

The Growth of Music in Ypsilanti

BY ERIC WALTERS

Introduction

Having grown up in Ypsilanti, I attended Ypsi Public Schools and Eastern Michigan University (EMU) and was involved with both of their music programs. As a string bass player, I have been afforded opportunities to perform regularly with four major musical ensembles that have been established in the last fifty years.

In 1969, I was in ninth grade and a string bass player in Barb Weiss's string program at West Junior High School when I met Lynn Cooper, who was teaching band there. A group of us would gather in Mr. Cooper's office almost every morning before school started, teasing him, kidding around, and generally being junior high school students with a teacher we liked. By mid-term, we were lobbying Mr. Cooper to let me into his concert band as a string bass player. He agreed to do that, and by the second semester of ninth grade, I was in both band and orchestra. Mr. Cooper later moved up to Ypsi High. I never played in concert band at that level, but I continued to play in the orchestra, still directed by Barb Weiss.

Years before the sesquicentennial, Ypsilanti Civic Orchestra collaborated with EMU's music department, allowing both the community and the school to provide a more robust orchestra than either could have done on their own. In the early 1970s, the Ypsilanti Civic-University Orchestra disbanded, and many of those players, including Mrs. Weiss, joined the Plymouth Symphony. The growth of EMU's Music Department allowed the university to have its own orchestra, thus it no longer need the adjunct players.

The Ypsilanti Community Band

Several years after I graduated from high school, Lynn Cooper decided that Ypsilanti needed a community band. He had been contacted by multiple alumni about doing this. Cooper and these former players formed the Ypsilanti Community Band in January 1979. For the years that Cooper directed this band, and for some years after, they met

and performed at Ypsilanti High School. The band grew in part because of the stability afforded by the close tie to the high school. My participation in this group came later.

The Ypsilanti Community Choir

In the spring of 1983, a flute player with the band, Denise Rae Zellner, was earning her master's degree in music at the University of Michigan. One requirement was that she conduct an ensemble as her final project. To fulfill this, she formed a choir from band members and their families for a performance. That performance turned into the Ypsilanti Community Choir, which incorporated in 1984.

Shortly after this, I got a call from Denise asking if I would play bass for the choir's upcoming concert. I remember going to a couple of rehearsals at the First Baptist Church. I didn't know many in the choir at that time, but I do remember getting a couple of looks from Phyllis Bogarin, their accompanist, who didn't like my pitch on a few occasions. I would grow quite fond of Phyllis over the years. She had a reliable ear that I grew to depend on once I was singing with the choir.

In 1996, I had to give up playing basketball every Thursday night. As soon as I announced that retirement, my wife, Lisa, immediately suggested we join the choir which she'd been wanting to do for some time. I agreed that it would be nice to do something like this together.

By the time we joined, the Ypsilanti Community Choir was rehearsing at Emmanuel Lutheran Church. I remember walking into that first rehearsal and thinking, "Am I a tenor or a bass?" I looked at the maybe ten men that were there and I noticed there were only three tenors. That decided it for me: I'd be a tenor. (Clearly I hadn't done all that much singing in a choir, and I guessed I could sing either part.) Denise said, "It's the bass player!" remembering me from their concert ten years earlier.

I sat down next to Bob Klaffke, and while that was just dumb luck, it turned out to be just what I should have done, as Bob has perfect pitch. With him singing in my left ear, I could generally stay out of Phyllis's doghouse.

The choir performed annual holiday and spring concerts, on Memorial Day at the Vietnam Veteran's observance, and at the Heritage Festival in Riverside Park. Since the passing of Denise Zellner in 2006, the choir has been led by Ariel Toews-Ricotta, with Maria Cimarelli as accompanist.

My Connection to YCB

I also met Wayne Jahnke at choir. It turned out that Wayne played trombone with the Ypsilanti Community Band (YCB) and, more importantly, with John Reeves' Riverside Big Band. Wayne explained that the RBB needed a steady bass player and that they rehearsed the hour before YCB at what was then West Middle School. This was irresistible to me. I'd be rehearsing in my old band and orchestra room!

Of course, the big band was a gateway to playing with the concert band. I mean, once I've hauled the bass to the venue and I've unbagged it, I might as well just stay on and play with that group, too.

