The Music Culture of Grand Forks, North Dakota
By Christy Kimball

Grand Forks, North Dakota is, by some standards, a fairly small town. It is not particularly
ethnically diverse nor is it likely to be so. It is not very attractive to outsiders so is not growing by
leaps and bounds. Yet this city, so far north on the prairie, is home to many diverse musical
opportunities. These opportunities are so numerous that one cannot possibly cover them all.
However, a description of a small portion of the more “classical” side of the music culture of Grand
Forks will be attempted here.

Historically speaking, Grand Forks has a definite Norwegian heritage, of which it is justifiably
proud. In his introductory speech June 7, 1939, when Crown Prince Olav and his wife, Crown
Princess Martha, visited Grand Forks, T. H. H. Thoresen said

Your Royal Highness: This occasion has been arranged with the thought in mind
that we would like to demonstrate to Your Royal Highness, and through you, to His
Excellency, the King of our motherland, that fact that the children of Norway and
their descendants here have kept the faith and preserved the heritage of a great
people. The love of God, Country and Home inculcated into our race is still the
fundamental thought of our people in America. We also would like to demonstrate
here today that we have taken with us and preserved as a priceless heritage the best
in literature, culture and folklore from our mother country, Norway. We glory in the
progress and achievements of our motherland and we hope that our lives through the
generations of the past and now may be such that Norway may be proud of her
people in America.

These hardy Norwegians, and other Scandinavians, formed the backbone of this land. They
worked the soil, built the churches, built the schools, and helped the communities grow in so many
different ways.

One such church, the uniting of three different Lutheran churches, is United Lutheran Church,
located at 324 Chestnut, just outside of downtown Grand Forks. This church has a strong
Norwegian heritage, which one can hear in the speaking voices of its members. Their music and
the ways in which they have led music in Grand Forks are quite telling. They love the old
Norwegian hymns, especially around Christmas time. On Christmas Eve 1998, the Sunday school
children sang “I am so glad each Christmas Eve” in Norwegian (Jeg er så glad ver Jule kvel),
inviting the congregation to join them. The church nave resounded with joyous song. The
children’s eyes came alive in the hearing. The music library of this church is quite extensive, with
one whole section dedicated to Scandinavian hymnody and arrangements thereof.

This church also, in the 1960’s and 1970’s, sponsored events in Music and the Arts. They brought
in many guest artists (musical), who gave concerts in the church that were attended by hundreds of
community members. One of the specific gifts this church offered the community was the fine
Casavant 3-manual tracker pipe organ, built and installed there in 1964. Hymn festivals and
recitals have been held in the church with great frequency. M. Beatrice Johnstone, a former County
Superintendent of Schools (Rural) and UND professor, played the organ there at one time, making
organ music and women in music both known and appreciated. Later on, Robert Wharton, who was on the music faculty of UND, was the organist there. He was responsible for the training of many young organists throughout the city. Today there is still a connection between this particular church, its organ, and UND in that the organist is a student at UND and, after some much-needed repairs are done on the instrument, UND will have use of it for the purpose of organ lessons and recitals. Recently, the church also purchased a 9’ Baldwin concert grand piano. This beautiful instrument will not only enhance the worship services in the church, it will also be available for guest artists to give concerts on it.

One of the first groups who will use it will be the Grand Forks Master Chorale, at their annual “Folk on the Red” concert in February 2000. This is a group of men and women from the greater Grand Forks area, about 40 in number, who audition each fall and then perform at several concerts throughout the year. They are directed by Dr. James Rodde, the Concert Choir director at UND. Dr. Rodde is in his 15th year at UND and indicated that Master Chorale was founded about two years before he arrived. The previous director and a few of his students thought that certain things could happen in a group like this and so it began. From its very inauspicious beginning, with only 20 members, it has grown to be a group whose musicianship and overall presentation attracts audiences from miles around. The Master Chorale has no “home” from which to present its concerts, so it avails itself of opportunities at various churches around the Grand Forks and East Grand Forks (MN) communities. Its annual Christmas concert, held the first Sunday in December, has an audience of 700-800 people and is growing. In 1987, the Master Chorale and the UND Concert Choir did their first performance together, along with orchestral accompaniment. This has grown into the MasterWorks concert held each spring, again with a large audience. Their repertoire list is quite impressive, including such works as Bach’s Mass in B minor and St. Matthew Passion; the Poulenc Gloria; Handel’s Messiah in its entirety; Orff’s Carmina burana; the Brahms Requiem; and, on April 30, 2000, they will perform the Mozart Requiem. The Grand Forks Master Chorale has been ranked 2nd on a list of groups which the North Dakota Council on the Arts particularly would like to financially assist, which is a real kudo for them.

