

THE ORCHESTRAL WORKS OF MEREDITH WILLSON

By

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To my friends, family, and especially...
to those teachers who opened my eyes to the world, past and present.

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Iowa-native Meredith R. Willson contributed significantly to twentieth-century American music. Best-known as a flutist and composer of popular songs and musicals, Willson was also a radio musical director, division head of NBC west, popular radio host who became an Iowa icon, and composer of orchestral works. Nevertheless, aside from just a handful of compositions, the bulk of Willson's work, regardless of genre, remains virtually unknown. This is particularly true of his orchestral works.

To better facilitate a discussion of Willson, this study begins with a brief synopsis of the literary sources. A biographical overview of the composer's life follows, in which significant aspects of Willson's life are examined, including his childhood, training, performance highlights, major compositions, and recognitions. Willson's relationship with the popular world as examined through the composer's own writings and in writings by other individuals. Following this information, the bulk of this study focuses on the orchestral works in relation to Willson's life. A chapter on his training as a composer and conductor outlines his studio career and places the orchestral compositions in their chronological output. Particular analytical attention is given to Willson's two symphonies, as these are the only of his works for which complete scores are known to exist.

Compositionally, Willson's orchestral works combine elements of popular and classical music, including polytonality. This study documents Willson's orchestral compositions and examines the social factors and cultural contexts which contributed to their writing; analyzes the works to identify compositional procedures utilized, observes stylistic influences, and summarizes the composer's style as an orchestral composer. Numerous musical examples and extensive quotations from the composer's autobiographical works and interviews are included.

Two lengthy analyses of the symphonies, with musical examples, are included. Willson's style as a symphonic composer is examined in terms of programmatic influence, rhythm, melody, harmony, instrumentation, improvisation, and structural devices. Commentary from popular and critical sources is incorporated throughout the study. An extensive bibliography and catalogue of Willson's works complete the examination.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

Meredith Willson, 1902-1984, was a remarkable multi-talented American musician whose musical skills encompassed an array of musical interests over the course of his lifetime. The earliest professional aspect of his career was as a flute and piccolo player in John Philip Sousa's band, and soon thereafter with the New York Philharmonic under Willem Mengelberg, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Willem Van Hoogstraten, and Arturo Toscanini. From performance Willson expanded into conducting, distinguishing himself by becoming the youngest director of the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra. Willson was a pioneer in the new medium of radio, for which he directed orchestras, developed programs, and managed radio stations during the 1930s and 1940s. He influenced the development of standard accepted media formats of the era, including stereotypical characters and 'top ten' or 'Hit Parade' listings. Willson was also a writer, authoring a manual of popular compositional techniques, three books reflecting on his musical pursuits, and one work of fiction. Over the course of his various musical and professional identities, Meredith Willson maintained his creative outlet, composition.

Willson's career as a composer spanned sixty years, over which time he composed approximately four hundred works in numerous genres. His output included hundreds of songs, some works for band, film scores, and several stage works, such as the popular *The Music Man*, and *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*. The area of output for which Willson is least known is his orchestral works: two full symphonies; two symphonic poems; three suites; and several works of no specified genre. Over the course of his career, Willson received numerous honors, awards, and commissions, among them two Academy Award nominations and a Tony award.

During the early twentieth-century, American composers were significantly influenced by new trends and technologies, and became both agents of this change, and affected by it. Willson's musical life was lived during a time of dramatic musical and social change in the United States. The purpose of this dissertation is to present a short biography of the composer, to discuss musical influences on the compositions, to explore aspects of Willson's performance and conducting careers, and to illuminate his lifelong connection to his native Iowa. An overarching aim of this study is to document ways in which Willson's music was affected by twentieth-century trends, the multitudinous facets of his career, and his diverse life experiences. To this end the study explores circumstances surrounding Willson's orchestral compositions. Appendices order his works by chronology and genre. In order to consider the orchestral works within a context of his entire output, the study touches, to a reasonable extent, upon compositions in the diverse genres of music in which Willson composed.

Works are analyzed to show how Willson used compositional elements. Extra-compositional particulars are also explored so as to place Willson's works in the context of the early twentieth-century and to reveal the variety of influences which inspired his compositions. Analytical focus centers on those compositions for which a score is known to exist. Commentary is generally omitted on transcriptions, editions, and rearrangements by Willson. There are numerous orchestral arrangements, by both the composer and others, of Willson's successful stage works; these will not be considered part of his orchestral output.

Need for the Study

Displaying a diversity of talent that rivaled other composers of his generation, Willson composed songs, orchestral music, radio music, film scores, and centennial music for at least five individual state celebrations. These works have been given short shrift in current literature and are in need of further elucidation. Willson appeared frequently as a guest conductor for groups

as diverse as large established orchestras and middle school bands. He was honored by federal, state, and municipal governments, as well as by universities, professional societies, and individuals, with honorary degrees, membership invitations, and various other awards. Despite his musical prowess, Meredith Willson has not been well-remembered in musical circles nor, considering his high-profile radio career, by the public he served for many decades. He is generally only recollected for one or two stage works which gained widespread popularity. The bulk of his numerous compositions, including songs, band works, symphonies, and orchestral works, are largely unknown and inaccessible.

Though his output was prolific and diverse, Willson remains a neglected figure in twentieth-century music. He did not center himself as a ‘classical’ composer, nor as a ‘popular’ composer, nor did he focus his efforts in any one genre. He rode the wave of faddish culture and willingly popularized himself with public and press. Only a limited selection of leading books, dictionaries, and encyclopedias mention the musician and his accomplishments, and in these the focus is largely on his better known popular works, rather than his orchestral works.

At the time of publication most of Willson’s orchestral compositions were not widely circulated, and many scores cannot be located. This scarcity of printed scores is a factor further contributing to the neglect of Willson’s orchestral compositions. The scores for most of his compositions for radio have disappeared, and it is likely they were either destroyed or, through multiple purchases and repurchases of networks and radio stations, remain lost in boxes or storage facilities. Willson made no effort to keep scores or personal papers, frequently sending items to friends without keeping a copy. What personal papers and other forms of memorabilia have survived, remain scattered, unpublished, and unavailable to performers, teachers, and

conductors. Some items may remain in the possession of his widow, Rosemary Sullivan Willson, who, for many years has been largely secluded.

Though Willson's fame rests largely on his popular stage works, most of his orchestral compositions were publicly premiered. This is largely due to the composer's friendships with influential musical figures, as well as his own efforts in using orchestras with which he had an affiliation, usually as a guest-conductor. Relatively few of the orchestral works, though, have been recorded. The difficulty in finding recordings and scores, and a lack of repeat performances of many of the premiered works has further hampered appreciation of Willson's orchestral contributions.

Few individuals have explored Willson's life and works, and existing works focus almost exclusively on his stage works. The most noteworthy of these, *The Music Man* (1957), was produced relatively late in Willson's career. A selection of newspaper and journal articles have focused on either the life of the composer, or on an individual career success, such as *The Music Man*, but there has been little scholarship on Willson's earlier life and works. The orchestral works were composed almost entirely in the first decade of his compositional career, from his early *Parade Fantastique* (1930) to his *Symphony Number 2 in E Minor* (1940), an era of Willson's life which remains largely unexplored.

Willson has been overlooked, too, by the scholarly community. A survey of the literature reveals that discussions of his music are omitted altogether from important texts dealing with music of the twentieth-century, music of America, and biographies of musicians. Willson is mentioned only in passing in other texts, and the overwhelming focus of most entries is on his stage works. These are curious omissions in important areas of Willson's creative career. Since a study of Willson's orchestral works has not been previously undertaken, the author will rectify

this situation in the present document. The current study will also endeavor to correct errors or misconceptions found in other printed sources and previous published materials regarding Willson, both as a personality and as a composer. His good humor and willingness to ‘play the stooge’ have contributed to the anecdotal nature of previous writings about the composer. This study seeks to present a revisionist perspective, one which does not demolish or diminish Willson, but brings accuracy to the circumstances of his life.

Research Procedure

Information for this study had to be gleaned from various diverse sources. The general information and framework for the present investigation was based on material from the sources cited in the Chapter 2, *Review of the Literature*. More specific details were found in such disparate sources as newspaper and journal articles, Willson’s literary works, the University of Iowa (UI) Music Library, Mason City Public Library archives, letters, program notes, and talks and informal interviews with members of the musical community who knew Willson personally. The author consulted illuminating vignettes in a number of newspapers; for example, the *New York Times*, the *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, the *San Francisco Observer*, and multitudinous other city newspapers which contained one or more articles on the musician. Among the more helpful and detailed sources on the composer were program notes from performances of his various works.

The present study would not have been possible without the assistance of several important institutions. The Mason City Public Library (MCPL) Archives houses family letters and information pertaining to the ancestry and childhood of Willson and the local history of the Willson family. This excellent archive was also the source of biographical pamphlets, newspaper and magazine articles, and most importantly, manuscript and published copies of several of Willson’s works, though largely the songs. The University of Iowa Archives hold

manuscripts and music donated by Willson, including the score for two movements of his *First Symphony*, and a variety of newspaper articles relevant to his connection with the University.

The Fleisher Collection of the Free Library of Philadelphia holds the complete scores for the two symphonies.

Analysis of Data

Using an essentially chronological approach, each orchestral work was individually studied and addressed. An analysis of the individual works was gained through biographical readings, score study, listening to any available released or private recordings, score reading, and program notes. Background information, such as commissioning circumstances, premier dates, and general life circumstances of the composer, was established and presented for each piece. A thorough and deliberate search was made for the scores for each work. Those works for which a score could be located were analyzed, and an attempt made to illuminate stylistic trends. Those works for which only a reduced or piano score could be located were also analyzed for general characteristics. Items for which no score could be found are noted, both in the body of the work and in the appendices. Both written commentary and musical examples were used to describe and illustrate compositional style and intent.

Findings are presented using an essentially chronological approach. The intent of this approach is to facilitate the identification of trends in Willson's development as a composer and the reflection of these in his compositional style. A chronological approach is also valuable in establishing Willson's role within the diverse trends of twentieth-century music. An additional aim of this approach is the anticipation that providing a background for and broad description of each piece will encourage performance of Willson's works by orchestras and ensembles. Finally, conclusions are drawn as a result of this vast research and analytical survey.

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Biographical Dictionaries and Encyclopedias

As a thorough examination of the orchestral works of Meredith Willson has never before been executed, any gathering of information must begin by examining general music dictionaries and encyclopedias, and major sources on the history of music in the United States. Given the common perception of Willson as a popular composer, sources must include a variety of books which examine this area as part of an overall perspective; thus the review includes selected sources on contemporary music and popular composers. While most examined references are excellent in their own way, they generally touch only briefly upon the subject at hand. Much of their merit lies in their bibliographies as a point of departure to additional material. The researcher, then, must ferret material from a variety of sources, among them, newspaper and magazine articles, reviews of Willson's works, interviews with individuals who had close contact with the composer, record and CD jacket notes, program notes, letters, scripted talks and lectures, and archival materials.

The remainder of this section will provide an overview of musical sources grouped by topic or subject area: general references; books on twentieth-century musicians and composers; texts on twentieth-century music; American music and American composers; and sources that deal with a specific genre of music. Information exists in each grouping, with different sources providing varying degrees of usefulness. Since virtually no research has been done on Willson's orchestral works, little exists in the way of directly related sources. Most entries are brief and serve more to establish a historical perspective than to provide topical data.

The first category consists of major musical sources serving as general references of music facts. The standard music dictionary in English, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and*

Musicians, recognized Meredith Willson for the first time in its 1980 edition. The entry consists of a single paragraph, in which one learns that “Willson composed two symphonies, a set of orchestral variations and the music for . . . films.”¹ Also included in the entry is mention of the three well-known stage works, *The Music Man*, *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*, and *Here’s Love*. Nowhere in the entry is there an attempt to address the compositional style of either orchestral or stage works. The entry concludes with a bibliography of only two sources, both of which were published significantly earlier than the entry itself.

Willson is again included in the most recent edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Published in 2000, the entry in this edition is expanded to two paragraphs. Persons unfamiliar with the composer’s orchestral works will discover that Willson’s “. . . orchestral compositions tend to be programmatic and to espouse much of the musical rhetoric of late 19th-century Romanticism (despite such modernist felicities of orchestration as a saxophone quartet in the *First Symphony*).”² The entry also includes a repertoire list divided into two categories. The first focus is the ‘Stage Works,’ and this constitutes the bulk of those works included as Willson’s repertoire. In the second, smaller, category, ‘Other Works,’ several orchestral works are listed, including the early *Parade Fantastique*, the *O.O. McIntyre* and *Jervis Bay Suites*, the two *Symphonies*, *Symphonic Variations on American Themes*, and Willson’s two best-known film scores, *The Great Dictator* and *The Little Foxes*. The bibliography is also expanded, and the 2000 edition includes five sources, all but one published significantly earlier than the entry itself.

¹ Deane L. Root, “Meredith Willson,” ed. Stanley Sadie, in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980), 20:442.

² Larry Stempel, “Meredith Willson,” ed. H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie, in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 24:421.

Another source containing a significant entry on Willson is *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Here one finds a sizable passage of both scope and depth. Willson's childhood piano training by his mother is addressed, as are his youthful musical experiences and early career. The entry is loosely structured as a chronology of his positions, compositions, and major personal and musical events of Willson's life. This approach provides valuable insight about where the composer was located when he wrote various works, and suggests influences in his life that may have impacted his compositions. The premiers of both symphonies are covered, and there is some mention of his other orchestral music.

Other general references that contain material on Willson include the *Harvard Biographical Dictionary of Music*, edited by Don Michael Randel. It contains a short, one paragraph biography which is well-balanced and mentions various diverse aspects of Willson's career, including the fact that in his youth the composer, "played flute in John Philip Sousa's band (1921-23), then in the New York Philharmonic under Toscanini (1924-29)."³ The entry also traces dated highlights of Willson's career, such as 1932, when he, ". . . became musical director of NBC's Western Division, first in San Francisco, then in Los Angeles." Despite the inclusion of such diverse aspects of Willson's musical life, there is only brief mention of his orchestral works: "He also composed some concert music, including two symphonies (1936, 1940) and some film scores (*The Great Dictator* (1940))." The focus on musical works in this entry is on those songs and stage works which gained popular success.

A retrospect look at the *International Who's Who in Music* finds that Willson was included in numerous editions, and covered for the final time in the 1980 edition, the last edition before his 1984 death. This account mentions his early training and career, three marriages, popular

³ Don Michael Randel, ed., *Harvard Biographical Dictionary of Music* (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 989.

songs, and books, but makes no mention of his orchestral compositions.⁴ An entry in the *International Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians* focuses on the ‘serious’ versus the ‘popular’ perceptions of Willson’s works. This entry exemplifies perceptions about the composer, noting that Willson “. . . composed symphonies and other orchestral music, choral music, and band music. But he won his real successes with his popular music, including the scores for Broadway musical comedies, *Music Man* and *Molly Brown*. . . .”⁵ This observation, with a focus on the serious versus the popular nature of his music, highlights a central facet of Willson’s career.

It is relevant that several important literary works did not include an entry on Willson. There is no mention of the composer, for example, in Randall Thompson’s *Dictionary of 20th Century Composers 1911-1971*, or in *Greene’s Biographical Encyclopedia* (1989). Willson is also omitted from Michael Kennedy’s well-known volumes, *The Oxford Dictionary of Music* and *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music* (1994).

Books on Twentieth-Century Musicians and Composers

Another category of importance encompasses those sources focusing on composers and performers in the twentieth-century. The life of Willson, who was born in 1902 and died in 1984, lies exclusively within this century, and consultation of these sources is necessary for the establishment of current perspective of his compositional role in this period of music history. One of these sources is Eric Salzman’s *Twentieth-Century Music, An Introduction*, which misspells ‘Wilson’ in the index, but correctly in the text. Willson is listed as one of a number of composers for whom, “The Broadway influence, found in the movie scores of experienced

⁴ Adrian Gaster, ed., *International Who’s Who in Music*, 9th edition (Cambridge, England: Melrose Press, 1980), 791.

⁵ Oscar Thompson, Editor-in-Chief, *International Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians*, volume M-Z. 10th ed. (NY: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1975), 2469.

Broadway composers . . . was, on the whole, less important except in the film musical itself.”⁶ A *Twentieth-Century Musical Chronicle, Events 1900-1988*, includes copious listings of musical events, formal and popular, by both major and minor composers. Despite the multitudes of listings, the important contributions of Willson as listed are his birth, death, and the premier of *The Music Man*.⁷

Nicholas Slonimsky’s *Music Since 1900*, lists important musical events in chronological progression, and includes two entries for Willson. The first of these is the sole entry for April 19, 1936, which reads: “Meredith Willson conducts in San Francisco the first performance of his First Symphony on the thirtieth anniversary of the San Francisco earthquake.”⁸ In the entry for August 27, 1940, one learns that, “Meredith Willson, 38-year-old American composer of popular music, conducts the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra on Treasure Island, California, in the world premier of his ‘Prelude to The Great Dictator’, the thematic material of which was “composed,” by whistling and humming, by Charlie Chaplin himself, and set on paper, organized and harmonized by Hanns Eisler and others, with Hynkel (Hitler) represented by a hoarse trumpet. (The program included also Willson’s own *Second Symphony*, subtitled *The Missions of California*.)”⁹

American Music or American Composers

A further division of the twentieth-century sources can be found in those which focus on American music or composers. One of the major sources of information on American music is the *New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, and one finds two paragraphs about Willson

⁶ Eric Salzman, *Twentieth-Century Music, an Introduction*, fourth edition (NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2001), 248.

⁷ Charles J. Hall, compiler, *A Twentieth-Century Musical Chronicle, Events 1900-1988* (NY: Greenwood Press, 1989) Part of the Music Reference Collection No. 20, 7,174, 253.

⁸ Nicholas Slonimsky, *Music Since 1900*, fifth edition (NY: Schirmer Books, 1994), 395.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 452.

included in the fourth volume of this large work.¹⁰ The entry is the same as that in the 2000 edition of *New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, and one finds two paragraphs about Willson included in the fourth volume of this large work. The entry is the same as that in the 2000 edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Another major source of information is *Contemporary American Composers: a Biographical Dictionary*. Here we learn of Willson's private flute studies with Henry Hadley and Georges Barrère. The usual honors are presented, along with his distinction as the recipient of the "... first annual Texas award to an outstanding figure in musical life, 1958."¹¹ This is one of the few accounts of Willson which completely neglects his numerous vocal works, though the entry does make passing mention of several of the smaller orchestral works in addition to the symphonies.

A volume which deals indirectly with American music, by listing literary works related to music, is the *Literature of American Music*. This citation includes two of Willson's autobiographical works, with brief sketches of their contents and the wry summary of the composer's "... apparent aim – to tell as many funny stories as possible."¹²

There is a smattering of information about Willson in several sources in this category, including *A Chronicle of American Music 1700-1995*. This volume is a chronological list of significant events in American music, which notes the three successful musicals and the premier dates of his two symphonies (1936, 1940.)¹³ In a chapter titled 'Contemporary Composers,' John Howard's *Our American Music* mentions Willson's symphonic works in passing.¹⁴ *The Biographical Dictionary of American Music* categorizes Willson as a 'Popular Composer.' The

¹⁰ Stempel, "Meredith Willson," 537-538.

¹¹ E. Ruth Anderson, compiler, *Contemporary American Composers: a Biographical Dictionary*, second edition (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co.), 561.

¹² David Horn, *Literature of American Music Supplement 1* (NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1988), 318-319.

¹³ Charles J. Hall, *A Chronicle of American Music 1700-1995* (NY: Schirmer Books, 1996).

¹⁴ John Howard, *Our American Music*, 538.

inclusion is a single paragraph which mentions Willson's musical training and the two symphonies, with the focus resting on his most famous popular works.¹⁵ A brief account in *The Bibliographical Handbook of American Music* mentions Willson only as the donor of a large collection of sheet music to UCLA.¹⁶ Willson is entirely neglected, though, in the authoritative *The Cambridge History of American Music*,¹⁷ and in the biographically oriented *Contemporary American Composers*.¹⁸

Genre-Specific Sources

A particular group of sources which seem to have at least some mention of Willson is that which focuses on band literature. This is especially surprising considering that very little of Willson's output was for band. The inclusion of Willson in band sources might be explained by the fact that the few band pieces he composed were fight songs and include the current collegiate fight songs for both State Universities in Iowa, and at least two high schools in the same State. Some of his most popular songs, including *It's Beginning to Look Like Christmas*,¹⁹ are found in standard band arrangements. Several pieces from his musicals are also commonly found in band arrangements, and one piece in particular, *76 Trombones*, is a standard for marching bands. A source with an entire page devoted to a biography of Willson is *Program Notes for Band*.²⁰ This listing also includes several of his instrumental works not mentioned elsewhere, though is limited to marches and arrangements of his Broadway hits.

The major works of Willson's orchestral output are his two symphonies, and publications focusing on this genre should be examined. It is apparent, though, that there is a distinct lack of

¹⁵ Charles Eugene Claghorn, *Biographical Dictionary of American Music* (West Nyack, NY: Parker Publishing Company, Inc., 1973), 478.

¹⁶ D.W. Krummel, ed., *Biographical Handbook of American Music* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 160.

¹⁷ *The Cambridge History of American Music*, ed. David Nicholls (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 323.

¹⁸ Anderson, *Contemporary American Composers*. 560.

¹⁹ This is the correct title, though there exists the tendency to include the words "a lot," which are found in the text.

²⁰ Norman E. Smith, *Program Notes for Band* (Chicago: GIA Publications Inc., 2002), 650-651.

inclusion of Willson's works in the standard texts on symphonies. The sizable *American Orchestral Music: A Performance Catalog* fails to mention Willson's works,²¹ as does *A Guide to the Symphony*, despite an entire chapter devoted to 'The American Symphony.'²² There is no mention of Willson's works in the vast *Da Capo Catalog of Classical Music Compositions*.²³ A more serious omission is *Orchestral Music in Print*, which fails to mention Willson's works in the original printing, the 1983 supplement, and the 1994 supplement.²⁴ Adding to the challenge of locating Willson's scores is the sparsity of his works in the catalog of the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP), which lists locations for only four of his works.²⁵

The orchestral volumes in which Willson does appear are those sources geared towards more popular orchestras. An entry for pianist Carmen Dragon, in *Conductors and Composers of Popular Orchestral Music: A Biographical and Discographical Sourcebook*,²⁶ notes that Dragon, "... was employed by Meredith Willson, the NBC Radio's West Coast musical director." The same entry goes on to draw the connection that working for Willson, "... led to other important work in radio, records, motion pictures and television, as well as appearances as guest conductor with symphony orchestras throughout the United States, South America and Europe." Despite the allusion to his importance and influence, surprisingly the volume holds no independent entry for Willson.

The Popular Arena

In addition to his inclusion in works on popular orchestras, Willson is covered in several volumes dealing with the development of popular music. In *Show Tunes, the Songs, Shows, and*

²¹ Richard Koshgarian, *American Orchestral Music: A Performance Catalog* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1992).

²² Robert Layton, ed. *A Guide to the Symphony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

²³ Jerzy Chwialkowski, *The Da Capo Catalog of Classical Music Compositions* (Da Capo Press, 1996).

²⁴ Margaret K. Farish, ed. *Orchestral Music in Print* (Philadelphia: Musicdata, Inc., 1979).

²⁵ ASCAP *Symphonic Catalogue*, 500.

²⁶ Reuben and Naomi Musiker, *Conductors and Composers of Popular Orchestral Music: A Biographical and Discographical Sourcebook* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998), 62.

Careers of Broadway's Major Composers, author Suskin devotes over two pages to Willson. Though the focus is primarily on his Broadway works, Suskin tells his readers that, as a child, Willson “. . . sang barber shop and became proficient on flute and piccolo.” The author later provides his opinion that “Meredith Willson . . . was an inventive novelty writer with one great show in him.”²⁷

Another significant entry can be found in *American Song: The Complete Companion to Tin Pan Alley Song*. The entry consists of several pages of a chronology of the publication of Willson’s compositions. This is largely complete, and mentions several of Willson’s orchestral works. In the short biography preceding the list, one discovers that Willson “Studied music with George Barrère, Henry Hadley, Mortimer Wilson, Bernard Waganaar, [and] Julius Gold.”²⁸ Stephen Banfield’s *Popular Song and Popular Music on Stage and Film* mentions only *The Music Man*, and then only to compare the protagonist to a similar character in the earlier George Cohan musical, *El Capitan*. *Film Music: From Violins to Video* includes Willson’s contributions *The Great Dictator* (1940) and *The Little Foxes* (1941), while overlooking the composer’s recently discovered earlier film contributions.²⁹

Subject-Specific Biographical Works

Willson’s musical career spanned six decades, and little has been done to compile a definitive musical biography. A logical place to seek information about Willson would seem to be his personal correspondence, letters, diaries, and everything which comprises his personal

²⁷ S. Suskin, *Show Tunes: the Songs, Shows, and Careers of Broadway's Major Composers* (New York, 1986, enlarged 3/2000) 269-271.

²⁸ Ken Bloom, *American Song: The Complete Companion to Tin Pan Alley Song* volume 3: ‘Songwriters’ (NY: Schirmer Books, 2001), 979.

²⁹ *Film Music: From Violins to Video*, compiled and edited by James L. Limbacher (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. 1974), 683.

papers. These have never been collected³⁰, but various letters and scores exist in several locations. The *Resources of American Music History* notes that the Iowa State Historical Department contains “miscellaneous biographical materials...”³¹ Some letters can be found in the Sousa collection at the Harding Library of the University of Illinois, as well as reminiscences of Sousa by Willson. Willson’s hometown library, the Mason City Public Library (MCPL), has an excellent archive of local history and notable figures. The MCPL collection includes a number of binders containing copies of collected family information and early press clippings.

The scattered nature of his papers holds true, too, for Willson’s scores. Willson gave scores to people throughout the country, seldom retaining a personal copy. Recipients may or may not have saved the works; several have not come to light in either recorded or written form. Some scores may exist undiscovered in the libraries of current day media giants, the result of decades of media company mergers and the resulting acquisition of materials. Willson also left scores where he worked, so some are scattered in various public libraries throughout New York City. Other works seem to have been left in the state in which they were written, as in the case of the five or more centennial celebrations for which Willson composed music, which included California, Kansas, and Texas. The lack of a central repository of his personal papers and scores is a serious challenge to Willson research; pieces are scattered everywhere.

Mason City journalist John Skipper recently published a biography of Willson, cleverly titled *The Unsinkable Music Man*.³² The work focuses largely on the popular compositions, and includes limited reference to the orchestral works. Skipper clarifies the chronology of Willson’s

³⁰ The existence of personal papers is a matter of some debate. A very few letters can be found in scattered libraries and archives, but a ‘collection’ does not exist in any public library or location. If personal papers have been preserved they are most probably in the possession of Willson’s widow, Rosemary Willson.

³¹ D.W. Krummel, et al., *Resources of American Music History: A Directory of Source Materials from Colonial Times to World War II* (University of Illinois Press, U Chicago, 1981), 128.

³² John C. Skipper, *Meredith Willson: The Unsinkable Music Man* (Mason City, IA: Savas Publishing Co., 2000).

career, and brings to light some examples of inaccuracies in Willson's own autobiographical works. The importance of Skipper's book is the clarification of some of Willson's dates and locations. The book, however, does not cite sources, relies heavily on anecdotes, includes numerous factual errors, and does not provide a strong basis for study. Bill Oates recently published another biography of Willson, *America's Music Man*, which corrected some of Skipper's inaccuracies and focused strongly on Willson's 'radio years.'³³

The composer himself wrote two general autobiographical works, which are largely stream-of-consciousness and anecdotal, *And There I Stood with My Piccolo* (1948)³⁴ and *Eggs I have Laid* (1955).³⁵ A third autobiographical work, *But He Doesn't Know the Territory*, centers largely on the creation of a single work, *The Music Man*, and, as such, is of little relevance to the topic at hand. In all, these autobiographical compositions are interesting and entertaining, and provide some general impressions of Willson. On the other hand, Willson provides little information about the writing of his symphonic works, to the point of neglecting to mention most of them. In Willson's writings nearly all the information is anecdotal, and this presents significant challenges in detailing the composer's life. Willson's literary gifts lay not so much in factual accuracy as in good storytelling. Sometimes the dates and locations Willson provides do not align with dates and places which can be verified via other, unbiased, sources. In his writings he exaggerates some events, probably to present a more entertaining retelling of an actual event. In still other cases there are notable omissions of important material, as in the 255 pages of *And There I Stood with My Piccolo*, in which Willson fails to mention his twenty-six years of marriage to Peggy Wilson, a high school sweetheart, their subsequent divorce, and his remarriage two weeks later. Further, musical happenings related to Willson's marriage are

³³ Bill Oates, *Meredith Willson, America's Music Man* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2005).

³⁴ Meredith Willson, *And There I Stood With My Piccolo* (New York: Doubleday, 1948).

³⁵ Meredith Willson, *Eggs I Have Laid* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1955).

glossed over or entirely ignored. It has been reported, for example, that Willson's renowned New York flute professor, Georges Barrère, stubbornly refused to continue with Willson as a student in reaction to the young flute player's marriage. External sources suggest that Barrère felt that marriage at such a young age would compromise Willson's performance career. Because of this and other omissions, the reader is left to assume that Willson's studies with Barrère continued uninterrupted from the time he came to New York until the time he left it for the West Coast a decade later, though other sources suggest differently. Willson also drew attention for paying for Peggy to follow him while on tour with the Sousa band, a practice not allowed by Sousa. Nowhere in *And There I Stood with My Piccolo* does Willson mention these or any incidents related to Peggy.

In all, Willson's writings prove to be more challenging than enlightening as source materials. He may have neglected mention of these events for personal reasons, but the absence of major life events lessens the value of his biographical works as sources of detailed facts about the composer. Willson's omissions and exaggerations do not seem malicious, but the end result is a significant need to question the accuracy of his recollections, and to use caution in accepting his 'facts.'

A final publication of Willson's, *What Every Musician Should Know* (1938),³⁶ has been little explored, and is noteworthy for its focus on the composer's ideas about the composition and performance of contemporary, largely popular, music. While it possesses much of Willson's trademark humor and quick wit, *What Every Musician Should Know* is the sole work in which Willson addresses functional elements of the compositional trends of his era.

³⁶ Meredith Willson, *What Every Musician Should Know* (NY: Robbins Music Corporation, 1938).

