

Melvin K. West

1930 -

Mel West, noted Adventist organist, church musician, composer, and music educator, is one of a select group of six Adventist musicians who have had music buildings named after them. In a career that has spanned more than fifty years West taught organ at three Seventh-day Adventist Colleges and has served as organist and Minister of Music at numerous churches.

Born in St. Paul, Minnesota, West as a child was totally fascinated with music, listening to the Walter Damrosch weekly radio music program from age four and, at age six, "playing" organ on the front bumper of the family car, pretending the grill was the pipes. He started piano lessons at ten and organ studies three years later.

When he was still young, his family moved to Lodi, California, where his mother, Thelma, sang in the choir at Lodi Central SDA church and was the primary supporting force in it for many years. Both she and West's father, Laurence, enthusiastically supported their son's interest in, and pursuit of, a music career.

In his high school years at Lodi Academy, West studied organ under Allen Bacon of the College of the Pacific in Stockton, California. In 1948, he began his undergraduate work at Union College, where he attended through 1950 before transferring to Emmanuel Missionary College, now Andrews University. While most of his organ study was at EMC, West spent one semester at Columbia University in New York City, studying with Claire Coci, celebrated organist and teacher.

Following graduation from EMC in 1952 with a B.A. in organ, West was immediately hired to be organist at Faith for Today, an Adventist television program based in NYC. After one year there, he was invited to teach at Atlantic Union College.

In the next six years, while teaching at AUC, he took a one-year leave of absence and completed an M.Mus. in 1955 at the University of Redlands, where he studied organ under Leslie P. Spelman and was elected to membership in Pi Kappa Lambda. He started graduate study at Boston University in 1956 and while pursuing graduate study there under organist George Faxon, he became a Fellow in the American Guild of Organists. West received a DMA at Boston University in 1959. During those years at AUC and in graduate study he was active as an organist with Episcopal, Unitarian, and Congregational churches.

On campus, West's talents in organ performance and improvisation and teaching inspired faculty and students alike. While his classes were rigorous, he was a gifted lecturer, known for his knowledge in music history and ability to clearly explain concepts in music theory. He was an accomplished pianist, frequently using that ability to spontaneously make a point in class presentations.

When West accepted the invitation to be music chair at Walla Walla College, now University, in 1959, at age 29, students at AUC, where I was a junior music major at that time, experienced a profound sense of loss. We had enjoyed hearing him play and been inspired by his youthful enthusiasm for teaching and music, and his sense of humor.

West chaired the music department at Walla Walla College for fifteen of the next eighteen years.

Through his leadership and initiatives he launched the modern era for music at that school.

From the first music faculty meeting on, he became an agent for change, and the result was a revolution. In the next eight years, West achieved accreditation for the program in the National Association of Schools of Music and gained departmental membership in the national music honor society, Pi Kappa Lambda, both firsts for SDA colleges and universities. He brought about the construction of a large, fully equipped music and art facility, the first in SDA colleges in the latter third of the 20th century; and oversaw a comprehensive pipe organ installation that included five pipe organs.

West also expanded the size of the music faculty, hiring young and talented musicians who helped create excitement in the program. Marvin Robertson, an earlier WWC graduate who later served as head of the music program at what is now Southern Adventist University, would later write about his return to campus to teach for three years under West before going to Southern:

By the time I returned to teach at the college, everything had changed. Most of us were very young. While I was there the old building was torn down and the new fine arts center was built. It was an exciting place to be and very rewarding personally. The decision to leave was a difficult one since we were very happy there.

Bruce Ashton, who started his career under West during that time, would also later observe:

I felt at the time that I was starting at the top of the available music departments in our colleges. Walla Walla College was it, the place to be. It was very upbeat. There was the feeling within the music faculty of lots of horsepower under the hood.

And, as at AUC, West inspired students and worshippers alike with his playing as an organist in church services and recitals. He started an evensong program, a meditative program combining organ music and the spoken word in the 1962-63 school year that still continues today as a meaningful way to end the Sabbath.

During his years at WWC, West also participated extensively in community and regional music activities, serving as a member of the local symphony board, President of the Community Concert Association of Walla Walla, Chairman of the Northwest region of the AGO, and as an adjudicator in numerous festivals. He was also featured as an organ soloist with the Walla Walla Symphony. A superb theory and music history teacher as well as knowledgeable lecturer in both art and music in the Arts and Ideas class he founded, he was listed in the 1977 edition of *Outstanding Educators of America*.

In his work at WWC, West served as a catalyst for constructive changes and growth, a man driven by his dreams and vision. In reflecting on that experience, he later observed:

As I came to Walla Walla College, my idea was to develop a quality music program so that students could study music at an Adventist college and not feel they were being cheated in their education. To do so required that we provide the best in teaching, facilities, and degree programs. I wanted the students to leave as informed and capable performers, able to make music as well as teach it. My coming to Walla Walla and what happened there was not just the result of a professional pursuit, but more a sense of mission, growing out of strongly held convictions that deepened as the years went by.

