

OKLAHOMA CITY JUNIOR SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA, 1950-1959

By *Aileen Stroud Libke**

History is war and tragedy, stupendous effort and sustained sacrifice, sod houses and struggle with raw nature, development of a stable economy and emergence of an urban skyline. Yet history is more than epochal events. For man does not live by bread alone, and next to his faith in God is his response to the influence of good music. Nevertheless, the spiritual and the ideal and the cultural do customarily lag behind the material maturity of a commonwealth.

Oklahoma, however, did not wait to put down the rifle and the hoe before picking up the fiddle and the bow. Older than statehood are our two big school bands at Oklahoma State University and the University of Oklahoma. Both celebrated their 50th anniversaries in 1955. And in 1955 the Bacone Indian boys' chorus at Muskogee celebrated their diamond jubilee!¹

Oklahoma received its first national publicity on musical activity only a dozen years after statehood, when Frederic Libke, Oklahoma Baptist University (Shawnee) fine arts dean, ". . . . introduced music festival week and brought in soloists (from the east) for choral performances in which town and gown joined voices. The *Chicago Music News* reported all this, giving Oklahoma music its first nationwide publicity."²

The early years did give prime concern to erecting a State upon the prairie. Today, however, with stability a fact instead of a goal, Oklahoma has definitely entered into a phase of cultural development, supporting among other endeavors, civic opera in Tulsa and symphony orchestras in Tulsa and in Oklahoma City.

Another Oklahoma cultural expression of more significance in some respects, especially to the future of the State, though less pretentious, less sophisticated than opera or major symphony is the Oklahoma City Junior Symphony Orchestra. Or-

*Aileen Stroud Libke (Mrs. Frederic Libke) is Vice President of the Board of Directors, Oklahoma City Junior Symphony Orchestra. She is past State President of Oklahoma Federation of Music Clubs, and has served as National Chairman of Music in Schools and Colleges, National Federation of Music Clubs.—Ed.

¹*Norman Transcript*, February 25, 1955.

²Aline Jean Treanor, music editor, *The Sunday Oklahoman*, February 1, 1950.

ganized in the fall of 1950, initial enrollment was 13, by mid-year it had jumped to 50. In July 1959, Oklahoma City's Junior Symphony had a membership of 75 youngsters, plus a junior training orchestra of less advanced children of 30 members. With its root properly in the capital city, the organization draws its membership from towns as far as fifty miles away. At times members have come from Ada, Bethany, Chandler, Chickasha, Choctaw, Edmond, El Reno, Guthrie, Lindsay, Midwest City, Moore, Mulhall, Norman, Putnam City and Yukon. In addition, to carry the name of Oklahoma abroad in the literal sense, there have been two exchange students from Germany, who played in the orchestra while attending school in Oklahoma City. In its nine years, the Junior Symphony has played concerts in Oklahoma City, Ada, Chickasha, Edmond, Guthrie, Lindsay, Midwest City, Muskogee, and Shawnee.

Two earlier editions of a junior symphony orchestra were started in Oklahoma City, but both faded away after short duration. In the mid-thirties, probably including 1933 to 1935, a youth orchestra which merited the respect of Oklahoma City professional musicians flourished under Conductor Hebestreit. Later, under WPA sponsorship, with Clyde Roller, who now directs the Amarillo Symphony Orchestra, as conductor, another junior symphony graced the Oklahoma City sounding board for a period including the year 1939.

By 1950, however, neither schools nor city had a string program for its youth, though brass, winds, and percussion found expression in fine school bands. Even for these groups, orchestra music should have a place.

The beginning³ of Oklahoma City's permanent Junior Symphony Orchestra was described by the press in this fashion a year after its founding:⁴

Floyd Rice, young dance band leader, was training a highschool jazz combo, when the members asked if it were not possible to develop a larger group. Rice approached the junior chamber of commerce with the idea, and after careful examination, the Jaycees included the orchestra project in their Youth Activities program Six months later the orchestra made its debut before a forum of its sponsors at a chamber luncheon at the YWCA.

That same day, more than 500 season tickets were bought by excited city folk who recognized good music when they heard it

A non-profit, sponsoring group was incorporated under the name, Oklahoma City Junior Symphony Society, Inc., with

³Floyd Rice credits Tracy Silvester with initiating the effort.

⁴Sunday *Oklahoman* November 18, 1961.

membership composed of those donating \$5.00 to \$100.00 for support of the orchestra.⁵

The first Board of Directors functioned for six months. In that short period the Junior Symphony Society was incorporated. The Board had organized itself for action, drew up and adopted a constitution and adopted procedures for supervising the orchestra's activities, including concert dates and sponsored refreshments for orchestra members. Dr. Louis May, Eric Parham, and Tracy Silvester were employed to conduct the orchestra, and physical facilities for rehearsals and concerts were set up. The Board also determined policies, organized, rehearsed, and presented the orchestra in two public concerts. It paid out \$647.25 and kept orderly Minutes of its official acts. With all these achievements, the Board ended its first term with a cash balance on hand of \$1,455.65.