CHAPTER 3 BIOGRAPHY

Family Background

Robert Reiniger Meredith Willson was born in Mason City, Iowa on May 18, 1902, to John and Reslaie Reiniger Willson. His father, John Willson, was a lawyer who had studied law at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. His mother was the former Rosalie Reiniger, daughter of a Chicago lawyer, who graduated from the Armour Institute in Chicago as one of the first trained Kindergarten teachers. ‘Glory,’ as he was known in his childhood, or ‘Meredith,’ as he later became publicly known, was said to have entered the world to some local acclaim. His sister reminisced, “Less than 24 hours after he was born in Mason City, Iowa, on May 18, 1902, my brother Meredith Willson made headlines: he had weighed in at 14 pounds, 7 ounces, the biggest baby Iowa had ever recorded.”³⁷ Meredith’s birth notice in the local paper was more mundane, announcing a normal weight of 7 pounds, 4 ounces. The sisterly exaggeration, however, serves as a fitting introduction to certain aspects of Meredith’s life, including a Willson family habit of embellishing stories to make them more dramatic, a sense of fun, and a positive outlook which would accompany Meredith throughout his life (Figure 3-1.).

The Willson family had strong roots in the area and enjoyed a certain degree of social prominence. Grandfather Alonzo Willson organized a team of men to search for gold in California in 1853, and returned with \$10,000 in “cash from deals he had made with the gold miners.”³⁸ Upon his return to the town of Owen’s Corner, Alonzo increased his fortune by setting up a business loaning money to farmers, who put up their land as collateral. His relative wealth impacted the local community, for Alonzo established the first public library and oversaw construction of the first school in the township, in addition to serving as its first teacher. In 1878

³⁷ Dixie Willson, “The Man Behind ‘The Music Man’,” *The American Weekly*, May 4, 1958, 15.

³⁸ Skipper, *The Unsinkable Music Man*, 3.

the family moved to nearby Shibboleth, where Alonzo was instrumental in changing the town name to Mason City.

John Willson

Alonzo's son John, Meredith's father, was born August 4, 1866, on his father's farm in Owen's Corner, Iowa, one of three boys and four girls. In 1884 John matriculated into a two-year law course at the University of Notre Dame, where he played E-flat cornet in the Notre Dame band and also played on the school baseball team. Upon completion of the course, the eighteen year-old John took the state bar examination, where he represented himself as twenty-one years of age, the legal age to practice law. As an adult he lived in Mason City where he was a practicing lawyer for only a brief period of time. While the reasons are not clear as to why he did not establish and maintain a legal practice, one obituary opinioned that "...the law profession palled upon him. The mean little technicalities that baffled and bluffed justice irked against his nature."³⁹

John became a sort of general businessman who tried several sorts of enterprises, including banking, contracting, and real estate. He was even a builder for a short time, and built the first brick building in nearby Estherville. After that, in 1899, John took over management of his father's large farm at Owens Grove. Eight years later he once more turned his attention to various business opportunities in Mason City. At one point he co-owned a bakery in which he was active in management, and served as secretary and treasurer of a baking corporation. The subheading from his home-town obituary concludes that John, "Had Varied Career as Realtor, Banker and Contractor."⁴⁰

³⁹ Obituary for J.D. Willson, Jan 10th, *Mason City Globe Gazette*, 1931.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

The impact of Meredith's father, John Willson, on the development of his children is not well established. Meredith recalled little in the way of musical influence, offering only that "Papa . . . played the E-flat cornet in the Notre Dame band but gave it up for the guitar as he mellowed into middle age. His [guitar] specialty was the *Spanish Fandango*."⁴¹ The recollections of John's children are striking for their lack of consensus as to the personality and influence of their father. Two of John's children, Dixie and Meredith, mentioned their father in various interviews and articles, though their recollections of him are notably different. Dixie remembered and wrote about her father fondly, while Meredith wrote about him with mixed recollections, generally negative, and sometimes contradicting his own statements. Recollections which credited John Willson as playing a positive influential role in the development of his three talented children came largely from Dixie.

Meredith presented more unflattering recollections. In his first biographical work, *And There I Stood with My Piccolo*, Meredith mentioned his father very little, only to remember him as, "...red-headed, Scotch-Irish, Midwestern and very stubborn ..." and declared, "...there is no stronger combination."⁴² In his second biographical work, *Eggs I Have Laid*, Willson devotes several pages to consideration of his father. As his first work had focused glowingly on his mother, perhaps Meredith sought a certain balance in parental memories, though not in the same memoirs. He provided probably the best explanation for his strained relationship with his father in *Eggs I Have Laid* when he reflected, "Too bad that a guy's father generally has to be a big granite institution instead of a person. As I look back now, Papa was just the kind of man I'd love to have sat around and visited with."⁴³

⁴¹ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 74.

⁴² "Meredith Willson - Product of Sad Family Strains," *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, August 6, 1970

⁴³ Willson, *Eggs I Have Laid*, 41.

A central point in John's life, which dramatically affected his children, was his bitter divorce from their mother, Rosalie, in 1920. Meredith was a teenager at the time of John's divorce from Rosalie, and had just moved to New York City, the last child to leave home. The divorce provides some explanation for a general trend by Meredith, based on articles in which he was directly quoted, to become more acrimonious about his father as he grew older. At the age of sixty-eight Meredith was the subject of an article by the *Iowa City Press-Citizen*. The article is dramatically titled, 'Meredith Willson – Product of Sad Family Strains,' and begins by quoting Meredith's assertion that, "All that I am or ever hope to be, I owe to my angel mother."⁴⁴ He continued by suggesting a tense paternal relationship with roots in Meredith's own birth:

My mother and father already had a son and a daughter.... He [John] was angry when my mother told him I was on the way and further that she was determined she'd have me. From that time on, my father never spoke directly to my mother by name and never in my lifetime did I hear my name pass through my father's lips.⁴⁵

The same article suggests that the rejection by Meredith's father was, "... the kind of episode that would galvanize a youngster . . . into the determined path of independence and success."⁴⁶ It is possible that Meredith meant to say "her name," rather than "my name," implying that his father never again spoke his mother's, Rosalie's, name. It is curious that Meredith states that his father never spoke his name, for there are several examples, related by Meredith, of his father speaking his son's name, and Meredith's comment is in direct contrast with the recollection of his sister Dixie. And while John Willson is not specifically mentioned, it seems unlikely that he, or at least his derby, would play such a role in the selection of Meredith's name, and then never speak it.

⁴⁴ "Product of Sad Family Strains."

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 5B.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Even the acquisition of his [Meredith's] name had a sort of dramatic aspect. He was one week old when slips of paper bearing five potential names were put into Dad's derby. My brother Cedric, 16 months old, held the hat while I, as eldest of the Willson progeny now numbering three, reached in to make the all-important choice. If my hand had taken a different direction [the name might have been] Roderick, Rex, Alonzo or Buford. But the slip I brought out said Meredith.⁴⁷

Other quotes in the article, "Product of Sad Family Strains," are negative to the point of near paranoia: "I wired my father and asked him to lend me the money (\$50, to attend the Damrosch (Sic) Institute)⁴⁸ and guaranteed I'd repay him. In May, I did, and I don't think he ever forgave me for it, because my brother and sister never repaid his 'loans.'"⁴⁹ It makes little sense that John Willson would be angry with his son for repaying a loan, but demonstrates the bitterness with which Meredith increasingly remembered his father.

Another part of the recollection appears to date from the early 1920's, Meredith's time with the Sousa band: "By that time, my father was very ill and had gone into the Mayo Clinic. When we were playing nearby, I stopped in to see him and told him I was first flute with the Sousa band and playing a solo each day and maybe he'd like to hear me. I stood in that hospital room and played for him and he still wouldn't admit he appreciated it or I was talented or it was good or anything . . . I really think I sped his demise. That was the last time I saw him alive."⁵⁰ It is relevant to note that Meredith's tenure with the Sousa band ended in 1923, but that John Willson did not die until January of 1931, and that his demise occurred in a Mason City hospital. Meredith's significant distortion of the facts is an indication of the lengths to which he would go

⁴⁷ Dixie Willson, "The Man Behind," 15.

⁴⁸ Willson frequently referred to the school as the 'Damrosch Institute of Musical Art,' a misnomer which has been perpetuated, usually in writings about Willson. The Institute, while founded by and closely affiliated with Damrosch, did not bear the founder's name and was known simply as 'The Institute of Musical Art' (IMA).

⁴⁹ "Product of Sad Family Strains."

⁵⁰ Ibid.

in order to indict his father, and suggests that Meredith held strong negative feelings for his father.

Rosalie Reiniger Willson

Rosalie Reiniger was born in Charles City, Iowa, in 1860. Rosalie's father was Gustavus G. Reiniger, a lawyer who died when Rosalie was a child of eight. Little is known of her mother, the former Lida Meacham. Rosalie grew to be a lady with a strong personality, deep convictions, and strongly held and voiced opinions. Given the defined gender roles of the early twentieth-century, it is not surprising that her primary outlet was her three surviving children. She provided an immense early influence on the development of Meredith's talent and personality. As her role was paramount in Meredith's early years, and shaped much of his later life, Rosalie Reiniger Willson warrants close examination.

As a nineteenth-century female from a prominent mid-western family, Rosalie's options were likely limited to marriage, nursing, or teaching. She chose teaching and in 1885 completed a short course in Kindergarten Education at the Armour Institute in Chicago. The Armour course was among the first in the United States directed towards the teaching of young children. Rosalie went on to study at the Kindergarten Department at Iowa State Teachers College, today the University of Northern Iowa located in Cedar Falls.⁵¹

Her age at the date of her graduation, 1888, is noteworthy, for she was twenty-eight and unmarried in an era when women commonly wed in their late teens. Rosalie met John Willson that same year when he traveled to Chicago to play a baseball game. When she married Willson on August 28, 1889, she was six years older than he and the editor of a weekly newspaper, "The Blushing Bud," which focused on women's rights. After her marriage, Mrs. Willson moved with her new husband to the small town of Estherville, near Mason City, where she took up her role as

⁵¹ In 1901 this institution became the State College of Iowa, and in 1961, the University of Northern Iowa.

the wife of a prominent citizen. By 1901 she was quite active in the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Humane Society. Rosalie's most zealous focus, though, was the church. She was deeply religious, taught Sunday school, and eventually became superintendent of the primary department of the First Congregational Church, a position she proudly held for thirty-two years (Figure 3-2.).

Rosalie adorned the Willson home with religious and moral reminders posted in such places as the bathroom mirror; "God Gave You This Day: Meet the Challenge," and the outside door, "Remember, Do Unto Others..."⁵² The four pictures which hung in the parlor represented stages of the 'Voyage of Life,' complete with Guardian Angel and moral warnings.⁵³ Rosalie also "wrote inspirational thoughts on little cards giving them, along with advice, to young people delivering goods and papers and to other children."⁵⁴ She gave many of her former kindergarten students a card inscribed with a quotation by author Philip Brooks:

Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger men. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for power equal to your tasks. Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle, but you shall be the miracle. Everyday (sic) you shall wonder at yourself, at the richness of your life, which has come to you by the grace of God.⁵⁵

One childhood playmate of Meredith's kindly remembered Rosalie Willson as, "a wonderful lady with high ideals which she worked hard to instill in children."⁵⁶ Rosalie's strong pious focus was recalled differently by various people. Some said Mrs. Willson was "a very religious woman." Others deemed her, "a sanctimonious old gal."⁵⁷ Rosalie certainly had a deep sense of propriety and an equally strong compulsion to share it with others, an impulse sometimes considered intrusive.

⁵² Skipper, *The Unsinkable Music Man*, 9.

⁵³ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 14.

⁵⁴ Letter from Marjorie S. Arundel, undated, found in MCPLA, 1.

⁵⁵ Skipper, *The Unsinkable Music Man*, 9.

⁵⁶ Letter from Arundel.

⁵⁷ Skipper, *The Unsinkable Music Man*, 9.

Rosalie's strong focus on religion impacted her children, who were expected to regularly attend church with her. All three children were heavily involved in church activities at the local Congregational church. There is some evidence that Rosalie's husband, John Willson, grew to resent Rosalie's concentration on religion, especially where it concerned the three children. It was, nonetheless, at the local church that Meredith had his first experiences performing on stage, in plays, and musical events. Certainly Meredith recalled certain parts of his childhood as strongly infused with religion. He later described relating childhood events and routines to certain sounds, "Sunday sounds began with mom playing "Jerusalem the Golden" and "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam," or maybe "The Church in the Wildwood," on the black upright piano in the parlor . . ." ⁵⁸ (Figure 3-3).

After he left home as a teenager, there is no evidence that Meredith had anything to do with religion for the next forty or so years. While his upbringing was strongly religious, this training produced little or no direct influence on Meredith Willson's output, nor a religious basis for his works. Meredith's third marriage was to a devout Catholic, and late in life he converted to Catholicism and composed a small Mass for his wife.

During Meredith's childhood, small town newspapers provided detailed announcements of local happenings and events both in homes and churches. The Mason City Globe Gazette of the early 1900s provides tantalizing information about Meredith's early musical activities. For example, readers of 1915 are encouraged to attend an upcoming Easter service which will include "... a special flute and piano selection by Robert Meredith Willson and sister and an Easter play arranged by Mrs. John D. Willson . . ." ⁵⁹ We know the family was musically active

⁵⁸ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 12.

⁵⁹ Mason City Globe Gazette, April 8, 1915

in the community, and that the children were encouraged to participate in musical events both in and out of church.

During their childhood Rosalie was the parent who dominated home life, the parent who said grace at the dinner table and special prayers at Thanksgiving and Christmas.⁶⁰ A cousin who visited the Willson house as a child described it as emotionally cold and Rosalie as stern and strict.⁶¹ Rosalie was strongly opinionated and outspoken. These characteristics can be seen in her lifelong crusade to convince the US Postal service to reverse its address practices; Rosalie was convinced that State information should come first, city name next and street number, the least common element, last. She expressed her opinions on the topic at every chance, even speaking publicly to suggest the Post Office alter their procedure. Rosalie read aloud every night to Cedric and Meredith from a book called *What Every Boy Should Know*, a dry etiquette manual about how to act when in the company of the opposite sex.⁶² She had little experience beyond her local area; there is no evidence that she traveled beyond Iowa and Illinois, other than a trip she took late in life to New York City to visit her daughter, Dixie.

The Family and Early Musical Training

John and Rosalie Willson were both intelligent and well educated. They produced five children, three of whom survived infancy. The oldest was Lucille Reiniger Willson, born on August 6, 1890, who became a doting older sister to Meredith. As a teen, Lucille took to calling herself 'Dixie', and that became the name by which she was known for much of her life. In a page of a family album there is a rough tracing of a small hand annotated with the date of an

⁶⁰ Skipper, *The Unsinkable Music Man*, 12.

⁶¹ Related by Art Fischbeck, June, 2003, who had spoken with the cousin. He indicated that the cousin was slightly younger than Meredith, and female, though Mr. Fischbeck declined to identify her for the sake of propriety.

⁶² Skipper, *The Unsinkable Music Man*, 9.

infant's death.⁶³ This was daughter Maureen, born in Estherville, who died in October of 1894 at the age of six months. Maureen's death, probably from cholera, occurred shortly after the family moved to Mason City. The local paper, at that time called *The Times*, carried a brief piece about the infant's death. It is possible that this was yet another lost Willson infant, since *The Times* refers to this child as a male, and states that 'he' died of Spinal Meningitis. The dates, however, make it more likely that these facts were in error and that the child who died was Maureen.

The deaths of these infant siblings certainly impacted the young Dixie, and may be one reason she bonded strongly with Meredith; the two had a lasting and fond relationship during their childhood and through Meredith's twenties. The middle child, John Cedric Willson, was born on 26th October, 1900, and known simply as 'Cedric'. Robert Reiniger Meredith Willson was the youngest; an enthusiastic and energetic child nicknamed 'Morning Glory' and frequently in his childhood called simply 'Glory.'

The Willson parents had decided ideas about how to raise their children; from birth they guided all three of their offspring towards specific careers. Daughter Dixie later wrote about her parent's unique views on child-rearing and the guidance they found in a book titled *Prenatal Influence*. The book "outlined how potential parents could, from the moment they knew they were to have a child, make and mold that child's future into anything they wanted it to be."⁶⁴ According to Dixie, when John and Rosalie were expecting their first child, "they talked it over and decided they would like to have an author for a child." Within a short time, "fine engravings and copied photographs of great authors and poets" were hung on the walls, and a "bust in bronze of a child reading a book" was brought into the house. "Dad, who enjoyed reading aloud,

⁶³ Copies of many family papers, including this album, can be found in the Mason City Public Library Archives.

⁶⁴ Dixie Willson, "The Man Behind," 16.

brought home everything he could find to read and discuss concerning the lives of great writers and their work.”⁶⁵

Prenatal Influence directed the objectives for John and Rosalie’s other children, as well. When Cedric was due, explained Dixie, “they decided on a business man and bent all effort toward that . . .” For Meredith’s impending arrival, “. . . they discussed the future of this child and decided on a musician.” Dixie recalled that a bronze bust of Wagner appeared, and pictures of great musicians were put up all around the house, and that “Books about music and composers and musicians were read aloud by Dad and re-read by Mother.” While *Prenatal Influence* sounds like a fascinating book to have put into practice no such publication by that title fitting Dixie’s description has been located with certainty. It is noteworthy that Dixie is the only source which tells of this parental guidance. It is possible that Dixie, an author, exaggerated or simply created the entertaining *Prenatal Influence* story.⁶⁶

While it is impossible to know exactly how the parents encouraged their first child while she was still in diapers, Dixie’s recalled her earliest thoughts were an urge to “write write write” in every spare moment. “I was no more than ten when, instead of playing, I would hurry home to a small desk Mama put in my room where, in my school notebooks I would write stories and plays while the neighborhood kids romped outside.”

After religion, Rosalie’s second strength was early childhood education. She started the first kindergarten in Mason City, when Meredith was about five years old. She also had a strong theatrical bent and produced church plays with her Sunday school classes and including her children. Meredith performed in these from an early age. Most important, both parents had

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ If Dixie’s tale is accurate, this book has not been positively identified. One likely contender is *Heredity and Prenatal Culture Considered in the Light of the New Psychology*,” written by Newton N. Riddell and published by Child of Light publishers in 1900, though the date of publication would suggest this was used more for Cedric and Meredith than for Dixie, who was born in 1890.

some musical training, and music was prominent in the Willson household. Rosalie was a strong proponent of music in the home. Rosalie set the direction for the upbringing of Meredith and his siblings, and daughter Dixie would recall that her mother kept the children out of mischief with “prayers and banjos.”⁶⁷

It seems certain that both parents played roles in encouraging and supporting Meredith’s early musical growth, but it is indeed a difficult task to establish clearly their roles in his life, largely because of the conflicting accounts by their children. This may have been in part because Dixie, as the oldest of the children, experienced and remembered different aspects of her parent’s relationship than did Meredith, who was the youngest child, and separated in age by twelve years (Figure 3-4.). Part of the explanation may also be found in the divorce of John and Rosalie, an acrimonious and public scandal which occurred soon after Meredith left the house for New York. John left Rosalie, writing her an eight page letter of explanation for his actions, accusing her of coldness, distance, and creating an unpleasant home environment.⁶⁸ (See appendix A)

The letter also paints a bleak picture of home life for the Willson family. John labels himself and Rosemary a “mismatched” couple, with views of life “diametrically” opposite of one another. He tells Rosemary that he considers her “inane” and “ignorant” and provides examples of incidents where she has publically embarrassed him, “When I think of the times you have humiliated me before business men, even until your grown children have been ashamed of your actions (and) begged for me, I grow to hate.” John goes on to accuse Rosemary of “...sneer(ing) at my friends and associates...” then asserts that he wants to, “...get you out of my way so that I can, without fear of insinuation or insult, associate with the class of people that I find to be most

⁶⁷ Agnes McCay, “Prayers and Banjos Started Dixie Willson on Fame’s Road,” *Herald-Express*, April, 1941.

⁶⁸ This document can be found in the Mason City Public Library Archives.

honest and kind hearted, and less hypocritical than the ones to whom you wish to attach me and yourself.”

A central focus of John’s complaints lie with Rosemary’s religious convictions, which John attributes to causing Rosemary to be “set and stubborn, bigoted and vain...”, in addition to her having, “an insatiable desire to ape after people that are in better circumstances than you, you travel alone in your chosen sphere...” It is obvious, too, that the relationship of the parents has impacted the children. John notes that he regrets that, “the children have had to listen to disagreeable and inharmonious conversations, and have naturally acquired a querulous demeanor that will handicap them in life.” He also states that Rosemary has accused him of, “every thing (sic) mean and crooked,” and that she has encouraged the children to “do things contrary to my desires.”

Neither the letter nor the divorce papers themselves should be trusted as a completely objective source of information, as they are likely inflated to overstate salient points. But the letter is raw in its portrayal of the poor relations between John and Rosemary, and is a very different view than any painted by Meredith. It establishes that home life was tense and argumentative, and that the parents likely manipulated the children to their own ends. This situation had probably existed for much of Meredith’s life, and at one point John comments that, “It makes me rage inwardly now to think of the times without number that you have told me to pack up and go.” The divorce petition also provides new information, though much of it is directly drawn from John’s letter. In paragraph five John is accused of, “...absent(ing) himself from home for months at a time.” In paragraph eight we learn that John Willson holds stock and ownership in property which is worth, “at least the sum of \$100,000.”

The divorce petition was filed on January 5th, 1920, six months after Meredith, the youngest child, graduated from High School. Later in 1920, John remarried. The second marriage was to Minnie H. Hartzfield, a young woman who was the same age as his children, in fact four years younger than Dixie. John and Minnie moved into a home which had been owned by his grandfather, Alonzo, and was located directly and insultingly behind Rosalie's home. Rosalie, who did not drive and owned no cars, had a three-stall garage built behind her house, to block the view of John and Minnie's house. In areas of the Midwest in the early twentieth-century a divorced woman was termed a 'grass widow.' This colloquialism explains listings of Rosalie Willson in newspapers and the town directory as 'widow' in the years following the divorce.

The three Willson children chose sides, perhaps were forced to do so in order to maintain relationships with a parent. Dixie, the eldest, remained closest to her father, perhaps due in part to a strong father – daughter relationship, and perhaps in part because her memories of the twelve years she lived with her parents before Meredith's birth were, presumably, more pleasant than the later years of their marriage. Meredith, the youngest child, maintained a stronger contact with his mother. It was to her house, his childhood home, that he came on his trips back to visit Mason City. Perhaps the most telling information about their natal home is the fact that all three children left home at young ages and returned only for brief visits.

While many aspects of Willson's childhood remain unclear, what is certain is that the three Willson children were strongly guided in music. This was an activity in which they were encouraged to engage at any time. Rosalie provided early training and instruments, telling her children, "they could own and play as many musical instruments as they wanted . . . Their house

was alive with musical instruments.”⁶⁹ The Willson children were born during the era of American parlor music, and their parlor held both a piano and guitar. Both parents were musical, though which parent played which instrument is unclear; various sources report differently. Some sources report that John played piano and Rosalie played guitar. It is more likely, though, that John played the guitar and Rosalie was the pianist. Meredith recalled in an article published some sixty years later that his mother, “played the piano, as did all proper ladies in those days, and she believed in music in the home.”⁷⁰

Under the tutelage of his mother, Meredith began piano lessons at age six. His older sister recalled that their mother spent “endless hours” tutoring Meredith on the piano.⁷¹ Indications are that Meredith was a musical child, who, “could, and did, make music on just about anything – on Mother’s sherbet glasses, on pieces of pipe left in the back yard by the plumber, on the inside strings of the piano when Mr. Vance took the keyboard downtown for repairs.”⁷²

Iowa was a state with a strong musical tradition. Home music making was a widespread tradition, and ‘banjo bands,’ or trios, were popular; there is a suggestion that both Cedric and Meredith ‘picked-up’ the guitar, banjo, mandolin, and ukulele while they were children.⁷³ Certainly all three children had some degree of ability on the piano and some stringed instruments by their teens (Figure 3-5). A major part of Iowa’s strong musical tradition centered on band music, both marching and performing, which certainly impacted the young Meredith. As he later remembered, “Like any Iowa child, I loved to play circus and hated to practice the piano. I hung around the bandstand in the summertime and practically passed out when they

⁶⁹ Marjorie Arundel letter, 2.

⁷⁰ “Product of Sad Family Strains,” 5B.

⁷¹ Skipper, *The Unsinkable Music Man*, 19.

⁷² Dixie Willson, “The Man Behind,” 16.

⁷³ “Willson Family Anecdotes,” a 5-page collection of family lore found in the MCPLA, 2.

played “Custer’s Last Stand” with the red fire and everything. Naturally I wanted to play in the band someday, and that got me to dreaming about Sousa’s band and show business.”⁷⁴

Along with encouraging their musical activities, Rosalie provided the resources for her children to attend functions where there might be live music, as one musician recalled:

During this time I met a friendly boy who I know now was 7 years old and seeing him on the street he always gave me a smiling friendly greeting but I didn’t know his name. As time went on I was so glad to see this boy, at this time, 1910, I was with Bob Gate’s orchestra, married and living (in? – unclear writing) Clear Lake but being in Mason City often, after another year or two passed the Bijou picture house opened, wanting an orchestra. I formed one (with) piano, clarinet, drums and violin, so seeing 3 children sitting behind the orchestra quite often and one of these was my friend I asked their name and it was Willson.⁷⁵

This sort of encouragement was important for the young Meredith, for this was a period of time in American music when there were few boundaries between musical styles. Meredith likely would have heard classical works played alongside popular tunes of the time.

Each Willson child learned the piano first, taught by Rosalie, and Meredith progressed quickly enough to study with another teacher after a short time. An announcement in the *Globe Gazette* informs readers of “a good attendance last evening at the piano recital by the pupils of Prof. E. A. Patchen, held at the home of Dr. and Mrs. Earl McEwen,” at which Meredith performed *Witch’s Dance*, by Schytte.⁷⁶ The length of time Meredith studied with Professor Patchen is unknown. After about two years of piano study, Cedric and Meredith began studying the bassoon and flute, respectively. Not surprisingly it was Rosalie who directed Meredith’s selection of a second instrument, “After you get so you can play the piano real nice, you must learn to play another instrument so you will stand out among the other boys when you go to

⁷⁴ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 16.

⁷⁵ Unsigned letter of reminiscence, titled ‘Meeting Meredith 1909 – 7 years old but not knowing his name.’ in MCPLA, by John Kopecky, band director at Clear Lake.

⁷⁶ *Mason City Gazette*

school.”⁷⁷ Years later Meredith recalled that his mother began ‘talking up the flute’ because her father, a Stuttgart professor,⁷⁸ was an amateur flautist.”⁷⁹ Rosalie “scraped” together the funds, probably borrowing the money, and they ordered a flute from the Chicago Mail Order House.

Meredith described the arrival of the first flute seen in that part of Iowa:

Such goings on and hysterical unwrapping of paper you have never seen in your whole born days as that Saturday morning when my cousin Walter, who was the postman on our street, brought the package from Chicago. And what a horrible disappointment to get the flute out finally and put it together and discover that instead of holding this instrument in front of you . . . you had to play it sideways, practically over your shoulder, where you couldn’t possibly see what was going on.”⁸⁰

The complications of returning a mail-order flute seemed less involved than suffering a transverse playing position, and the decision was made to keep the instrument.

As there was no other flute, nor flautist, in the area, Meredith’s piano teacher found a book on how to play the flute and coached him for few lessons. Meredith then switched to study with, “a gentleman who actually played the cornet but who managed to stay one lesson ahead of me on the flute.”⁸¹ Soon thereafter he found a real flute teacher in Suiz Hazleton, who had come to Mason City to play in the theater orchestra. Hazleton recognized an ability to improvise in the young Willson, and suggested that this might be of real benefit in a dance orchestra. He recommended that Willson begin playing banjo, an instrument significant in dance accompaniments of the time. The addition of this instrument to his performance repertoire expanded Willson’s musical opportunities, and he was soon performing with regularity in nearby towns.

⁷⁷ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 18.

⁷⁸ Rosalie’s father had been an Illinois lawyer, so it is unclear where Meredith got the idea of his grandfather being a “Stuttgart professor.”

⁷⁹ Willson, *Eggs I Have Laid*, 33.

⁸⁰ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 18.

⁸¹ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 18.

⁸³ Skipper, *The Unsinkable Music Man*.

Hazleton gave Meredith his lessons in the tower of White Pier at Clear Lake, a few miles from Mason City. After about a year, Hazelton told John Willson, who was paying for the lessons, that Meredith knew more about playing the flute than Hazelton. At that point the elder Willson began an earnest search for a good teacher, and, “hunted all over the state to find a teacher for Meredith. He finally engaged one who made a weekly trip from Minneapolis for the lesson.”⁸³ There is no record of how much John Willson paid for these lessons.

From his earliest musical experiences Meredith was also experimenting with playing as a member of a group. First it was with Dixie and Cedric who were also learning to play instruments. Very soon, though, he asked to sit in with local groups. A letter in the Mason City archives has an illegible signature, but the writer apparently knew Meredith at a young age; “it was 2 years later, 19XX, (illegible) when I started leading orchestra at Cecil Theatre. He (Meredith) patted me on my back and asked if he could sit in, as I didn’t have flute parts out he played off my violin part and enjoyed it, we enjoyed him.”⁴⁵

Acting was one of the activities encouraged in the family. “Mama had played the lead in a great many local productions when she was a belle around Brighton, Illinois, and she tried to give us some histrionic coaching... and although we were impressed with her scrapbook and all, we were too filled with that native impatience . . . to settle down and learn a few principles.”⁸² From a young age, Meredith also took part in theatrical productions, both in church and community. These included events both at the Congregational church and childhood plays written and produced by sister and future playwright, Dixie. At age fifteen Dixie entered a writing contest; her poem was selected as the winner over entries from 5000 adults.

⁸² Willson, *And There I Stood*, 45.

High School and Immediately Thereafter

Willson's high school years were musically active and the time during which he cemented his desire to become a professional musician. His high school yearbook, *The Masonian*, records that Willson played in the high school band, and sang in the glee club for four years and in the chorus for three. As a sophomore he appeared in the school opera, and as a senior participated in the school minstrel show. Throughout his high school years, Willson also played in the eleven-piece high school orchestra. The group met in the evenings, at the homes of members. Since they lacked a cello, one young lady played those parts on her euphonium. The repertoire was wide and included light string music of the time, generally popular tunes arranged for small string groups. The group also played band arrangements for orchestra, and a few true classical works, such as Schubert's "Serenade."⁸³ This was probably Willson's first significant playing exposure to standard concert repertoire.

Willson gained his first semi-professional performance experiences just after his freshman year in high school. At that time summer bands were sponsored by municipalities and hugely popular throughout the State.⁸⁴ He was hired to play flute and double on piccolo with an orchestra at Lake Okoboji, a resort town about 100 miles west of Mason City. The orchestra consisted of piano, drums, cornet, trombone, clarinet, flute, and piccolo. Willson did not own a piccolo, but calculated that the proceeds of the summer would just cover the cost of one. He purchased his first piccolo at the local Mason City music store, Vance's, for \$96.

