

The Normal Academy of Music

Long before the State University established a summer session, Iowa City boasted a summer school of another kind, so unique and excellent that it attracted attendance from far and near. On June 9, 1866, the Iowa State Normal Academy of Music was organized by a group of townspeople and incorporated under the laws of Iowa. It was the "design of some of the corporators" that this academy be so engrafted "into the University that it should eventually and at all times be recognized as one of the essential branches of that institution."

This dream was not fully realized, but at a time when singing schools and musical conventions were common the Normal Academy of Music was a significant and ambitious response to the artistic needs of the people. It would not have been in harmony "with the young, thriving, go-ahead state of Iowa" if an effort had not been made to "partake somewhat of the spirit of the times in regard to music culture."

In July, 1867, the local newspaper announced that the "Iowa State Normal Academy of Music will open in this city on August 6th, and close September 13th. This Institution is in charge of Profs. H. S. and J. E. Perkins, of Boston. These gentlemen have a national reputation as teachers of music, and the

mere mention of their names is sufficient to secure for the Academy here a liberal support."

Professor H. S. Perkins, of the Northern New York Normal Academy of Music, was engaged as the Principal of the Academy for a period of five years. He was promised a minimum of "seventy-five scholarships, of fifteen dollars each, for each annual session of six weeks." Professor Perkins was assisted by his brother Jule who was "a distinguished Basso and Pianist", Mr. A. T. Smith, and Miss Hattie C. Lindsey.

One hundred and five students enrolled for the first session, which was held in one of the upper chambers of the Old Stone Capitol. Several weeks of practice culminated in a concert at Metropolitan Hall. The room was packed at thirty-five cents per ticket. No wonder a great crowd turned out, for the newspaper had promised them an entertainment which would "range through the whole field of solos, duets, trios, quartettes and choruses, with many new, unique, amusing, gay, grave, lively and profound presentations." Nor was the audience disappointed. Several of the numbers were composed by the Perkins brothers, including W. O. Perkins, then a musician of note in Boston.

As the "Grand Closing Concert" for that year the Academy presented Josef Haydn's *The Creation*. This was a difficult undertaking, but the "zeal and enthusiasm with which the students composing the chorus class of the Academy entered into the

study, even of the most difficult choruses, together with the successful rendering of the entire oratorio", gave the principal much encouragement in his "arduous labors". The evening was "pronounced a decided success — exceeding the expectations of the most hopeful."

But it was impossible to please everybody. The newspaper published a letter from a "man with a deaf ear" who complained that though the chants, choruses and operatic selections were grand, and that "harmony, concord, and all the splendors of sound" trembled in every note, there was not enough variety in the selections. He observed that "the public is not a musician, and while he, she or it may tremble and turn pale at the first burst of a storm of sweet sounds, there soon arises a longing for a change in the bill. A simple ditty — something with a dash of humor — 'something familiar in our ears as household words,' would relieve the strained nerves and prepare the public for another diapason."

The Perkins Music School, as it was familiarly called, sang merrily on for a period of five years. It became an accepted institution in the city, an occasion to be anticipated with enthusiasm by local music lovers. Aspiring young vocalists and teachers flocked in from out of town, willing to pay room and board and to toil through the hot August days for the privilege of receiving instruction from the Perkins brothers. The number of pupils ranged

from a hundred to a hundred and thirty, and during the summer of 1870 the counties of Muscatine, Scott, Cedar, Lee, Davis, Appanoose, Mahaska, Marion, Warren, Madison, Poweshiek, Story, Tama, Benton, Linn, Jones, Clinton, Buchanan, and Iowa were represented.

Besides the Perkins brothers a staff of two or three "assistant gentlemen teachers" and one or two "lady soloists" came out from Boston to assist in instruction. In 1869 the faculty consisted of Professors H. S. and Jule E. Perkins, J. A. Doane, M. Z. Tinker, and W. F. Heath, assisted by Miss Mary E. Gibbs, soprano soloist, and Mrs. J. A. Doane, alto, all of Boston. In 1870 Professor Perkins had "associated with him an efficient corps of teachers in the persons of J. J. Kimball, W. F. Heath, L. A. Phelps (formerly of Grinnell), and Miss Delia Ekins, of Galesburg, Illinois.

The Academy was housed in several different buildings. During the first year or two a "concord of sweet sounds" issued from the chapel of the University and from the Senate Chamber of the Old Capitol. Later Metropolitan Hall and Market Hall were the scenes of the "chords and dischords". The former was located on the southwest corner of Washington and Dubuque streets, where the Hotel Jefferson now stands, and the latter was on the southeast corner of Dubuque Street and Iowa Avenue. It was properly named Burr's Hall, but since there was a meat market on the first floor people

fell into the habit of calling it by the more descriptive name.

One of the most successful sessions of the Iowa State Normal Academy of Music was opened on August 3, 1870, with an address by the Reverend Miss A. J. Chapin on the subject, "The Aesthetical and Educational in Music". The editor of the Iowa City *Press* felt "confident that those of our citizens who wish a rare literary and musical treat" would not fail to be present, and bespoke "a crowded house to witness the exercises" which he trusted would "inaugurate the most successful session of the Academy".