One entry in the Minutes is quotable: ". . . . in view of the paucity of players for some instruments, and because the possibilities of orchestra are not yet determinable, no standards for membership in the orchestra [will] be fixed at this time." The second year's Board took office in April, 1951, and the only piece of business recorded by the Minutes of that meeting was: "Motion carried that we buy two tympani." Thus lightly touched upon was one of the major crises of the young junior orchestra.

The organization of a children's symphony orchestra seemed to non-musical Board members merely a matter of rounding up kids who played orchestral instruments, which of course was true with violinists, trumpeters, French hornists. But where was a boy with a set of tympani to play and transport to rehearsal and concerts? The comfortable bank balance was not enough to cover \$900 in conductor's salaries, other running expenses, plus the purchase of an expensive set of drums. Yet, what is an orchestra without tympani? Spirited discussions arose. Finally there was nothing to do but set up a drive for funds to buy drums. It was not easy but the money was raised. A set of tympani costing \$400 wholesale was purchased, and this set is still used and in good condition.

Three times the orchestra has bought national publicity of the finest sort to the State. The first occasion was when, under date of June 9, 1951, *Collier's* magazine carried a large page-wide color spread picturing the Oklahoma City Junior Symphony Orchestra. A year later the State was again spotlighted when the "Jaycees" entered a scrapbook on the Junior

⁵ A Board of Directors (1959) handles administration and policy, and the Junior Chamber of Commerce sponsors the orchestra as a Youth Activity project.

Symphony Orchestra in their national competition and won "First Place in Youth Activities," and "First Place in Fine Arts."

The third time the Junior Orchestra brought cultural recognition to the State was in May and June of 1958. On May 29, in Will Rogers Park amphitheater the juniors played their first "concert for pay."⁶ Free to the public, the young musicians played under contract for scale prices from the Music Performance Trust Fund of the recording industries and the American Symphony Orchestra League. Receipts were applied on expenses of orchestra members and chaperon attending the American Symphony Orchestra League Workshop in Nashville, Tennessee, on June 11 and 12.

Unfortunately, more harassing problems than edifying publicity items are apt to attend large organizational effort. The Junior Symphony had a diversity of problems, large and small, with which to contend, some of which almost swamped the project. Finances, for example, continued an annual struggle. The junior orchestra's budget was modest, the largest single item being the conductor's remuneration of \$1000.00 a year. There were other items, such as auditorium rental for concerts and chair rental when the children were to play on TV. If there were printed programs, these must be paid for if not contributed. Music for 75 players added up fast. When one year failed in the membership drive, and some years did fail, then the volunteer workers of the following year had to scabble to clear the deficit as well as to raise their own budget.

Volunteer workers were another problem. A certain dullness of routine attached to most civic obligations proves discouraging, as does the dullness of work, for some newcomers to unpaid Board directorships.

There has been no lack of variety to the difficulties which beset the Junior Orchestra. For instance, in the orchestra's fourth season, the President⁷ described his own administration as "one hassle after another." He named the "hassle over a rehearsal place, some wanting to get out of a church or teacher's studio to a 'neutral' place"; and the "hassle over seating in the orchestra." There was a practically unanimous ambition among the youngsters to snare the honor of orchestra section principal who sits in the "first" chair. This was no minor crisis! Also, in this same president's year the "hassle over conductors" accelerated.

⁶ Sunday *Oklahoman* February 22, 1959.

⁷ John Ingram.

The organization's first year was topheavy with conductors, with three to direct one junior orchestra. The number was reduced to two the following year: Eric Parham as main conductor, Tracy Silvester as assistant. With the passing of time, dissatisfaction with orchestra repertoire developed. When organized, the orchestra was not capable of playing advanced music, nor had the members ever done any playing except as individuals. "Playing together," even on the level of their own average advancement was an impossibility. Orchestral personnel for several years included adults to help carry the young players along. Mr. Parham's aim seems to have been to produce an ensemble, via as painless a route as possible. This meant light music on the grade school level. By the fourth year, parents were feeling that the juniors were ready to approach closer to a repertoire of the simpler classics, and the conductor was re-elected by the slim margin of one vote. Two years later a change in conductors took place. Everett Gates, a string man, was employed at \$1000.00 per year.

Not all problems were charged with emotion. One of the gravest seemed to rouse no feeling, one way or the other: the need for music racks. There were not enough racks the first year. By the second year the situation was desperate. Floyd Rice, according to the Minutes, was "appointed as 'attic' committee of one, to work with Miss Edith Johnson of the *Oklahoman* on publicity to get the public to look in their attics for music racks and to contribute same, if found, to the orchestra." Either Oklahoma City attics contained none, or attic-owners just did not care, because, year after year, the Minutes recorded the "desperate need" for music racks. In fact, this problem was never solved until two or three years ago Oklahoma City's big symphony finally let the juniors use their rehearsal room in Municipal Auditorium for their weekly practicing.