The 1918 summer stint also provided Willson with his first opportunity to conduct. During the final week, the orchestra leader, a violinist named Emery Moore, was called into the

⁸³ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 25.

⁸⁴ So popular, in fact, that in 1923 the State of Iowa passed a law commonly known as the 'Iowa Band Act', which enabled cities and municipalities to pass a local ordinance which could use tax dollars to provide for summer band concerts and lessons, and even to fund an entire municipal band.

war service. Willson was an obvious replacement, as his flute could easily play the C violin parts, so he led the group in the final performance of the season. It was immediately following the first number that the relieved novice conductor sat heavily into his chair and onto his piccolo, bending it into a permanent curve. In his memoirs he stated that he played the bent piccolo for a number of years, though he sadly called it, “part scimitar and part bow and arrow.”⁸⁵ An *Mason City Globe Gazette* article from 1940 tells what is probably a more accurate account, that Willson traded in the bent piccolo for a “less substantial and at the same time less expensive wooden variety.”⁸⁶

Hazel Erwin Griffith, who was four years older than Meredith, played the piano in the orchestra that summer and later married one of the men who founded it. She said Meredith had not yet turned 16 (Willson had actually had his sixteenth birthday that May) during the summer in which he learned piccolo. In a later interview she recalled the night he sat on his piccolo. “I’ve never seen a man so sad. That piccolo stayed bent for years. He even played that same one when he took his first big job at the Winter Garden Theater in New York.” Meredith was “a fine flute player,” she went on to say, “but I confess I never really ever thought he would be a big-time success. I just thought he would end up as a musician.”⁸⁷

Meredith graduated from Mason City High School in 1919. In the yearbook, beneath their name and school activities, students were permitted to include a single phrase or saying. Willson’s was, “great men are not always wise.” Another yearbook inclusion was Willson’s goals for the future, and this was telling, as he wrote, “Consolidate the Wilsons.” He was referring to his plan to marry his high school sweetheart, Elizabeth “Peggy” Wilson, daughter of

⁸⁵ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 23.

⁸⁶ “They Started Here: A Mason City Series of Success Stories, No. 2 Meredith Willson, Master Musician,” *Mason City Globe Gazette*, March 3rd, 1940.

⁸⁷ Skipper, *The Unsinkable Music Man*, 21

the city engineer in Mason City. It was a year after his graduation that Willson returned to play in the municipal band.

During his high school years it seems that Meredith was also serving as librarian for a Mason City concert orchestra. A hometown article from many years later tells us that the orchestra was “led by James A. Fulton, now a prominent composer and who has done many arrangements for Victor Herbert.”⁸⁸ While the article does not provide an exact date, indications are that his concert orchestra participation was during his high school years. The article goes on to tell of another musical luminary who played with the group, cornet soloist Frank Simon, who had been a soloist with Sousa’s band and later became a featured soloist with the Armco band.⁸⁹ The Simon connection was to prove vital in Willson’s future, for Simon, a featured cornet soloist, held an important position in the Sousa band, even serving as assistant conductor, and had influence with the legendary conductor. Meredith was increasingly gaining exposure to the musical world.

New York Years

Sister Dixie provided Meredith’s first contact in New York. Dixie was twenty-four years old and dreamed of a career as a playwright. In March, 1913, Dixie wrote a musical comedy, *The Owl and the Pussycat*, with original musical numbers. In February of 1914 she wrote a three-act play, *The Blue Heron*, which ran in Mason City and gained local acclaim. On October 29th, 1915, Dixie married Benjamin Lambert, only to divorce him within a year. Feeling limited in Mason City, she moved to Chicago in 1916, and in 1918 moved to New York. The reasons she later gave for the move do not seem to match her life at the time, but are probably a literary embellishment:

⁸⁸ “They Started Here.”

⁸⁹ Ibid.

To help me make up my mind whether I wanted a literary or a stage career, Mother and Dad let me join a musical comedy chorus in nearby Chicago.⁹⁰ It was via this company that I made my first trip to New York, by which time writing had become my choice.... Meredith was then 15 and I begged Dad to let him visit me for a look at the town where I was certain [Meredith] would find his four-leaf clover.

On the night of his arrival I took him for a ride on the upper deck of a Fifth Avenue bus. I was certain no sight on earth could thrill him so much. But I was wrong. When he spotted a large electric calendar and the current date of July 12, he exclaimed, "Look at that, Sis. We're missing the county fair!"⁹¹

Just after he graduated from high school in 1919, at age 17, Willson made a move to New York. Through the years, Meredith told different stories about his departure for New York, at one point reducing his age to only fourteen at the time of the move. In his recollections, *And There I Stood with My Piccolo*, Willson reminisced that, "the main reason of going to New York . . . was to study the flute with the world-famous flutist, the great Georges Barrère."⁹² As his autobiography centered on his professional experiences as a musician, it stands to reason that Willson would highlight a musical impetus for his move. Some thirty years later, however, in another biographical article, he indicated a different reason for going to New York. This retrospective had little to do with flute study, but Willson admitted that he moved to the city, "because I thought it was exciting."⁹³

Willson first called on Barrère at his New York City apartment. During their initial meeting the young flutist arranged to take lessons and Barrère phoned several of his top pupils and asked them to help Willson find a job as a flute player. These contacts included Lem Williams and Billy Kincaid, who was then principle flute with the Philadelphia Symphony

⁹⁰ It is notable that Dixie indicated gaining her parent's permission, as the dates she provided indicate she was married or newly divorced.

⁹¹ Dixie Willson, "The Man Behind," 16.

⁹² Willson, *And There I Stood*, 29.

⁹³ "Product of Sad Family Strains," 5B.

Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy. These established players advised Willson to report to the union every day carrying his flute, prepared in the event that absence of a regular player would provide a substitute flute job on the spur of the moment. The young flute player was impressed with Barrère's assistance and willingness to help a stranger. It was many years later that Willson discovered that his mother, on the day young Meredith left Mason City for New York, had written Barrère a letter extolling the virtues of her son and asking the great French flute player to, "Take care of my boy, please. Help him to meet good people."⁹⁴

At the time of their first meeting, Barrère (1876-1944) was inarguably the most influential flute player in America; it is impossible to understate the importance of his influence on the young Willson. A Frenchman by birth, Barrère had graduated from the Paris Conservatory in 1895, became premier flutist of the Paris Opera, and also taught at the Paris *Schola Cantorum*. In 1905 Barrère came to the United States to play with the New York Symphony Orchestra, a position he held through 1928, when the New York Symphony Orchestra merged with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. The same year Barrère came to the United States, he joined the faculty of the Institute of Musical Art (IMA), where he taught for thirty-nine years, through the transition of the Institute into the Juilliard School of Music on September 18, 1930. He was a close friend of Frank Damrosch, founder of the IMA, and was an honorary pall bearer at Damrosch's funeral in 1937.

Barrère was a player of great virtuosity and is credited with creating a new standard of excellence for American flute players. His virtuosic playing inspired major additions to the solo and chamber repertoire of the flute, including Charles Tomlinson Griffes's *Poem*, and Edgard Varèse's *Density 21.5*. During his years in New York Barrère premiered more than 170 works, including several now standard to flute repertoire, including the Hindemith *Sonata* and Roussel's

⁹⁴ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 63.

Trio for flute, viola, and cello. Barrère also commissioned works from many American composers, especially encouraging young composers. His method book, *Flutist's Formula, A Compendium of Daily Exercises*, remains a standard resource for flautists.

The French flutist holds a position of preeminence in the history of American flute playing, teaching the vast majority of outstanding flute players of the era. In addition to Willson, Barrère taught a number of great American flutists, including William Kincaid, Frances Blaisdell, Arthur Lora, Samuel Baron, Bernard Goldberg, and Henry Hadley, alongside whom Willson was soon playing in the New York Philharmonic. Barrère's close ties to musical life in New York, his contacts were paramount in Willson's success as a professional flutist. It was through Barrère's connections that Willson obtained his first few playing experiences in New York.

Willson substituted throughout the city and soon landed a permanent job as a member of the pit orchestra at the Crescent Theatre in the Bronx. There he played to accompany the silent moving pictures of the era. In his memoirs, Willson reveled in the retelling of humorous and entertaining stories, such as the time he was playing in the pit orchestra at the Crescent Theatre and they added a viola player:

He sat next to me in the orchestra pit and played so out of tune I couldn't stand it anymore, and I finally leaned over to him and whispered, "If you'll excuse me, your C string is a little flat." He plucked at the string a couple of times and then said pleasantly, "That's funny. It's about as tight as I usually have it."⁹⁵

Sol Klein, a leader of various New York popular bands, also hired Willson as a regular, and Willson had a steady income. Within a short time Willson realized he could enroll at the Damrosch (Sic) Institute of Musical Arts for lessons with Barrère, with a savings of three dollars per lesson, a not insignificant sum for a struggling young musician at that time. Willson recalled

⁹⁵ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 32.

that “the only hitch was a \$50 enrollment fee, returnable in May if you passed all your subjects.”⁹⁶ While Willson later claimed that he had left for New York City as a teenager and never returned home, one brief summer in Mason City would have ramification which would forever change the young flute player’s career prospects.

An article in Willson’s hometown newspaper, the *Mason City Globe Gazette*, appeared in the summer of 1920. It informs the reader of a musical luminary who has been hired to play with the Mason City Municipal band, cornet soloist Frank Simon. Simon had been a soloist with Sousa’s band and later became a featured soloist with the Armco band.⁹⁷ Also listed are the names of the other band members, including Meredith Willson on flute. This article indicates that Meredith, despite later assertions to the contrary, returned home from New York for at least one summer, the summer following his parent’s bitter divorce and his father’s remarriage. It also squarely ties Meredith with a well-known American musical figure, one who would play a promising role in the young flautists, cornet soloist Frank Simon.

The John Philip Sousa Band

One of Mason City’s leading residents was Harry B. Keeler, Vice President of the Mason City Brick and Tile Company. Keeler played both trumpet and piano, was a graduate of Boston’s New England Conservatory and, most important as relates to Meredith, was a huge fan of John Philip Sousa and his traveling band. Keeler encouraged Mason City leaders to sponsor the Sousa band, and also to sponsor the town Municipal Band in which Willson played in the summer of 1920.

In the Sousa band the most important figures, after Sousa himself, were the featured soloists. Frank Simon was among the most famous of these, a ‘card man’, who was given the

⁹⁶ “They Started Here.”

⁹⁷ “All Artists Engaged For Mason City Summer Band,” *Mason City Globe Gazette*, June 7, 1920.

prestige of having a large card placed on the front of the stage where he played, a card which displayed his photo in Sousa uniform and the name of his hometown. Keeler was immensely impressed with Simon and concocted a plan to bring him to Mason City. After its Mason City appearance the Sousa band went on to Des Moines, and it was to Des Moines that Keeler sent Frank Simon a telegram, proposing the cornet soloist be featured with the Mason City Municipal Band during Sousa's off season. Keeler pointed out the job perks of a potential Mason City engagement: Frank would not have to work too hard, as no-one played at all on Mondays; during the rest of the week there was an hour-long concert in the afternoon and an evening concert lasting an hour and fifteen minutes; Keeler also mentioned the beautiful Lake Okoboji. A brief negotiation followed, along with Frank's acceptance of the offer.

Soon after Simon's arrival in Mason City, three local groups, the Kiwanis, Rotary, and the Lions Clubs, invited the cornettist to a special 'meeting' at the local country club. The event was actually a concert designed to highlight the best of the local talent for the visiting musician. Meredith Willson was a featured performer, and his performance made an impression on Simon. "I thought he was simply great," Simon wrote in his memoirs. "I was astounded at this young man's artistry, how magnificently he played. I wondered how he got it, but he did play like an angel. I was knocked off my feet." Willson was accompanied by his mother, Rosemary, on piano, and Simon complemented her, as well, "You could see where he got his background of good manners, good looks and great musicianship."⁹⁸ After the concert Simon approached Willson. "Young man you play the flute very well. You are a very talented young man. I have noticed your work in the band. How would you like to go with Mr. Sousa?"⁹⁹ In his memoirs Frank Simon recalled that Willson's response was, "You know, Mr. Simon, I didn't believe this

⁹⁸ Michael Freedland, *Music Man: The Story of Frank Simon* (Portland, Oregon: Vallentine Mitchell, 1994) 106.

⁹⁹ Freeland, *Story of Frank Simon*, 106.

could ever happen to me, but I would give my right arm if I could get in.” To this Simon responded, “I’ll see what I can do”.¹⁰⁰

Simon immediately wrote a letter to the famed conductor. “Mr. Sousa,” he wrote, “you will be pleased with this young man. He is a fine reader, he is a handsome-looking boy. He plays well and is an excellent musician. He has style, taste and technique. He has everything.”¹⁰¹ The description of Willson’s qualities gives an important insight into Sousa’s priorities. Sousa was as concerned with appearance as he was with musical talent. He demanded that his musicians portray an attitude of intelligence, and a certain degree of good looks and manners. Willson fit these qualities well, which is one of the reasons Simon took such note of him.

From the DuPont hunting preserve in California Sousa wrote back to Simon. “Have your boy send me two pictures of himself, one in playing position and one standing holding his instrument.” On the basis of Simon’s recommendation Sousa was set to hire Meredith if his general appearance was suitable. Perhaps he was even projecting ahead to how the young flute player would look on the Sousa band posters and publicity leaflets. As soon as Sousa’s return letter arrived, Simon advised Willson to have his photographs taken as quickly as possible. Simon also sent another letter to Sousa, urging, “Don’t pass this boy up, Mr. Sousa, he’s got it and he’s going places. He has the dedication, determination and the talent.”¹⁰²

Simon probably did not tell the young Meredith that the Sousa band was undergoing a transformation. Sousa’s famous band was, at that time, populated by an assortment of German, Spanish, and Italian-born musicians. Sousa had apparently told Simon that he hoped to see the day when every one of his musicians would be a “real American.” This was reflected in a

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 107.

¹⁰² Freeland, *Story of Frank Simon*, 108.

comment Frank made to Meredith, “You’re just the type of young American boy that Mr. Sousa wants for his band.”¹⁰³

The future looked bright. Willson played in the band all summer, excitedly anticipating his Sousa possibilities. Immediately after the final band concert, on August 29th, 1920, Meredith drove his long-time sweetheart Peggy drove 37 miles to Albert Lea, Minnesota, and there the two were married. The Albert Lea location, which Meredith and Peggy called their elopement, was almost certainly designed to avoid the Willson parents. John and Rosemary’s separation and divorce, and John’s quick remarriage to a much younger woman, were agonizingly painful for the family, and Meredith returned to New York with Peggy as soon as the summer band ended.

In 1921, while attending the Institute of Musical Arts and studying with Barrère, Willson was hired as principle flutist and piccolo player in the John Philip Sousa Band. Though he came under the strict regulation Sousa imposed on his bandsmen, several friends of the family relate that Meredith took Peggy with him on at least one Sousa band tour, even though Sousa himself did not approve. In one article he joked that, “he and Mrs. Willson honeymooned with Sousa’s band supplying musical accompaniment.”¹⁰⁴ Willson held his chair in the Sousa band during the 1921, 1922, and 1923 seasons, and was one of, perhaps the youngest, instrumentalists to hold a soloist position with the band.¹⁰⁵ In 1923 Willson recommended his brother, Cedric, to Sousa as an excellent bassoon player. Like Meredith, Cedric was hired without an audition and played in the band through the 1924 season. Meredith played with the Sousa Band through 1923, touring the United States, Mexico, and Cuba, and reminisced that, “We traveled a lot and always in band

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ “They Started Here.”

¹⁰⁵ The ‘soloist’ position seems unique to the time – these were musicians who played with the band and were featured on technically challenging solos.

uniform. They locked up our own clothes and we were walking advertisements.”¹⁰⁶ He continued to study with Barrère in the brief intervals between performance tours (Figure 3-6.).

The breadth of Sousa’s compositions stretches far beyond the marches for which he is best remembered, a depth of career which likely set an example for Willson. Sousa’s nickname, “The March King,” primarily reflects the public memory of his numerous marches and would suggest that these were his only musical contributions, though Sousa composed and arranged in a surprising number of musical genres. His original vocal works included seventy songs, based largely on the works of American poets, fifteen operettas, and a number of works which fall into genres as diverse as hymns and pageants. Sousa’s instrumental works include one hundred and thirty-five marches and include four overtures, eleven programmatic suites, instrumental solos, and more than three hundred arrangements of works in various genres.¹⁰⁷

Meredith’s tenure in Sousa’s band provided the regular playing the young musician needed to hone his performance skills. The band performed an average of two concerts per day, sometimes even playing in two different states on the same day. A further aspect of the Sousa experience was Willson’s growing association with musicians of significant stature in the professional world, all of whom had played with Sousa at one time or another. Willson recalled that each Sousa season would close with a grand concert at Madison Square Garden, attended by former bandsmen from points near and far. In one of these concerts Willson glanced around and realized he was playing with some of the leading American instrumentalists. “Standing on my right was Ellis McDiarmid from the Cincinnati Symphony and one of the best flute players I ever knew, and next to me on the other side was the first trombone of the Philadelphia Symphony, Simon Mantia, and next to him was Arthur Pryor, who had his own world-famous band by this

¹⁰⁶ “Product of Sad Family Strains,” 5B.

¹⁰⁷ The Corporation for Public Broadcasting's series *The American Experience*, produced an hour-long special entitled "If You Knew Sousa" which briefly mentions Willson and Sousa’s mentoring of him.

time.”¹⁰⁸ As a musician in the Sousa band, Willson was a member of a sort of music fraternity and gained a lifelong series of contacts in varied musical fields. These associations were vital to his success in the music world.

During periods of time when Willson was in New York, usually in the Sousa off-season, he continued his flute studies. He studied sporadically with Barrère. There is an indication that there was some sort of opposition to Willson being married at such a young age, by either Barrère or Damrosch, and that this opposition resulted in Willson being denied the opportunity to study for a period of time. A ‘memory book’ by Willson’s cousin, Jeanette Hardy Cain, states that as a result of Meredith’s marriage to Peggy, “Mr. Damrosch got mad and wouldn’t take him anymore, so that is how he happened to join Sousa’s Band.”¹⁰⁹ Another person who knew Willson told this author that this was incorrect, that it was Barrère who refused to teach Willson because of his marriage. Eventually peace was made and Willson continued his studies. From 1923-1924 Willson also studied with Henry Hadley. Other flute instructors with whom he studied during his years in New York include Mortimer Wilson, Bernard Wagenaar, and Julius Gold.

Willson’s relationship with his wife, Peggy, during these years seems to have been good. One article informs readers that, “Mrs. Willson was not idle in this period either, for she went to school and in time earned a teacher’s certificate.”¹¹⁰ There were early signs of marital friction, however. Acquaintances of the couple suggest they began a private conflict over the issue of children from early in their marriage. Meredith is said to have wanted children, though Peggy

¹⁰⁸ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 43.

¹⁰⁹ Jeanette Hardy-Cain, unpublished ‘Memory Book,’ found in the Archives of the Mason City Public Library.

¹¹⁰ “They Started Here.”

rejected the idea early on, due to concerns that pregnancy would ruin her figure.¹¹¹ Though their marriage last nearly two decades, the two had no children.

One of Willson's most important contacts in New York City was Hugo Reisenfeld, whom he met soon after his move to the city. Reisenfeld conducted the orchestra in the Rialto Theatre, and Willson began playing in the Theatre orchestra during the Sousa off-season, perhaps in 1920 (article from Mason City states he was ...). The Rialto was among New York's most important motion picture houses at that time. In this era, radio was in its infancy and there were as yet no films with sound, nor was there television. Entertainment was live, and in this world the orchestra was of vital importance as 'the voice of the silent drama.' This was particularly true in New York City, which boasted large theatres and full-sized orchestras. Where space and funding allowed, the orchestra was of sizeable proportions and conductors of major stature would be retained. Elaborate thematic scoring was prevalent and even the delineation of a newsreel could be a precise art.

For example, there are several historical scores for *The Thief of Bagdad*, including Mortimer Wilson's specially-composed score for the New York premiere and the James Bradford "cue sheet" score. But these are by no means the only legitimate scores for the film. Local theater musicians were ultimately responsible for choosing the music for silent films shown in their theaters, so almost every theater had a different score. Perhaps a third of America's movie houses had orchestras, which at that time ranged from three to twenty-five players. Large theaters in large cities might have an expanded orchestra, but most theaters would not have used Wilson's score, as they did not have the one hundred-piece orchestra required. Instead, they would have compiled their own scores from their own music libraries, possibly with the help of

¹¹¹ Fischbeck Interview.

James Bradford's cue sheet.¹¹² The cue sheet would have helped to determine the type of emotion meant to be drawn from the film action, and this music would have been drawn from short arrangements catalogued accordingly.

The conductor of the Rialto, Hugo Reisenfeld, had been born in Vienna in 1879. At the time Willson met him, Reisenfeld served as managing director of three important New York theaters, the Rivoli, the Rialto (Figure 3-7), and the Criterion, and was a pioneer in the composition and performance of theater music. Reisenfeld felt that too many theater musicians failed to correlate their music with the mood of whatever was being shown.¹¹³ His approach was to score music which followed what he called the 'mood' of a particular film or scene. During his time at the Rialto, Reisenfeld oversaw the cataloguing of over twenty thousand pieces of music and had them all organized according to the mood they represented. The headings included such diverse themes as, "Spanish dances,' 'romances,' 'religious ecstasy,' 'cowboys,' 'running horses,' 'joy,' and so forth. Reisenfeld was of the opinion that cataloguing by mood greatly facilitated the arranging of a score, "The musician simply has to note what kind of emotion or situation is registered in each scene and then turn to his files for its musical counterpart."

While it is impossible to say how Reisenfeld's system, unique for its era, influenced Willson, one can infer that as a musician playing under Reisenfeld's baton, Willson knew of the conductor's theory and performed music which Reisenfeld felt to reflect the emotional content of whatever silent film was playing at the time. A programmatic approach can be found throughout

¹¹² A cue sheet is a list of scenes in a film, with a suggested piece of music for each scene, an approximate duration of the scene, and occasionally comments such as percussion effects to watch for. The cue sheet was sent to each theater several days ahead of the film, so that the music director could select music from his library before having seen the film if necessary. The cue sheet for *The Thief of Bagdad* is six pages long and contains 64 musical cues. <http://www.mont-alto.com/recordings/ThiefOfBagdad/ThiefCues.html>, accessed 23rd August, 2004.

¹¹³ Reisenfeld, Hugo. "The Advancement in Motion Picture Music", *The American Hebrew* (April 3, 1925), 632. Available online at http://www.cinemaweb.com/silentfilm/bookshelf/6_riese2.htm, accessed 26th August, 2004.

Willson's symphonic works, perhaps in large part due to the influence of Reisenfeld. The two had a working relationship which extended beyond the Rialto. They collaborated on at least one of Willson's early compositions, and the score of a film, *My Cavalier*, released November 1, 1928, and all indications are that Reisenfeld was an important musical mentor for the young Willson.

1920's New York was also a world center of growth in technology, not the least of it centered on entertainment in the form of music. Reisenfeld was interested in this sort of growth, and involved himself in it, as well. He involved himself with the work of Dr. Lee De Forest, who was experimenting with the technology to incorporate sound with moving pictures. In 1923 Reisenfeld supported the process by hiring Willson to provide live music for De Forest's experiments. Every morning Willson would head to the studio to play for what became one of technology's greatest achievements:

His place was the old Norma Talmadge Studio over on East Twenty-eighth Street, and I would play scales on my flute hour after hour while this man would record on film. The next day he would play it back and we would listen. There was so much surface noise and static scratching that you couldn't recognize the sound for a flute, but at least you knew you were hearing tones and the pitch was accurate.

Well, I never knew anyone to have the patience this man had. We would listen to yesterday's scales, and that night he would tear out every bit of insulation and rewire the whole studio, then in the morning more scales.

The next day we'd listen to the playbacks again, and sometimes the rewiring made it sound worse and sometimes slightly better. But either way, that patient man panned out little grains of golden know-how, and after a few months the scales not only played back as clear as could be, but now you knew it was a flute.¹¹⁴

Thus De Forest, using Willson as his musical model, developed the first method with which to tie recorded sound to the motion picture. De Forest might well be considered the

¹¹⁴ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 59.

world's first sound engineer. The final test linking sound and motion was a moving picture of a girl dancing to the music of a four-piece orchestra, Willson included, playing Brahms's *Waltz in A Major*, and the 'talking picture' was born.

Reisenfeld, ever the innovator, became one of the first to compose for the new medium, and his works included scores for numerous early 'talking pictures.' The Rialto theatre became the first venue for sound on film, the first performance of which took place on April 15th, 1923. Sadly, however, Reisenfeld is little known to history. His programmatic cataloguing system may be the reason, for he composed and catalogued so much music that early 'talking pictures' made liberal use of it, yet gave little credit to the musical point of origin. Reisenfeld's extensive musical files seem to have formed a major source for 'stock' music in early films. Works and parts of works by Reisenfeld were featured in over one-hundred movie scores of the 1920s and 1930s, yet few credited the composer.¹¹⁵ Following an extended illness Reisenfeld died in Los Angeles in 1939.

In the 1920s Willson was still working with Reisenfeld at the Rialto and encountering some of the great musical figures of the day, including Rialto guest conductor Victor Herbert. Herbert wrote music for a series of elaborate tableaux and conducted the orchestra during a week of rehearsals and performances. Willson was most impressed with Herbert and recalled that, "All of us musicians in New York had a real affection and admiration for this great man, and also he was very amusing at rehearsals on account of . . . he was Irish and very witty."¹¹⁶ One incident made a lasting humorous impression, and Willson described several musicians joking around in Herbert's dressing room when a "... frightened-looking little man all full of apologies came bowing and scraping in...". The gentleman was a wealthy amateur who produced a score,

¹¹⁵ <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0006252/> accessed December 20th, 2004.

¹¹⁶ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 48.

“...gorgeously bound in Morocco leather with beautiful gold-embossed letters on the cover that read “Mass in F, Dedicated to Victor Herbert.”

It was still about forty-five minutes before curtain time, so Mr. Herbert took the score, settled back in his chair, and proceeded to look through the music, painstakingly scrutinizing every note on every page, while the small (man) chewed off his nails and perspired all over his necktie.

A half-hour later Victor Herbert closed the “Mass in F” and handed it back to his admirer and, fixing him with a curiously intense look, he said, “By God, it IS in F!”¹¹⁷

That this was the major incident with Herbert which Willson chose to recall in his memoir illuminates his sense of fun. While Herbert was an excellent conductor and well-known and regarded composer, Willson focused on the humorous aspects of his personality, rather than on his musical accomplishments. Willson frequently seems to have eschewed the serious, and chosen to move towards humor.

Many of Herbert’s musical connections were similar to Willson’s, though not contemporarily. Like Willson, Herbert was involved with the bands of the time. In the 1890s Herbert was connected to numerous bands, including the famous 22nd Regiment Band of the New York National Guard, previously directed by Patrick Gilmore. In 1914 Herbert and John Philip Sousa were among the principal founders of The American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP). The group has a strong presence in the modern era, where it continues to protect copyrights, and collects royalties on behalf of the organization's members. In 1916 Herbert wrote the first identifiable through-composed score for film, still silent at the time, *The Fall of a Nation*, and for this is sometimes considered the first composer to write for film. Herbert died suddenly of a heart attack in 1924, within a year of meeting Willson, so there was only a brief association between the two. Yet Herbert, like the leading musical figures of

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 48-49.

the time, was a musician of multiple talents; instrumentalist, composer, and conductor. These multiple musical facets, found among the great musicians of the era, served as a model for the young Willson. Herbert's charm and wit also impressed Willson. Willson's admiration for a one-liner, as well as his desire to be the showman who provided the punch-line, came to closely emulate his musical heroes, of whom Herbert was one. He grew to be known as a humorous and entertaining musician willing to be the stooge or butt of a joke, characterizations which sometimes overshadowed his musical gifts. In the 1920s Willson was in the right place at the right time. He was working with musicians and conductors of immense talent, leaders in their fields. He was living in one of the great musical centers of the early twentieth-century, working with talented and influential music personages. No wonder, then, that he soon tried his hand at composition.

1924 was a year marked by two important events for the young Willson. The first landmark was the publication of his first composition, a work he called *Parade Fantastique*. While he claimed to have been, "writing all kinds of musical junk ever since I was old enough to hold a pencil . . .,"¹ only one previous work by Willson is known to have been written; a small piece he mentioned composing while in high school. No score has been found for this juvenile work, and *Parade Fantastique* takes a place as the earliest known orchestral composition by Willson.

Willson relates the story of his best friend, Abe Meyer, who was a secretary to Reisenfeld. Meyer 'pestered' Reisenfeld to listen to the *Parade Fantastique*, and Reisenfeld agreed to help Willson publish the work. Willson admits to a resistance to make suggested edits, particularly to the overall form of the work, and referred to the piece as his 'child'.¹¹⁸ Willson opined that, "A man isn't really a composer till this happens, . . . I think it is entirely safe to say that there is

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 58.

no feeling like the one a person gets the first time he sees his own composition in print, 'real' print. He is now a composer, his music is available to everybody, he has actually created something.”¹¹⁹

New York Philharmonic

The second major event of 1924 was Willson's admission to the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, a group he fondly called, “. . . that obstinate, stubborn, spoiled, conceited, pampered, gorgeous instrument known as the Philharmonic Symphony Society of New York.” The program from October 16, 1924 records Willson's first performance with the New York Philharmonic as R.M. Willson. The conductor was Van Hoogstraten, in a concert which included Weber, Respighi, Mozart and Wagner.

For the rest of his life Willson told the semi-apocryphal story that his inaugural concert with the New York Philharmonic marked only the second time Willson had heard a symphony orchestra, and he was living the experience as principal flutist. Willson told the story of the overture of this first concert having been Beethoven's *Lenora* and then recalled that the orchestra, “. . . rushed through rather sketchily at the rehearsal on account of everybody (but me) had played it a million times.” Willson had been hired as second chair flutist; the first chair flutist at the time was John Amans. At the time of Willson's premier Amans was temporarily sidelined by acute appendicitis, thus Willson's so-called premier performance was as first chair flutist. Willson was fond of recalling this particular concert, referring to himself as “. . . a dude in a canoe shooting the rapids for the first time. . .”, but just leaning back in his metaphorical canoe and enjoying it. Willson enjoyed pretending ignorance of common orchestral literature and customs, so told a fine story of conductor Van Hoogstraten gesturing to the novice flute player,

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 56.

who looked around confusedly, and had to be told to get up and bow. Willson stood up and bowed,

...as nonchalantly as possible – and early the next morning rushed over to ask my teacher, Mr. Barrère, if they always did that to a new member.

