

## Special Focus: Comprehensive Music Programs

# Karl Gehrkens

## Ohio Son, Music Education Pioneer, Comprehensive Musician

By Peggy D. Bennett and Joanne Erwin

The ultimate aim of music teaching in the public schools is to cause children to know, to love and to appreciate music in as many forms as possible, and thus to bring added joy into their lives and added culture and refinement into their natures [Birge, 1928, p. 249].

The collective wisdom of this statement came from a 1910 committee whose charge it was to establish a direction for the American school music curriculum. Cincinnati hosted the Music Supervisors National Conference (a precursor to MENC) that year, and at that gathering, the goal statement was submitted and accepted. Names of commit-

tee members read like a Who's Who in Music Education: Will Earhart, Hollis Dann, Walter Aiken, Edward Bailey Birge, and Karl Gehrkens (Birge, 1928, p. 249). These first architects of school music outlined national goals and established roots for the comprehensive study of music and the broad development of musicianship: performance skills were to be developed in partnership with both musical knowledge and student enjoyment.

### Karl W. Gehrkens

A key player in these early years of school music and training music supervisors was Ohio native, Karl Wilson Gehrkens. Gehrkens's beginnings in a state noted for its outstanding music programs and prominent music education leaders, set the stage for his lifetime of cardinal contributions to the field.

In 1907, when the Oberlin College recruited 25-year-old Gehrkens to head the school music department, he brought brief but varied experiences in public school teaching to the campus. Born in 1882 on the shores of Lake Erie, Gehrkens graduated from Oberlin College in 1905 and accepted a position teaching German, algebra, choir, and piano lessons at Oberlin High School. By the following year, Gehrkens was teaching all the music classes in the Oberlin schools.

The fledgling program in school music that Gehrkens inherited at the conservatory had begun five years earlier in 1902<sup>1</sup>. William Horner and sisters Estelle and Lucille Reed taught two courses to train conservatory students to teach music in the public schools. One course was devoted to "a thorough drill in sight singing," and the other presented "in a systematic manner, the best teaching methods, together with



Music education pioneer, Dr. Karl W. Gehrkens, leads a teacher education session at the helm at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, ca. 1952.

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the material for each successive grade" (Warch, 1967, p. 37). In 1907, only 15 students were enrolled in the school music department. In the next 15 years, however, Gehrken built a program that attracted students and carved a model for music teacher education.

### Comprehensive Teacher Training

Gehrken struggled to provide comprehensive training to future music educators in a climate that held little interest in such a field. In 1960, Gehrken wrote a letter explaining his difficulty in designing a comprehensive curriculum.

"Even such subjects as music theory, music history, and music appreciation were 'lowly cattle' among those who sang or played or taught the performing arts. When I attended meetings of the MTNA and was introduced as a member of the Oberlin faculty, the person to whom I was being introduced would murmur, 'How very interesting; my aunt (or my cousin or my wife or my someone else) used to study in the Conservatory—do you teach piano or singing?' And when I replied that I taught school music . . . the person would murmur, 'Oh yes—and turn away'" (Lendrim, 1962, p. 260).

Persistence in designing a comprehensive program for school music teachers paid off. By 1921, Gehrken had 100 students enrolled in the program that "included four years of coursework in the fields of applied music, music theory and history, educational psychology, school organization, practice teaching, and related courses in the humanities" (Oberlin College Archives). In 1923, the Oberlin College school music department awarded the first-ever Bachelor of School Music degree in the United States—a scaffold for the profession of music education.

### Music For Every Child

The reciprocal synergy of Gehrken's work on campus and nationally gave tremendous support to the budding profession of music education. Attendance at the first conference of the Music Teachers National Association (MTNA), held in Oberlin in 1906, launched Gehrken's 36-year commitment to that organization, as its president (1934-35) and as editor of proceedings (1917-1939) (Lendrim, 1962, p. 45). Gehrken's involvement with Mu-

sic Educators National Conference (MENC) included lobbying for a permanent headquarters, crafting national standards for training music teachers, serving as president (1923), and being a member of its Executive Committee (1930-1934). In 1922, Gehrken coined the phrase "Music for Every Child, Every Child for Music" and MENC quickly adopted it as an official slogan.

### From Theory to Practice

Gehrken's work and ideas grew from his perspectives as a teacher. What he needed to learn in order to teach his courses, he searched for in available books. Not finding the information he wanted, he created and organized ideas into manuscripts that often later became published articles or texts. In this way and in this sequence, Gehrken's career "reflects the growth of public school music in the first half of this century" (Lendrim, 1962, p. iii).

