

William Bell

Biography

WILLIAM J. BELL (1902-1971) A Biography - By Harvey G. Phillips

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

The concise William J. Bell biography, which follows, was prepared for response to numerous inquiries about this great man. It is unfortunate that few music dictionaries and music history books make reference to William Bell; nor do they include sufficient, if any, reference to other great brass, woodwind and percussion artists/teachers whose impact on 20 and 21st century performers cannot be over estimated. It is hoped that future academic dissertations and theses might properly acknowledge and record the enormous contributions of singular artists whose reputations elevated them to one name reference; artists such as Helmecke, Floyd, Gallodoro, Kincaid, Baker, Tabuteau, McLean, Carmen, Glantz, Crisara, Burke, Barrows, Schuller, Pulis, Mantia, Helleberg, Evans, Jacobs, (many others). These renowned musicians established the highest standards of performance and pedagogy for their respective instruments. Their innate musicianship and consummate artistry has inspired and influenced the artistic development of future generations.

William John Bell was born in Creston, Iowa on Christmas Day, 1902. Siblings included three sisters (Sarah Betzner, b. 1898; Ruth Rankin, b. 1900; Alice White Hazeltine, b. 1907) and one brother (Samuel Milligan Bell, b. 1896). Parents were William M. Bell and Nancy Milligan Bell. I know nothing about the origin and/or professional life of his parents. All members of the family have passed on. William Bell died on August 7, 1971 and is buried in Perry, Iowa. In 1977 The Harvey Phillips Foundation established (in Perry, Iowa) an annual William Bell Celebration and installed on Bell's gravestone a bronze plate that chronicles his professional career.

When William Bell was around ten years old, he began playing tuba in a boys band in Fairfield, Iowa. The leader of this band was a local grocer with some

musical training. It must be pointed out that in the early part of this century, every town of consequence had its own town band made up of adults and accomplished younger musicians. These town bands had enthusiastic and loyal fans in their respective geographic areas which in combination, served as audiences for the outstanding professional touring bands of the day, the most popular of which was the renowned, internationally acclaimed band of John Philip Sousa; but, there were others: Bohemia Kryl, Arthur Pryor, Patrick Conway, Giuseppe Creatore, etc. The Edwin Franko Goldman Band in New York City (which never toured) was also acclaimed by critics and the patronage of loyal fans, including the wealthy Guggenheim family which built the band shell in Central Park and sustained the Goldman Band for many years. Touring circus bands were also looked up to by every town band musician. Circus bandmasters/composers such as C.L. Barnhouse, Johnny Richards, Karl King, Fred Jewel, and Merle Evans (with their respective entourage of "windjammers") were also musical heroes to town bandsmen. The State of Iowa has always been renowned for its bands and output of great brass, wind and percussion players. Young Bill Bell's persona benefited greatly from the enormous pride expressed by Iowa's citizens for their native bandsmen. The talented and precocious young Bill Bell soon attracted the attention and admiration of adult musicians.

The age of fourteen (1917) Bell was already touring with W. W. Norton's popular area professional bands and orchestras. He continued to perform for Norton after entering the University of North Dakota at age 15 (1918) on a full music scholarship. In 1918 his fame as an outstanding performer came to the attention of Colonel Harold Bachman, leader of Bachman's Million Dollar Band. Bell's assignment to the chair of principal tuba impressed all who heard him perform. In 1921 his fame and performance stature was recognized by none other than John Philip Sousa, whose famous band was, at that time, the most famous and renowned of all the world's musical organizations. The music world was astounded when John Philip Sousa summoned, without audition, 18 year old William J. Bell to accept the position of principal tuba in The Sousa Band. It is interesting to note that an outstanding young piccolo player in The Sousa Band was none other than Meredith Wilson (who later won great acclaim for his Broadway Show and movie *The Music Man*). Meredith Wilson and Bill Bell became close friends. And, it was not unexpected that William Bell (throughout his life) would gain the warm friendship and loyal, professional admiration of all his colleagues. Young Bell's reputation as a mature, courteous and personable young gentleman was equal to his unparalleled reputation as a great tubist. In the spring of 1924, while The Sousa Band was taking a much deserved rest in New York City,

William Bell was informed by one of his musician friends that Fritz Reiner was in town to audition musicians for the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra; one of the positions he hoped to fill was that of principal tuba. William Bell promptly borrowed a CC Tuba (the instrument of preference for orchestral playing) and stayed up all night memorizing tuba parts to Richard Wagner's Ein Faust Overture, and Die Meistersinger Overture, both on Reiner's audition list. The next day he appeared at Reiner's audition and was asked to play the Ein Faust Overture. On hearing Bell's performance of this one excerpt, Reiner engaged him for the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra; there was no need for Bell to play other music in the audition.

From 1924 to 1937, William Bell served as Principal Tuba with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. He also taught at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music and soon established himself as an outstanding teacher of tuba and low brass. During this tenure Bell also played principal tuba on the weekly radio broadcasts of the popular Armco Band directed by Frank Simon. From 1926-1937, during off-season for the symphony, Bell would settle in New York City to play principal tuba in the famed Goldman Band, or his beloved Asbury Park Municipal Band, founded by Arthur Pryor and Simone Mantia. (later conducted, for many years, by Frank Bryan).