What overture was it?” he said, and I said, “‘Leonore’ by Beethoven.”

Well, he started to laugh and rocked back and forth so furiously that his favorite chair, with him in it, turned a complete somersault and ended up upside down in the corner, his famous Parisian beard waving helplessly at the ceiling. He finally managed to say, “That overture has in it one of the most celebrated flute solos in the whole symphonic repertoire.

I helped the world’s greatest flutist to his feet and his little boy, Jean, who was four years old by now, laughed and laughed, too, and for the first time I wasn’t scared to death of my teacher.”¹²⁰

While Beethoven’s *Lenora Overture* was not on the program of Willson’s first concert with the New York Philharmonic, it is likely that the incident happened. It was at this time, upon joining the Philharmonic that Willson first began to develop a sort of jovial ‘bumpkin’ persona. He would state that he never heard of such and such symphony growing up in Iowa, or that he had never heard of a certain famous composer but would be happy to learn the flute parts, then proceed to astonish by playing a part superbly. This act certainly worked in his favor and became a favorite of his, as illustrated in the above example.

The New York Philharmonic Society, as it was known in those days, was a changing organization. In 1921 it had merged with the National Symphony orchestra, whose conductor, (Josef) Wilhelm Mengelberg, became one of the lead conductors of the New York Philharmonic (Figure 3-8). Wilhelm Furtwängler was a featured guest conductor until 1925, when he was appointed a permanent conductor. Arturo Toscanini was conductor from 1927-1933. The overlap in years is notable, for the Philharmonic retained concurrent permanent conductors

¹²⁰ Ibid., 61-63.

during the 1920s. Those were years during which the Philharmonic absorbed several smaller orchestras, including the City Symphony, the American National Orchestra, and the State Symphony Orchestra. The amalgamation of various performing orchestras produced multifaceted results. It reduced competition, strengthened a base of public support, and brought in new talent. Willson was one of the young talented musicians brought in during this time; he played with the Philharmonic for five years, from 1924 through 1929.

During his years in the Philharmonic, Willson played primarily under conductors Mengelberg, Furtwängler, and Toscanini. His writings suggest that the young flutist was the least fond of (Josef) Willem Mengelberg, a Dutch pianist and celebrated conductor. Mengelberg first guest conducted the New York Philharmonic in 1905. In 1921 he became conductor of the newly organized National Symphony, which soon merged with the New York Philharmonic. Mengelberg was retained as a permanent conductor, a post he held until 1930.¹²¹ Willson called Mengelberg his ‘bogyman,’ and related an experience which, no doubt, helped to set a poor tone between the two. Willson, with his keen sense of fun, was standing in the musician’s locker room, telling a joke about a musician who went insane every time the name ‘Mengelberg’ was mentioned, when he discovered that Mengelberg was standing “unsmiling” behind him.¹²² Mengelberg was a European-trained conductor, and had a definite opinion about how every note in a composition would be played; musicians were expected to accept his word as law. Willson illustrated the conductor’s attention to detail by recounting incidents such as his placement of special signs throughout music. One example given by Willson was Tschaikovsky’s *Fifth Symphony*, a work frequently played by the Philharmonic. The famous horn solo was apparently heavily marked, to the point where horn player Bruno Jaenicke could scarcely see the notes.

¹²¹ *Living Musicians*, Compiled and Edited by David Ewen (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company), 1940.

¹²² Willson, *And There I Stood*, 70.

Willson recounted that Jaenicke went to Mengelberg before rehearsal one morning, to let Mengelberg know that he could not, "...see the notes for the parts." Jaenicke produced a new horn part asked Mengelberg to add any expression marks he would like played.

Mr. Mengelberg said, "Hou haff ze old part?" Mr. Jaenicke handed him the old part. After studying it for a few moments Mr. Mengelberg said, "Zis old part is pairfectly fine, except you must can add a crescendo here and a diminoendo at zis blace, one more forte in ze next measure, and two more pianissimos by ze end."¹²³

Despite his respect for the written note, Mengelberg often made sweeping alterations in scores. His attitude to this practice comes vividly to life in the two following quotations: "The performer must help the creator," and "Faithfulness to the notes is a recent invention."¹²⁴ Mengelberg was a link in the nineteenth-century, Austro-Germanic romantic tradition of conducting: Wagner-Mahler-Mengelberg-Furtwängler. The chain would be broken with the next conductor of the Philharmonic, Toscanini, who would become the leading pioneer of a more objective, typically twentieth-century style of conducting. As a musician playing under the great conductors Willson expressed a preference for the style of Toscanini, rather than of the Germanic romanticists. He seemed to appreciate Toscanini's clarity and excellent musicianship.

Willson's writings about Mengelberg may have been colored by events of the time. Mengelberg had been a prestigious, highly-regarded conductor who maintained an excellent reputation with the American public. His star, however, began to fade under the increasing popularity of Arturo Toscanini. Willson published his first biography, *And There I Stood With My Piccolo*, in 1948, shortly after the Second World War. The prevailing anti-German sentiment of the time, coupled with the writing of a book Willson hoped to be a popular favorite, may have prompted Willson to portray the Germanic composers in a somewhat less than favorable light.

¹²³ Ibid., 84.

¹²⁴ Frits Zwart, "Willem Mengelberg Dirigent Conductor", Haags Gemeentemuseum, 1995.

While Mengelberg was a Dutch citizen, both his parents were German and he was closely connected with certain German composers whom he championed in the U.S. After the Second World War Mengelberg, who spent the war years conducting in the Netherlands, came under public censure for cooperating with the Germans. While Willson's recollections are not overtly hostile, he definitely presents Mengelberg as Germanic:

Mengelberg used to invent words. "Tee-totto" meant crisply marked. "Tee-tottissimo" meant *very* crisply marked. "Sevcik was a world-famous violinist especially renowned for his brilliant bowing, so Mengelberg tried to coerce brilliant bowing from his string section by often asking for "Sevcikissimo." An expression which no member of the orchestra was able to decipher was "the Bismark bow." "In fact, nobody knew what (Mengelberg) meant until years after he went back to Holland. By that time some genius had figured out that Bismark was bald except for two or three hairs, so when Mengelberg asked for "the Bismark," he was only trying to get the string players to play lightly, with, if possible – only two or three hairs of the bow."¹²⁵

During Willson's tenure in the New York Philharmonic, Mengelberg was one of the few conductors in the States to perform the music of Gustav Mahler. The conductor had met and befriended Mahler in 1902 and zealously promoted his compositions.¹²⁶ He would tell the orchestra members, "Szhentlemen – you must can like this moosic. Mahler iss ze Bateoffen von our time."¹²⁷ Mengelberg was also good friends with Richard Strauss, whose *Ein Heldenleben* is dedicated to him. Despite, or perhaps because of, the tutelage of Mengelberg, Willson never professed a great admiration for the music of Mahler, Strauss, nor of Bruckner, whom Mengelberg also championed.

Willson's biographical works provide a glimpse into the political workings of the New York Philharmonic of the 1920s. He writes little of Furtwängler other than that the board of Director's wanted Toscanini. The implication is that they set out to rid themselves of

¹²⁵ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 96-97.

¹²⁶ Mahler had also been a highly-touted conductor of the Philharmonic Society from 1909 through 1911.

¹²⁷ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 96.

Furtwängler: “The music critic on the *Herald Tribune*, Lawrence Gilman, had written Furtwängler’s epitaph in the nature of a scathing review of what most of us in the orchestra thought was a very magnificent all-Wagner concert, and Maestro Toscanini . . . replaced . . . Furtwängler as the Philharmonic’s permanent conductor.”¹²⁸ Willson reserved his greatest praise for Toscanini, a conductor he called, “. . . the greatest by 10 miles than any other before or since . . .”¹²⁹

In addition to the primary conductors Willson played under a host of musical giants who guest conducted the Philharmonic, including Damrosch, Goossens, Reiner, Stravinsky, and others. The New York Philharmonic was renowned for introducing some of the great musicians of the day. Before rehearsal one day Willson asked several musicians about the guest soloist, none of whom knew much about him, nor could remember his name. Mengelberg was the conductor that day, and when he came in to begin rehearsal was, “. . . followed by an anemic high school sophomore in a pink shirt who looked like he was apologizing for being alive as he sat down nervously at the big concert grand, sniffing from a runny nose.” Mengelberg introduced the young pianist as, “. . . one of ze great pianists von our time.” Willson records a rather bored shuffling from members of the Philharmonic, none of whom had ever heard of the young man.

The young man’s nose was dripping very noticeably by now, but apparently he was used to it because he didn’t pay any attention. Mengelberg glared around the room, hit the throne a couple of times with his stick, and finally threw the down beat.

Well this pink boy crashed down onto the keyboard with the most electrifying sound I’d ever heard in my whole born days, and by the end of the first movement that . . . hall was rocking with the most majestic, monumental reverberations in the history of the building, mixed with the hysterical shouts

¹²⁸ Ibid., 98.

¹²⁹ “Product of Sad Family Strains,” 5B.

of the dignified, superior gentlemen of the Philharmonic: Horowitz had played in Carnegie Hall for the first time.”¹³⁰

Of all the musicians with whom Willson worked, and out of his several years playing in the New York Philharmonic, Willson reserves his highest praise for Toscanini. He recounted several incidences of Toscanini’s legendary ear, as well as his infamous temper. As a conductor Toscanini inspired, according to Willson, both fear and love. Willson recounted completing a composition some years after he moved to the West Coast, which the NBC music director, Frank Black, mentioned to Toscanini, who responded that he would be interested in seeing the piece. Excited by the possibility of Toscanini conducting one of his works, Willson records the story, probably apocryphal, of rushing to New York with his score, a twenty-three hour journey at the time, to watch Toscanini rehearse at Radio City.

There were those eyes and they darted at me, around me, over me, and through me. That hoarse voice began:

“Ah yes, ah yes, ah yes – *caro*, my dear, my dear – I remember, I remember – Willson, the flute, the flute, the American flute. You are now in California, no? With sunshine, the beautiful sunshine, and the oranges. You are well, no? You are happy? I am glad to see you. Ah yes, ah yes, ah yes – I remember, I remember.”

Pause – long pause.

“Ah yes, ah yes – I remember – the American flute. Is always sun in California? I will come once to California, ah yes.”

Pause.

“You wish to see me about something, no?”

I shook my head and bowed myself backward out of the dressing room with my score still under my arm. I hurried out to La Guardia Field, sat there half the night waiting for a seat on a westbound plane, arrived in Los Angeles some twenty-three hours later, and I’ve never brought up the subject since.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 86-88.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 106-107.

Willson's years with the New York Philharmonic were also notable for his first exposure over a growing medium, radio. On November 15th, 1926 Willson played a concert which was the first broadcast of a music program on the NBC radio network. This broadcast, the culmination of a concept of wiring different radio stations together to facilitate coverage of large areas, was an event known as 'the birth of NBC.'¹³² The concert was conducted by Walter Damrosch, and included the New York Oratorio Society, and the Goldman Band. In 1922 the New York Philharmonic became one of the first orchestras to be broadcast, via radio, in a live concert. The Philharmonic quickly became one of the most frequently broadcast orchestras in the world, and it is likely that Willson participated in a broadcast prior to the 1926 NBC premier, though there are currently no records indicating this.

As a talented flute player in New York in the 1920's, Willson also played with other groups, such as the New York Chamber Music society.¹³³ He found himself involved with some of the more progressive and daring trends in music, which he blatantly disliked. Details of exactly whose works he played have not come to light, but Willson deemed the music, "ugly, cacophonous schnozola..." One assumes he is referring to compositional experiments with atonality. Willson did admire the music of some contemporary composers, and these included Respighi, Stravinsky, and Gershwin, all tonal composers. He was bound to be stung by criticism from some of the notable critics of the day, including Olin Downes. When Willson played for dancer Angna Enters, Downes wrote: "Miss Enters is perhaps the greatest mime of our day. As for the rest of the evening, its items were uniformly vapid."¹³⁴ Willson never forgot the

¹³² "Electrification of Sound: Audiovisual Collections Between the Wars," *Library of Congress Motion Pictures, Broadcasting, Recorded Sound, An Illustrated Guide* (Washington, 2002), 24.

¹³³ "They Started Here."

¹³⁴ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 111.

comment and included it in his memoirs to illustrate how a young musician could take such criticism to heart.

The West Coast Years

Sometime in the mid 1920s Willson made the acquaintance of Aldoph Linden, a Seattle banker who was attempting to build a coast-to-coast network. In these early radio days there was a difficulty in linking broadcasts, as Willson explained, “. . . there was only one complete coast-to-coast network, and it was highly desirable to broadcast not only east to west, but also west to east, and this network-reversing was a big technical chore and expensive, too, in those days, so Mr. Linden thought of having *his* coast-to-coast station hooked together in a figure-eight pattern, so that the broadcast would constantly be flowing in both directions at once and no network reversals would ever be necessary.”¹³⁵ In addition to his banking interests Linden owned Seattle’s Camlin Hotel, produced and sold phonograph records, was involved with oil interests, and, like Willson, was a native of Iowa.

In 1928, while Willson was still living in New York, Linden hired him as musical director for a series of summer concerts in Seattle, designed to promote the coast-to-coast radio stations. While not financially successful, the concert series was noteworthy as a beginning of new horizons for Willson. It marked a number of firsts for the young musician: first significant exposure to life on the West Coast, his first foray into conducting, and his introduction to and initial contacts in the burgeoning world of radio. The concerts, however, were not well attended. In his writings Willson simply recalled that the radio venture failed and he returned to New York,¹³⁶ blaming the lack of attendance on poor weather. The details were more dramatic, as

¹³⁵ Ibid., 114.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 117.

Linden and his partner were arrested for embezzling bank funds to bankroll the network. They were later convicted and sent to Walla Walla prison.¹³⁷

The enterprise had created ongoing problems for Willson, as well, for he had convinced a number of New York musicians to accompany him to the West Coast. They had been promised pay at the end of the summer, but the low turn-out and arrest of the sponsoring partners meant no funds were available. Willson lived in fear that musicians were going to seek him out and hold him responsible for their unpaid services, but all was forgiven.

Sometime in 1929 Meredith and Peggy Willson headed west for a permanent relocation to the West Coast. There seems to have been no single impetus for the move, but a combination of circumstances. The move heralded what was to become the bulk of his professional career: Willson's work in radio and, later, television. Willson had an important contact in Hollywood in the person of good friend Abe Meyer, who was now musical director of Tiffany-Stahl, a company which produced moving pictures. Willson recalled his 1929 efforts in Hollywood:

In those early days Hollywood was a glorified fish fry, and the important thing was to look busy, so at Abe's suggestion I took up cigar smoking and spent my mornings walking around the Tiffany-Stahl lot, knitting my brows and smoking cigars.¹³⁸

Tiffany-Stahl was an early film company which first specialized in silent films. As technology for sound became available Tiffany-Stahl became one of the first studios to integrate the new sound technology and produce numerous 'Talkies.' In his first months in California, Willson scored music for several films produced by the company.¹³⁹ Willson mentioned the names of two of these films in *And There I Stood with My Piccolo*. One was a December 1929 science-fiction film called *The Lost Zeppelin*, another was the melodramatic *Peacock Alley*,

¹³⁷ J. Kingston Pierce, *Eccentric Seattle*, Washington State University Press, 2003

¹³⁸ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 129.

¹³⁹ Dates for Tiffany-Stahl films can be found at <http://www.vitaphone.org/tiffany.html>, accessed 10th February, 2005.

which was released in January of 1930 (Figures 3-9 and 3-10). It is relevant to note that the films were released within two months of each other. Composers were expected to write, score, rehearse, conduct, and record quickly. Composers of these early ‘talkies’ did all the composing and scoring, but had not yet gained enough stature for inclusion on advertisements. When it came to the actual recording of the film, music, voices, and sound effects were recorded at one time, with actors, conductor, and orchestra in the same room and reading the same script. This practice resulted in one of the few remaining traces we have of Willson’s earliest film scores, ASCAP cue sheets. These cue sheets still survive in the ASCAP archives and list Willson as composer for several early films.

Recent research has proved that Willson wrote scores for several additional Tiffany-Stahl films, including *My Cavalier* (also known as *The Cavalier*), released November 1, 1928, *The Taming of the Shrew* (1929 United Artists), and *Wide Open*, 1930.¹⁴⁰ Composing credit for *My Cavalier* was given to Hugo Reisenfeld, Willson’s colleague from the New York Rialto theater, who worked in partnership with Willson. No copy of the film has thus far come to light, nor has any score; only the ASCAP cue sheets are known to exist. *Wide Open* and *The Taming of the Shrew* incorporated works Willson composed in 1929; *Tornado* and *The Siege*, which, as examples of some of Willson’s first orchestral compositions, will be addressed in a later chapter. In the latter part of 1932 Tiffany-Stahl was absorbed into World Wide Pictures. Somewhat later Willson also contributed to a twelve-part serial, *Undersea Kingdom*, which was released in 1936. *Undersea Kingdom* has recently been found and is in circulation on DVD among certain early film buffs, but the extent of Willson’s contributions is not clear. With no existing scores and no credits it is difficult to determine exactly to which musical portions Willson contributed. Many early films were lost, composers were recognized haphazardly, and there remains the possibility

¹⁴⁰ ASCAP sheets indicate Willson as composer and conductor.

that Willson composed music for films which have yet to be rediscovered. Of these early ‘talkie’ scores Willson admitted that he, “didn’t know much about picture scoring – in fact, didn’t know *anything* about picture scoring,” though he did possess what he felt was one vital qualification, his “cigar gave out the proper smoke screen.”¹⁴¹

At about the same time as he was composing his first film scores Willson was hired as musical director of radio station KFRC, based in San Francisco.¹⁴² The call sign ‘KFRC’ was an acronym which stood for “Known for Radio Clearness,” a promotion of the station’s transmitter system. The station was owned by entrepreneur Don Lee, who had accumulated much wealth as the California franchisee for Cadillac automobiles. In the late 1920s Lee had branched out into radio and set up wire-line connections between several stations, one of the first examples of a ‘network.’ In 1929 Don Lee entered into an agreement with Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) for his stations to become the western outlets for CBS; he touted this as the Don Lee-Columbia Network. Willson’s hiring was a direct result of the contract, for Lee sought out the best talent he could find to promote and run the new network.

Thus Willson began to serve in a new capacity for radio, that of Music Director and/or Orchestra Leader for widely-heard radio programs. The positions were not well-defined and seem to have overlapped. As Orchestra Leader his primary job would have been to rehearse and conduct the orchestra, with limited input regarding musical selections. As Music Director, Willson would have had a broader influence in what was being heard in the broadcast, as he would have selected the music and integrated it into the narrative portions of the program. His earliest widely-heard big show was *Blue Monday Jamboree*, which in 1929 began a successful run of several seasons. Willson recalled *Blue Monday Jamboree*, as, “. . . a two-hour clambake

¹⁴¹ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 129.

¹⁴² <http://www.olderadio.com/archives/stations/sf/kfrc1.htm>

every Monday night from eight to ten, and you could shoot off a gun in any street in California on that night and never hit anybody on account of they were all home listening to *The Blue Monday Jamboree*. I can't think of anything that's ever been done on the radio that we didn't do first on that program."¹⁴³ Indeed, many 'stock' characters, which came to define radio and early television, were developed for *The Blue Monday Jamboree*. These include comedy duos like those later imitated by Amos 'n' Andy, widely used stereotypical ethnic characters of the day such as the wise-cracking Mexican janitor, the standard singing cowboy, and many more. KFCR also played the first original musical comedies written for radio, as well as murder mysteries and comedic whodunits. Even the voice of the character 'foghorn leghorn,' popular in children's television cartoons of the 1960s, was attributed to emulating a character on *The Blue Monday Jamboree*.

As is the case with many early radio programs, the significant impact of *Blue Monday Jamboree* is not well understood in the modern era. Recordings were sometimes made, but generally the better recordings were reused or lost, though curiosity about particularly poor performances kept those recordings in circulation. A few years later many early recordings made on aluminum and glass cylinders were contributed to recycling efforts of the second World War, and thus lost forever. One of the ideas Willson premiered, probably on *Blue Monday Jamboree*, was that of "Chiffon Jazz". He had the idea that the audience would prefer a sort of modified jazz or dance music to listen to over the air. He began to arrange works in which the brasses and saxophones were replaced by violins and woodwinds, a practice which became popular and has continued to this day.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 135-136.

¹⁴⁴ 'You and I,' *Super Song Book* (popular magazine, no publisher listed, 1940), 3.

Peggy and Meredith settled in San Francisco and began a long and productive association with the city. The NBC Western Division headquarters were in San Francisco and, due in part to the strong Don-Lee, NBC connection Willson was appointed music director of the Western Division of NBC in 1932. This position was, presumably, excellent training for Willson, and San Francisco was the center of West Coast radio, then emerging from infancy into the major form of entertainment. Radio broadcasts in the early days were live, and studios were usually filled with people; the musical director, engineers, guests, and a live orchestra which varied in size from a quartet up to one hundred musicians. The variety of music played was remarkably wide, ranging from classical concertos to jazz (Figure 3-11).

This period was busy and productive for Willson. It was in these early years with NBC that Willson began to implement innovative programming ideas for radio. One of these was the program, *Concert in Rhythm*, the first to feature popular dance music not to be danced to, but simply to be listened to. Another innovation was in the form of a half hour radio program *Waltz Time*, devoted entirely to the playing of waltzes. Both *Concert in Rhythm* and *Waltz Time* ran in 1932. In 1933 Willson became orchestra director of the popular *Captain Dobbsie's Ship of Joy*, which ran for three years, and also became orchestra director of his first big hit radio program, *Carefree Carnival*, which ran through 1939.

In all, this was a heady time in radio. The country was in the middle of the great depression and people depended on radio as often their sole form of entertainment, news, and even education. Willson was at the center of developing the new medium, given largely a *carte blanche* to try new things. After two or three uncertain years caused by the depression, musical activity boomed again on a burgeoning radio and record industry and the public's need for communication and entertainment as war clouds rolled in during the following decade. Willson

was immensely busy during these years, directing sometimes as many as seventeen musical radio programs a week. He also found time for appearances as a guest conductor for regional orchestras, including the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, Seattle Symphony Orchestra, and Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Researching the ‘radio years’ of Willson’s career has the potential to be highly confusing, for early radio was not the standardized system we know today. Rather, it was a growing conglomerate of independent owners who shaped rather loose ties to networks. In the early years of radio, there were two NBC networks, NBC Blue and NBC Red. From the early 1920s, large cities had multiple stations, problematic when more than one wanted a network feed. If the network was already affiliated with a station it could not affiliate with a second station. NBC solved this dilemma by creating two networks, which it named Blue and Red, potentially doubling the number of stations which could have an NBC affiliation. Additionally, in the early years, some stations carried shows from more than one network. The autonomy of the early stations was a boon to the spread of different genres of music. Local stations had, when needed, the resources of a national hookup, but they also realized the value of maintaining and drawing upon regional aspects. For example, Willson built a Spanish program around a local singer, Carmen Castillo, while at KFRC.¹⁴⁵ Networks depended on their local affiliate stations to provide national advertising and nationally directed, high-budget programming.

Station owner Don Lee died of a sudden heart attack in 1934, and his stations were taken over by his son, Tommy Lee, with the CBS arrangement continuing through the end of 1936. During the early 1930s there had been growing friction between the Lee organization and Columbia over programming control issues. The Lee group wanted to continue their programming autonomy, while CBS sought more control over the broadcasts. It is notable that

¹⁴⁵ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 134.

Willson departed the network in 1936, the same year in which the CBS moved its affiliation to station KSFO. At that time the Lee stations became affiliates of the Mutual network and moved their radio headquarters to Los Angeles. Willson left no clue that he had any preference nor played any role in KFRC's switch in network affiliation.

Willson remained in San Francisco and became musical director of the NBC stations KGO and KPO. As radio expanded in popularity and scope in the 1930s certain challenges arose. One was the difficulty of having a single network which served the different time zones of the east and west coasts. This was live radio, with no option to record and replay, so a show which broadcast in the evening on the east coast would be broadcasting at mid-afternoon on the west coast. One attempted solution was a double broadcast, in which shows would broadcast from LA in the afternoon for an evening program for NY, and then cast and crew would reassemble several hours later and do the show again for the West Coast. The dilemma of live broadcasting and time zones required the network stations in the Pacific to air much of their own programming, which in turn called for a person to coordinate the performance and broadcasts. In 1935 Willson was named to this important post and became the music director for the West Coast division of the NBC network, essentially half the national network.

The following year, 1936, was a banner year for Willson. He completed and premiered his *First Symphony* subtitled 'San Francisco Symphony,' and inspired by his time living and working in San Francisco and his deep passion for the city. Willson guest conducted the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra in the April 19th premier of the work, in the process becoming their youngest ever guest conductor. The work premiered to some acclaim. Willson seemed to be on the brink of carving a permanent niche for himself as a symphonic composer.

At the end of his 1936 season Meredith and Peggy took a month-long cruise aboard the S.S. Virginia, crossed through the Panama Canal, then spent two weeks amid familiar scenes in New York City. While there he directed the NBC symphony orchestra in Radio City. The couple then made a trip to Mason City, where they stayed with Peggy's mother. In the language of the time Willson told the local paper that he was making the trip as a celebration of the completion of his *First Symphony*. He added, "Who knows, I might write a Mason City symphony . . . Mason City has plenty to crow about. I like it better every time I come here."¹⁴⁶ The following summer he hinted that his symphony would be played by the New York Philharmonic, though the work was apparently never written.

His work in radio, however, was about to pull Willson in another direction. From the mid 1930s radio headquarters had begun to shift gradually southward to Los Angeles, in large part because of the talent pool in nearby Hollywood. The location made it more convenient, too, for big name artists to perform on radio and in movies, and NBC moved many of its shows to Los Angeles. In 1937, less than a year after the premier of his *San Francisco Symphony*, Willson, still NBC Western Director, made the move to Los Angeles and signed an agent from the William Morris agency. Just after moving to Los Angeles, Willson became the musical director and host of thirty-minute variety radio show which became one of his best remembered programs, NBC's *Good News* (1937-1939). That summer Willson finished the first season of *Good News* and took a European vacation. In London he saw his first television and was asked to conduct a broadcast with the BBC orchestra, which he declined due to a slight illness.

In 1938, riding on name recognition and the success of his *First Symphony*, Meredith wrote a guide to composition, conducting, and radio, titling it *What Every Young Musician Should Know*. The work was a good-natured manual, filled with slang of the era, giving advice

¹⁴⁶ "Meredith Willson Plans to Continue Composing," *Mason City Globe Gazette*, June 3rd, 1936.

about how to approach the popular music world. The 1930s world of popular music included a variety of forms, from classical to swing, and Willson's guide addressed them all. Indeed, the move to Los Angeles marked the beginning of Willson's affiliation with many of the popular radio shows of the era. He worked in various capacities, as host, co-host, orchestra conductor, and musical director, for many years. In his various capacities Willson became instrumental in developing what became stock characters on radio; stereotypes which were later carried over onto television. As one of the few speaking characters in the radio studio, and one whose voice the audience would recognize, the orchestra conductor was frequently used as an actor or 'stooge' to whom questions were asked. Willson cultivated this role with a passion. He enjoyed serving as both serious orchestra conductor and the butt of jokes, but never at the expense of musical quality. A former performer, he respected his orchestras and once commented, "When you play in an orchestra you're scared of the conductor, and when you become a conductor you're scared of the orchestra because they're the ones who can really tell whether you know your stuff or not."¹⁴⁷

In his role as Music Director Willson found himself largely outside the loose network boundaries. While different stations might share the same ownership, they might also have different network affiliations. It was not uncommon to find stations in different cities which shared ownership, but which held different network contracts. As music director, Willson need only go from one station to another, a frequent, sometimes daily, occurrence, to find himself working for different networks. This explains the confusion of records which show Willson working at two or more studios and/or networks at the same time. Additionally, affiliation with a network was not as exclusive as it is today, and Willson moved his shows. He sometimes directed a show on one network concurrent with directing the same show on a different network.

¹⁴⁷ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 69.

A source which does an excellent and detailed examination of Willson's chronology and affiliation with different Old Time Radio, OTR, networks, and details the various shows he directed is Bill Oates' book, *Meredith Willson, America's Music Man*.¹⁴⁸

Over the course of his radio and television career Willson worked for the Red and Blue NBC networks and for CBS. In the 1940s the FCC ruled that the NBC Red and Blue networks comprised a monopoly and forced NBC to relinquish a network. Hence the 'Blue' network spun off to become the American Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) in about 1945. As a result, some sources show Willson working for ABC.¹⁴⁹ The changes between networks seem to have been encouraged, at least in part, through advertising sponsorship of networks and specific shows. Though somewhat later, an example can be found in Willson's show *Sparkle Time* (1946-47), also known as *The Meredith Willson Show* and *Ford Showroom*. The program began on CBS, sponsored in part by Ford, then moved to ABC, sponsored by Canada Dry Ginger Ale and later, again, Ford. Simultaneously, Willson was directing other shows on NBC.

As Music Director Willson influenced the format of radio programs, and thus impacted developments in the field. He developed the idea of taking the ten most played songs of the week, as published by *Variety* magazine, and making them into a show he called *The Big Ten*. The network later sold this concept, and it became the NBC *Lucky Strike Hit Parade*. The idea of featuring and counting down the top hits of the week originated with Willson and is carried on in the recording industry to this day.

Another significant feature of Willson's radio years was the number of celebrities and rising stars with whom Willson worked. A list is practically a 'who's who' of notable performers of the day, and includes such luminaries as Nelson Eddy, Jeanette MacDonald, Judy

¹⁴⁸ Bill Oates. *Meredith Willson, America's Music Man* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2005).

¹⁴⁹ Bill Oates also notes that in the late 1920s Willson worked for a Seattle network called ABC, a network which failed, not to be confused with today's ABC network.