The UND Concert Choir is part of the ongoing choral tradition of the Grand Forks community. It is an auditioned ensemble, singing nearly all a cappella music, with all of its members from the university student body. Currently, about 50% of the members are music majors at the university, of whom 15-20% go on to become music educators in the public school system. The choirs at UND have long had an influence on the music culture of the community. Professor H. “Pop” Rowland and his Madrigal groups were very popular in the 1940’s. He encouraged his students and the people with whom he came in contact to listen to the best music they possibly could. Today, the madrigal tradition continues at UND with the Madrigal Dinners the first week of December. They are held in the Chester Fritz Auditorium on the UND campus and attended by many people throughout the region. Dr. Rodde divides the choir into two smaller choirs, directed by student leaders. They serve a meal and provide dramatic and musical entertainment for an evening, dressed in Renaissance-style garments. While it takes a lot of work, the end result is well worth it, both for the choir members and the diners. People return year after year for this particular event. The UND Concert Choir has been chosen to perform at the ACDA Regional Convention in March 2000. This is an honor, based on a blind tape which was sent in to the convention committee. It is an honor of which both the University and the community can be very proud.
Other choral music groups at UND include the Varsity Bards, a men’s choir, which has been in existence for a long time, directed by Dr. Rodde. These guys practice twice a week and try to make things as fun as possible. They are a “hit” wherever they perform, with choreography included on almost all of their songs. For women, there is the Allegro women’s chorus, directed by Kathleen Rodde. This year there are 117 members, ranging from freshman through graduate students. These women also practice twice a week, with emphasis on the beauty, color, and strength of women’s voices. They are currently working on 20th century music from around the world, which means they sing in several different languages and styles, not all the Western art style to which most people are accustomed. They, too, will be singing at the ACDA Regional Convention in March 2000.

Choral music has been a strong point of Grand Forks. Not only in the churches, as previously mentioned, but in the schools as well. Grand Forks places such great emphasis on choral music today that there are two choral directors in each of its high schools and now two choral directors in each of its middle schools as well. Mr. Dwight Sherwood arrived at Central High School in the 1940’s. He took the handful of students who enrolled for choir and made them into a group of which the whole town could be proud. His music classes became very popular. He introduced Harmony and Theory classes into the curriculum, which were both difficult and fun. There are several of his students from those years who have gone on into music education in both this area and in other areas of the country. The impact of this man on the music culture of Grand Forks and its surrounding communities cannot be underestimated. He gave lessons before and after school to those who wanted to improve. He began the spring musical. Before too many years, he had so many people auditioning that he had to make two separate casts! With the hiring of Mr. Sherwood, a musical tradition was begun: there has been at least one Sherwood teaching in the Grand Forks Public School system ever since. Today that tradition continues with his grandson, Brad, at Red River High School, and his granddaughter, Connie, who is an elementary school music teacher. Connie Sherwood has been one of the organizers and promoters of the 6th Grade Honor Choir. This is an auditioned group comprised of the best 6th grade singers in the Grand Forks Public School system. They have sung music ranging from Renaissance to 20th century, sacred or secular. They have participated in the “Folk on the Red” concert with the Grand Forks Master Chorale, singing both by themselves and along with the Chorale. Sadly, the 1998-1999 school year marks the end of this tradition. The other teachers, along with Connie, have decided not to have the program any more. It is hoped that new life may be breathed into it later.

