

William D. Clark

The influence of a high school music teacher on their students is almost impossible to measure because the potential impacts of such influence can take many forms and roles. For some this influence can be 100% musical, for others it can be 100% personal, and for most it is a combination of these and other factors. Shaw Furlow was my first high school band director. He was “cool” and “hip” – someone I wanted to emulate. His college band director was Dr. William Clark, at that time Director of Bands at Delta State University in Cleveland, MS. Although it was not a conscious thought, somewhere deep inside I believed that if I wanted to be as “cool” or “hip” as Mr. Furlow, I had to study with Dr. Clark. Although Dr. Clark was introduced to our high school band many times, it was not until I built up enough courage to audition for the DSU Honor Band that I met him personally. Even to a dense high school kid, his warmth, friendliness, and pursuit of musical excellence was evident. I have known Dr. Clark for many years and recently had the opportunity to formally interview him (September 2010), gaining insight into a man that has touched the lives of thousands of students.

Dr. Clark grew up on a farm in Prescott, Arkansas. His father was a civil engineer and his mother was an elementary school teacher. Music was an integral part of his family life. Every Sunday after church, his extended family gathered together for the noon meal. After dinner (see quotes for a definition), the family would gather around the piano and sing for a couple of hours while his aunt, who was an accomplished musician, accompanied them. They also had a radio powered by a car battery since they did not have electricity during the early years of his childhood. “I got to listen to Paul Lavalle and the Cities Service Band of America... and then after that, the Firestone Hour, which normally was opera, and those were the things that I was allowed [to hear]. I would have probably been allowed to listen to something else but we all knew the value of that battery and so we wanted to save it in case we needed it. That’s the way I got introduced to music; it was through my family. I learned to read music simply by singing in church ...[the music is all] written down (shape notes)... some go up and some go down and all you gotta do is figure out how far.”

As a child, Dr. Clark’s parents “tried” to get him to “enjoy” the piano. This was not a successful venture. So along with his younger sister [Margie], his parents put them “with Mrs. Annalee Acker... She taught what they called ‘expression.’ [This included] singing, dancing, how to recite poetry, and how to speak distinctly.” Because he and his sister both took these lessons, they entered local talent competitions. “I guess I was eight or nine and Margie was two years younger... we would do ‘While strolling through the park one day’ ... I’d have a straw hat and a cane with a striped coat and she’d have a sundress... we would do this song and dance act and always win!” The five dollars they each won at these events was a great motivator.

Dr. Clark joined band in the 9th grade, playing trumpet. His first band director was F. B. Ward. His only other high school band director was Clyde McClellan, an excellent trombonist who started a Dixieland Band at the school. “He wrote out the parts for

us and taught us how to improvise.” During his high school years, Dr. Clark was also involved in the Future Farmers of American organization. “I was into forestry very heavily and along with a classmate, won the state championship on the forestry demonstration... this was a big deal back then.” When he went to Henderson State Teachers College in Arkadelphia, he started with a major in science thinking he would pursue forestry, geology, or archeology. “I enjoyed [science] but I found myself spending twice as much time at the music building as I did at the chemistry building... So after one semester, I just knew that I was fighting a losing battle, so I went ahead and changed to music.” During his first year of college, Robert Hardesty was his band director and was followed by Orville Kelley the next year. For his last two years of college, his band director was Mr. Wendell Evanson. Mr. Evanson remained at Henderson State throughout his career. “He built one of the finest small university programs in the nation. He is an amazing musician and an amazing man. Now he is eighty years old. I was on a trip with him last year... he gets around like a gazelle.” Dr. Clark credits Mr. Evanson with being a major influence on his approach to interpretation. During his college years Dr. Francis McBeth came to Ouachita Baptist College, located across the street from Henderson State. This gave him the opportunity to learn from both of these great musicians. Over time the three became close personal friends. As a college student, he had the opportunity to travel with both men. He would sit in the back seat and try to soak up as much of their conversation as possible.

In 1959 at the age of 20, Dr. Clark completed his undergraduate degree and became the high school band director at Arkadelphia, Arkansas. During the 50’s, it was common for many smaller communities in the south to have a band director who would teach at multiple high schools and sell instruments. Larger communities would have “career” band directors. Arkadelphia was on the edge of this dichotomy. At the time, Arkadelphia was at the beginning of a major growth phase for the community, Reynolds Aluminum and Levi Strauss both opened plants. It was this type of boost to the local economy that gave families the income to afford band instruments. With two colleges and a strong manufacturing sector, this was a vibrant community.

When he first started in 1959, band members were mostly boys “actually girls being in band was not common... except for twirlers and drum majorettes. Although this changed quickly – over about five years... there probably weren’t more than ten girls in a sixty-piece band and six of them were twirlers.” Because he was the only music teacher in the district at first, he was able to build strong working relationships with all the principals. After two years, the program had grown significantly, and Dr. Clark was given the opportunity to add music staff. Rather than ask for an assistant band director, he requested that elementary music teachers be hired – one for each of the two elementary schools.