Garland, Buddy Ebsen, Mickey Rooney, Clark Gable, Spencer Tracy, Lionel Barrymore, Fannie Brice, Jimmy Stewart, and more. Willson was never really a ‘name-dropper,’ but did occasionally mention the celebrities with whom he worked. Writing about the 1938 premier of *Good News*, for example, he recalled “We had lots of glamour and had rehearsed for many days with a big orchestra and chorus of seventy people and Jeanette MacDonald and . . . Judy Garland . . . and Buddy Ebsen.”¹⁵⁰ Willson painted vignettes of some of these personalities in his memoirs:

Nelson Eddy was getting good and tired of hanging around M.G.M. doing bit parts and was happy to get away to San Francisco and get a chance to sing again. He was barely in his twenties, but he killed all the people with the most tastefully complete singing of the “Toreador Song” you’ll ever want to hear. He was a bit on the callow side in those days, as it comes to me now.¹⁵¹

Sometime in 1939, using the *Good News* program as his platform, Willson commissioned ten well-known American composers to write original works in various prescribed traditional forms. The idea was probably first been broadcast in the summer, as several newspapers reported on it in mid-to late August. From *The New York Herald Tribune*:

Noticing that no American works have figured in the lists of favorite melodies named in various polls and performed in his “Concert Hall” radio hours, Meredith Willson is commissioning ten American composers to write works in small forms such as those of the minuet, serenade, caprice and barcarolle. These will be performed in the Concert Hall program, which originates from Los Angeles on Thursday nights over an N. B. C. national network.

The committee choosing the list of ten composers consists of Mr. Willson, Dr. Frank Black, of the National Broadcasting Company, and Howard Barlow, of the Columbia Broadcasting System. . .

Favored tunes which have already figured on Mr. Willson’s programs include Beethoven’s and Paderewski’s minuets, Schubert’s “Serenade,” the Brahms Lullaby, Kreisler’s “Caprice Viennois” and the Barcarolle from Offenbach’s “Tales of Hoffmann.” Mr. Willson thinks that American composers of

¹⁵⁰ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 149-150.

¹⁵¹ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 132.

popular music have hitherto lacked the incentive to compose works of such a type.¹⁵²

Another article asserts that “It is Mr. Willson’s contention that American popular composers have rarely been given the opportunity to try their talents in the more classic forms.”¹⁵³ Another article continues this thought, providing more detail about what Willson considered to be the problem:

Meredith, who is almost painfully in earnest about this, is worried because there were no American names in the list of composers of the “ten most beloved melodies ever written,” he has put on the air in the past. “It is obvious,” says Meredith, “that American composers lack the stimulus and incentive to write in classical forms.

The Wilson (sic) composer’s list is not yet complete, but it’s our guess that those who have felt the urge to write in the “classical” form have already done so and will continue. As for those other writers who wouldn’t swap a dozen barcarolles for one simple song a la Berlin, we regret they’d stick to their own very good lasts, keep far away from forms for which they have little sympathy and out of which they don’t get much fun.¹⁵⁴

Willson presented the resulting compositions each week during the *Good News* program, conducting the premier performances himself.¹⁵⁵ Each work was preceded by the designation ‘American.’ The pieces composed include *American waltz*, by Peter De Rose; *American arabesque*, Vernon Duke; *American barcarolle*, Harry Warren; *American lullaby*, Duke Ellington; *American humoresque*, Sigmund Romberg; *American caprice*, Morton Gould; *American minuet*, Harold Arlen; *American nocturne*, Dana Suesse; *March for Americans*, Ferde Grofe, and *American serenade*, Louis Alter. The works were recorded by Decca in 1941 in a five disc collection titled the “Album of Modern American compositions”.

¹⁵² ‘Ten U.S. Composers Will Get Commissions,’ *The New York Herald Tribune*, August 20, 1939, Sunday.

¹⁵³ ‘Youngest Baton-Waver Lords It at Fair Tonight: Master Lorin Maazel to Conduct Tchaikowsky’s Marche Slave(sic), Festival at Bergamo, Brooklyn Opera, Opportunity.’ *The New York World-Telegram*, August 18, 1939, Friday.

¹⁵⁴ ‘Meredith Willson, who is to lead the orchestra...’, *The New York Post*, August 17, 1939, Thursday.

¹⁵⁵ ‘Willson Signs Contract to Record Music Album’, *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 12/31/1940.

The exposure of his 1936 *First Symphony*, and close affiliation with Hollywood soon resulted in a new venture. Around 1938 Willson was contacted by Charlie Chaplin, who asked if he might be interested in writing music for a new film, *The Great Dictator*. In an interview recorded in 1959 Willson recalled his collaboration with Chaplin with great fondness. His mention of Chaplin's lack of politics is particularly relevant given the time of the era of the interview. In 1952 Chaplin had come under severe pressure through accusations from Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee, which accused the filmmaker of communist leanings. Willson's recollections of eight weeks spent scoring with Chaplin were quite different:

I had lunch with him every single day, and every day I was absolutely sick from laughing. Such a fantastically humorous man – and I never heard him tell a joke. He only told experiences, things that had happened. All of this eight weeks on the lot, lunching every day, maybe from 12:30 to 2:30 – we were leisurely – the minute the picture was finished, Charlie would be out of work. He wouldn't have anything to occupy his mind. So he pretended that he was in a big hurry, but actually he hated to have it get over. In all that time, I never heard him speak a word of politics. We never exchanged one word about politics. He had something to say in general about the quality of the guy who was reading the news, maybe – didn't like his voice – but his leanings that we've been led to believe he has politically, and his "citizen of the world" poppycock is just a shame. It's too bad, because Charlie is such a great artist in every way. This man is a genius, no doubt about it. He would have been a genius as a house painter or as a portrait artist, or in the ballet he could have out – Nijinsky'd Nijinsky. Whatever he put his mind to, he would have been the greatest.¹⁵⁶

Willson was also still heavily involved with songwriting and his radio career and was one of the country's well-known entertainment figures. As such there were frequent news articles about him. Many of these were brief lines informing the radio public which artists would be featured on an upcoming show. These would mention Willson's name along with those of other celebrities:

¹⁵⁶ New York, Columbia University, [Willson, "The Reminiscences of Meredith Willson", Popular Arts Project Series V, volume IX, Category IA, Oral History Research Office, 1961] 34.

Lionel Barrymore again will visit Robert Young, Fanny Brice, Frank Morgan, Meredith Willson, Connie Boswell and other members of the cast of Good News of 1939, when he stars in a dramatic sketch during the broadcast at 7 p.m. today over WMAQ.¹⁵⁷

Other articles, though still brief, provided somewhat more substance about Willson, the man, such as those articles which seem to have evolved from a short interview or even overheard comments. Like the smaller articles, these list celebrities and, frequently, the names of shows. These vignettes are somewhat longer and more anecdotal, relating short stories or incidents which involved radio personalities. Even small items were of interest to the public:

Frank Morgan hit the jack pot on a new soft drink vending machine just installed in the artists' corridor of NBC's Hollywood Radio City. First of the Good News of 1939 cast to spot the machine, Morgan insisted upon treating Fanny Brice, Bob Young, Meredith Willson, Hanley Stafford, Warren Hull and Connie Boswell. He started feeding nickels faster than the machine could take them, and before long the janitor was busy mopping, and collecting tipped over paper cups. After much effort but little refreshment, the Good News cast adjourned to their air cooled studio to enjoy iced coffee, leaving Morgan still trying to explain what he had done to the machine.¹⁵⁸

Willson was frequently asked his opinion about musical items, such as the current trend in writing silly songs:

Carloadings may fall off, the business index may sink out of sight, but the current "silly" music craze is a sure sign that bigger and better times have come, according to Meredith Willson, Good News musical director, here for a visit.

The fad for nursery rhyme swing that began with "A Tisket A Tasket" and continued with "The Mulberry Bush," "Rumplestiltskin," and "The Three Little Fishes," he explained, is the same kind of absurdity we had during the flush twenties in the form of "Yes, We Have No Bananas" and "Barney Google."

"All such songs are superficial from a musical viewpoint," Willson declares, "and they will not have any more lasting effect on musical trends than

¹⁵⁷ 'Lionel Barrymore Visits Snooks' *Springfield, Ill Journal*, Springfield, Ill, June 8, 1939.

¹⁵⁸ 'Air Land Chatter' *Sacramento California Bee*, Sacramento, California, June 8, 1939.

‘Ferdinand the Bull’ on literature, but they reflect a fundamental upswing in our national spirit. They herald better business and good cheer.”¹⁵⁹

There were also articles which included Willson as part of a significant event. He was sometimes featured as the main event, sometimes mentioned along with many other well-known performers:

It started with a tremendous crash of cymbals and the majestic sweep of Meredith Willson’s symphony orchestra carrying Tony Martin, famed tenor of screen and stage, into Irving Berlin’s patriotic masterpiece, “God Bless America.”

Tiny, red-headed Judy Garland held an honor position in the broadcast – that of unfurling before her nation-wide audience a “radio American flag” in the symbolic singing of MacDowell’s “To a Wild Rose” for the red of the flag, Stephen Foster’s “My Old Kentucky Home,” for the Dixie cotton fields representing the white, and George Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue” for the blue field.

Jeanette MacDonald had an equally impressive patriotic role when called upon to sing ‘The Star-Spangled Banner.’

Robert Taylor introduced what was probably the most dramatic bit of acting on the program – the landing of the Pilgrims, played by noted film stars under the direction of Frank Capra.¹⁶⁰

1940 was a productive year for Willson. In addition to *The Great Dictator*, Willson completed his *Second Symphony*, which he subtitled *The Missions of California*. About 1938 Willson had met conductor Albert Coates, of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and Coates suggested that Willson compose a second symphony. He began work immediately and completed the work in 1940. He also composed a song titled, *Wings on High*, which he dedicated to the United States Aviation Forces.¹⁶¹ The Mason City Globe Gazette touted that the work had, “. . . been accepted by them (the United States Aviation Forces) as their theme

¹⁵⁹ ‘Silly Songs Herald Bigger, Better Days,’ *Duluth Minnesota Herald*, Duluth, Minnesota, August 4th, 1939.

¹⁶⁰ ‘Patriotic Music Marks Program’ *Chicago Tribune*, Chicago, Illinois

¹⁶¹ It was only after the Second World War that the Air Force was established, and until that time several branches of the military had aviation services. Willson’s dedication seems to be directed towards those members of all branches who worked in aviation, rather than to a single service.

melody.”¹⁶² During this year he also began work on what would become one of his most famous radio affiliations, the *Maxwell House Coffee Time*, which ran through 1949.

In 1941 Willson was hired by CBS to host a one hour radio program *The Ford Summer Hour*. This was also the year he composed two songs which achieved wide-spread radio popularity, *You and I*, and *Two in Love*. Willson was delighted that both songs “got on the Hit Parade at the same time, which I thought was slightly ironic, or poetic justice, or sump’n, in view of the fact that I invented the Hit Parade.”¹⁶³ *You and I* stayed on the Hit Parade for 19 weeks. Also in 1941 Willson scored the music for the Goldwyn film *The Little Foxes*, based on the play by Lillian Hellman. The film version starred Bette Davis. For his work on *The Little Foxes* Willson received his second nomination by the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, for ‘Scoring of a Dramatic Picture.’

In the early 1940s Willson, like many Americans, was becoming increasingly focused on events of the war which would soon expand to the United States and become the Second World War. One incident particularly caught his interest. A 1940 poem, authored by Gene Fowler, related a tale of the heroism of the captain and crew of a ship, the *Jervis Bay*.¹⁶⁴ While escorting a convoy the *Jervis Bay* was attacked by the German warship *Admiral Scheer*. Most of the officers were killed during the shelling. The Captain of the *Jervis Bay*, Fogarty Fegen, suffered the loss of one of his arms, but stayed on deck issuing orders and was later killed by a shell. The crew refused to abandon ship but continued firing on the German fleet in order to occupy the attackers and provide the rest of the convoy ships a chance to escape. Moved by the story of these gallant actions, Willson composed *The Jervis Bay*, an orchestral work he termed a

¹⁶² *Mason City Globe Gazette*, August 10th, 1940.

¹⁶³ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 170.

¹⁶⁴ Gene Fowler. *The Jervis Bay Goes Down* (New York: Random House), 1941.

symphonic poem. *The Jervis Bay* was premiered by the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra in 1942, with Willson sharing the podium with Francescatti and guest conducting his own work.

Later that same year Willson enlisted in the U.S. Army. He was given the rank of major and made head of the Music Division of the Armed Forces Radio Service, essentially music director of Armed Forces Radio. At one point Willson was contacted by a musical friend, guitarist Les Paul, who had recently been drafted. Willson pulled strings to get Paul assigned to his unit, and Paul edited many hours of prerecorded entertainment into variety shows for Armed Forces network distribution, basically serving as a recording engineer.¹⁶⁵ Les Paul went on to become a famed guitarist and well-remembered for the guitar named for him. He considered the work he did with Willson to be among the most important of his career.

During his time in the Army Willson joined forces with radio personality John Nesbitt and co-hosted a half hour show entitled *The Meredith Willson – John Nesbitt Show*, on NBC. Under his influence the Armed Forces Radio Service also produced such memorable programs as *Command Performance* and *Mail Call* for GIs throughout the world.

It was during this busy time that Willson wrote again for film, contributing the piece “Ta Ra Ra Boom De Ay” to the movie *Happy Go Lucky*, released in 1943. The stars were big names of the era, Mary Martin and Dick Powell, and Willson’s piece, to which Mary Martin dances, was the show-stopper of the film.¹⁶⁶ In 1944 Willson worked on a radio documentary program entitled ‘The Passing Parade,’ written and produced by Nesbitt. The fifteen-minute program was shown in film houses as a short subject.

After Willson’s 1946 discharge from the Army, he returned to radio. He exited the service determined to embark on a personal crusade to do something about what he felt were the trite

¹⁶⁵ Robert Denman, “Les Paul: The Living Legend of the Electric Guitar”, *Classic Jazz Guitar* 9/1 (2005) <http://www.classicjazzguitar.com/articles/article.jsp?article=25>

¹⁶⁶ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0035969/>, accessed 22nd September, 2005

musical programs on radio and the tired format into which commercial announcements had fallen. In his zeal to make commercials palatable, Willson conceived the "Talking People," a speaking chorus to deliver the sponsor's message, and various other ingenious devices. For the next decade he continued working on radio as commentator, composer, conductor, and musical director. Willson also continued to develop his own radio personality as a comedian, usually serving as the 'stooge' of jokes.

1948 marked several landmark events in Willson's personal life. One of these was the publication of his first biography, *And There I Stood With My Piccolo*, which became a bestseller. The major changes, however, were in Willson's personal life. On March 5th of 1948 Meredith Willson's divorce from Elizabeth 'Peggy' Willson became final. Just a week later, on March 13th, 1948, Willson married Ralina Rina Zirova, who was generally called Rini. Apparently Meredith met Rini, a singer of Russian and French parentage, during a rehearsal. The two quickly fell in love, and Meredith requested a divorce from Peggy. As was common practice at that time Peggy was the party who filed the divorce papers, on grounds of "mental cruelty."

Meredith's twenty-nine year marriage to Peggy produced no children, and various friends of the family tell of an increasing strain this decision placed on the relationship. Peggy is said to have insisted that bearing children would ruin her figure. As Willson's career and public stature grew, so did his wife's. Peggy appeared in many newspaper and magazine articles about Willson; these frequently accompanied by pictures. This public scrutiny may have hardened her resolve not to bear children, and sources close to the family relate that this was a source of conflict between Meredith and Peggy. In July of 1947 the couple was featured in a bucolic

pictorial in *The American Home* magazine.¹⁶⁷ By early 1948 they were in the middle of a divorce.

Despite Willson's twenty-nine years of marriage to Peggy, information about their life together is scanty. Willson, in fact, never mentioned Peggy in any of his autobiographical works. The primary sources for information about her are newspaper and magazine articles which mention Peggy alongside Meredith, or feature her as the wife of a popular musical figure. Besides the *American Home* magazine there are several newspaper and magazine articles which mention or feature Peggy Willson. One is a story published in the *Albert Lea Tribune* in 1939.¹⁶⁸

The last column that O. O. McIntyre ever wrote, chatted about a love story that was considered Hollywood's most romantic: that of the famous Meredith Willson . . .

The Wilsons and the Willsons lived next door in Mason City, Iowa. Meredith and Peggy had grown up together and every tree in the neighborhood had carved hearts on them, M. W. – P. W. 1910. Their parents thought this was puppy love and even during college days the couple still were very serious. One day, Meredith came home, in the spring, and told Peggy he would not go back to college until she went along. So he borrowed \$12 from his brother and later, in fact on August 29, 1920, they made the trip to Albert Lea, Minn., where they proceeded to look for the prettiest parsonage. It happened to be the Methodist one. The only thing they remember about is that the minister had a cold and reeked of Smith Brother's cough drops. And that, on the way out of the house, Peggy saw the dining room table set for dinner with two large and 10 little chairs drawn up around it, and for some reason, cried.

The Albert Lea story draws heavily on columnist O.O. McIntyre's last column, published posthumously. Both contain many factual errors, and an equal number of exaggerations. The Wilson and Willson families, for instance, lived close, but not next door to each other, Willson never went to college, but took a single class at Damrosch while beginning his professional career, there is no evidence of initials carved in trees, and so on... The article is, on the other

¹⁶⁷ *The American Home*, 37/6, 1947.

¹⁶⁸ Albert Lea is 37 miles from Mason City, the city in which both Meredith and Peggy Willson grew up.

hand, a very public confirmation that the couple was generally considered to have a happy marriage.¹⁶⁹

Another article, this one from 1940, boasts, “Twenty Years of Marital Bliss” and celebrates the couple’s long and happy marriage.

Many stories have been written about “ideal marriages” but none fits the plot better than the union of Peggy and Meredith Willson.

This week, in the city where admittedly they have spent “the happiest years of their married life,” Mr. and Mrs. Willson will celebrate their twentieth anniversary amid a series of fetes – to be rendered by San Francisco friends.¹⁷⁰

The Willson’s, who lived in Los Angeles at the time, are said in this article to have found it fitting to return to San Francisco to celebrate their anniversary, “Because it was in San Francisco that Willson first rose to fame.” An article from the couple’s hometown newspaper, the Mason City Globe-Gazette, trumpets an upcoming visit in which Willson will direct the North Iowa band festival. This article features a picture of Meredith playing the piano, Peggy fondly holding his shoulder, and the couple smiling at their cat, who sits atop the piano, and portraying the image of a happy and successful couple.¹⁷¹

According to friends of the couple, in an attempt to remove memories of Peggy from Meredith’s life, Rini proceeded to throw away many of Willson’s early press clippings and papers, with special emphasis on items which mentioned Peggy. This purge provides a partial explanation for the lack of papers and information about Willson’s early career and works. A set of scrapbooks kept by Meredith and Peggy bears the unique feature of scratched out and partially

¹⁶⁹ ‘Here’s an Interesting Story’ *Albert Lea Tribune*, Albert Lea, Minnesota, February 21, 1939.

¹⁷⁰ ‘Twenty Years of Marital Bliss’ *San Francisco Chronicle*, San Francisco, California, August 25, 1940, 4.

¹⁷¹ Meredith Willson Invited to Festival: Asked to Lead Massed Bands. *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, Mason City, Iowa, May 18th, 1945.

destroyed entries.¹⁷² The missing entries were articles which mentioned Peggy, defaced by second wife Rini (figure 3-8). Rini, on the other hand, was featured prominently in Willson's second memoir, *Eggs I Have Laid*. Willson indicated that the two had a close personal and working relationship and that Rini, a singer, was frequently consulted about works in process.

In the divorce settlement Peggy received more than fifty thousand dollars in bonds, insurance and securities, twenty-five percent of Willson's continued earnings, a gas station, and the Beverly Hills home which had so recently been featured in *The American Home* magazine. Two years later, in 1950, Peggy married wealthy businessman Leroy Van Bomel. Van Bomel's obituary states that he was president of the National Dairy and increased sales to \$1 billion, "thus making his company one of the nation's biggest food processors."¹⁷³ Peggy died in 1986 and her ashes were interred in Mason City's Elmwood Cemetery.

In 1949 Willson was included in David Ewen's *American Composers Today, A Biographical and Critical Guide*. This entry is flattering and exaggerated in some respects. What is most relevant about this period is Willson's recognition by, and popularity with the listening public. Television had had begun to spread in the 1940s, and by the end of the decade was growing rapidly, pulling sponsors and audience away from radio. In 1950 Willson became part of radio's attempt to remain competitive with television. This was in the form of a ninety-minute extravaganza entitled *The Big Show*, co-hosted by Willson and Tallulah Bankhead. Willson composed the theme song for the show 'May the Good Lord Bless and Keep You...' which closed every show and gained wide popularity. The song was a number one hit and

¹⁷² These scrapbooks contain articles sent to the Willson's from fans throughout the country, with entries ranging in length from two to three lines to several pages, and covering much of his early career. The scrapbooks are currently in possession of Art Fischbeck, retired Mason City town historian and archivist. He relates that they were "thrown in the trash" by Willson's third wife, Rosemary Sullivan, in an attempt to remove items which reminded Meredith of his former wives. Neighbors who had been friends of Rini's rescued them from the trash and sent them to Fischbeck.

¹⁷³ *Time Magazine*, Friday, Dec. 30, 1966.

became one of the pieces for which Willson is today most remembered. The inspiration for the song came from his mother, who every week dismissed her Sunday school class saying, “May the good Lord bless and keep you!” *The Big Show* ran until 1952. Willson’s long and salubrious radio career ended in 1952 with a 30-minute musical variety program on NBC, *Encore*, which ran for just a year. He continued to guest conduct orchestras for special programs for the next few years, but *Encore* was the last regular program for which he served as orchestra conductor.

Posthumous

During his lifetime Willson received praise from groups as diverse as Parents magazines, military associations, church organizations and others, who lauded the composer for presenting an entertaining picture of America’s better side. The childless composer was an active member of the Big Brothers organization and a six-time president of the Greater Los Angeles chapter of Big Brothers. President Kennedy presented Willson with the National Big Brother Award in recognition of his service to the country's youth. President Lyndon Johnson appointed Willson to the National Council of the Humanities. In 1982, the National Academy of Popular Music elected him to the Songwriters Hall of Fame. Willson received honorary doctorates from at least five colleges/universities. Willson received recognition from the National Fathers Day Committee, and The Salvation Army honored him for service to it and other volunteer organizations.¹⁷⁴ A stamp featuring Willson was released on Sept. 21, 1999, in New York City, as part of a series to commemorate the important contributions of Broadway songwriters.

Acknowledgement of Willson’s musical talents continued after his death. Willson was posthumously awarded the Iowa Award for lifetime achievement by Iowa Governor Terry Brandstad and the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Ronald Reagan. In recognition of Willson's great contribution to musical theater and twentieth-century music, the Mason City

¹⁷⁴ *Mason City Globe-Gazette* Obituary.

Foundation has created 'Music Man Square' in Willson's birthplace, Mason City, Iowa. The facility is a mall-like structure with a faux street down the center designed to emulate a street from the early twentieth-century. The sides of the street are lined with old-time business fronts and buildings drawn from *The Music Man*. The designers based the names on the shops from citizen names they found in a 1912 city directory. While the names reflect those of prominent 1912 Mason City residents, they do not necessarily relate to the business fronts on which they are found. The large space, plus the attached 'reunion hall' auditorium, attracts public events such as class reunions, wedding receptions, band festivals, and even debates between Presidential candidates.



THE *Rich Studios*....
MASON CITY, IA.

Figure 3-1. Note on this photograph from the family album reads, “Robert Reiniger ‘Meredith’ Willson, 6 months old” (Courtesy Mason City Public Library Archives).



Figure 3-2. Rosalie with Meredith, circa 1904 (Courtesy Mason City Public Library Archives).



Figure 3-3. Rosalie coaching sons Cedric, left, and Meredith on the “black upright piano in the parlor.” (Courtesy Mason City Public Library Archives).



Figure 3-4. Willson Family, circa 1908. Left to right: (Dixie), Cedric, Rosalie, John, Meredith. John’s appearance in the background, in different shades and perspectives, suggests that the photographer may have added a pre-existing photo to create the ‘family’ portrait (Courtesy of Mason City Public Library Archives).



Figure 3-5. Meredith with banjo, Cedric with an instrument identified as a long-neck mandolin, and Dixie (seated), with mandolin (Courtesy of Mason City Public Library Archives).

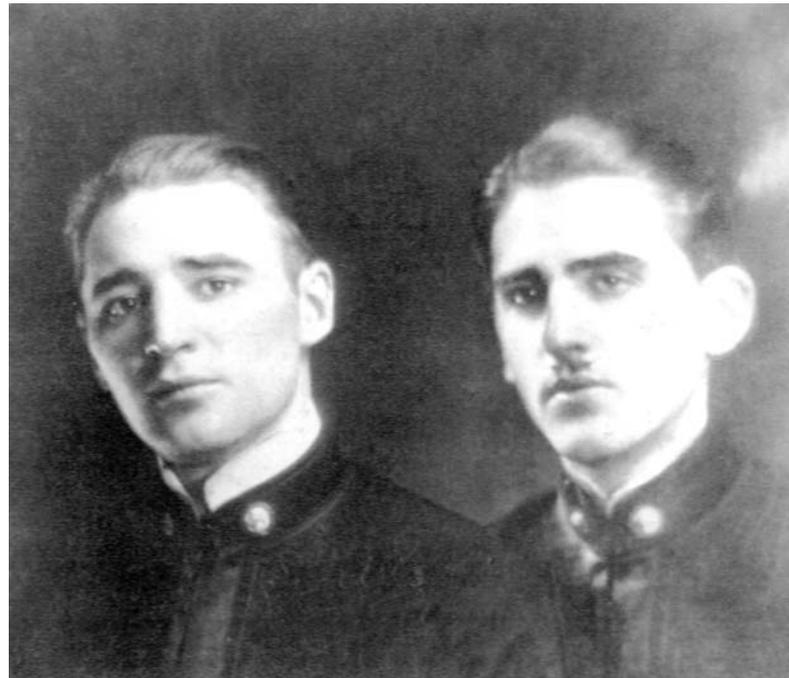


Figure 3-6. Cedric, left, and Meredith in their Sousa uniforms (Courtesy Mason City Public Library Archives).

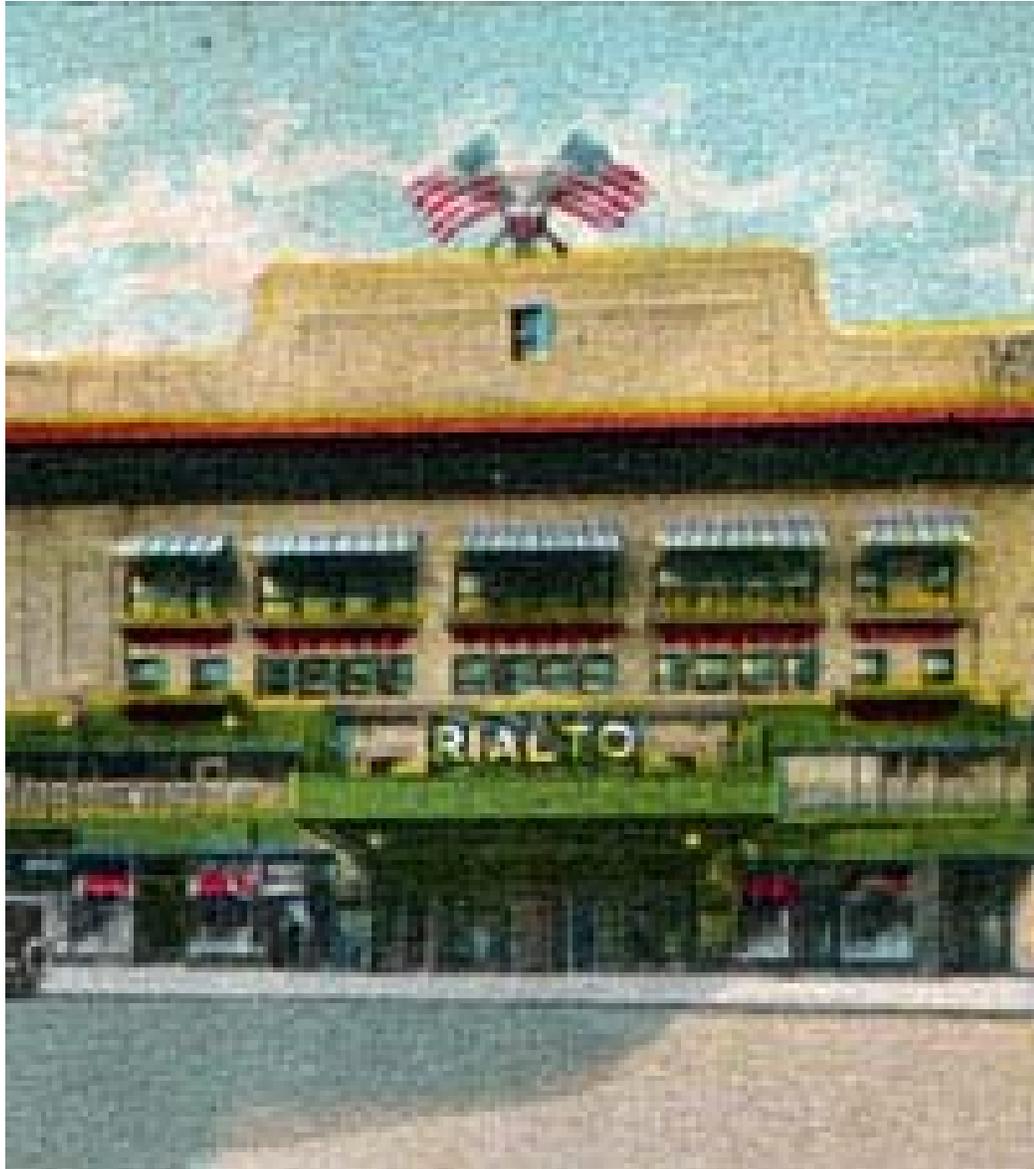


Figure 3-7. Vintage postcard of the Rialto theater, demolished around 1932, site of one of Willson's first playing positions in New York City (public domain).

Anti-Radio Stance

(Continued from page 1)

and remarked that almost every program coming out of Hollywood nowadays seems to have two or more sponsors—the manufacturer of the product and the film companies represented by talent on the show.

Metro Starts It

Metro's announcement that it was withdrawing its connection from Maxwell House Coffee's 'Good News' series June 29 was followed by a statement from A. W. Hober, president of Benton & Bowles, agency on the account, that he was not worrying about the fate of the program or radio's future ability to draw on studio talent. Hober added that the studios that have already acted antagonistically toward radio will find that the players themselves have something to say about their rights to work on the air. He predicted that the latter, as a whole, will refuse to bear the brunt of the sort of 'grandstand play that had been put on the week before in Hollywood.' Hober's reference was to Darryl Zanuck's pulling of Tyrone Power off the Sunday night Woodbury show.

Hober stated that his client had the right to continue with the title of 'Good News' and that it was probable that the succeeding variety program would include Fanny Brice ('Baby Snooks') and Meredith Willson, neither of whom are on the studio contract rolls. The agency is also confident of being able to retain the services of Frank Morgan.

