

A Brief History of the ABA

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Vol 12, #1, p.8 (Aug-Sep 1996)

During the early decades of the twentieth century, it was the concert band which could rightfully be credited with bringing more quality music to the general public than any other type of musical organization. Concert bands travelled throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe and brought great music to thousands of people who otherwise would not have had an opportunity to experience musical culture. Regardless of their popularity, these concert bands were unable to compete on the same musical level as the symphony orchestra and, as a result, were said to have suffered from an inferiority complex. Several factors contributed to this state of mind including the difficulty of aspiring band conductors to obtain a quality music education, the limited repertoire of the band (which, with the exception of marches, had to be largely borrowed from libraries of the orchestra, opera, and light opera), and a lack of camaraderie among the leading bandmasters.

Dr. Edwin Franko Goldman, composer, conductor, and founder of the Goldman Band, recognized these problems and challenges to the band movement. He believed that good band music could and should be offered to the music-loving public. In addition, Goldman was convinced that what was good for one band would be good for all. He arranged for a small group of outstanding bandmasters to meet in New York to discuss the problems of their profession. They all agreed that through a combined effort, they could work toward better bands and better band music. It was here that Goldman's idea for establishing The American Bandmasters Association (ABA) became a real possibility.

Goldman continued to be the momentum behind the ABA and was driven by his resolve to improve what he considered to be unprofessional conduct among some bandmasters. Goldman noted an increasing degree of envy and jealousy among band conductors and performers. He, in fact, was determined to improve not only the band profession, but collegial spirit among the directors. Goldman also realized the dramatic impact of the radio broadcast and the steady decrease in popularity of the touring professional bands. Concert bands were forced to compete for important bookings. The one exception was Goldman's New York City-based band which experienced the opposite effect from the popularity of the radio. Many of Goldman's concerts were broadcast on radio and became popular throughout the country. This in turn boosted his live concert success in New York City, drawing crowds of 25,000 or more people. Goldman became the second most famous bandmaster in the United States, behind only the immortal John Philip Sousa.

This rise in fame was not easy for Goldman, as his sensitive nature caused him to worry about the quarrelsome conduct he was witnessing in the professional band world. It did, however, provide him the respect and contacts that he would need to gain interest and support for the ABA. In 1927, his travels as a leader in the band world afforded Goldman opportunities to discuss his ideas with other bandmasters. He was encouraged by favorable reactions in the profession and, during the summer of 1928, met with Victor

Grabel, conductor of the Chicago Concert Band and Captain William Stannard, Leader of the U.S. Army Band, in Columbus, Ohio, to begin discussing what resulted in the first formal steps towards the foundation of ABA.

The original and lasting intent of ABA was recorded in a letter to Albert Austin Harding, Director of Bands at the University of Illinois, by Capt. Stannard in August, 1928: "...we conceived the idea of creating an ABA for the purpose of furthering the interests of outstanding American Band Masters, and of interesting composers, arrangers, and music publishers in Wind Band music... It would be the aim of the ABA to unite in a concerted effort to influence the best composers to write for the Wind Band."

He also mentioned that Commander John Philip Sousa had been interviewed in connection with the proposed idea and was quite enthusiastic in consenting to act as President of the association. The support of John Philip Sousa was of vital importance as he was a man recognized as America's foremost bandmaster. Sousa had the respect and personality necessary to motivate bandmasters to unite in Goldman's common cause.

Grabel and Stannard immediately began groundwork toward the official foundations of ABA. Stannard sought input from acclaimed bandmasters and Grabel organized meetings in Chicago when Stannard, Harding, Sousa or other bandmasters were in the city. Goldman remained the guiding force behind the movement, while Grabel appears to have acted as the primary executive force.

Next time: The first meeting.