Choral repertoire with orchestra has been a large part of the music culture of Grand Forks. The orchestra here is the Greater Grand Forks Symphony Orchestra, of which the community is very proud. Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was on the program in the spring of 1999. The symphony began in 1908 as a volunteer group, initially called the Greater Grand Forks Philharmonic Orchestra, which accompanied the Bjarne Male Chorus, a Norwegian choral group. Its first director was Dr. George A. Stout, a member of the UND faculty, although its first season was 1910-11, under the direction of William Wellington Norton, UND Music Department chairman. UND personnel, both faculty and students, have continued to be a part of the symphony over the years. Regular concerts have been held since the first public one in March 1911, except during WWII, with the concerts resuming in 1946. In addition to the symphony itself, there has been a Symphony Association in existence since 1950. While it has undergone structural changes over the years, the Association has always had symphony personnel involved as well as Citizens Committee
The Board of Trustees, who duties range from fund raising to providing refreshments at concerts. In 1984, the Board of Directors of the Symphony Association hired its first part-time manager, although the need for one had been apparent for some time. At about this same time, paid subscriptions to the Symphony concert series were begun. In 1983, the North Dakota Arts Council suggested to the Symphony Association that it hold open auditions for each playing position. This idea was adopted and continues to this day. The Symphony now has over 60 members in the regular orchestra plus a Youth Symphony and a Junior Symphony. The symphony has had no regular “home” in the past, but a few years ago was looking toward a new home in the about-to-be-renovated Empire Arts Center (the former Empire Theater in downtown Grand Forks). Before this dream could be realized, a devastating flood hit Grand Forks in April 1997. Most of the town was evacuated at this time. Extensive damage was done everywhere, including symphony member’s instruments, music, books, and other personal belongings. Concerts and fund-raising campaigns were canceled. On top of all of this, the newly hired executive director resigned. The Empire was severely damaged. Yet interest in maintaining the integrity of the Symphony in Grand Forks never flagged. They pulled together, working voluntarily, to get funding, implement a concert schedule, and other needs. Today, the Symphony is at home in the Empire Arts Center, which held its grand opening in March 1998, with the Symphony on its program. One of the highlights of the Symphony season is the Family Concert, held in early spring. 4th, 5th, and 6th graders from public schools in the surrounding areas are specially invited to the two matinee performances of this concert. In the spring of 1999, an unusual connection between UND and the Symphony was begun, in that the upper level music history class was invited to write program notes, educational activities, and a short play about two of the composers, Haydn and Mozart, for inclusion in the program. It is hoped that this may continue in the future.

While it may seem from the information included here that most of the more “classical” music of Grand Forks is connected with the University, this is not necessarily true. In the days before television and other technological advances, most homes had an upright piano and a radio. Families played, sang, and listened together often. In a world where work lasted many hours a day, Sundays were often reserved as a true “day of rest” and families did things together.

[My] dad had a good ear, played the violin by ear, sang a solid bass, encouraged his family in music; ie, listened to everything from Phil Spitalny and his All-Girl Choir and Orchestra on the radio Sunday nights; Kraft Music Hall on the radio; Thelma [the oldest child] was the only one who had piano lessons, but her Theo Presser beginners book was available for all the rest of us to learn from.

There was also a community organization in the 1940’s which brought in outside music groups and artists, about 6 or 8 events per year. One year they even brought in the Phil Spitalny Choir and Orchestra! Today, many community musical events are brought in to the Chester Fritz Auditorium on the UND campus. Some are now coming to the Empire Arts Center. Coming in 2000 or 2001 is the Aurora, the new convention center for Grand Forks, which will hopefully host even more and larger musical events than can be held in the other auditoriums.

Another community event was the annual Talent Show sponsored by the Exchange Club in GF. Anyone could enter; it was a wonderful time for all who performed and all who listened. There was at this time a French community, located near the airport, who always had an entry of French
folk tune medleys; one Chinese family who did something; two Japanese families who performed; and a lone Black man, whose name was never really known, who always did “the old soft shoe” at the Talent Show. These people, while often not included in the community in other ways, were welcomed and applauded at this event. They gave a different feeling to the Talent Show, since the rest of the performers were made up of mostly white Norwegian farmers and their families.