Statement which Metro's New York office issued Friday (10) designated March 30 as the last 'Good News' broadcast it would produce. Several hours later Nicholas M. Schenck agreed to defer this move until June 29, at the request of General Foods. Schenck explained that this was done so that the agency would have ample time to build a substitute program.

In commenting on Metro's action, William F. Rogers, general sales manager for the film company, said that since our business is with exhibitors, Metro in fairness to them is taking this step to discourage radio participation by stars.

Impression in Hollywood has been that Schenck didn't like the tie-up with the commercial program from the start and that he was on the verge of cancelling the alliance around the first of this year when the question of renewal came up; in fact, it had almost been agreed to call off the show in late December. Another reputed strong opponent to the connection was Edward J. Manix, Metro v. p., and general studio manager. His objections always stem from the circumstances that rehearsals for the air shows interfered seriously with the film-making routine in the Metro studios.

Frank Morgan and Meredith Willson's orchestra, together with stars from Hollywood, will be featured at 8 P. M. today over KSTP. They will be heard in the Good News of 1939 show, which provides comedy, dramatic previews of the new pictures, and Willson's musical album.

Friday, February 10, 1939

THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

MGM GOOD NEWS AIRSHOW MUTES IN HEED TO EXHIBITORS

Studio Dropping Radio Program

(Continued from Page 1)

fully open to it, which was to withdraw at the close of its contracted period.

Action of MGM will finally close that chapter in Hollywood radio in which the studio participated as a unit in setting up a program, it is believed. This was the first studio alliance of this type, the ill-fated Warners-Lucky Strike combination, which followed, giving Hollywood two abortive trials at meshing production in the competitive media.

The retirement of MGM will occur at the height of the program's success. It has risen steadily under the supervision of Sidney, ranking among the leading shows on the air. General Foods is reported to have found the program remarkably effective in selling product, and the studio was able to derive heavy exploitation through its coverage.

Breakup of the show will force General Foods, through its agent, Benton & Bowles, to frame another Hollywood series enlisting talent from freelance and guest ranks, it is believed. Meredith Willson, conductor, will probably form the keystone of the show, for the sponsor has leaned strongly in the past to music.

Barrymore, Rooney

Lionel Barrymore and Mickey Rooney will pay tribute to Abraham Lincoln when they present a dramatic sketch drawn from the life of the martyred president, during the broadcast of Good News of 1939, tonight at 9 o'clock over the NBC-WFBC network under auspices of Maxwell House coffee.

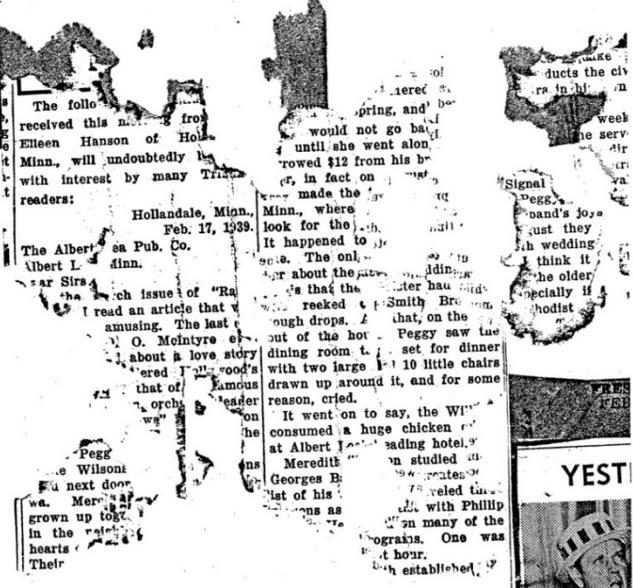
Guest soloists during the broadcast will be Zarova, brilliant Russian soprano, and Douglas MacPhail, baritone. Zarova, who postponed her previous engagement to appear as guest singer because of illness, will feature "Kak Strano," and MacPhail will sing "Dusty Roads" and "Mandalay."

Master of Ceremonies Robert Young will present for the first time on the air a new Good News quartet, which will be featured weekly in Meredith Willson's "Album of Yesterday's Harmonies." Members of the quartet are Young, first tenor; Frank Morgan, second tenor; Hanley Stafford, third tenor, and Meredith Willson, fourth tenor.

The first presentation in the series of "barber shop" harmonizations will be "Way Down Yonder in the Cornfield."

Fanny Brice as Baby Snooks and Hanley Stafford as Daddy, will be heard in another round of their eternal conflict, and Frank Morgan, as boastful as ever, will be on hand with new stories of his own prowess.

Willson's orchestra will present music from MGM's "Top Folies," and a special arrangement of "Jeepers Creepers."



SACRAMENTO-CAL. BEE FEBRUARY 6, 1939

Kay Kyser's Band Is Voted As Best

Kay Kyser and his orchestra, featured every Wednesday in Kay Kyser's College of Musical Knowledge over KFBK, were acclaimed in a poll of radio celebrities as "the band of the year."

Reports of the poll, conducted by Gilmore Mike, weekly magazine of radio news, showed a unanimous vote for Kay Kyser and his orchestra by the committee of ten selected to choose the outstanding band for 1938.

Members of the committee were Bing Crosby, Rudy Vallee, Bob Hope, Marion Talley, Meredith Willson, Guy Lombardo, Frank Sinatra, Shirley Ross, Lanny Ross and Dick Powell.

HOLLYWOOD-CALIF. CIT. NEWS FEBRUARY 24, 1939

Carey Wilson, M-G-M writer, and Millie Korjus will be presented on Good News of 1939, KFI at 6. Meredith Willson will introduce "Chestnut Tree," England's latest dance craze, further conducting his orchestra in "It Seems to Be Spring" and "Thoughts While Strolling" from his "O. McIntyre Suite."

HOLLYWOOD-CALIF. VARIETY MARCH 16, 1939

'Silly Dilly' on Air
Eddie Cherkose's new tune, 'Silly Dilly,' for which Meredith Willson wrote music, will be aired tonight on the Good News program.

Sponsor of Good News of 1939 with Frank Morgan, et al., has completed plans for next fall's program. The names of Fannie Brice and Meredith Willson's orchestra are prominent in the arrangements, but other than that there is complete silence.

WEST



The barbe with is unique will recognize heard each T right, Warren Frank Morgan

out Co gr: ma ba: so

Figure 3-8. Page from the scrapbook kept by Meredith and Peggy Willson's during his radio days. The two defaced entries represent an apparent attempt by Willson's second wife to remove memorabilia associated with first wife, Peggy (From Art Fischbeck).



Figure 3-9. (Josef) Wilhelm Mengelberg (1871-1951), Willson's 'bogeyman' (public domain).



Figure 3-10. Poster for one of Willson's early films. Composers of these early 'talkies' did all the composing and scoring, but had not yet gained enough stature for inclusion on advertisements (public domain).

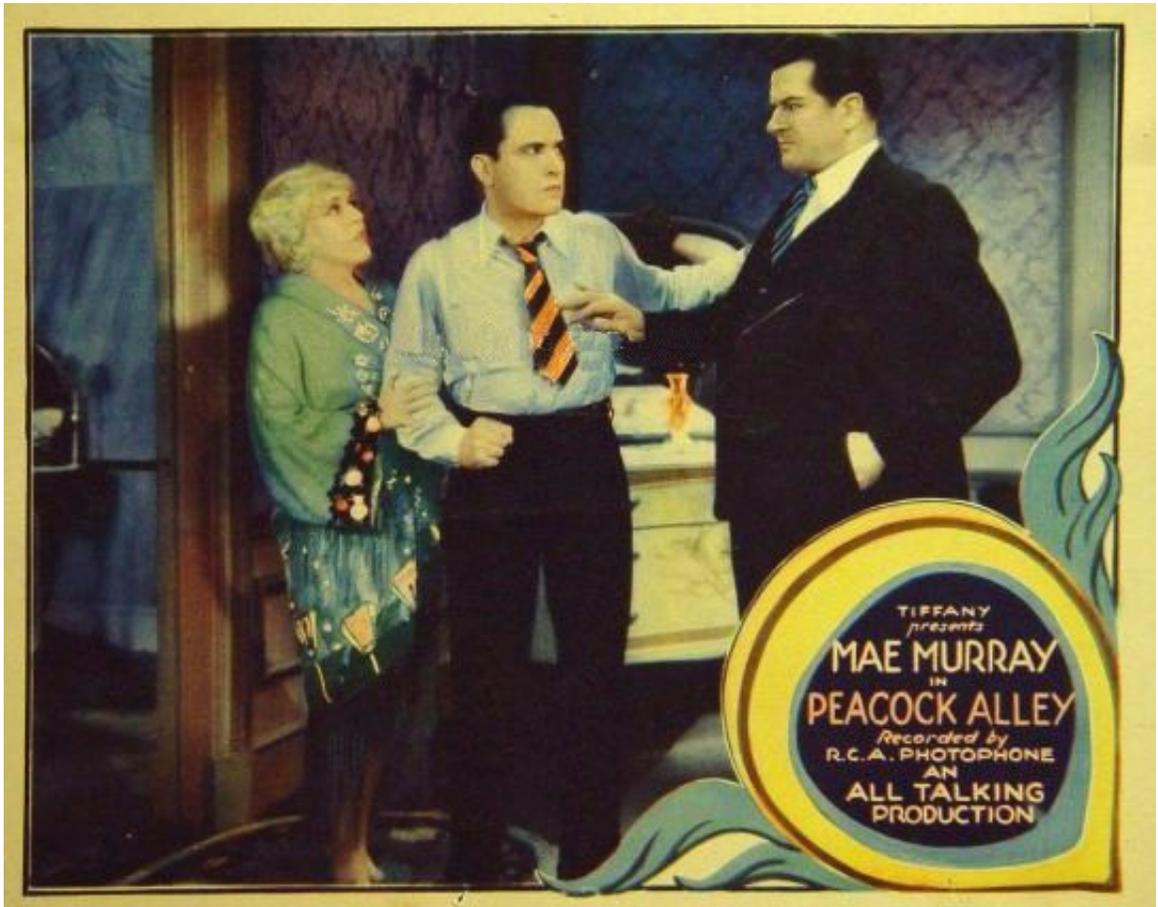


Figure 3-11. Poster for another of Willson's early films, *Peacock Alley* (public domain).



Figure 3-12. Meredith Wilson while directing the *Carefree Carnival* program, during rehearsal with the Williams Sisters: Top standing is Laura Williams, middle is Alice Sizer and sitting is Ethelyn Williams (public domain).

CHAPTER 4 WILLSON AS COMPOSER AND CONDUCTOR

Background

Willson's rise as a performer in New York coincided with a period of great flux in the symphonic world. The New York Philharmonic program of 16th October, 1924, documents the first performance of flautist R.M. Willson with the New York Philharmonic. The concert was directed by the Dutch conductor Wilhelm Van Hoogstraten, and included works by Weber, Respighi, Mozart and Wagner. Willson's tenure in the New York Philharmonic was marked in large part by the power-struggle among conductors and resulting significant public commentaries on their various conducting styles. These public arguments and merges with other orchestras resulted in the hiring and firing of many of the Philharmonic musicians during Willson's tenure, and directly impacted Willson's continued employment with the orchestra. The controversies may well have impacted his future career decisions, as well, for he would leave the Philharmonic just after its largest merger, with the New York Symphony Society, another august musical organization. It was during this merger that more than forty musicians were released from their respective orchestras, though there is no evidence that Willson was one of these.

During Willson's years with the group, the New York Philharmonic merged with several groups. The first of these happened in 1921, before Willson's arrival, and the New York Philharmonic inherited conductor Willem Mengelberg after its merger with the National Symphony. Mengelberg was a Dutch pianist and conductor of the Germanic post-Romantic school, a good friend and advocate of Mahler, and a well-known interpreter of the works of Richard Strauss. As a conductor he demanded a great deal of personal respect and was called a 'demigod'. In 1924 and 1925 he was joined by co-conductor Willem Van Hoogstraten. Van Hoogstraten, also Dutch, first became a guest conductor for the New York Philharmonic summer

concert series in 1922, a position he held through 1939. He was appointed an associate conductor of the orchestra in 1923, a post he left after the 1925 season. Both were overshadowed by the rise of Toscanini, first as a frequent guest conductor, and finally in his 1925 appointment as sole permanent conductor. Mengelberg and Van Hoogstraten shared a predilection for romantic interpretations, especially with regard to illustrating or illuminating a score. Toscanini's approach was less interpretive and focused more on direct and accurate playing of what was written. Toscanini was noted for his conducting crispness and clarity, a move away from the Germanic tradition. Mengelberg and Toscanini had frequent clashes over interpretations of music and rehearsal techniques. These disagreements were frequently engaged in front of the instrumentalists and eventually resulted in Mengelberg's departure. The arguments became widely public, and the *New York Times* editors and readers engaged in ongoing debate about the virtues of conducting styles, the role of a conductor, his style, status, virtues, and faults. As a member of the New York Philharmonic there can be no doubt that Willson was sharply aware of the debate about conductors.

During his New York years, Willson performed under various conductors in famous New York locations, such as Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera House, and the Brooklyn Academy of Music. In addition to the well-known Philharmonic conductors, Willson also played under a stellar list of guest soloists and conductors. These included Efrem Zimbalist, Pablo Casals, Ossip Gabrilowitsch, and Igor Stravinsky, in his first appearance in the United States.

A defining event of the twentieth-century took place the evening of November 15, 1926 - the inaugural and well-publicized broadcast of the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). The transmission was preceded by a September advertisement in New York newspapers, announcing

that the Radio Corporation of America had purchased WEA, New York, from the American Telephone and Telegraph Company.¹⁷⁵ The advertisement trumpeted that the transaction cost the organizers one million dollars. The station would be incorporated as the National Broadcasting Company with the intent to broadcast programs through WEA, and also would make these programs available to outlets throughout the country. The advertisement emphasized that the time was ripe for such a venture, as already five million homes in the United States were equipped with radios and some twenty-one million homes "remain to be supplied."

Set in the grand ballroom of the Waldorf-Astoria, New York's pre-eminent hotel and social center of the era, this landmark broadcast lasted a remarkable four and one-half hours and highlighted numerous luminaries of the day. The gala inaugural featured such diverse performances as the New York Oratorio Society, concert pianist Harold Bauer, Metropolitan opera's baritone Tito Ruffo, Cesare Sodero's grand- and light-opera ensembles, Edwin Franko Goldman's band, and the comedy team of Weber and Fields. Also integrated were well-known dance orchestras of the day, including those of Vincent Lopez, Ben Bernie from the Roosevelt Hotel Grill, George Olsen from the Hotel Pennsylvania, and Ben A. Rolfe from the Palais d'Or.

A remarkable feature of the broadcast was the inclusion of performers who were broadcast from locations around the country. Scottish-American soprano Mary Garden was broadcast from Chicago singing a collection of Americana songs which included *Annie Laurie*, *Little Gray Home in the West*, and *Open Thy Blue Eyes*. From Independence, Kansas, humorist Will Rogers twanged "Fifteen Minutes with a Diplomat," a droll monologue in which he mimicked President Calvin Coolidge so impeccably that many listeners thought they were actually hearing the

¹⁷⁵ The parent corporation was General Electric Corporation, and it was from these initials, GEC, that the famous three chimes originated, using the corresponding musical notes. The network three chimes theme is used to this day.

President. Also in attendance was Meredith Willson, performing on his flute as a member of the New York Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Walter Damrosch.¹⁷⁶

It is worth noting that the United States underwent a dramatic transformation in a short period of time. The early twentieth-century was marked by a period of interlinked explosive technological growth, expansion of communication media, and experimentation in new art forms. The first radio broadcast occurred in November of 1920, and by the time of the NBC broadcast, some six years later, more than five million homes had purchased radios. Those six years marked the transformation of a novelty into a national medium, one that would form the backbone of telecommunications industry of today. By 1929 Willson was integrally involved with radio, helping to define the role of music and musicians in the medium, and carving out a significant aspect of his career in the process. Willson's presence at one of the defining moments of the era serves to illustrate his link with the foremost musical events of the time. Willson's musical paths were integrally coupled with the age and its multitudinous directions. Willson came of age with the century, and did so in its quick and eager nucleus of growth, New York City. Willson's desire to expand his musical horizons towards composition and conducting rose with his fortunes in NYC. He was youthful, talented, and exuberant and, despite a lack of formal training in either musical arena, felt he might make an impact.

Training as a Composer

As far as can be established, Willson had no formal training in composition. His childhood included piano lessons and encounters with various instruments, and what pedagogical instruction he did receive was based entirely in Mason City, and largely from his mother. But there exist no childhood piano sketches, no experiments in musical invention or mystic early

¹⁷⁶ This ground-breaking broadcast was featured in a Library of Congress online exhibit, at <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/bobhope/radio.html>, accessed March 12th, 2006.

works of any type, lost or extant, from his early years. There were no early lessons in composition or studies with the great compositional pedagogues of his day, and nothing in his early life indicates an early interest in composition. Willson recounted only a single early unnamed work, penned in high school, for which he did not provide a title and which is not currently known to exist. This was a song for the Mason City high school class of 1919, about which Willson commented upon some forty years later:

...confidentially, just between us and the tape, was possibly the worst group of notes and words ever put down on paper, and I just shudder that somebody might dig it up and try to render it someday. I would like to go on record here: please don't do that to me, posterity! Dig up anything you like, but not my class of 1919 song!¹⁷⁷

There is no evidence in the available information on Willson's early life and career that his early career goals included composition. Indeed, while there is an abundance of evidence which supports his development as a performer, there is an equal lack of indication to suggest that the young Willson ever planned a career as a composer. On one occasion Willson even mentioned his lack of interest in serious study of technique, recounting that he and his two siblings were, "...too filled with that native impatience... to settle down and learn a few principles."¹⁷⁸ Composition, rather, seems to have been an outgrowth of his performance career. While his formal training was limited, Willson's childhood was marked by an abundance of creativity at home, and maternal encouragement towards a spirit of experimentation. It was certainly this spirit which eventually propelled the flutist into composition.

The First World War and subsequent influenza pandemic were followed by an era of prosperity and growth, and the performing arts boomed during the 1920s. Recordings were beginning to be mass-produced and better quality disks became available when electronic

¹⁷⁷ New York, Columbia University, [Willson, "The Reminiscences of Meredith Willson", Popular Arts Project Series V, volume IX, Category IA, Oral History Research Office, 1961] 36.

¹⁷⁸ Willson, *There I Stood*, 45.

transcriptions replaced inferior acoustic recordings. The public took to purchasing recordings in increasing numbers. Another result of the post-war boom was the construction of many new theaters and music halls, in part to house the many new orchestras which were founded in the 1920s. New York was the epicenter of musical growth and experimentation of the post-war era.

Even during Willson's heady early years performing New York, there is no evidence that he took courses in orchestration or composition in his brief course of formal studies. It may have been that Willson later felt this omission to have been a career deficit, for in one interview he suggested that, "during my time at Damrosch I studied composition." In *There I Stood with my Piccolo* Willson related a story of taking over the pit piano during an intermission at the Crescent Theatre, "glad of the chance to try over an exercise in sequence I had to have ready for the next morning's class at the Institute." He goes on to note that he saved the exercise and, "used it ten years later as the theme for . . . 'Thoughts while Strolling',"¹⁷⁹ a movement of his *O.O. McIntyre Suite*.

While Willson implied that his initial forays into composition dated to his student days at the Institute of Musical Art, this study would have been independent. His course records from the Institute document courses in flute, under Georges Barrère, ear-training with Helen W. Whiley, and performance in the orchestra under Frank Damrosch. Willson also studied theory with George A. Wedge, but Wedge was known as a basic theory and applied harmony teacher. Even the well-known textbooks authored by the theorist, such as *Ear Training and Sight Singing Applied to Elementary Music Theory*,¹⁸⁰ deal with applications of basic theory, and, as in the case of *Applied Harmony*, aspects of simple harmony.¹⁸¹ Wedge's works were fundamental in

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 31.

¹⁸⁰ George A(nson). Wedge, *Ear Training and Sight Singing Applied to Elementary Music Theory* (New York: G. Schirmer Inc., 1921).

¹⁸¹ George A(nson) Wedge., *Applied Harmony* (New York: G. Schirmer Inc., 1930).

the theoretical world, and still used today, but there is nothing which suggests Willson studied concepts of orchestration or composition with Wedge.

Willson's youthful move to New York placed him in the foremost center of music in the United States. He was working in the foremost musical center in the United States, surrounded by exceptional musicians and composers, and it was during Willson's years in New York that his first composition was published. Many of Willson's professional instructors and acquaintances had multiple careers. Barrère, for example, was a highly-regarded flutist and pedagogue who taught at Damrosch/Juilliard for thirty-nine years, and also edited many editions of flute music and published a landmark flute method, *Flutists Formulae: A Compendium of Daily Studies on 6 Basic Exercises*.¹⁸² Willson's theory instructor, George Wedge, established a well-regarded system for the teaching of music theory, published his own texts on written theory,¹⁸³ and harmony,¹⁸⁴ and this was in addition to serving for a time as the Director of Juilliard. In addition to the multi-faceted Barrère and Wedge, Willson worked alongside many musicians and pianists who also composed. Surrounded by professional musicians, many of whom had successfully published their compositions, it is no surprise that Willson turned his talents in that direction. In typical Willson fashion, though, he wrote little about his decision to begin composing, providing only a series of one-liners, like "I had become a composer because I never could play the piano very well and it was embarrassing to just sit there."¹⁸⁵

The October 1, 1999 Naxos CD release of Willson's two symphonies creates even more confusion about Willson's compositional training, for the jacket notes state that he studied,

¹⁸² Georges Barrère, *Flutists Formulae - A Compendium of Daily Studies on 6 Basic Exercises* (New York: G. Schirmer Inc., 1935).

¹⁸³ Wedge, *Ear Training and Sight Singing*.

¹⁸⁴ George A(nson) Wedge, *Advanced Ear-Training and Sight-Singing as Applied to the Study of Harmony* (New York: G. Schirmer Inc., 1922).

¹⁸⁵ *Eggs I have Laid*, 29.

“composition from Mortimer Wilson and conducting from Henry Hadley.”¹⁸⁶ This assertion is not supported by other sources, nor existing evidence. It is certainly possible that Willson took a few sporadic lessons with Wilson and Hadley, but there is no indication of sustained compositional study with either of them, or any evidence that Willson studied with other composers of the era.

Willson was accurate, though, in his implication that this was the period of time during which he composed his first works, and it is relevant that this period, 1921-1923, was also the time during which the flutist performed with the Sousa band. All indications are that Willson’s training in composition was self-guided and largely wrought through influential figures who Willson met in his performance career. These were the musical figures with whom Willson worked on a daily basis, and who came to play an integral role in influencing his development as a composer. First and foremost among these was John Phillip Sousa.

Willson strongly admired Sousa and thought highly of the bandsman’s compositions: “Every part of a Sousa march (is) inspired – the bass line, the woodwind figures, the trombone countermelodies, and even the peckhorn afterbeats.”¹⁸⁷ This was a period of time in which Willson was becoming increasingly interested in score reading and composition, and the experienced Sousa assumed a father-like role for the young Willson:

After I joined the band I used to sit on the train every day with a pocket score of the ‘Nutcracker Suite’ just to make an impression on anyone who happened to walk down the aisle. Actually I had no idea how to read a score.

Mr. Sousa suspected this, I’m sure, as I used to stay on one page entirely too long, but instead of asking me embarrassing questions he slid into my seat one day and started giving me little hints about orchestrating and how he got so he could read a score and all.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ (jacket notes, Naxos CD).

¹⁸⁷ Willson, *There I Stood*, 35

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 34-35

Earliest Publications

Willson's first published composition was a song, *Two*, marked as a 'fox-trot' arranged for piano and voice and published in 1927. The publishers were a company with the name of Pro-Arte Producers, located at 119 West 57th Street in New York City. No trace of the company now exists, though it is possible that Pro-Arte Producers was absorbed into a large publishing company at a later date. The street address currently belongs to a multi-level building, and several of the resident businesses are arts-affiliated. Along with the expected dentists, laser treatment centers, and day spas, 119 West 57th street is currently home to a number of talent agencies and arts agents.

Distribution of Willson's first published work seems to have been limited. Only a single copy is publically available, this a Xerox of an original Willson sent to his brother Cedric. The work carries a caveat at the top of the page. On the left hand side of the page is the word, "Warning!" followed by:

PROFESSIONAL COPY

This Copy is intended for the use of PROFESSIONAL SINGERS ONLY, and any one (sic) found selling or exposing it for sale is liable to a fine or imprisonment, or both, and will be prosecuted under the copyright law by THE PUBLISHER.

While impressive, the warning may have served less as a deterrent and more to pique interest in the work. *Two* was composed during the Tin Pan Alley era, and given its popular thrust, the work was most likely composed with the hope that it would find a large audience. At the time the music houses in lower Manhattan received a steady stream of songwriters, performers, musicians, and producers, all hoping to score a popular success. Willson did not publish his first work with a known Tin Pan Alley publisher, or exactly in the Tin Pan Alley geographical area. While the Pro-Arte Producers were on west 57th Street, Tin Pan Alley was centered in the area of West 28th Street, between Broadway and 6th Avenue. Small local

publishers flourished throughout the city and Willson probably found it easier to be published with one of these groups than with the more established publishing giants. Because *Two* was the initial work of an composer who was not well recognized, it most likely received a limited distribution to the music houses. The ‘professional copy’ probably represents the work’s limited distribution to music houses, perhaps the work’s sole distribution.

Two is marked as a ‘Fox-trot’, a popular song and dance idiom of the 1920s. While his first published composition seems to indicate Willson is aiming towards a career as a popular songwriter, in the following year he followed *Two* with three new published works, these in various idioms – *Parade Fantastique*, film music for *My Cavalier*, and *American Foxtrot*. Willson’s first few works were published while he was living in New York, but the majority of Willson’s orchestral works were written during the years after he moved to the west coast.

First Orchestral Publication, *Parade Fantastique*

It is noteworthy that Willson’s second publication was an orchestral work, *Parade Fantastique*, and geared towards a ‘classical’ audience. Because of the limited distribution of *Two*, the orchestral *Parade Fantastique* is generally considered to be Willson’s first publication. Willson intended his *Parade Fantastique* to be a combination mix of a traditional march and macabre musical images reminiscent of the Halloween season. There is some suggestion that *Parade Fantastique* was not well-received by publishers. One story tells of Willson appearing at the publisher’s office to collect royalties on *Parade Fantastique*, being handed, “pocket change and ushered unceremoniously to the door.”¹⁸⁹

Fantastique was published and distributed in 1928, Willson’s final season in New York. Despite intensive searches undertaken by several different researchers on both coasts, the score

¹⁸⁹ Oates, *America’s Music Man*, 35

for this work cannot be located.¹⁹⁰ *Parade Fantastique* used in two early films. ASCAP records indicate that Willson's score was first used as mood music in *The Last Performance*, a film made in 1927 by the Jewel division of Universal pictures. The film was distributed by Universal in 1929, and Willson's *Parade Fantastique* was probably added at that time. The second film that used the work was *Love in the Desert*, made in 1928 and distributed in 1929 by the short-lived company 'Film Booking Offices of America' (FBO). While it is possible that editions of these films will someday be found and distributed, neither *The Last Performance* nor *Love in the Desert* is known to exist. A plot summary of the film *Love in the Desert* provides some hint of the action for which Willson's music was found suitable:

An early sound film for flapper star Olive Borden, this low-budget effort from FBO featured the erstwhile "Joy Girl" as Zarah, "a beautiful Arabian" saving irrigation engineer Bob Winslow (Hugh Trevor) from being abducted by bandit leader Abdullah (Noah Beery). The latter naturally takes umbrage to this and threatens a massacre if Zarah does not return as his bride. The plucky girl does return but is rescued in the nick of time by Bob, who kills Abdullah in a climactic fistfight.¹⁹¹

The sole known musical source of *Parade Fantastique* is a single recording made during a live performance on one of Willson's radio programs, Good News, on the eleventh of May, 1939. During the program Ed Sullivan narrates a segment titled 'Water under the Bridge,' apparently devoted to the telling of personal stories of success. In this segment Sullivan tells a dramatic short story of the eighteen-year old Meredith Willson's first rehearsal with the New York Philharmonic, under Von Hoogstraten. Willson's actual age is reduced by several years, and his role as the unprepared country boy exaggerated. The parts of the characters are read by actors.

¹⁹⁰ While the original publisher is unknown, the copyright, according to public record, is Transmark music. The Transmark company, however, insists that they do not hold the copyright, and asserts that they hold no scores other than Willson's popular, and frequently rented, musicals.

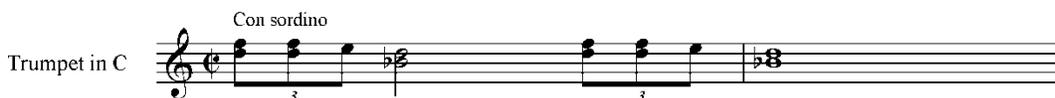
¹⁹¹ <http://www.mtv.com/movies/movie/65646/moviemain.jhtml>, accessed 12th November, 2006.

The skit includes standard Willson humor, as when the Willson character explains to another musician, “I’ve never even heard a symphony, but I’ll catch on.” Later in the segment Von Hoogstraten is quoted as having asked whether the young flute player has played Tschikovsky’s *Sixth Symphony*. The Willson character quips that he did not even know Tschikovsky wrote that many symphonies, and Von Hoogstraten to have replied, “Then I hope you enjoy it.” The skit goes on to inform the listener that a mere three years later the New York Philharmonic, again under Von Hoogstraten, premiered Willson’s first orchestral work, the *Parade Fantastique*.

The story is apparently just that, for the facts do not seem to support the plot narrated by Sullivan. Von Hoogstraten left New York in 1925 to become the conductor of the Oregon Symphony Orchestra, so would not have been easily available for a 1928 premier on the opposite coast. While he was a frequent guest-conductor throughout the United States during his tenure in Oregon, the New York philharmonic archivists can find no record of Willson’s *Parade Fantastique* ever having been rehearsed or performed by the group. It is also standard policy for the New York philharmonic to retain scores for every work it performs, and there is no score for *Parade Fantastique* in its archives. The lack of substantiating evidence renders the work’s reported premier with the New York Philharmonic, unlikely.

On the sole existing recording, the 1939 *Good News* program, only three or so minutes of the work were played, barely enough to provide a sample for aural analysis of a work thought to have been twenty or so minutes long. The overall impression of the brief sample is that *Parade Fantastique* is melodically-centered, tuneful, and falls into the loose genre of what is now called film music. The work is in the key of A minor, the main theme an ascending triad. There are a few rumbling sounds before the initial wind instrument entrances, though it is not clear whether

these are studio noises or drums. The piece begins with a brief muted trumpet fanfare-like statement (example 4-1).