Classes started with precision. First the students' voices were tested to see whether they should sing soprano or alto, tenor or bass, and then the work began in earnest. Elementary classes were organized for those who had just learned how to carry a tune but who could not read the notes, while those whose voices had nearly reached the perfection of a flute or cello were placed in advanced groups. The daily schedule opened at half past eight with devotional exercises followed by fifteen minutes of physical exercises. At nine the first and second harmony classes met, the ten o'clock hour was devoted to first and second vocalizing, and second notation occupied the final morning period. No classes were scheduled in the afternoon. First notation completed the program at seven in the evening.

Public concerts which were given at intervals throughout the term united the school in a common interest, for the soloist in an oratorio must be sustained by the background of a perfect chorus. Usually the teachers carried the leading parts, but capable pupils were also given plenty of opportunity to display their talent.

The song book most used was *The Nightingale*, but it was supplemented by considerable study of other compositions. Professor Perkins's "new and neatly gotten up" *College Hymn and Tune Book* had been adopted by the University "for the use of all of the Students at Chapel exercises." He had another song book in preparation for the use of the common schools, to be called the *Musical Echo*, which a local editor prophesied would "doubtless prove a success which has been the case with all of his books and publications."

Though his compositions were of high order, Professor Perkins's best talent lay in his ability to organize and direct, and to endear himself in the hearts of his pupils. That he was unusual along this line can be judged by the glowing reports of any of the "closing concerts". When the final session of the Academy was closed with Mendelssohn's "great and popular" oratorio, *Elijah*, the editor heralded the event with as much sincerity as eloquence. "This sublime Oratorio," he wrote, "has never been sung west of Chicago, and we think not in that city. It is a Herculean task to prepare it,

and no one with less energy, ambition and masterly skill than Prof. H. S. Perkins could have accomplished what has been done by the Academy of Music in preparing it for a public performance. The choruses are grand in a superlative degree; the solos are many and magnificent, especially those for the Basso, which will be rendered in a masterly manner by Prof. Jule E. Perkins, who is equal to any task of this kind. He will make the words of *Elijah* a 'living reality.' The Soprano Solos will be artistically sung by Miss Mary E. Gibbs and the Tenor by Prof. H. S. Perkins, who is always ready with his voice as well as with the magnetic *baton*, which never fails to move the choruses of voices with great precision, accuracy and delicacy."

At the close of another concert the paper reported that the "programme was all classical, or music of a high order," and that one commendable change which had occurred in the minds and taste of the people was "the present ability to appreciate the better class of music as compared with the condition of things before the organization of the Academy. Without the Academy we could not have the opportunity of listening to the compositions of the old classic writers, nor could we even *with* the School without a conductor at the head with that breadth of musical culture, appreciation, taste, tact and ability which is absolutely necessary to grapple with, and master the difficulties which stand in the way, and so often intimidate the majority of men."

During the "Grand Concert" of 1870 the members of the school took the opportunity to show their affection in a more concrete manner. "The Hall was filled to overflowing with one of the most appreciative audiences" ever assembled in Iowa City. "As the time arrived for opening the Concert, Professor Perkins was first annoyed because his *baton* could not be found. He, in the twinkling of an eye improvised a *stick*, which, however, some member of the class endeavored unsuccessfully to take from him. He did not 'see the point' until Captain A. B. Cree stepped forward and presented the Conductor with a very fine gold tipped baton, in behalf of the Academy, and accompanied the presentation with short but appropriate remarks." Silver cake baskets and a gold pen and pencil were presented by several prominent students to the other members of the faculty.

Mozart's *Twelfth Mass* was then "finely performed by a splendid chorus numbering some 75", with the solo parts sustained by Miss Delia Ekins, Miss Ida M. Kimball, Miss Hattie Glenn, Mr. H. S. Perkins, Mr. J. J. Kimball, and Mr. W. F. Heath. The entire work had been prepared in a little over six regular evenings of rehearsal, a feat which was considered just short of a miracle.

In addition to the oratorio, Mr. Phelps rendered a "Grand Etude Galop" upon the "fine Mathushek piano". Miss Lucy Smith sang the cavatina, "O luce di quest' anima", by Donizetti, with much

credit to herself and teacher. Mr. George Smith then made his début in the Academy with the solo, "Friend of the Brave". He was reported to have a "mammoth voice" for one of his stature. Professor Otto Schmidt played a fantasia on his violin and then the audience demanded "The Mocking Bird" which he performed in such inimitable style that some who heard him were convinced that none but he could improve upon himself, for he seemed to be "without a peer upon the instrument of his choice".

Professor Heath sang "Rock Me Ye Billows", and Mr. Phelps, with the Messrs. Perkins and Kimball in the chorus, pleased the votaries of music with the beautiful song, "Under the Snow". Professor Kimball favored his listeners with "There's Peace on the Deep", a piece composed by Professor Perkins. The cavatina, "Ah! non credea mirarti", from *Sonnambula* afforded Miss Ekins an opportunity to display to good advantage "her high, flexible voice". The concert closed with the side-splitting "Laughing Trio" by Messrs. Perkins, Heath, and Kimball, which "left the audience in the best of spirits although they had been in the Hall for nearly three hours."