Some of the more satisfying moments for me included the completion of the Fine Arts Center; being able to work with the church in its music with a choir, church sanctuary, organ, and congregation that allowed us to do some wonderful things musically; and the opportunity to be involved in so many enjoyable performances of great choral works: the Brahms and Durufle *Requiems*, the Creston *Prophecy of Isaiah*, and the Poulenc *Gloria*. Performing this great literature with Harold Lickey was definitely a highpoint of my experience there.

In 1977, West left WWC to become Minister of Music at the Kettering, Ohio, Adventist church.

Four years later he went to Union College, where he taught music and served as Director of Development and alumni affairs and as Minister of Music for the College View SDA Church. In 1982, he became Director of Music at the Westminster Presbyterian Church in Lincoln, Nebraska, where he served for the next six years.

In addition to his activities as an organist, West is a gifted arranger and composer. In the 1970's, five of his many hymn arrangements and choral responses were published. Other unpublished music in that time included choral music and an instrumental work, *Dyptique for Trombone and Piano*.

In the 1980's, he was on the General Conference committee for creating a new church hymnal, serving as Chairman of the subcommittee on tunes. He and Wayne Hooper edited and arranged the music, with West composing five new hymn tunes. The Hymnal, which was released in 1985, includes over thirty arrangements and hymn tunes by West, the largest contribution by any one person in those areas.

He and his wife Betty Ann (Nilsson) retired to the Northwest in 1988 where he has continued to perform and be active in church music. In 1996, West was honored for his work at WWC and his contribution to Adventist music when the college's Fine Arts Center was named for him.

While West's accomplishments are many and distinguished, in the minds of many he is best known for his gifts in teaching and performing. Through his talents and dedication, he has ennobled, enriched, and inspired the lives of countless students and worshipers.

ds/2009

Sources: Wayne H. Hooper and Edward E. White, *Companion to the Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, 1988, Review and Herald Publishing Association, 666-68; "Biographical Sketch," Melvin West's DMA Graduate Recital program, 26 November 1957; Dan Shultz, *A Great Tradition, Music at Walla Walla College, 1892-1992*, pages 122-129, 134 (Robertson quote), 135-141, 142 (Ashton quote), 146-151, 171, 160 and 181 (West quote); National Association of Schools of Music 1976 Faculty Record Report; Interview, 4 January 1991; Conversation, 25 September 2009; Personal Knowledge.

Mozart, Mel, and Me

A Tribute

Dan Shultz

When I first met Dr. Melvin West, we were young men. He was the brilliant young teacher and organist who captured the imagination of students and worshipers and I, the aspiring music student.

In the nearly five decades since, we have related to each other in a variety of ways: teacher and student, musicians making music together, and friends commiserating about shared experiences in living and chairing music departments. Those interactions have yielded many memories: the stimulating clarity he could bring to the most challenging of topics; that delightful sense of humor and infectious laugh, both of which have helped me keep perspective; and his inspiring improvisations at the organ.

The most vivid memory for me, however, is one that literally changed the course of my life. He was my music theory and history teacher at Atlantic Union College. While he was a demanding and inspiring teacher, more importantly, at a critical moment in my life, he took the time to encourage me.

I had arrived at AUC disillusioned by what I had witnessed and experienced in the music program at another Adventist college. I had left in disgust, convinced that the Adventist college scene and music were not for me. Then a sister convinced me to try AUC.

I enrolled as a history major but could not stay away from the music building. Within a couple of weeks I had joined the band and orchestra. Soon after that I was invited to join with three other wind players and Mel West, pianist, in rehearsing the Mozart Quintet.

It was challenging and exciting to play Mozart's music with that group, particularly with Mel. His musicianship and sense of humor made the experience truly enjoyable then, a treasured memory now.

Later that fall we performed the work one Sunday morning for a nearby church. As we pulled into the parking lot by the music building upon our return, Mel and the chair of the department, Ellsworth F. Judy, who were sitting in the front seat of the station wagon, turned to face me. Mel stated simply, "Dan, *you* should be in music," an observation reinforced by Judy.

I was surprised. That kind of encouragement from persons I respected and deeply admired impressed me. I protested. I would be a half-year out of sequence with the theory class. Without hesitation, Mel said, "I will teach you privately." And he did. Within a few weeks he had taken me to the point of where I could join the class . . . and then continued to teach me music composition privately.

I didn't fully realize what an imposition this was on his schedule until years later when I was writing about his life and contribution at Walla Walla College in the college's centennial music book, *A Great Tradition*. As I reflected on that time, I realized he was simultaneously teaching a full load, holding a Sunday church position, and finishing a doctoral program in nearby Boston.

While I was deeply affected by his interest in me then, today I am overwhelmed by the effect his encouragement and help at that point have had on my life. I can trace my satisfying career and the life I presently enjoy back to that particular moment, when caring teachers took the time to encourage an unsure student. It was literally the turning point in my life.

1996/2003