One such group was the Allendale Tin Cans. This group was made up of 4 young country farmers, Woodrow Heth, banjo; Don Johnson, guitar; Neil Hendrickson, fiddle and vocals; and Kenny Hendrickson, guitar. These young men had all been raised to sing during their daily chores, at church, and in school. They listened to the radio, which often broadcast country western music, which they called “hillbilly music.” They “practiced weekly, and enjoyed playing at country dances, occasional wedding dances, and at a few amateur contests.” They once won a talent search held by radio station WDAY in Fargo, with their entry then being broadcast on the radio that very night. Their entry into the Grand Forks Talent Show was very colorful.

Later we entered an amateur talent night at Grand Forks. There were 42 entries, playing to a packed city auditorium. Having by now gained considerable notoriety among the country folk, we were cheered by the crowd as we marched onto the stage. We played, and I twanged the good old “Wabash Cannonball.”

I played the lead-in on the fiddle. Then, as soon as my voice broke through the loud speakers, the audience erupted with the shrill sound of hundreds of female voices - strangely effected, I supposed, by the sound of my mellow voice.

We won second prize and took home some money. We felt good about it, especially since the first prize winner was not really an amateur - and we learned later that one of the judges hated country western.

The memories that linger are pleasant, and yes, still entertaining, even to us.

Today, while the annual Talent Show is now defunct, country music has not lost its popularity. There are an abundance of country music stations on the radio, as well one on cable TV. There are music production companies (or so they call themselves) which provide DJs and music for wedding dances, school dances, business gatherings and such. There are also local country western bands who perform at area bars with dance floors. While these entertainers have not made it to the “big time” in music, they are received well in the community. They still fill an important place, that of the idea of music as relaxation after a hard day’s work.

Thus it is that one can easily see that music culture is made up of four components: 1) ideas about music; 2) social organization of music; 3) repertories of music; and 4) material culture of music. Grand Forks, North Dakota has in the past and continues to have the idea that music is important in one’s life, in terms of education and relaxation. Anyone can participate in the making of the music and are even encouraged to do so. Both performers and spectators are involved in how musical events happen in this area. Both classical music, in the style of Western art music, and country music are embraced by the community. As the world becomes ever smaller through the use of technology, other musics are being brought into the community to provide an even broader
education and appreciation of music. Performance halls are being provided by the University, the area churches, and the community as a whole. Quality instruments are used everywhere and are perceived as important in musical training and appreciation. For the “small town” perception of Grand Forks by those both inside and outside of it, it has a most amazing music culture, with more opportunities available to residents of the area than one could ever imagine.

This small sampling of the music culture of Grand Forks, North Dakota gives an indication of the hope and promise of its citizens. They are who they are and they remain in North Dakota, partly due to their music culture. They are people of work and watchfulness who are genuinely rich in musical heritage. Their future is sure to be based on their past, and the passing on of their music culture is ensured because of the participation and passion of the community as a whole in this endeavor.
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Hendrickson, Neil. E-mail Interview, November 14, 1999.


Christy Kimball
Popular and Classical Musics of the World
November 24, 1999
Joyce Hendrickson, Telephone Interview, September 4, 1999

All the information about the history of the Grand Forks Master Chorale was provided by Dr. James Rodde in personal interviews, held November 22 and 23, 1999

James Rodde, Personal Interviews, November 22 and 23, 1999

Joyce Hendrickson, Telephone Interview, September 4, 1999

James Rodde, Personal Interviews, November 22 and 23, 1999

Joyce Hendrickson remembers instantly dropping a shorthand class to take Harmony, only to find that the first semester project was a 24-part band arrangement of a piece of their own choosing (she chose Handel’s “Largo” from Xerxes)

Joyce Hendrickson, Telephone Interview, September 4, 1999.


Greater Grand Forks Symphony, “Historical Sketch”, Collection #431, Accession #87-1561 and 87-1572, in the University of North Dakota Special Collections at the Chester Fritz Library, 1.


So called because they all lived in Allendale Township and for their first performance used tin cans attached to broomsticks as their “microphones”!!

This could only be called the fiddle, since the violin was used for classical music and the music being played was not classical and not thought by some to be music at all, since the fiddler played strictly by ear.

Neil Hendrickson, E-mail Interview, November 14, 1999. Incidentally, Neil is this writer’s father.