Example 4-1. Trumpet fanfare which begins *Parade Fantastique*

The quiet fanfare is followed by a motif found throughout what is known of the work. This motif is played by the woodwinds and is characterized by a descending pattern (example 4-2). The woodwind motif repeats a number of times in a simple progression largely marked by a full statement starting on different pitches.



Example 4-2. Woodwind motif

Played beneath the woodwind motif is an accompaniment march pattern which underlies the entire recorded portion of the work. This march is found in the string sections. It is made up of *arco* strings, perhaps with some woodwinds, playing a basic *staccato* rhythmic pattern. The pattern generally consists of two measures of quarter notes, the third measure with two quarter notes, an eighth-note triplet, and another quarter note, varied in the subsequent measure so the triplet falls on the second beat (example 4-3). The rhythmic pattern occurs in four measure increments, each fourth measure ending on a cadence note:



Example 4-3. Basic string rhythmic pattern, *staccato* eighth note march in the string section.

The sole striking feature of the work is the inclusion of wordless male voices which help to outline the rhythmic pattern. These are syllabic and wordless (or unintelligible). Each part is added separately in additive fashion, and the main melody enters after all the accompanying parts are in place.



Example 4-4. Main theme of *Parade Fantastique*.

The overall compositional style is uncomplicated, characterized by a combination of march-like rhythmic patterns and melodic themes. These two features would become hallmarks of Willson's compositional style. At one point Willson indicated that he had loosely based the idea for the composition on Berlioz's *Symphony Fantastique*, though Willson's *Parade Fantastique* is more aurally reminiscent of a programmatic work composed fewer than thirty years earlier, Paul Dukas' *Sorcerer's Apprentice*.

Willson composed two other works in 1928. The first of these was the title song and accompaniment music for the film *My Cavalier*, written with Hugo Riesenfeld. Neither the music nor the film is available. Riesenfeld, mentioned in chapter three, was the musical director of the Rialto and Rivoli theaters for which Willson was hired to play in the early 1920s. Riesenfeld had catalogued thousands of musical themes by their potential film use. Willson gives Riesenfeld only a passing mention in his works, but it is likely the Austrian had some influence on Willson's development as a composer. Willson was in his early twenties when the two met, an impressionable age, and certainly played melodies taken from Riesenfeld's extensive catalogue of silent film themes. The final piece Willson published in 1928 was a work titled

American Fox Trot. Because this piece has not been located, its scoring is unclear. It seems likely that it is a work for piano.

Willson's first published compositions do not clarify how he was trained in composition, but only add some confusion as to exactly how he composed. In 1929 Willson published a piano piece, *Skyline*, subtitled an 'American Intermezzo for Piano.'¹⁹² *Skyline* is a popular idiom piece, jazz-like in its approach. This two-page composition presents something of an enigma. An ascription in the publication states the 'Piano Arrangement is by Robert Armbruster.' There is no hint as to or from what instruments it is transcribed, for which instrument it was written, nor why Willson, a talented pianist in his own right, would need a transcriptionist.

This attribution, like several found in early Willson works, inspires conjecture. Perhaps, for example, Willson composed a melody and hired Armbruster to arrange it. Another possibility is that Willson asked for Armbruster's assistance in some way, or just for the use of his name. Armbruster was a known and frequently-used studio pianist in New York City, and Willson may have felt his chances of getting the work published were enhanced by an affiliation with a known musician. Yet another possible scenario is that Willson composed both melody and harmony and had Armbruster polish the rough work towards a finished product. Or did Willson compose the work on another instrument, flute, perhaps, and hire Armbruster to transcribe the work for piano?

In the 1920s, Armbruster was an 'in demand' pianist who recorded piano rolls of numerous popular artists of the day. From 1915 into the 1930s he recorded numerous piano rolls for the Duo-Arts company, performing classical, popular salon, and ballad arrangements. He is perhaps best remembered for recording several of Gershwin's works onto piano rolls, including

¹⁹² Meredith Willson, *Skyline: American Intermezzo for Piano*, (New York: Edwin F. Kalmus, Inc, 1929).

Rhapsody in Blue.¹⁹³ Though Willson never mentioned Armbruster in his writings it is likely that the two had a working relationship which spanned many years. Nearly thirty years later, in 1964, Armbruster would serve as Musical Director for the film version of Willson's *Unsinkable Molly Brown*. As radio became more widespread, Armbruster became a conductor.

It is relevant to Willson's growth as a composer that he knew Armbruster and, presumably, Gershwin. The three of them were musically active and at the beginnings of their careers, were active during the period when jazz was undergoing a transformation from its humble origins to its emergence as a serious art form, one which would enter American concert halls. Gershwin performed with the New York Philharmonic during Willson's tenure as first flautist. The *Rhapsody in Blue* premiered in 1924, the same year that Willson joined the Philharmonic society. Gershwin's *Concerto in F* was even more integrally connected to Willson's musical circle. It was commissioned by the Philharmonic-Symphony Society of New York, and had its first public performance with the New York Philharmonic, conducted by Walter Damrosch, on Thursday afternoon, December 3, 1925, at Carnegie Hall. Gershwin himself was the soloist, and R. Meredith Willson one of the flutists.

In his own works Willson mentions Gershwin only to provide passing admiration, and does not relate any events which mention Gershwin. Gershwin's initial reception into the classical arena was poor. Critic Winthrop Sargeant, for example, related the first interaction between Gershwin and members of the New York Symphony Orchestra, an orchestra later assimilated into the New York Philharmonic:

When fledgling American composer George Gershwin came for a special visit, an air of European snobbery and artistic egotism pervaded the direction. On this occasion the

¹⁹³ Beginning in 1934 Armbruster served as conductor for the 60-minute Lux Radio Theatre. Some contemporary Old Time Radio analysts consider this to have the most important dramatic show in radio. The show ran a remarkable 19 years, through 1955, and during its apex was estimated to have an audience as high as forty million listeners. The 931 episodes were based on popular films of the era, with major stars playing the roles.

Philharmonic was to play Gershwin's *Concerto in F* for piano and orchestra... Under the leadership of the primarily European classical musicians, the orchestra members rebuffed the young artist's work and misplayed it at rehearsal, feigning not to understand the new jazz patterns. Returning to get their haughty goats, Gershwin attended a later rehearsal not wearing traditional formal wear. Instead he played the piano sporting a derby hat, while smoking a big, fat cigar, much to the chagrin of the stuffy assemblage.¹⁹⁴

It is important to note that during this era jazz was generally not well accepted by either the concert-going public or formally trained musicians, especially those of the Philharmonic. Dr. Frank Damrosch, director of the Institute of Musical Art during Willson's brief time there as a student, and closely affiliated with the New York Philharmonic, commented that, "Jazz is to real music what the caricature is to the portrait."¹⁹⁵ A host of popular articles from the era, such as an article in the *Ladies Home Journal* decry jazz as sinful,¹⁹⁶ and suggest the genre is worthy only of being purged entirely from the musical scene of the United States.¹⁹⁷ Willson's affiliation with the pioneers of jazz in the concert hall, along with his early works in popular idioms, suggests that from his earliest compositions he was acutely attuned to the popular arena and the lucrative potentials of his works.

A Trio of works, *The Tornado, The Siege, The Phenomena*

1929 was also the year of publication for three more orchestral works, *The Tornado, The Siege*, and *The Phenomena*. The first of Willson's extant published orchestral works, these works seem to have been composed together, almost as three movements of a single work. While a full score for the works has not survived, many of the individual instrumental parts recently appeared in the small archive of the Mason City *Music Man Square*. Their provenance is uncertain, but evidence suggests that they were given to a former director of *Music Man Square* by Rosemary Sullivan Willson, Willson's third, and surviving, wife.

¹⁹⁴ Winthrop Sargeant, *Genius, Goddesses and People* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1949), 212.

¹⁹⁵ Maureen Anderson, "The White Reception of Jazz in America", *African American Review* (Spring, 2004): 10.

¹⁹⁶ Anne Shaw Faulkner. 'Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?' *Ladies Home Journal* (August, 1921): 16-40.

¹⁹⁷ R. McMahon, 'Unspeakable Jazz Must Go'. *Ladies Home Journal* (December, 1921): 34.

The theatrical titles combine with musical evidence drawn from the available parts to indicate a programmatic direction in Willson's early compositional approach. The major features as revealed by the parts are heavy chromaticism, numerous instrumental runs, and a good bit of musical drama in the form of varied tempo, meter changes, and dramatic dynamic shifts. The works lie squarely in the post-romantic genre. As they were likely composed in imitation of Reisenfeld's catalogued theme music, it is no surprise that ASCAP records indicate the works, sometimes in their entirety, were used in several early films.

From East to West Coast

The years in which his first compositions were being used as film music were also the years during which Meredith and Peggy made a dramatic relocation. As previously indicated, the Willsons departed New York and made a permanent move to the West Coast in 1929. The reasons behind this cross-country relocation remain obscure. Willson provided no single comprehensive explanation for the move, but offered a variety of vague reasons in different sources. In *And There I Stood with My Piccolo* he states only that he got, "spunk enough to put away the flute and piccolo and scam to California and start my second career from scratch."¹⁹⁸ While this seems to indicate a positive choice in the move, Willson, at the same time, expresses regret at leaving New York, "Just when I'm getting used to New York – in fact, beginning to consider myself a New Yorker who could never live anyplace but – I find myself headin' West . . ."¹⁹⁹ A 1938 article proclaims that "Willson felt he was standing still in New York."²⁰⁰ In an

¹⁹⁸ Willson, *There I Stood*, 118.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 119.

²⁰⁰ Tom Moriarty, 1938. 'The Young Master: Of Meredith Willson, Symbol of the New Hollywood', *Unknown Newspaper* (June 18): 77/2.

interview done many years later he provided a typical Willson one-liner, declaring that he had gone to “Seattle to see a football game back in 1929 and stayed.”²⁰¹

It is somewhat curious that Willson would leave a promising performance career and established performance contacts in New York City. As a flutist he had survived the 1928 merger of the New York Philharmonic with the Symphonic Society of New York, during which time many musicians were let go. In 1929, when Toscanini became sole permanent conductor, he dismissed a number of musicians. It is possible that Willson was among them, though there are no definitive records of the dismissed personnel in the archives of the present-day New York Philharmonic. Comparisons of programs show that Willson left the Philharmonic during this time, but do not provide the reason. The theory that Willson was among the dismissed musicians is not necessarily borne out in his recollections, for he wrote glowingly of Toscanini and fondly recalled a number of rehearsal incidents, as well as later wishing to show a score to Toscanini. These recollections provide no conclusive evidence, however, since Toscanini was a guest conductor of the New York Philharmonic and Willson would have played under the legendary conductor several times before Toscanini was named sole permanent conductor. This recollection of Toscanini in a positive light may also have been good politics, especially considering the high regard with which Toscanini was viewed by the American public. On the other hand, it is possible that Willson could have retained his position under Toscanini, but decided to move west for other reasons entirely.

This change was intensified by the 1929 stock market crash. Many New York music establishments suffered reduction or closure. Little has been written regarding the plight of symphonic musicians during those years, but repercussions can be suggested. With fully one

²⁰¹ ‘Meredith Willson, A Fabulous Career that Started in San Francisco’, *San Francisco Examiner*, Pictorial Living Section, July 22, 1962.

third of Americans unemployed, there was little extra cash for luxuries such as musical performances. Most professional musicians, as we have seen in Willson's case, relied on multiple positions to provide their income. Even if a single orchestra survived others would fail, resulting in partial loss of income, and musicians would have to look elsewhere for additional funds. A second major trend of these years was the growth of industry in radio and talking pictures. It seems logical to suggest that, if Willson foresaw the loss of opportunities for performing in New York, he was smart enough, and motivated enough, to seek new horizons in the musical fields of growth - radio and film.

Willson's move may even have been related to a series of events which propelled many musicians and actors towards the West Coast. In October of 1927 *The Jazz Singer* premiered, the first full-length film to use sound. The live productions of Broadway suddenly paled with comparison to the film possibilities of the West Coast. Almost overnight, Hollywood was seen as the new Broadway, and a flood of talented performers headed towards the West Coast. The possibility that this was the reason for Willson's move is strengthened by the brief memoir of a cousin, Jeanette Hardy Cain, who temporarily lived around the corner from Meredith and Peggy in New York. She wrote of Willson's last few months in New York, "Meredith was very thoughtful and not talking much. Peggy said that he was trying to decide what to do, because the music world was changing, due to talking pictures and radio coming in."²⁰²

Willson's Early Vitaphone Compositions

Willson's first position after his move to the West Coast was in composing film scores. He asserted that he simply needed a job, and took to writing film scores as mean to support himself and Peggy through their early days in California:

²⁰² Memory book by Jeanette Hardy Cain, page 2, MCPLA.

I went out there at the behest of my dear friend, who is still my dear friend through the years, Abe Myer ...and he immediately engaged me at Tymphahny Stall (sic). He said, “This is all a big fish fry out there, all you’ve got to do is learn to smoke cigars and walk around looking important and I can put you on the payroll right now.” So I learned to smoke cigars at \$100 a week, and I scored a couple of pictures – one was something about up in the North with snow and an igloo and Conway girls – and I wrote the music for it, recorded it and so on.²⁰³

The era of the 1920s and 1930s was a time during which film scores were increasingly composed by acknowledged classical composers. The trend was most pronounced among the French, who, it should be noted, held a strong compositional influence on U.S. composers of the era. As early as 1908 Camille Saint-Saëns composed what may have been the very first film score, music for *L’Assassinat du duc de Guise*. In 1924 Darius Milhaud composed a score for Marcel L’Herbier’s *L’Inhumaine*, 1924, and in 1927 Arthur Honegger composed for Abel Gance’s *Napoléon*.

Among the first instances of music composed for film in the United States was that of Louis F. Gottshalk²⁰⁴ who in 1914 composed full-length scores for the Oz Film Manufacturing Company. Perhaps the biggest landmark piece in this country was Victor Herbert’s 1915 score for *Fall of a Nation*. Willson, as previously mentioned, worked with Herbert during his New York years. Willson also had direct contact with this trend in 1928, when the New York Philharmonic recorded the music for Warner Brothers’ *Don Juan*, the discs of which were to be coordinated when the film was shown, a process known as Vitaphone. The *Don Juan* score was composed by the fairly unknown William Axt and David Mendoza. Many years later Willson, during a taped interview, recalled his experience in making the *Don Juan* recording:

... the music was of course scored and synchronized to the scene. Henry Hadley conducted various concert pieces, as little special features that went along with the main feature, short subject (sic). ...They were all people from the Philharmonic who made these recordings. Of course, I was only a flute player; I knew Herman Heller because he was a

²⁰³ Columbia interview, 28.

²⁰⁴ Not to be confused with Louis Moreau Gottshalk, who was the great-uncle of this composer.

very democratic type of a conductor.²⁰⁵ We made a lot of money that week, we boys in the Philharmonic. In fact it was longer than that – a month, I guess – and we got paid overtime and everything else, because in those days the thing that happened was, the machinery would break down. We could have recorded this whole thing in half a day, but the machinery always broke down. We would record maybe a two minute sequence, and it would break down – or we'd start to record a two minute sequence, get into the seventh bar, and we'd have to stop. Then we'd go out and stand on 34th St. and smoke and eat ice-cream for two hours and a half while they fixed the machinery.²⁰⁶

The Vitaphone process was used by Warner Brothers, and the term was used as a sort of company name. Willson's *Parade Fantastique* has already been noted to have been used in several early films, and ASCAP records detail many songs and melodies composed by Willson during the late 1920's and early 1930's which found their way into a number of early talking picture, *Vitaphone*, scores. Though Willson was largely affiliated with the Tiffany-Stahl studios, his works were used in productions by other companies. When motion picture companies simultaneously released both silent and sound films, publishers provided a reservoir of useful tunes to augment the story's mood. In the 1920s and 1930s, copyright laws for motion picture music were in their infancy. The composer had little or no involvement with the use of a work; the studio which purchased the work owned it and could use it or sell it on demand. The Edward Everett Horton comedy *Wide Open* (Vitaphone 1929) used Willson's 1929 piano piece, *Skyline*, and the Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. and Mary Pickford adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* (United Artists 1930) incorporated his *Tornado* in the sound version. Other Meredith Willson works used in early sound films include *The Siege* (Second Floor Mystery) Vitaphone 1930, and *Defiance* (Czar of Broadway Universal) 1930. These films are lost, or may exist in studio vaults. It is a virtual certainty that there are still more early films which feature Willson's compositions

²⁰⁵ Henry Heller was a conductor for Vitaphone. It is unclear why both Henry Hadley and Henry Heller are mentioned as conductors of this project.

²⁰⁶ Columbia interview, 28.

and are, as yet, unrecognized. None is currently available to the general public, and Willson's compositional contributions are known only through ASCAP records.

The Lost Zeppelin of 1929 is one of the few extant films which uses Willson's music, and provides some insight into early film music. There was a general film theme, but the film itself had no background or transitional music. Music was not used to enhance or accompany certain scenes or bridge changes in scene or mood, but was almost incidental in application within the movie. For example, an actor might enter a room and turn on a radio, at which point the composed piece would begin. After a time there would be some lines of dialogue which related to the music, such as, "Shall I turn the radio off?" and an actor would turn off the radio, at which point the music went silent until the next literal need arose. *The Lost Zeppelin* also provides the tantalizing possibility of Willson's first appearance on film, for there is a dance number in a nightclub scene, during which a live orchestra plays. The conductor has a shock of dark hair, a Willson trait, and is likely Willson himself, though his firm identification is made problematic by that constant curse of a conductor; his back is to the audience the whole time.

But Willson had his musical sights set elsewhere, and wrote film music for only two years or so. The details of his move out of film music are unclear, but it seems that radio was his decided path:

This (film music) was not for me, however. I was interested in radio. I went up to San Francisco to see a football game, and ended up being engaged as musical director of KFRC, the CBS affiliate there, Don Lee station, and I remained there until some years later (when) I went over to NBC as their musical director, conductor of the Western division. The headquarters were in San Francisco. There was nothing in Los Angeles at that time at all, in the way of radio. Subsequently that headquarters moved to Los Angeles. I moved with them.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 32.

Willson as Conductor

Already established as a fine flautist, Willson's move to the west coast also marked the launch of his career as a conductor. While he continued to play the flute and piccolo sporadically through the rest of his life, Willson's major musical focii in California became conducting, composition, and his evolution as a radio personality. As with his approach to composition, there is little which suggests an early interest in becoming a conductor, and only a few engagements as a conductor prior to the westward move.

We can conjecture that, as principal flautist in small groups, Willson would have occasionally been called upon to direct groups in which he played, both in Mason City and in New York. He references one such occurrence in *And There I Stood with my Piccolo*. This was his 1918 summer stint with the orchestra at Lake Okoboji where he replaced the violinist/conductor who had been drafted. The experience was brief and marked by his relieved collapse onto his piccolo.²⁰⁸ Beyond this and few more limited experiences he may have had, there is no evidence that Willson engaged in any formal training as a conductor, or had significant experience as a conductor, before he began studio work in California.

I was not in any way disposed toward conducting. Every musician, I guess, wants to conduct, but I never gave that any serious thought till a friend of mine, Adolph Linden, talked me into leaving the Philharmonic, to go out to Seattle and conduct the Seattle Symphony Orchestra for one summer. I did so, and then a dear friend of mine, Abe Myer, who was Hugo Riesenfeldt's (sic) secretary, when we were the same age back at the Rialty(sic) Theatre—he had since gone to Hollywood and become a very important executive in the Tympany-Stall(sic) Company, that made moving pictures. He insisted that I come to Hollywood – insisted – wouldn't take no for an answer -- said, 'Just come. Look, there's a big fish-fry out here.' This was in 1929. Sound had just come in.²⁰⁹

Willson's first significant experience in conducting was the briefly-described summer stint in Seattle. There is little available information about this engagement, for it was apparently a

²⁰⁸ Willson, *There I Stood*, 23.

²⁰⁹ Columbia oral history, 27.

financial failure. Willson had convinced other musicians from the New York Philharmonic to play in a Seattle concert series, and was embarrassed when funding for their payment fell through. The following season in New York was his last, and at its conclusion he made the permanent move to California.

Willson learned the art of conducting largely by way of his work in early radio. With only a few weeks experience as a conductor, but with plenty of zeal and confidence, he somehow acquired a job coordinating music for a radio station. This was a fairly new concept, and Willson largely defined the role through his own trials and errors. Soon he found himself conducting radio studio orchestras, in situations which required that he perfect his conducting skills quickly and quietly. In early radio and recording studios there was no way to keep instruments or voices from being heard. Warm-ups were nearly impossible for one show would immediately follow another in the same studio. There was generally only a single rehearsal before a broadcast. In early radio the need for absolute silence while on air was vitally important. Lack of clarity of broadcast equipment meant that ambient noise would be amplified and transmitted, distorting whatever intended voices and sounds might be being broadcast at the time. This was especially true in the earliest years of radio transmission, the very years in which Willson developed as a conductor. Early radio studios necessitated the development of certain hand signals, as there was no way to orally communicate without being broadcast. It would seem to follow that clarity in conducting style would be a valuable asset, as this would improve the ability to communicate silently.

One significant difference in studio and public conducting was the lack of a visual audience. Where symphonic conductors would draw critics and public opinion, studio conductors were not seen, and their work remained generally uncommented upon. Indeed, it

seems that public appeal, measured in the ability to engage orally a distant audience, was likely to indicate greater success than fine conducting skills. Still, despite his lack of formal training, all evidence points towards Willson being a skilled, demanding, and generally excellent conductor. What Willson did possess was the experience of playing under several of the best-regarded conductors of his era; Mengelberg, Furtwängler, Von Hoogenstraten, and Toscanini, during the remarkable period of New York public argument about conducting styles. In that vein, a 1936 article suggests Willson was a demanding conductor, that, "...no matter what style Meredith Willson is called upon to direct, he insists upon accuracy, brilliance, finish. Perfection is not enough. He seeks something even higher. And some day he'll find it."²¹⁰ In the style of his former conductors Willson had a dramatic conducting presence, using large hand and body gestures as he directed, an effect which elicited the observation that, "His dark hair, usually neatly parted, becomes a waving mass as he leans from the podium and implores his musicians to "Give! Give!"²¹¹ A series of studio photos from the era portray a youthful Willson in trendy clothing and positions which seem to have been staged to look casual (figure 4-1). He was in some way unprepared for the photo session, for he is waving a pencil, rather than a baton.

One of Willson's conducting trademarks was a temperamental use of conducting batons. His loss of batons, usually via throwing them across the room, was legendary in the studio world, and Willson was said to have brought, "...at least a dozen batons to the studio for each broadcast, and their mortality rate is high, so high, in fact, that he keeps a stock of 25 extras always on hand."²¹² The observation was made by an unknown staff reporter who was probably not a trained musician. The reporter went on to comment about Willson's conducting style,

²¹⁰ Herb Caen, 1936. "Prying Meredith Willson Apart, Discovering What Makes Him Tick So Fast", *San Francisco Chronicle*, 77/2 (Sunday, 2 August), 37.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid.

noting that, “Each wave of his baton, each gesture of his left hand means something as he seeks to draw the utmost from the orchestra. And if he doesn’t like someone’s performance, he isn’t hesitant in expressing his views.”²¹³

Willson’s conducting skills also received high marks from well-known critics such as Alfred Frankenstein of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. After issuing a mediocre review for the premier of *Willson’s First Symphony*, critic Alfred Frankenstein tempered the remarks by adding, “Willson’s talents as a conductor of other men’s music were neatly and positively displayed in well rounded performances of the overture to Glinka’s “*Ruslan and Ludmilla*.” Mozart’s “*Nachtmusik*” and the “*Spanish Caprice*” of Rimsky-Korsakoff.”²¹⁴

Frankenstein also critiqued Willson’s *Second Symphony* several years later. The review was similar, featuring tepid comments about Willson’s work, with more complimentary remarks about Willson’s interpretation of Mendelssohn’s *Italian Symphony*, the “...one true masterpiece among that composer’s symphonies, and its performance was completely admirable both for the spurting virility of its dance movements and the delicacy with which its more graciously tinted pictures were projected.”²¹⁵ A further note about Willson’s conducting was that he seems to have been highly regarded by the musicians who played under him. One article touted that, “Musicians like Willson. We mean all types of musicians, from the most finished symphony soloist to the hottest “jam” trumpeter.”²¹⁶

Film Scores

Willson maintained his conducting and composing careers simultaneously, and was once again approached to compose for film in 1938. As previously mentioned, Willson collaborated

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Alfred Frankenstein, 1936. “Symphony Introduced by Willson”, *San Francisco Chronicle* (Monday, 20 April), 77/2.

²¹⁵ Alfred Frankenstein, 1942. “Willson and Francescatti Share Bows”, *San Francisco Chronicle* (February 7), 11/4.

²¹⁶ Caen, ‘Prying Meredith Willson Apart’ 77/3.

with Charlie Chaplin for music to the movie *The Great Dictator*. In directing Willson's composition, Chaplin indeed served as a 'Great Dictator,' and it is impossible to determine the extent of acknowledgement which should be given to Willson or Chaplin for the resulting score. In August of 1940 the prelude of *The Great Dictator* was given a premier by the San Francisco Symphony orchestra with Willson as guest conductor. A notice in the *San Francisco Chronicle* states, "Chaplin himself composed the entire score to the picture, although Willson did the orchestrating."²¹⁷

It is probably accurate to say that Chaplin provided some ideas, and Willson was responsible for most of everything else, including new composition and scoring. Willson provided only a tantalizing hint of how the two worked together:

I've seen him (Chaplin) take a sound track and cut it all up and past it back together and come up with some of the dangedest effects you ever heard – effects a composer would never think of. Don't kid yourself about that one. He would have been great at anything – music, law, ballet dancing, or painting – house, sign, or portrait. I got the screen credit for "The Great Dictator" Music score, but the best parts of it were all Charlie's ideas, like using the Lohengrin "Prelude" in the famous balloon-dance scene. "I can't say I see eye to eye with Mr. Chaplin about a lot of things, including his politics, and I think he is a very selfish and in many ways inconsiderate man, but I also think he is a great artist and I will certainly say that it was a real pleasure to watch him day after day and see him tick."²¹⁸

Willson's comment about who received compositional credit is noteworthy. In Chaplin's writings and casual conversations he frequently claimed that he, Chaplin, wrote the score. While he obviously impacted the creation of the music, it was Willson who was given 'official' credit and certainly did the bulk of the musical work. Willson's contributions included original composition, scoring, conducting, and serving as musical director during recording sessions. As with other early film scores, no written score can be located. The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences nominated Willson for a Music Scoring award. He was in excellent company,

²¹⁷ "Music Programs," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 25th, 1940, 22.

²¹⁸ Willson, *And There I Stood*, 166-167.

for this was also the year that Aaron Copland was nominated in the same category for the score of *Our Town*.

In *The Great Dictator* there are a few scenes known to have been entirely composed by Willson. In the only interview in which he addressed his actual compositional input to *The Great Dictator*, Willson noted that he had to have working titles for his works. He recalled telling *Time Magazine* that, ‘You’ve gotta have titles so you know where you’re at, and these are all filed away and cleared, registered, and you’ve got to have a title.’ One example Willson gave was a “... tender scene where he’s in the barber shop shaving somebody.” Willson named this the *Barber Shop Appassionato*. Another example is related with regard to a scene Willson refers to as “the pudding scene”. In this scene a coin is in pudding and characters are eating the pudding with the understanding that whoever finds the coin must go and “...kill the Schicklegrubber.” Willson recollected, “I wrote for that, the *Pudding Scherzo*.”

Willson compared this with a similar scene, in which the main character shaves himself, which was synchronized to the Brahms *Hungarian Dance Number Five*. Willson gave credit to Chaplin for tying the Brahms piece to the scene. A similar scene was one where Chaplin’s character plays with a globe as though it is a balloon. Chaplin set this to Wagner’s *Lohengrin Prelude*. Willson concluded that most of the original music was his, but that, “...wherever you heard a recognizable tune, that is all Chaplin.”

I had many scenes – I had the love scene – the dominant scene was Austerlitz scene, where the Pualette Goddard scene moved over to Austerlitz across this beautiful bridge, and this is also a love scene. I did the music for that. Kind of a popular song in the Rachmaninoff harmony period style.²¹⁹

(regarding *Great Dictator* and *Little Foxes*) I wasn’t interested in scoring pictures. I was interested in radio then, and had my own program, and was very happy with that.²²⁰

²¹⁹ Columbia interview, 36-37.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

When pressed about his point of view on writing for film, Willson finally provided an illuminating view about writing for early film:

My point of view that I had at the time of course is antiquated completely. There were the general theories about such things as, if you heard the music it was going to be wrong, if you didn't know there as any music in it then it was going to be a good score – all those clichés. Views have changed. We used to do quite a little bit of Mickey-Mousing in those days. If somebody would fall down the stairs, or it was dramatic or tragic or what, we'd maybe do falling-down-stairs music. Nowadays they don't do that. They get a more general atmosphere of the vibrations in the room, rather than this kind of thing.²²¹

What Every Young Musician Should Know

During the radio years Willson was conducting nearly every day. As a public figure he was also frequently asked questions by would-be musicians, received unsolicited manuscripts, and generally became accustomed to proffering advice about how to succeed as a modern musician. Eventually he codified and published this advice in an instructional guide entitled *What Every Young Musician Should Know*, with the subtitle 'A Concise and Modern Volume Revealing the Inside of Radio Musical Technique' (figure 4-2). The forty-page work was published by the Robbins Music Corporation in 1938, just two years after the premier of his *First Symphony*. The publication provides important insight to Willson and New York musical life in the early twentieth-century. Wilson uses a great deal of popular humor and language of the era, some of which is self-directed, and calls his approach to the writing, “. . . a sort of casual every day discussion that should be easily read and understood.”²²² The previously given caution of trusting Willson's facts comes into focus in the 'Biographical Note.' Here Willson relates that he, “directed the local orchestra when he was twelve,” and goes on to tell of purchasing a silver

²²¹ Ibid., 35-36.

²²² Willson, *What Every Young Musician*, 2.

piccolo with the profits, a tale which contrasts the reality of his first conducting experience at age seventeen, for which he had purchased the piccolo just previous to the job.

In this, as with others of his published work, Willson expresses an aversion to formal textbook style and language. He presents answers to musical questions in what he called a ‘casual every day discussion that should be easily read and understood.’ His language was that of the popular, rife with radio slang, and intended to seize reader interest.