Gehrken's "extensive interest and work in the field of psychology" had been strongly influenced by Farnsworth's ideas, presented in the 1909 text, *Education Through Music* (Lendrim, 1962). Farnsworth presented five principles for teaching music that broadly describe the stability of practice that should underlie all music teaching. "The purpose of education through art is to quicken perception, clarify feeling, and stimulate initiative for the beautiful" (Farnsworth, 1909, p. 7). Gehrken disseminated his ideas about this meshing of psychology and music teaching when he presented his first paper for the 1912 Music Supervisors National Con-

ference, *The Value of Psychology to the Music Supervisor* (Lendrim, 1962, p. 166).

"View[ing] the subject from the pupil's point of view" (Farnsworth, 1909, p. 8) was a theme that found its way into many of Gehrken's written works. Emphasis on song singing and listening lessons to achieve appreciation of music was foundational to the lessons presented in *The Universal School Music Series* by Damrosch, Gartlan and Gehrken (1923-1936). The initial book of this series was one of the first texts to address music teaching in a *comprehensive, balanced way*. From this progressive education perspective, teachers were encouraged to balance a work period covering music fundamentals with a recreational period including listening and singing.

In what sounds like an early version of concern for developmentally appropriate practice, the introduction to *The Universal School Music Series* cautioned teachers to consider their students' needs and interests as they planned and taught their lessons.

The wise teacher knows that both time and nerves are conserved by a few minutes of recreational music two or three times daily, entirely apart from the formal music period. One of the most noticeable shortcomings of our American social life has been our inability to engage in satisfactory song-singing at social or other gatherings. It is our aim to meet this need by suggesting that all children in the public schools

### BOOKS BY GEHRKEN

1914	<i>Music Notation and Terminology</i> . Chicago: Laidlaw Brothers.
1919	<i>Essentials in Conducting</i> . Boston: Oliver Ditson.
1919	<i>An Introduction to School Music Teaching</i> . Boston: C. C. Birchard & Co.
1924	<i>Fundamentals of Music</i> . Boston: Oliver Ditson.
1927	<i>Handbook of Musical Terms</i> . Boston: Oliver Ditson.
1930-36	<i>Twenty Lessons in Conducting</i> . Boston: Oliver Ditson. <i>The Universal School Music Series</i> . New York: Hines, Hayden & Eldredge. With Walter Damrosch and George Gartlan.
1934	<i>Music in the Grade Schools</i> . Boston: C. C. Birchard.
1936	<i>Music in the Junior High School</i> . Boston: C. C. Birchard.
1941	<i>The Teaching and Administration of Music in the High School</i> . Boston: C. C. Birchard. With Peter W. Dykema.
1925-34	Editor of <i>School Music</i> .

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commit to memory each year the words of two or three well-known songs (Mark, 1982, p. 178).

The introduction to his third book, *An Introduction to School Music Teaching* (1919), iterates Gehrken's passion for quality music education and hints at his lifelong avoidance of identification with a music series, method, or "any commercial concern to dominate me" (Lendrim, 1962, p. 261).

I am a thorough believer in the unique educational value of music as a school subject, but I am just as thoroughly convinced that it is only when properly administered that significant results will eventuate. This does not mean that any particular method must be employed but rather than teachers must realize more definitely the end to be accomplished through music study" (Gehrken, 1919, p. v).

### **An Ongoing Legacy**

MENC Hall of Famer (1986), Karl Wilson Gehrken, has earned a secure place

in the history of music education in the United States. Heart problems eventually led to Gehrken's retirement in 1942 at the age of 60; he lived until 1975. When Gehrken promoted the notion of "Music for Every Child, Every Child for Music" in 1922, he could not have known that his sentiment would resonate just as powerfully 80 years later. Gehrken was a pioneer and a pivotal force in the early days of training music teachers in the United States. He designed curricula and materials to assist public school music teachers and shape public school music programs, all presages to the comprehensive musicianship model we know today.

When we reflect on our work as music teachers, assessing our goals and our students' accomplishments, those aims written nearly 100 years ago can still serve as touchstones for our work: Are we helping children to know, to love, and to appreciate music in as many forms as possible? Are we helping bring added joy into students' lives and added culture and refinement into their natures?

'On November 9, 2002, the Oberlin Conservatory and the Music Education Division celebrate A Century of Oberlin Music Education, commemorating the rich history and traditions of its program.

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