By the time I joined that band, Lynn Cooper had moved on to the university level down in Kentucky, and the director was Dr. Jerry Robbins. Between Cooper and Robbins there had been three other conductors: Paul Stanifer, Dr. Charles Lee, and Ken Bowman, the retired band teacher for Lincoln High School and a charter member of YCB. He conducted till 1998. His wife, Mary, also sang with the choir, yet another connection between the two organizations.

For years the two community groups cooperated on a holiday concert, or rather, the band invited the choir to perform at their holiday concert. These concerts went on from about 1984 to 2012, when both groups had large enough followings that the only venue in town that could house the event was EMU's Pease Auditorium. The expense of that made it impractical to continue the holiday program.

The band played five regular season indoor concerts at various venues and three summer concerts, in Recreation and Candy Cane Parks and on the campuses of EMU and Washtenaw Community College (WCC), in addition to the Heritage Festival.

The Ypsilanti Symphony Orchestra

In August 1999, I got a call from Barb Weiss, my string teacher of many years and colleague in the Plymouth Symphony. She had been asked to join a new community orchestra that was forming, and she knew they were looking for bass players. I agreed to attend the first organizational meeting of the Ypsilanti Symphony Orchestra (YSO), at which I was elected to the board as their first vice president. I served one year as vice president, two years as president, and two more years as vice president. I did a lot of work trying to make the fledgling orchestra into a credible performer over those first five years.

In that five years the orchestra went from no budget to a budget of about \$45,000 annually. I'm really proud that we were able to fund the orchestra and start a scholarship that is still being given out today.

Initially, the YSO performed at Holy Trinity Chapel and then moved to WCC's Towsley Auditorium. They held four regular season performances and a fundraising concert in the spring. This spring concert exists today as their Memorial Day concert in Riverside Park.

It was through my membership in the YSO that I met Chris Balk and Ben Kessler. At the time, I didn't know they'd become important to me. Chris was acting as photographer for the orchestra (his wife was a cellist), and Ben was the principal trombone player.

The Depot Town Big Band

In 2011, Matt Balmer started the Depot Town Big Band. He was getting his master's

degree at EMU and the band was a project for his degree (a recurring theme for grad students in music). Matt was also playing in the YCB and asked me to join his big band. By this time the Riverside Big Band was no more, as John Reeves had moved on with his library of big band charts.

It was at one of my first rehearsals with this band that I reconnected with Chris and Ben. For two years Matt held rehearsals at the Alexander Music Building at Eastern. The band had a difficult time keeping to a regular schedule, and many players came and went. Matt's tenure ended with him getting his degree and taking a job out of state. He handed the band off to Chris, as band manager, and Ben, as band director.

Without an official connection to EMU, Chris had to find a new place for us to rehearse. It so happened that Lisa and I owned a commercial building in downtown Ypsilanti, right next door to Haab's Restaurant. As the first floor was vacant, it was an ideal location for the band to rehearse, starting in the fall of 2013. Often when Lisa and I would go to Haab's for a meal, Mike Kabat, Haab's owner, would mention hearing the band through the common wall.

The band continued to have problems with players showing up consistently for rehearsals. It occurred to us that attendance would be improved if musicians were working toward a performance. I thought of Mike's comment, and I volunteered to talk to him about playing in Haab's backroom once a month. When I approached Mike, it was a pretty easy sale. From early in 2014 to the COVID shutdown, the band had a performance to work toward, and the community had a nice event to look forward to.

All four of these groups came back after the COVID shutdown. All have good websites that will lead you to their performance schedules, and I'm sure all four are happy for your patronage and participation. They are proud of their ties to the Ypsilanti community, and Ypsilanti is fortunate to have them.

A Notes on Sources

Sources for this chapter include mainly the author's personal recollections, supplemented by the bands' and choir's websites.

About the Author

Eric Walters moved to Ypsilanti when he was two years old. He and his wife, Lisa, raised three sons who also attended Ypsi schools and studied several musical instruments. In addition to performing as a musician, Eric has maintained a career in the field of Information Technology. In 2017, Eric and Lisa retired to Palm Springs, California, where he continues to play frequently and has joined a number of local bands. They maintain a second home on Ypsilanti's Ford Lake.