

The High School Festival

Excited students, eager parents, and loyal younger brothers and sisters gathered at Novelty, Missouri, one evening in the spring of 1915 for a high school music contest. Long before the first number on the program the room was filled to overflowing. Cheers echoed and reechoed. Certainly the contest was successful in arousing interest. The enthusiasm which greeted the efforts of Superintendent G. T. Bennett to introduce interscholastic music contests was due partly to their novelty and partly to rivalry between neighboring high schools. But the results were highly satisfactory whatever the contributing factors may have been in bringing together this musical talent.

Five years later when Bennett was superintendent of the public school in Rockford, Iowa, he wrote to all schools in the State with six or more teachers suggesting a State-wide music contest for the following spring. Only fifty replies were received, but forty of them favored his plan. The interested schools were so scattered, however, and the teachers so busy that no State organization was formed that year. Nevertheless, two small contests were held, one by the Northeast Iowa Musical Activity Association at Rockford in March, 1921, and the other by the Northwest District Music Association in April of

the same year at Rock Rapids, thus preserving the ideal from utter failure until more enthusiasm could be worked up among other schools.

These contests encouraged Bennett to make another attempt to form a State organization. Early in September, 1921, he wrote once more to the school superintendents of Iowa. This time about one hundred replies were received which in the main were favorable.

In the following spring regional contests were conducted at Logan, Sheldon, Audubon, Garner, and Manley, the winners of these being invited to meet at Sheldon in April. Only four schools responded to the Sheldon invitation. The contestants paid their own travelling expenses, but were entertained in Sheldon free. Thus the first high school music contests in Iowa were sectional affairs with the participants selected by invitation, the events limited, and the number of entries few, due partly to the lack of proper facilities.

In 1923 bands were added to the list of events to compose a program of mixed choruses, girls' glee clubs, boys' glee clubs, orchestras, and bands. Six district contests were held previous to the so-called State contest at Rockford. Cedar Rapids won first place in the orchestra section and in each of the three vocal events, while premier band honors went to Charles City.

After this contest a need for classification of schools according to size became apparent. Before

the 1924 contest at Cedar Rapids, the constitution of the High School Musical Activities Association was revised to permit the division of high schools with an enrollment of less than one hundred and fifty into class C, those between one hundred and fifty and five hundred into class B, and those over five hundred into class A. The State was also divided into eight districts with specific boundaries and the number of competitors in certain groups was limited. About five hundred high school pupils representing twelve schools participated at Cedar Rapids, while at Ames the following year eight hundred and fifty pupils were entered, though some parts of the State were not represented.

The first annual contest which was truly State-wide in competition occurred at Iowa City in 1926. Upon the suggestion of Professor E. H. Wilcox, the State University of Iowa proposed to convert the usual State contest into a high school music festival to be held at Iowa City under the joint auspices of the Association and the University. The announced purposes of this arrangement were to "encourage an interest in music by promoting concerts in which representatives of many Iowa schools may join;" to "make it possible for large numbers of students to hear an outstanding musical artist;" to "demonstrate the accomplishments of our high schools in their music courses and organizations;" to "set standards for high school music;" to "enthuse high school students by showing the in-

terest in music in other schools;" to "give an incentive for intense and sustained preparation;" and to "recognize outstanding merit." In accordance with the new plan, the constitution of the Association was revised to provide for a joint festival committee. The number of events was increased from five to fifteen, more definite eligibility rules were adopted, the classification of schools was changed slightly, and judges were forbidden to place a school in a higher class. Since 1928 only public high schools have been eligible to enter their students in these events.

On May 6, 1926, nearly two thousand high school boys and girls poured into Iowa City. They came in special trains, busses, interurban cars, and automobiles. From Danbury the townspeople, eager to help the students, brought a delegation of fifty in automobiles. Edward H. Lauer, Director of the University Extension Division, called on boy scouts, Iowa City high school pupils, and university students to aid in taking care of the throng which was nearly twice the expected number. The mayor issued a proclamation of welcome. Private homes, dormitories, and fraternity houses were made available for the entertainment of the guests. One Iowa City man whose wife was out of town volunteered to house fourteen boys. Upon learning that his sister would be with him at the time of the festival, he requested that fourteen girls be sent instead. But his sister brought several friends, so the genial house-

holder spent the nights of the festival in his porch swing. According to an inveterate statistician "if the maximum number of beds required to rest these weary music devotees were placed end to end they would cover the distance of two and one-half miles which would reach from the city limits of Iowa City to the very heart of Coralville." The University supplied the contestants with meal tickets at the various restaurants and boarding houses during their stay in Iowa City.

A year later, early in May, 1927, nearly three thousand giggling, bobbed-hair girls and tall, "dressed up" boys filled the streets of Iowa City. Again dormitories, private homes, and sorority and fraternity houses were pressed into service. Even the armory was used for sleeping quarters for this deluge of aspiring artists.

In 1928 the number of participants was well over three thousand, due to increased interest in the contest idea, more thorough organization, and better roads for motor transportation. The congestion was relieved, however, by extending the period of the festival from two to three days and arranging the program so that many of the contestants would not need to be in Iowa City for more than a day or two. The first day was devoted to soloists and small groups, the second to choruses and glee clubs, while bands and orchestras brought the festival to a colorful climax on the final day. "Both in the higher type of music presented and in the improvement of the

way the music was played," this festival showed "great advancement". One of the most memorable features of this festival was the picnic supper provided by the University at the Memorial Union. Seventy gallons of ice cream, a hundred gallons of milk, two hundred pounds of wieners, four barrels of potato chips, four kegs of pickles, and two truck loads of buns were consumed with gusto and appreciation.

A more elaborate system of eliminations was conducted before the State contest in 1929. This had the effect of slightly reducing the number of contestants at Iowa City and of raising the standards of performance. The State was divided into six districts and thirty-six subdistricts, so in all there were forty-two preliminary contests. Among the twenty-eight events on the program at Iowa City was a new band marching contest.

Previous to the contest at Ames in 1925, each contestant or director selected his own music, but the difficulty in judging such contests made a change necessary. Since the festival has been held in Iowa City all choruses, glee clubs, bands, and orchestras have been required to prepare a group of two, three, or four specified selections. From these the State festival committee chooses one to be given by all competitors in the same class. The contestants also prepare at least two pieces of their own choice and may render one or both as time and the inclination of the director permit.

Not in the nature of a prize to be won but as an opportunity to be embraced, the State University invited to the campus as guests of the University, during the summer session of 1929, those students who merited recognition for their accomplishments in high school music during the year. Nearly all were winners in solo events in the State festival. The first term was devoted to instrumental music. An orchestra was organized under the direction of Lee M. Lockhart, who was assisted by a staff of notable musicians. The daily routine included orchestra rehearsals, chamber group rehearsals, private lessons, classes in music theory and appreciation, and one elective high school or college course. Twenty-six schools were represented, and thirty-six high school supervisors and teachers were granted the privilege of regular attendance at the rehearsals followed by daily conferences with the conductor in which problems of orchestra training were discussed. The second term of the summer session was devoted to instruction in vocal music. A chorus was organized and rehearsed daily by H. Stanley Taylor of Morley College, London, England. All of this valuable instruction was given free by the University.

Both the State high school music festival and the summer training afforded by the University seem to be exerting a tremendous influence upon musical education in Iowa. The competitive element is lending zest to the process. And the University is succeeding in sensitizing the State to its educational

facilities. More people are learning to play better music better. Approximately twenty thousand students entered the thirty-six subdistrict music contests this year, from among whom about twenty-five hundred will be selected to participate in the final competition of the eighth annual high school music festival.

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