Integration was the problem eight years ago, which came nearest to wrecking the junior symphony. It started to rear its dark head in the Board meeting of October, 1951, when someone innocently suggested that "a party of some kind be given for the members of the orchestra." A committee was appointed to set it up. Three months later, at the January (1951) meeting, a Board member asked why no report had been heard on the party. The Minutes tactfully state that "the committee had gone over the question very carefully and that it was not deemed feasible at the present time to have a mixed social event. . . . "

In 1950, three years prior to the racial integration decision handed down by the United States Supreme Court, without

fanfare, public announcement, or arguments pro or con, as far as anyone can now recall, the junior orchestra in the process of organizing had casually integrated. They simply took any junior who could play and wished to do so. From the start there were two young Negro boys who could, and did wish to play. It is claimed⁸ that the Oklahoma City Junior Symphony Orchestra was the first non-segregated organization in the city.⁹ "It was not planned that way," early Board members insist. "It just happened." Apparently it did "just happen," without even attracting notice, because when plans for the party were started, a Board member's home was offered for the affair. When the color situation was discovered later, the offer was withdrawn.

A second incident confirms the general unawareness of the integration factor. The Junior Symphony was invited to attend a concert by the senior orchestra, and a section of sixty seats on the main floor, down front center, was reserved for them. The juniors arrived and were at the door ready to enter when the two Negro boys were discovered in the group. On learning that the colored boys would not be permitted to sit in their reserved section, despite the fact that many of the young white players were of southern background, rather than permit public humiliation of two of their group, the entire junior orchestra went to the high balcony. The empty section of sixty seats remained a mute but dramatic witness to group loyalty throughout the evening.

As time went on, it happened, also apparently by chance, that no Negro young people applied for membership in the orchestra, leaving the situation not necessarily non-integrated, but actually all-white. Then, in the spring of 1956, a young Negro applied for orchestra membership. To some parents whose children had joined during the all-white interim, this application of a Negro was a "new" thing, rather than the re-appearance of a formerly routine situation, and whether new, or resurrected, to many it was anathema.

The Junior Chamber of Commerce on the national level favored integration, and the opinion has been expressed that one reason the Scrapbook won the national Jaycees award in Youth Activities was because of the integration factor.¹⁰ The fine spread in *Collier's* magazine (1951) shows a Negro boy at the drums, and another in the woodwind section. Everette Gates, conductor, took a strong stand, stating his position as that of a musician auditioning applicants for a musical organization.

⁸ Floyd Rice.

⁹ Other than the Urban League.

¹⁰ John Ingram.

If any standard, color or otherwise, except musical ability, were to be set up, he would resign. The schism became "news," and publicity was carried in Oklahoma City papers.

An open air concert was given in Lincoln Park by the Junior Symphony in conjunction with the Air Force Choir. Following the concert, Mr. Thad Farmer, president of the Junior Symphony Orchestra Society, made a speech to clarify the position of the Junior Chamber of Commerce on the integration policy for the junior orchestra. The situation climaxed in the resignation of some Board members, and in the withdrawal of their children from the orchestra by a number of the parents.

Although a number of "key" players were lost, the cliché again proved true that "no one is indispensable." Recruits filled the chairs. Resurgence came in the fall. In the spring of 1957, the orchestra was presented in concert at the state convention of the Oklahoma Federation of Music Clubs in Muskogee.

The ninth season of the junior orchestra—1958-59—has been a year of stabilization. Under the presidency of Ray Scales, systematic procedure was tightened, and the Board has followed accepted business practices.¹¹

Irrespective of objectives, declared or debated, an organization of the size and type of the Junior Symphony Orchestra, looking to and dependent upon the public for financial and administrative support, makes an impact on the community that is not rightly measurable.¹² Oklahoma City, in supporting a

¹¹ Presidents of Oklahoma City Junior Symphony Orchestra Society, Inc:

1950-1951	Dean Terrill
1951-1952	Dean Terrill; Jack Griffin
1952-1953	Jack Griffin
1953-1954	John Ingram
1954-1955	Mrs. Retta Beekman Taylor
1955-1956	Pendleton Woods
1956-1957	Thad C. Farmer
1957-1958	Emmit B. Hedrick
1958-1959	Ray Scales

¹² Conductors of Oklahoma City Junior Symphony Orchestra:

1950-1951	Dr. Louis May - Eric Parham - Tracy Silvester
1951-1952	Eric Parham - Tracy Silvester
1952-1953	Eric Parham - Tracy Silvester
1953-1954	Eric Parham
1954-1955	Eric Parham
1955-1956	Eric Parham - Everett Gates
1956-1957	Everett Gates
1957-1958	Everett Gates
1958-1959	Larry Fisher

junior symphony orchestra, has shown itself quite a different type of town from another metropolis of 350,000 population supporting no such idealistic outlet for its younger citizens. Oklahoma, the State, has proven itself, too, a different type of State from those having no junior symphony orchestra in any of their cities.

There is an appeal to the heart to see seventy-five teenagers and pre-teens, bowing and blowing in fondly imagined unison, that compensates the critical ear for any teasing imperfections. That Oklahoma City youngsters have kept on bowing and blowing for nine years while storms of policy swirled about them, organizational, racial, financial, cultural, now to stand sturdily upon the threshold of their tenth season, is a matter of pride to the City and State, and to those men and women who have, as working members of the Board of Directors, served the orchestra's need.