In 1927, in Cincinnati, William Bell married the love of his life, Agnes Haacke who became affectionately known to a legion of musicians as "Aggie." With his marriage to Aggie, he gained a step-daughter, Phillipa Solomon (1917-1995). On December 12, 1934 daughter Nancy was born. Bell's adoring wife, Aggie, died in 1963.

In 1937, General Electric's David Sarnoff invited esteemed conductor Arturo Toscanini to select personnel for a new orchestra to be known as The NBC Symphony Orchestra. This orchestra was to be comprised of the world's greatest musicians. As legend has it, William Bell was the third musician selected by Toscanini, after his concertmaster (Mischa Mischakoff) and principal oboe (Philip Ghignatti). Early in his tenure with NBC the Ein Faust Overture again played a role in the legend of Bill Bell. The overture begins with a three measure soli played in unison by the tuba and contrabass section. The rehearsal began and, after the opening passage, Toscanini stopped and asked that it be played again. After four more requests to repeat the passage, Bell was at a loss as to what could be wrong. Toscanini sensed Bell's concern and looked in the direction of his tuba player (Toscanini had very poor eyesight), he smiled, and said, "No, No, there is nothing wrong. It is so beautiful, please play it once more, just for me." Such praise was very unusual for Toscanini and his open admiration of Bell impressed everyone in

the orchestra. In the meantime, Bell continued teaching tuba and other low brass in his private studio and became "first call" for all freelance recordings and broadcasts.

In 1943 William Bell finally succumbed to the long standing invitation of his former Sousa colleague Maurice Von Praag, then manager of The New York Philharmonic, to accept the position of principal tuba in the Orchestra. His distinguished career continued, as did his popularity with colleagues, conductors, audience, students, and all who came in contact with him. Leopold Stokowski invited Bell, under his direction of The New York Philharmonic, to perform and narrate George Kleinsinger's famous Tubby The Tuba, and to perform and sing a special arrangement of When Yuba Plays The Rhumba on the Tuba. In 1955 Bell performed the American premiere of Ralph Vaughan Williams' Concerto for Bass Tuba and Orchestra with The Little Orchestra Society.

Bell's favorite extra-curricular performance activities continued to include the Asbury Park Municipal Band and other bands in the New York area. His love for playing in bands continued throughout his life. He was often times provided opportunities to sing as well as play. William Bell had a wonderful bass-baritone voice and could match professional singers in quality and style (which he often did). During his tenure with The New York Philharmonic, Bell maintained his private studio at 119 West 121st Street (NYC) where he taught a steady stream of students from around the world, as well as from The Juilliard and Manhattan School's of Music.

In 1961, Wilfred Bain, Indiana University School of Music Dean, decided he wanted William Bell to teach for his school. He commenced calling Bell about this important position and, finally, Bell accepted and moved with his wife Aggie to Bloomington, Indiana. While at Indiana University Bell attracted some of America's most outstanding and promising students. His teaching success at Indiana is well documented and adds to his enormous contributions to the tuba and to music generally. Indeed, virtually every tubist of the twentieth century (and fixture generations) continue to benefit from the teachings, professional stature and persona of William J. Bell.

In 1971, William Bell retired from Indiana University. Following in his footsteps was former student Harvey G. Phillips who, on his appointment, established the William Bell Memorial Scholarship. Shortly after his retirement in May, 1971, Bell became ill and passed away on August 7, 1971. On October 3, 1971, in the IU School of Music's Recital Hall, Phillips hosted a memorial concert (followed by a wake) honoring William Bell. On this program were

world premiere performances of works Phillips commissioned especially for the occasion; works by Robert Russell Bennett, Paul Lavalley, Morton Gould, Alec Wilder, Warren Benson, and Gunther Schuller In 1973, in IU's newly constructed Musical Arts Center Phillips hosted the First International Tuba Symposium-Workshop, dedicated to William J. Bell. In 1974, inspired by William Bell's Birth on Christmas Day (1902), Phillips founded the now famous MERRY TUBACHRISTMAS concerts which honor William Bell and, through him, all artists/teachers of the tuba and euphonium; these concerts take place in over 150 cities and often involve as many as 300-500+ players. in 1974 Alec Wilder arranged traditional Christmas carols for the occasion and ironically passed away on Christmas Eve, 1980. Through Alec Wilder, at each concert, grateful tribute is paid to all composers who have embraced the tuba and euphonium with their solo and ensemble compositions. MERRY TUBACHRISTMAS-I 999 (26th anniversary) celebrates over a quarter century of concerts honoring William Bell.

In May, 1994, Harvey Phillips retired from Indiana University with the title of Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Music. Throughout his professional performance and teaching careers Phillips championed the personal and professional integrity of his teacher, William J. Bell.

In 1994 Daniel Perantoni, world renowned artist/teacher, joined the Indiana University School of Music faculty. During the mid-1960's, while a member of the United States Army Band, Dan traveled to New York City for private study in the Carnegie Hall Studios of Harvey Phillips. Thus the lineage of Bell's influence continues into another century.

Harvey Phillips

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