

HISTORY OF THE BOWLING GREEN WESTERN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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In 2008 the Bowling Green-Western Symphony Orchestra (BGWSO) will celebrate a century of providing learning opportunities for student and community musicians as well as entertaining and educating the public about the joys of orchestral music. The Orchestra's history is indelibly linked with the development of WKU's music department.

The first catalog for the Western Kentucky State Normal School, published in November 1906, listed only four music classes: Common School Music—Methods & Training, Sight Singing, Piano, and Voice. The faculty, consisting of W.L. Gebhart and Irene Russell, encouraged students to participate in various performance ensembles, including the Choral Society, the Glee Club, and the Normal School Orchestra. During the school's first year of operation, 275 students enrolled in music courses, most of these were future teachers. Western's budget request to the General Assembly the following year suggested a special appropriation of \$600 for the music department. Of that amount \$250 was earmarked "to purchase a new piano for the music room." The growing institution could not afford instruments for the students. A 1909 catalog noted: "If new students desire to become members of the band [or orchestra], they will have an opportunity to do so. It will be a good idea to bring with you any instruments you may play. There will be no extra charge for this work." It is doubtful that the group performed for an audience more than once a semester. Western introduced Professor A.W. White as the new "Director of the School of Music" in the fall of 1909. He instituted a schedule of vocal and instrumental music concerts, but the programs concentrated on solo and small ensemble performances. The first program that has survived from that era that includes the Normal School Orchestra is dated November 9, 1909. The group performed "Over the Waves" by Juventino Rosas. No doubt the Orchestra had performed before, but no documentation survives to authenticate that fact.

The Orchestra became a much more vibrant part of the school and the community when Professor Franz J. Strahm was hired as the "Dean of the School of Music" in 1910. Strahm immediately scheduled orchestral performances throughout the academic year, invited exciting musical celebrities to campus, and began an annual May Festival. The Festivals were well attended, filling Van Meter Auditorium with over 2000 eager listeners. They also brought great recognition to Western's music department.

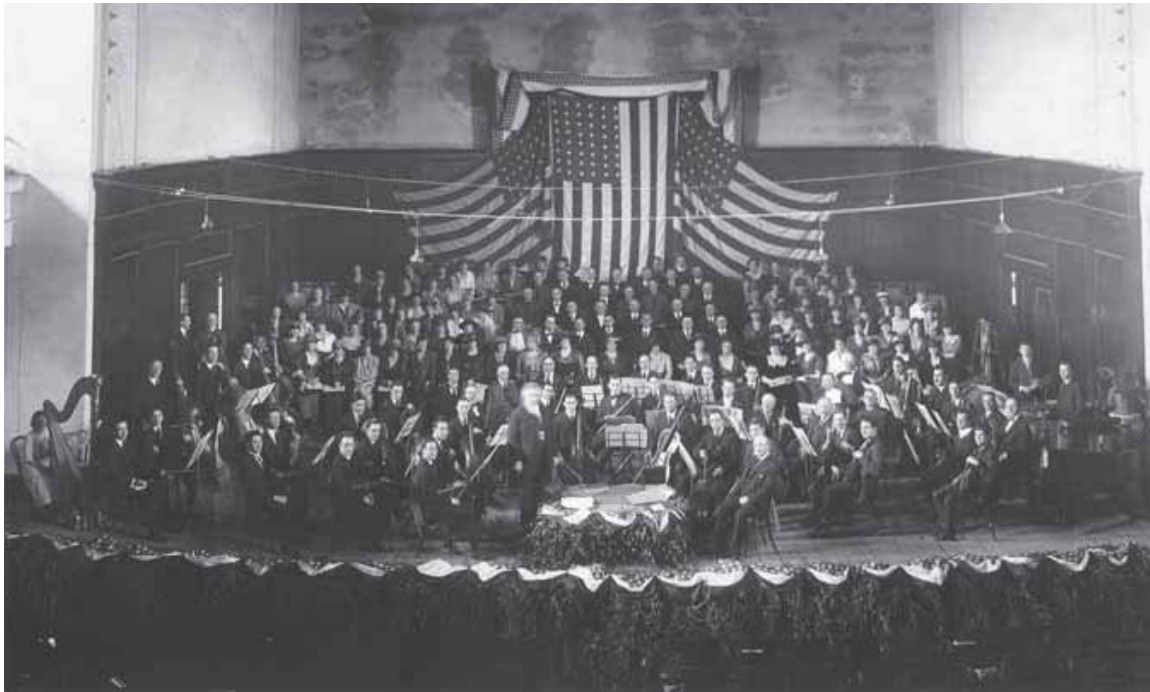
Since the Strahm era, Western has enjoyed an enviable reputation in music education. The BGWSO has been a vital part of that experience. Although the public was always encouraged to attend concerts, the community did not financially support it as an arts group in their community. Instead, they supported the Bowling Green Community Concert Association which helped bring nationally recognized musical performers to the city. Because of budget constraints in the early 1980s, the Western Symphony Orchestra was threatened with extinction. A concerned cadre of citizens banded together to help support the symphony both financially and with their attendance. The "Premier Concert" of the BGWSO was performed on October 18, 1982 under the directorship of Gary Dilworth in the recently renovated Capitol Arts Center.

With a new community venue, BGWSO's financial



Franz J. Strahm led Western's music department from 1910 until his death in 1941.

coffers benefited, but a critical need for more funds existed. Gradually, it became clear that a new organization was needed to support the orchestra with strategic planning, volunteers, and fundraising. The Bowling Green Western Symphony Orchestra was officially incorporated in 1986 as a non-profit corporation responsible for “promoting and fostering music, dance, arts and other cultural activities for enhancement of the social welfare of the community.” The Orchestra’s broadened scope and continuing cooperation between the Bowling Green community and WKU has allowed it to provide interesting and entertaining programming for the last two decades. With musicians from WKU and the surrounding region, the Orchestra serves as a model of cooperation and financial stability for symphony orchestras in communities the size of Bowling Green. The next one hundred years certainly hold great promise for this important arts organization.



Franz J. Strahm getting ready to lead the Western Symphony Orchestra in a patriotic concert on campus.