Dr. Clark took a very unique approach to starting beginners. During the last six weeks of the school year, he would work with all the sixth graders. Using flutophone as a starting point, this gave him the opportunity to meet and learn all of the

student's names as well as teach them how to behave in a music class. Also, during this six-week period, he would have the high school ensembles come and perform for the sixth graders. He would give each student a music aptitude test. After the test scores were compiled, He mailed a letter directly to the parents about how well their child did on the test and explained the opportunities for being in band. Then he would set up appointments to meet with every child and parent(s) to discuss the instrument they would play. At the end of the six-week period, students wishing to take band were enrolled. The students started learning their instrument in the summer. He would organize the students into groups of six by like instruments and give a 30-minute lesson twice a week. He offered the lessons for eight weeks over the summer and required students to attend six of the eight weeks – this gave flexibility for family vacations. As the program matured, there were 70-100 students in his beginner classes. During this time the students learned fundamentals and completed the first band book. Through the 7th & 8th grades the students completed the entire sequence of method books. Completing this sequence allowed them to be ready for the All-State etude books when they started high school.

A key ingredient to his success at the high school was the establishment of weekly lessons for all students in grades 10-12. These 15-minute lessons were offered for 32 weeks of the academic year and included a major scale, a minor scale, a music term, and etudes along with band music when necessary. About 8 weeks before Solo and Ensemble competition, the entire focus would only be on solos. Eighth and ninth graders were in a section lesson once a week instead of individual lessons.

One of the ways he developed student leadership was through his approach to small ensembles. Students had to put together the small ensembles. "I'd tell them, Okay, you want to do a quintet... Then you come to me with the personnel, all having signed that they want to do this, where you will meet, when you will meet, and which parents are going to supervise you." Once this was approved, they would start rehearsing and Dr. Clark would schedule two coaching sessions for each ensemble. Each group would usually rehearse 5-10 times.

Whether with the large group, sectionals, ensembles, or lessons, Dr. Clark does not believe in "extra" rehearsals, only "planned" rehearsals. The only exception was for "acts of God" requiring the cancelation of a planned rehearsal. Grading was based on the lessons, not attendance at rehearsal – if you did not attend, you were not in the group.

When asked what stands out in his mind about his years at Arkadelphia, Dr. Clark said, "everything was an extension of the individual." For example, he is still in contact with many of his high school students. A retired doctor, who was in his high school band, called him recently and during the conversation asked, "If you could have the best big band that the world has ever known, who would you have in every section?" This former student has told him several times that playing "a really good solo with a jazz band [gives] me more satisfaction than any operation I have ever performed." This kind of personal connection is common with many of Dr. Clark's former students, at all levels.

Other high points from his time at Arkadelphia High School include the band being the Arkansas Honor Band, performing at the Four States Bandmasters Convention, and performing for the American School Band Directors Association National Convention. Being in the same community as Dr. McBeth gave the band the opportunity to read many of his compositions in manuscript, often to help with proofreading the parts. Performances of the Kalinnikov Symphony, "Trittico", the Persichetti Symphony and the Hindemith Symphony all stand out for him, but none of these compositions over-shadow the students coming together working for the same musical goal.

After eleven years of teaching at Arkadelphia, Dr. Clark took a leave of absence and began working on his doctorate at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM). The Arkadelphia program was well developed and there was an excellent assistant who could take over while he was away. Dr. Clark always had a desire to work in higher education and saw the doctorate as a path toward this goal. This seems like a logical conclusion considering his relationship with Dr. McBeth and Mr. Evanson.

He chose USM because the conducting professor was Joe Barry Mullins. The main thing that attracted him to Dr. Mullins, "he was an honest musician." There was something about the intensity with which he worked that resulted in a musical osmosis. Dr. Mullins had no issues with ego. Those who have worked with Dr. Clark know about his focus on pronouns – using "we" not "I." This use of collective pronouns came from Dr. Mullins. It does not matter what an individual conductor wants, what matters is what the music demands – music is the focal point. "He was the kind of person you never had to guess what he was going to say. He always told you what he thought was right."

After two years in residence and a few months passing a German proficiency test, the doctorate was complete and he accepted the Director of Bands position at Delta State University (DSU) in Cleveland, Mississippi. Although Arkadelphia High School granted him a leave of absence, there was no requirement to return. Before taking the DSU position, Dr. Clark talked with members of the Arkadelphia School Board and they understood this opportunity for him. The Cleveland and Arkadelphia communities were very similar in size, so the transition for his family was fairly seamless. The DSU music program at the time had plenty of room to grow. Although the DSU students were more mature than his high school students, their musical abilities as a whole were not quite the same. In his first year on campus, he taught marching band, concert band, all the brass lessons, and all of the percussion lessons. Of course, the greatest challenge was to get out and recruit, an activity that had been neglected. Focusing first on schools within a fifty-mile radius, Dr. Clark and one other faculty member hit the road. Over his fourteen years at DSU, these efforts paid off and the program grew in all facets – student population, number of faculty, and musical excellence. In 1970 there were approximately 15 music majors in the wind and percussion area. By the mid-eighties this number had grown substantially, with nearly two thirds of the 150 music majors in the wind and percussion area. Because

the University band and choir were focal points of the community, as the program grew so did the administrative support.