Quite naturally many of the students in the Academy lived in Iowa City. Among these were Macon Holmes, Lizzie Osmond, Addie Nixon, Minnie Kimball, Elizabeth Irish, George Starr, Chan Kimball, Horace Kimball, Blanche Lee, Carrie Wetherby,

Lucia Cole, Fannie Dunlap, Lizzie Clark, Nellie V. Hutchinson, Lucy Smith, Ida May Kimball, and Hattie Glenn.

The last two had probably the finest voices ever trained by the school. Miss Kimball came from a family of musicians. She first participated in a concert when but fourteen or fifteen years of age, appearing in a scarlet costume and singing "Robin Redbreast". From that time her success was assured, and she rapidly developed into one of the best vocalists in the State. Instead of seeking a musical career, however, she married Dr. R. W. Pryce of Iowa City and became one of the most prominent women in the city.

Hattie Glenn's father had a hardware store on the northeast corner of Clinton and Washington streets, where Whetstone's drug store is now located. Miss Glenn possessed a rich contralto voice and, after receiving considerable training at the Academy, an uncle in Chicago decided to further her musical education by giving her the opportunity to study in the East and in Europe. She appeared in opera for a time, and had the honor of singing before Queen Victoria. For public purposes her name was changed to Hope Glenn. It is reported that she was tall and graceful, with dark hair and eyes, and made a very striking appearance on the stage.

Miss Glenn appeared in Iowa City just after her return from Europe. She did not wish her parents to know that she was one of the troupe, but of course

the news got out, and when she stepped on the platform she was confronted by her whole family lined up on the first row. The effect so unnerved her that for the first time in her life she nearly collapsed with stage fright.

With such unusually fine talent at their disposal, it was no wonder that the Perkins brothers felt a special affection for Iowa City. They rented a house on South Linn Street and entered into the life of the town with more than a visitor's interest. On the occasion of graduation exercises they lent their musical talent to the University, often the proceeds of their concerts went to charity.

Professor Perkins was the leading figure in suggesting and organizing the First Music Teachers and Musicians Convention in Iowa. The gathering was to be conducted somewhat like a singing school, with the teachers as pupils, and several public concerts given at intervals.

Probably his most helpful contribution occurred in 1870. According to a "Liberal Plan", Professor Perkins offered a scholarship to "each county in the Commonwealth", whereby two students — "either ladies or gentlemen" — would be admitted free of tuition to all the class departments of the Academy of Music. The candidates from each county were to receive their appointment or be recommended by the county superintendent of public instruction. It was suggested that so far as practicable these selections should be made from the public school teachers, for

in so doing the cause of music would be more directly benefited, as the teachers would be better prepared to give correct vocal instruction.

The Perkins brothers conducted short "Musical Conventions" during different parts of the season, and their engagements were reported in the Iowa City papers with much interest. Such towns as Marengo, Nevada, Wapello, Tipton, Clinton, Grinnell, Marshalltown, and Muscatine were among the number so fortunate as to secure their services. It was averred that Professor H. S. Perkins had "probably conducted more conventions than any other western man," and it was urged that cities or counties wishing to form a convention which would "result favorably to the cause of music" could not do better than to secure his services.

For several years he conducted conventions or academies in southern Wisconsin and in Kansas. The Leavenworth paper reported that "rarely, in these ends of the earth, are we regaled with the beauties of song, as was the large and fashionable audience at Odd Fellows Hall. And rarely have we seen such enthusiasm as was created by the superb rendering of the chaste and classical programme of the evening."

The younger brother did not always accompany the other on his journeys into the far country. Nor did he often help with the teaching, but he made innumerable friends, and lent his voice graciously on many occasions. It was often said that his magnifi-

cent singing alone was sufficient to attract an audience of music loving and educated people. Professor Jule E. Perkins had "one of the most superb bass voices in this or in any other country, and his four years' experience in Europe, studying and singing in Italian opera" had made him an artist indeed. In 1869 he was the "only American Primo Basso in Italian Opera, making his *début* in March at Milan. That first appearance was a "trying scene" before a critical and exacting public, but one through which he passed successfully. It was small wonder that one admirer wrote that "the West will hope long to associate this pale singer with the coming triumphs of music."

But the brothers Perkins were not long associated with Iowa City. In the year 1871 the last chorus was sung and the last annual picnic was held. The Iowa State Normal Academy of Music died the death of all institutions which the times have outgrown. Yet the results of the awakened interest in good music and the fine classical training, which was an opportunity for even the most promising pupils, were influences not to be soon forgotten. For many years the tradition of music was sustained in Iowa City by men and women of talent. Even yet a few persons survive for whom the mention of the Academy brings a host of happy memories and a feeling of pride at having participated in those "up and coming" days.

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