personnel” were such dubious types such as *Player on ye Women’s Feelings*, *Player on Words*, etc... It probably was a fraternal club. The engraving was a standard one—in fact, it was still being used by music magazines in the 1970s for advertisements.