The choral director in his early years at Delta State was Bob VanBuskirk, who came from Hastings College in Nebraska. Together they started the Delta State Honor Band and Choir. These auditioned groups gave students the opportunity to come to campus, see first-hand what the university had to offer, and enjoy a great musical experience. Because Delta State was a small university and because his work was recognized, Dr. Clark was able to develop a relationship with the University President that is rarely seen on larger campuses. This relationship was key to the upper administration understanding the needs of the music program. The President once told him, "don't ever lose a good player because you don't have a scholarship." One of the keys that made this relationship flourish is that he did not ever abuse the connection. Dr. Clark kept the focus only on what was needed and never tried to see how much he could get.

After fourteen years at Delta State, Dr. Clark felt that he had reached a plateau. About the same time a New Mexico State University (NMSU) job announcement caught his eye. It was not just for a Director of Bands position, but along with the DOB and they were searching for two associate band directors! He visited with the NMSU Music department head at the time, Warner Hutchison, before applying for the position. Once the president of Delta State learned that Dr. Clark was looking at another position, he convinced him not to leave. When Dr. Hutchison learned that he was not going to apply, he asked him to work with them as a consultant to help find the right person. The more he talked with NMSU about the program and their needs, the more he realized that this was an opportunity for him and his family. The DSU president understood this desire and Dr. Clark became the NMSU Director of Bands.

In 1985, the NMSU music department was well known for its Pride marching band thanks to the work of Tim Lautzenheiser and Jerry Hoover. Dr. Clark's challenge was to grow the other aspects of the program while maintaining the excellence of this ensemble. Over the years the program had produced outstanding concert and jazz groups, at this point in history the department was ready for an upswing in all areas. A new department head was appointed by the Dean to restore fiscal management, so money was extremely tight in those early years. However, Dr. Clark said, "the thing that kept me going was the bands in this area and all the directors... were very receptive to us." Taking an approach similar to the one he used at Delta State, he put a new emphasis on recruiting, expanding from area high schools to across the state and across the region. He instituted the American Southwest Honor Band, an auditioned group of high school musicians from New Mexico and West Texas. In 1987 with area music educators, he started the Mesilla Valley Community Band, which has evolved into the Mesilla Valley Concert Band with over 100 members. "Philosophically, I had thought we were really not completing our job as music educators when we do not do something for the adults. "There are many programs for middle school, high school, and college band students, but past college we were not providing any opportunities for these musicians to continue playing." This

endeavor was very appropriate for the Land Grant University of New Mexico. In 1989, Dr. Clark was recognized by the community as Las Cruces' Citizen of the Year and the New Mexico Music Educators Association's Music Educator of the Year.

In 1990, Dr. Clark accepted the position of Academic Department Head for the NMSU Music Department. This transition allowed him to continue to remain an active conductor and clinician, while leading the growth of the entire department. During his 9 years in this position, the department expanded the number of faculty, doubled the number of music majors, and doubled the number of private gifts. In 1999, Dr. Clark officially retired as the department head and became emeritus faculty teaching half-time, or as he often described it – full time work for half-time pay! Prior to retirement, in 1996, he received the Papen Family Award from the Dona Ana Arts Association for his years of musical service to southern New Mexico.

Looking to the future, Dr. Clark reminds us – The trunk of the tree has to be a focus on fundamental playing skills, exposure to positive musical habits, a grasp of style, and characteristic sounds. Within a school band context, this is best achieved through the concert band first, then branching out to other types of ensembles such as jazz band, marching band, etc. "The first task for the band director is to give students a fundamental mind-set which tells them not to accept anything less than what the music requires to communicate the abstraction, [which] is more elusive as we perform higher level music....We don't want to water things down so people will like it. What we want to do is educate them and bring them... [to] learn to love it!"

Quotes

"Dinner – that's the noon meal for anybody that knows what they're doing and lunch is portable"

My Dad asked me what I was going to be when I grew up and I said, I think I'm gonna be a musician. Dad said, well you can't have it both ways."

Talking about musical terms in the private lesson, "I remember one kid had stringendo and he said that means string it out"

"Acts of God" are also known as "providential hindrance."

"I had a big poster board, it was PC, pre-computer."

"I think it's still a love affair with sound that I still just don't quite understand."

"I tell people to major in music only if you just absolutely have to, you just absolutely have to."

"Music is a gift, a gift that almost transcends what the human mind can wrap itself around when you get to the high level of music."

“There’s music, there’s music education, and there’s entertainment, and all three are very powerful and important. Music is the thing to center on if you’re gonna be successful at music education, and even if you’re gonna be successful at entertainment on a very high level.”

“People ask me all the time, what kind of music do you like? Well, I like any kind of music that’s honest music. I just don’t like dishonest music, such as music that promotes poor judgment and poor values and those kind of things.”