In his foreword Willson sets forth his idea of several “practical problems” of current music which the work will address: “How can you make a printed arrangement sound like a special?” “What are some simple rules for segueing from one chorus to another?” “With the modern instrumentation consisting so largely of brass, how can the strings be used most effectively to blend with saxophones, trumpets and trombones” “How do you write a drum part?” “What are the signs used in a radio studio?” “What are the definitions of some of the new musical terms which have been born in the popular orchestras of the day?”²²³ These posed questions suggest that the intended audience is people hoping to become composers in the popular idioms of the day, studio and dance band orchestrations.

For the purchasing public the single page ‘Biographical Note’ is both humorous and exaggerated, and seems more designed to impress a reader than provide accurate information. Willson cannot be held entirely to account for the inaccuracies, for it seems equally possible that the publishers helped to embroider his early years in an attempt to help sales. The embroidery begins with Willson claiming that by the age of four weeks, he was able to hum “a rather pleasing obilgato to his nurse’s contralto rendition of “Sweet and Low.”²²⁴ A curious tendency to loosely apply musical terms, found throughout Willson’s works, is demonstrated through his

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid. 3.

self-description of his ability, at age five, to "...improvise *agitatos* and *mysteriosos*." His exact performance meaning is unclear, but seems to suggest a child pounding a thunderstorm or gently picking pleasant sounds on his piano keys, rather than applying a specific musical technique.

Equally vague is what musical style or approach Willson indicates through his use of the terms "*agitato*" and "*mysterioso*." This loose application of terms is part of Willson's attempt to make his work non-text like. In the *Foreword*, Willson apologizes for even attempting to write the forty page booklet, because there are many other writings available on the same subject. "But," he explained, "sometimes the youthful American mind has absorbing solutions to practical problems that differ from the standard music textbooks."²²⁵ On page four Willson writes a brief 'Preface,' which is worth reproducing in its entirety:

The purpose of this preface is to enable me to state clearly my loathing for a certain device that frequently clutters up many otherwise lucid books about music. I refer to that rude, impudent, interrupting, irritating thought breaker-upper known as the footnote.*

As a matter of fact I have the sneaking suspicion that nobody reads prefaces anyhow so I will throw you a curve and discuss my preface under the heading of (at this point the text stops abruptly, and the reader turns the page to find the heading for CHAPTER ONE.)²²⁶

Note the insertion of the asterisk, then a standard indication of a footnote. When the reader jumps to the matching asterisked text at the bottom of the page, said reader finds, "**This is the first and last footnote you will encounter in this book*".

Chapter one begins with another unrelated passage designed for humor, "A blood curdling scream escaped the white lips of voluptuous young Amanda Whittlebottom. Before the scream dies away, I will hurry into my reasons for writing this book and what I hope to accomplish thereby. You may now forget about Miss Whittlebottom, as she occurred in the foregoing lines

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid. 4.

merely to trap you into actually starting to read this short volume”²²⁷ Willson goes on to state a more serious purpose of the book, “... to put down some practical information referring to the popular studio and dance band combination of today, that to my knowledge has not previously been set forth.”²²⁸

Chapter Two is titled “Have A Baton” and provides basic instruction in the techniques of conducting. Willson begins with details of how to hold a baton, and provides diagrams of conducting patterns. While basic patterns are presented, the art of embellishment with the baton is stressed. The idea of clarity for the sake of the musicians seems to be secondary to the need for aggrandizement of the conductor. In this section Willson’s legendary fondness for batons is once again apparent, for he includes four full pages of specific directions on how to wield a baton, including a caution about one thing novice conductors would discover: they are not leading the orchestra; it’s the other way around. The most important thing about the “technique of the stick,” as Willson called it, was that it must never be stationary. Once the music starts, the stick must move constantly. Willson also described various hand signals and explained why they were necessary in radio studios.

Chapter Three carries a title, *Meet the Orchestra*. As the heading title suggests, this is an introduction to the orchestra of the early twentieth-century, a valuable insight into changing instrumental times. Willson discusses what he refers to as the “modern orchestra,” though his meaning is unclear. It is likely he was referring to an orchestra designed for radio and/or a dance band. Willson suggests that a primary difference is that the modern grouping is, in fact, more band than orchestra. He attributes this to a dearth of strings and the preponderance of brass and woodwinds, an instrumentation heavily dominated by saxophones, “...usually two tenors and an

²²⁷ Ibid. 5.

²²⁸ Ibid. 5.

alto, or two altos and a tenor, two trumpets and one trombone, and a rhythm section comprising piano, drums, guitar and bass.”²²⁹ Willson instructs that “the saxophones and brass blend perfectly together in almost any combination.” He gives examples of a duet of tenor saxophone and trombone, a tenor saxophone playing melody with harmonic brass support, and a trumpet playing lead and harmonically supported by saxophones. He also provides definitions for what he calls the “modern vernacular of the musician”, a series of musical terms which originated almost as slang, and soon became accepted terms:

“Rip” – several anticipated grace notes from the brass section

“Sock” – exaggerating the rhythm tempo

“Bend” – saxophones, brass and strings smearing a sustained note

“Button” – the final chord

“Spat” – the shortest possible cymbal crash

“Jig” or “Bounce” – a tempo indication usually concerning tunes of a dotted eighth and sixteenth nature

“Lick” – referring to any ad lib solo passage

“Riff” – exactly the same thing as a lick

“Slurp: - the tying of two or more notes together by means of a glissando

Suites: *O.O. McIntyre* and *Jervis Bay*

As did many composers, Willson sometimes recycled his works. Parts of pieces appeared on his radio programs, sometimes using part of one piece as a basis for another. This practice had the unintentional results of producing a certain difficulty in tracing individual works. One of the most difficult pieces to pin down is an orchestral work he completed in its entirety in 1934, the *O.O. McIntyre* Suite. During his brief time at Damrosch, Willson, then playing in numerous venues, wrote an exercise for a class. He saved it, and years later modified it for the theme of one movement of the *O.O. McIntyre* Suite, ‘Thoughts while Strolling.’

²²⁹ Willson, *What Every Young Musician*, 10.

The work was titled after, and dedicated to newspaper columnist O.O. McIntyre. Willson spoke of McIntyre as a, "...remarkable man I was proud to know."²³⁰ He went on to provide only the most superficial reasons for his fondness, that, "...McIntyre always wore purple pajamas, and Mrs. McIntyre is a wonderful woman and sends me post cards from places like the deck of the *Empress of India* every once in a while."²³¹ O.O. McIntyre (1884-1938) was born Oscar Odd McIntyre in Plattsburg, Missouri. He started a journalism career at Gallipolis, Ohio but before long he was writing a syndicated column "New York Day by Day" which would eventually appear in over 500 newspapers, a remarkable distribution for the 1930s. No score to the Willson's *Suite* is known to exist, though a transcription for solo piano has recently come to light for a single movement, the afore-mentioned 'Thoughts while Strolling.'

The second of Willson's two suites was composed some years later, around 1941. This was the *Jervis Bay Suite*, so titled in honor of a British ship which sank in the early days of the Second World War.²³² The *Jervis Bay* had been a passenger ship, but was converted to a cruiser for use in wartime. In November of 1940 the *Jervis Bay* was the sole escort for Convoy of thirty-seven freighters headed towards Britain. Before the United States entered the war freighters transported munitions to England, and in that capacity were vital to the British war effort and a frequent target for German attacks. On November 5th the convoy was attacked by a German battleship, the *Admiral Scheer*. Captain Fegen of the *Jervis Bay* immediately realized he was significantly outgunned by the battleship, but ordered the convoy to scatter. This move was a standard defense against German warships, to provide ships in the convoy the chance to escape, and to offer the attacker with fewer immediate targets. What was especially heroic in

²³⁰ Willson, *There I stood*, 32

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

²³² Some sources list the ship as having a British registration, while other sources name the registration as Irish. The ship was British. The confusion probably arises from the nationalities of the men aboard, for the officers were mostly Irish and the crew, English.

this instance is that Captain Fegen steered the *Jervis Bay* directly towards the battleship, drawing the German ship into a one-sided, hopeless engagement. The bridge and gunnery control center were seriously damaged almost immediately, and Captain Fegen shouted orders to continue the fight. Shortly thereafter he was hit by a shell and lost an arm, only to be killed a few moments later by another shell. Various reports say the battle lasted from only twenty-four minutes to two hours. Of the 255 men on the *Jervis Bay*, only sixty-five were rescued. Captain Fegen was posthumously awarded a Victoria Cross for valor. The citation that accompanies the award is as follows:

For valour in challenging hopeless odds and giving his life to save the many ships it was his duty to protect. On the 5th of November, 1940, in heavy seas, Captain Fegen, in His Majesty's Armed Merchant Cruiser *Jervis Bay*, was escorting thirty-eight Merchantmen. Sighting a powerful German warship he at once drew clear of the Convoy, made straight for the enemy and brought his ship between the raider and her prey, so that they might scatter and escape. Crippled, in flames, unable to reply, for nearly an hour the *Jervis Bay* held the German's fire. So she went down; but of the Merchantmen all but four or five were saved.²³³

The actions of Captain Fegen and the *Jervis Bay*, heroic by any standard, inspired at least three narrative poems, a book, and a memorial. Willson read an account of the action and a narrative poem authored by Gene Fowler. So moved was he by the story that he composed a symphonic poem, with narration, based on the events.

Both of Willson's suites bear programmatic titles. The *O.O. McIntyre Suite* has a loose association with the columnist, and the *Jervis Bay Suite* a close tie to the event, as well as to the subsequently written poem which inspired its composition. Without scores it is impossible to classify these works, though Willson's other output and the programmatic titles suggest they were likely musically romantic in nature.

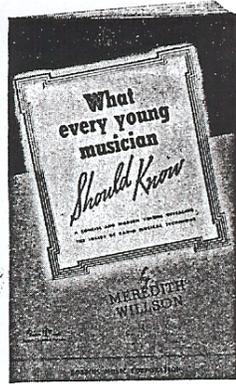
²³³ The National Archives of the United Kingdom, Victoria Cross Recipients: http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/details-result.asp?Edoc_Id=7500237&queryType=1&resultcount=1, Accessed 12th May, 2007.



Figure 4-1. Willson conducting, c. 1938. This photo was autographed for Dixie, with whom Meredith still maintained good relations (Courtesy Mason City Public Library Archives).

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Figure 4-2. Advertisement for *What Every Musician Should Know*.

CHAPTER 5
SYMPHONY NUMBER ONE IN F MINOR: A DELINEATION OF THE SPIRITUAL
PERSONALITY THAT IS SAN FRANCISCO

Background

Meredith and Peggy Willson moved to San Francisco in late 1929 or early 1930, and quickly developed a deep and abiding affection for the city. Willson had quickly moved up to the position of Program Director for NBC's western division, in charge of programming for NBC radio for the entire west coast. At the same time he continued conducting radio orchestras and composing songs. In these varied guises affiliated with musicians of all sorts, from dance bands to the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra. Willson called San Francisco a city with, "more personality than any other city I've ever been in: big, good, kind, friendly, the golden gate, the food, the people, their appreciation of music and sculpture and honest art, hills, . . . the fine musicians, the symphony, and Pierre Monteux."²³⁴ From Willson's NBC studio office he could view the erection of San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge. This construction, in part, inspired the composition of his *First Symphony*:

. . . it was pretty inspiring to look out of the windows and watch the beginning of the world's greatest bridge, and it finally gnawed at me to the extent that I started to write a symphony (appropriately titled Symphony Number One – also known as "The San Francisco Symphony") – measure for cable, note for rivet – and what surprised me even more, I finished it neck and neck with the ribbon-cutting ceremony. The bridge, however, made more money.²³⁵

The original scores of both of Willson's symphonies are in the Fleischer Collection of the Philadelphia Free Library, and copies were recently made for the Mason City Public Library Archives. Beyond the score itself, though, Willson left little to suggest his musical inspirations or compositional direction other than his program notes, very brief comments in his memoirs, and a few newspaper interviews. A full month before the premier the *San Francisco Chronicle*

²³⁴ Willson, *There I Stood*, 141.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

newspaper bragged that, “The youngest ever to direct the San Francisco symphony orchestra, 33 year old Meredith Willson will lead the 85 piece organization here Sunday afternoon, April 19, in his own “Symphony No.1 in F Minor – a Symphony of San Francisco.”²³⁶ The *San Francisco Chronicle* also trumpeted the composer’s personal appeal, “Willson, who is handsome and charming and enormously gifted, will conduct his symphony at a special concert to be given by the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra next Sunday afternoon at the War Memorial Opera House.”²³⁷ The previews were tantalizing, suggesting a great future for Willson’s symphony and encouraging San Franciscans to attend the premier:

Ernest Bloch tried to put all America into a symphony. That was a large order, which is perhaps why his America Symphony, after being played by many orchestras in its first year, has not been heard since. Now Meredith Willson has tried to put his city of San Francisco into a symphony. How well he has succeeded we may judge Sunday afternoon, when the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra plays ‘the San Francisco Symphony’ under the leadership of the composer himself.

A city seems a much more reasonable order for a symphony. And for such an order where could a better subject be found than San Francisco? The elements of a dramatic musical piece are all here. The city has color. Its character is individual. Its life has been dramatic indeed. It has had its idylls and its tragedies. It has felt the force of suspense and has knows striking contrasts. There have been strong dissonances mingled with its harmonies. A direct continuity runs through its history and the direction for its performance has always been *con brio*.

As a composer, Meredith Willson has paid the greatest compliment in his power to the city of his home. The city should give him the appreciative return of attendance on and attention to the compliment he pays it.²³⁸

Meredith Willson’s *First Symphony*, in F minor, received its premier at an afternoon concert on the 19th of April 1936, in the War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco. The symphony is composed in the traditional four movements, and takes approximately forty-two

²³⁶ ‘Meredith Willson Will Direct Own Symphony: Former Mason Cityan Will Lead Frisco Orchestra,’ *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 31, 1936, 1

²³⁷ Carolyn Anspacher, ‘S.F. ‘Lives’ in Music: Spirit of Great City Caught by Willson,’ *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sunday, April 12, 1936, 12.

²³⁸ ‘San Francisco in a Symphony,’ *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 17, 1936, 12.

minutes to perform. This was a special performance of the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, a concert to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the great earthquake and subsequent fires, which had nearly leveled the city on April 18th, 1906. On the score Willson subtitled the work ‘A Delineation of the Spiritual Personality that is San Francisco,’ though for its premier Willson shortened the subtitle to *A Symphony of San Francisco*. Willson expanded on the subtitle in the program notes:

The *Symphony in F minor*, which is specifically dedicated to Frederick Winfield Pabst and Lewis Scott Frost, was inspired by the incomparable traditions of San Francisco. It is not an attempt at specific or program writing but rather a delineation of the spiritual personality that is San Francisco.²³⁹

The score includes a dedication page, which reads, “Dedicated to Frederick Winfield Pabst and Lewis Scott Frost.” The two subjects of the dedication are not known to have been significant public figures, and their identities remain elusive. It is possible that Pabst was a descendant of the Pabst brewery family; the name ‘Frederick’ was common in the Pabst family. Lewis Scott Frost has yet to be identified. Willson had significant corporate contacts through his radio work, as his shows received substantial sponsorship from major corporations. The Pabst name seems to suggest that the dedications were to business connections.

Willson’s composition was the second item on a program of standard orchestral fare. The concert opened with Glinka’s Overture to *Ruslan and Ludmilla*, and Willson’s symphony followed, to complete the first part of the concert. A footnote in the program notes informed the audience that this was the ‘World Premiere’ of the symphony. After the intermission, Mozart’s *Eine Kleine Nachtmusic* was presented, and the concert concluded with Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Capriccio Espagnole*. Willson conducted the concert and, at age thirty-three, became the youngest person to conduct the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra.

²³⁹ Bruno David Usher, Program notes, premier performances, April 4th and 5th, 1940, 158.

First Movement, *Andante--Allegro, Ma Molto Moderato--Allegro Moderato--Vivace*

Willson himself penned the program notes for the premier, providing little in the way of substantive musical ties to the programmatic title or musical themes. Willson gave his *First Symphony* a programmatic title and went so far as to tie musical themes to certain elements of a loose program. His programmatic ties, however, were distant.

The first movement begins with a brief Andante introducing the fundamental accompaniment motive. This motive is developed slightly in an Allegro Ma Molto Moderato which leads into a further short development, Allegro molto, which in turn leads directly to the first theme which is definitely of masculine character. The second theme in contrast, is a simple melody that sounds almost like an old hymn tune. Generally speaking, the first movement is intended to convey pioneer courage, loyalty, strength of purpose and freedom.²⁴⁰

In an interview published one week before the premier, Wilson illuminated some of the programmatic intent of the music, noting, “In the first movement I have tried to catch the virility of San Francisco’s past.... There are sweeping plains and galloping herds.”²⁴¹ He even played certain themes for the interviewer, loosely tying them to his program. Unfortunately, little remains to suggest what themes were tied to which ideas. About the first movement he said only, “Listen—here’s a feminine theme. It’s a little hymn. It’s simple and foursquare.”²⁴² We are left to guess to which of the many themes he was referring.

Meredith Willson’s *First Symphony* begins with an introductory section in F minor, an *Andante* with a 4/4 time signature. There is a rumble of introductory material in the basses. Willson referred to this as “the fundamental accompaniment motive.”²⁴³ While it seems transitory and insignificant, this material is found in several places in the score, in one instance, augmented. It is characterized by an upwards arpeggio and downwards jumps ((Example 5-1).

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Anspacher, ‘S.F. ‘Lives’ in Music...’ 11.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Usher, Program notes, 158.

Example 5-1. Introductory musical materials which, on first appearance, seem to be transitory, mm. 1-4.

In measure 9 the tempo shifts to *Allegro – ma molto moderato*, and new material is introduced in the string section. This is not clearly defined enough to be labeled as Theme 1, but has strong characteristics of the introductory material (Example 5-2). The triplet motion helps to characterize this material, and reappears later in the piece. The same material is presented in measure 13 by a bassoon and the clarinet section. In the program notes Willson referred to this as the slight development of the introductory materials.

Example 5-2. Introductory material development, mm. 9-12.

The introductory section ends at measure 17 with a shift to 6/8 meter with an *Allegro Moderato* tempo. The key remains in F minor, and the first truly identifiable theme of the movement is stated. This is Theme 1, presented in the piccolo, flutes, and first violin (Example

5-3). Theme 1 is the one Willson defines as, "...definitely of masculine character."²⁴⁴ Willson's flute background is apparent, as he places the most virtuosic 'busy' notes in the flute and piccolo parts. Theme 1 is characterized by ascending jumps of thirds, and moves from triplet eighth notes into sixteenth notes. These characteristics provide the theme with a forward momentum, part of the "... strength of purpose and freedom," Willson referred to in the program notes.²⁴⁵

The image displays a musical score for the initial statement of Theme 1, measures 17-22. The score is written in F minor (three flats) and 3/8 time. It consists of four staves: Flute, Violin, Flute (Fl.), and Violin (Vln.). The Flute and Violin parts play a melodic line starting with a triplet of eighth notes (F4, A4, Bb4) that transitions into sixteenth notes. The Flute (Fl.) part features a virtuosic passage of sixteenth notes in the first measure, followed by a descending line. The Violin (Vln.) part provides harmonic support with a sustained note in the first measure and a descending line in the second measure.

Example 5-3. Initial Theme 1 statement, mm. 17-22.

After a remarkably short passage of the first statement of the Theme 1 and some general chordal material, a second theme, Theme 2, is presented in measure 27 (Example 5-4). It has been only ten measures since Theme 1 was introduced, and in this we see one of the defining characteristics of Willson's symphonic writing; he does not wait to develop his themes, but presents theme immediately after theme. The second theme is more lyric and slower moving than the first theme. The key remains F minor, and Theme 2 is stated in the saxophones, horns, trumpets, trombones, and tubas, a presentation which makes it loud and dramatic. This is most

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

likely the theme Willson referred to as ‘hymn-like’ in the program notes, defining the music as, “... a simple melody that sounds almost like an old hymn tune.”²⁴⁶

The musical score for Example 5-4, 'Introduction of Theme 2, mm. 27-41', is written in 6/8 time and marked 'sostenuto'. It features four saxophone parts: Alto Sax., Horn in F, Trumpet in Bb, and another Alto Sax. The music is characterized by block chords and simple melodic lines, typical of a hymn-like theme. The Alto Sax. part starts with a series of block chords, while the other parts provide harmonic support with similar chordal structures and simple melodic fragments.

Example 5-4. Introduction of Theme 2, mm. 27-41.

Of significance in this Theme 2 statement is the scoring for four saxophones, two E flat altos, a tenor, and a baritone saxophone. This is quite unusual in symphonic writing, and particularly striking for Willson. Willson was not an advocate of the saxophone, and generally did not write for the instrument, even in his popular compositions. His creation of what he called ‘Chiffon Swing’ was jazz and swing music actually rearranged with the saxophone parts replaced by woodwinds and violins. In this period of time, the 1930s, the saxophone was popular in only a few musical genres, and generally not particularly well appreciated by the general listening public. Willson’s ‘Chiffon Swing,’ jazz *sans* saxophones, actually made the genre more palatable for public consumption. These factors give significant weight to Willson’s

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

heavy use of the instrument in its various sizes in this symphony. It is likely the saxophone represented modernity, and Willson used the instrument heavily in a musical effort to represent the modern nature of the city of San Francisco.

At measure 44 the meter changes to 9/8, with a presentation of a derivation of Theme 1 (Example 5-5). The section which follows features the same theme sequenced in different keys and meters, evidently Willson's version of thematic development. It is noteworthy that the Theme 5 series little, is only restated in a different key or varied rhythm. Throughout this section, which lasts for several pages, the basses and tympani play a driving rhythm on a single note, C.

Example 5-5. Theme 1 derivative, with key and meter modulations, mm. 44-49.

Willson uses this sort of development throughout the symphony, occasionally ending in an unsuitable key which necessitates having to move by half steps to find a more functional key. This is the case at measure 51, where he spends several measures modulating back to F minor. The material here is transitional, serving essentially as filler material. In measure 55 the original Theme 1 is restated in its original key, this time at a *fortissimo* dynamic level. At measure 62, Theme 1 is restated, this time in the key of C minor. The theme is preceded by a brief flourish in the saxophone section, another unconventional presentation by the saxophone (Example 5-6).

Example 5-6. Presentation of Theme I in C minor, mm. 62-65.

This statement is followed by a section of development of Theme 1 in C minor. At measure 72, page twenty, the development of Theme 1 continues, this time in D minor. The modulation is almost an exact imitation of the earlier development in C minor; the only significant change is the key. Willson uses D minor as a developing point for both themes, reintroducing the second theme in measure 79. This time Theme 2 is varied, and very fragmented. The composer apparently has a preference for use of the fully diminished 7th chord at the same time. He utilizes it here and throughout the piece. This is too deliberate to be accidental and suggests Willson is paying homage, giving a musical ‘hats off,’ to another composer, perhaps Beethoven.

In measure 83, again after only a brief section of development, Theme 1 returns and is developed in the key of A minor. The developmental technique is classic, for Willson takes the theme through an extended circle of 5ths sequence, one which continues for several pages. Once again the key changes are rapid, every two to four measures. The harmonic progressions begin in D major in measure 77, move to D minor in measure 79, G major in measure 84, then to G minor

two measures later. In measure 99 the key is C major, and only one measure later shifts to C minor, where it settles for two pages.

One of the high points of the movement is found on page twenty-five, at measure 109 (Example 5-7). Here Willson combines derived versions of both Theme 1 and Theme 2 in a *Bravura* section. This thematic conglomeration is presaged by the movement's Theme 1 derived material augmented in the bass lines - bassoon, baritone saxophone, tuba, and string bass. This is the culmination of the Theme 1 in the work. Theme 2, expanded, is presented in upper voices in clarinets, all the saxophones, and violins. The key remains, technically, F minor, as there are no cadences to truly establish another key. This is well written, perhaps the best-written section of the entire symphony.

Clarinet in B \flat

Bravura

Tuba

Example 5-9. Theme 1 derived material augmented and presented in the bass lines, mm. 109-115.

The presentation of these themes continues until measure 137, a point which represents the B section of the movement. Here the thematic material is reminiscent of the Theme 1, thus is another derivative, and the work remains in F minor. The pace of the work increases considerably with a new *L'istesso* note and a move to 4/2 time. Here, too, solo timpani establish a rhythmic pedal point on the 5th scale degree while other instruments move chromatically in series of long chords. The timpani line is significant, for solo triplet patterns in the timpani appear several times in the work. Though not particularly important material, the chordal

material and its descending motion has just enough character that it might be called, weakly, Theme 3 (Example 5-10).

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff is for Flute, Oboe, and Clarinet (Fl, ob, cl) in 4/4 time. It features chordal movement with dynamics 'poco cresc.', 'mf sostenuto', and 'mf'. The bottom staff is for Timpani, showing driving triplets starting at 'pp' and ending at 'mf'.

Example 5-10. Chordal movement in the woodwind parts, accompanied by driving tympani triplets, mm. 137-138. The material loosely resembles Theme 1, but is separate enough to be labeled Theme 3.

The pedal point in the tympani continues on the 5th scale degree for the next twenty or so measures, while other instruments, generally the woodwinds and French horns, move chromatically. This is reminiscent of Wagner, as are other elements in the symphony. Two pages later, on page thirty-three, is a strange jump of measures to 209; quite a number of measures have been removed, or the composer has forgotten what measure number he was writing. The *sostenuto* section, which began at measure 137, is thirty-three measures long, followed by a four measure tympani solo, and suddenly a new measure marking of 209. It seems reasonable to suggest that a number of pages were removed from this handwritten score, and the work rescored on page thirty-three. The four measure tympani solo which leads into measure 209 is a continuation of the rhythmic pattern that has been played since measure 137, only now on an F. Four measures before 209, measure 205 or 164 depending on from whence one is counting, the meter settles in 6/8. The tympani solo suggests, and even cadences into what appears to be an F key, but actually resolves into B-flat minor (Example 5-11).

The image shows a musical score for a Timpani solo in 6/8 time. It features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with dynamics 'cresc.' and 'f'.

Example 5-11. Measure 205 or 164, tympani solo leading to B-flat minor.

This effectively helps introduce the *sostenuto* at 209, where Theme 2 is presented in B-flat minor by, oddly, the saxophones, and paralleled in part by the trombones. The presentation is unusual, and the chromatic movement adds tension to the saxophones (Example 5-12):

The image shows a musical score for three saxophones: Alto Sax., Tenor Sax., and Baritone Sax. The music is in B-flat minor and 3/4 time. It features chromatic movement and dynamic markings such as *mf sostenuto* and *f*. The Alto Sax. part starts with a half note G4, followed by a series of eighth notes: A4, Bb4, C5, Bb4, A4, G4. The Tenor Sax. part starts with a half note F4, followed by a series of eighth notes: G4, Ab4, Bb4, C5, Bb4, A4, G4. The Baritone Sax. part starts with a half note E4, followed by a series of eighth notes: F4, G4, Ab4, Bb4, C5, Bb4, A4, G4. The score includes slurs, ties, and dynamic markings.

Example 5-12. Theme 2 in saxophones, mm. 209-217.

In measure 223 the Theme 1 derived development material is presented, this time in B-flat minor. Five measures into the presentation the chords loosely associated with a Theme 3 appear. Between measures 223 and 231 the work modulates to C minor. In measure 231 Theme 1 returns in the clarinets and violins, this time in C minor, and goes through some development. In measure 239 the first movement reaches a climactic fortissimo G minor chord. Here a fragmented Theme 2 is worked out in G minor. Other fragments, which previously appeared as developmental materials, begin to return and this reappearance provides these materials with an almost independent character; these could almost be themes in their own right. In measure 243 the key is still G minor when a Theme 1 derivative is restated in the violins. Its length here is extended, compared to its presentation in measure 231. The theme drifts away and by measure 247 the piece grows quiet except for Theme 1 material in the basses, somewhat reminiscent of the opening of the movement.

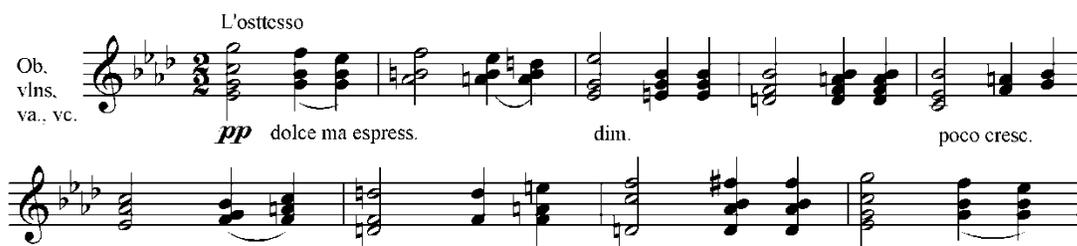
The quiet bass movement plays an almost introductory role, for measure 249 holds the surprise of a baritone saxophone solo (Example 5-13). While the use of the instrument here is

striking, the music is not. The material has been presented before, usually in basses as general movement under thematic presentation. This section is not harmonically well supported. The key could be G minor or B-flat major, but is never truly determined. Aurally it sounds like the minor due to the previously established tonality.



Example 5-13. Baritone saxophone solo, mm. 249-253.

The baritone saxophone solo introduces a section of chordal developmental material which continues until measure 279. Here Theme 4 is presented, in the key of E-flat major, the key traditionally associated with works labeled ‘triumphant’ or ‘happy’ (Example 5-14). Again, the possibility of homage to Beethoven is suggested, as most of the Beethoven works generally considered to be ‘happy’, are set in E-flat major. This theme is hyper-expressive and even somewhat reminiscent of popular piano parlor music of the previous century.



Example 5-14. Theme 4 as introduced in mm. 279-287. The thick chordal figures and chromaticism combine to make this a hyper-expressive thematic presentation.

Theme 4 continues through measure 308, and this is another area of missing measures. The measure numbers in this symphony are handwritten, and Willson, or whoever inserted the measure numbers, has seriously miscounted this section. On one page of the score, page forty-two, there are three different measure number markings, 274, 279, and 295. The markings for measures 274 and 279 are actually seven measures apart. Score note 279 lies only three or so

inches above score note 295, yet only eight measures separate these marked numbers. Between measure 274, on page forty-two, and measure marking 309, on page forty-three, lie only twenty-two measures, not the indicated thirty-five.

Two measures before score marking 309, during the final two measures of Theme 4, the Theme 1 derivative reappears, first in the cellos and basses, and begins to be developed (Example 5-15).



Example 5-15. Entrance of Theme 1 development, mm. 307-311, page forty-three.

In the same measure the meter shifts back to 6/8. Two measures later, in measure 311, a solo clarinet and bassoon interject a brief variant of Theme 4 (Example 5-16).



Example 5-16. Theme 4 materials, mm. 311-315.

As the clarinet and bassoon solos cadence into measure 315, the Theme 1 derivative enters again, with more insistence, this time stated *forte*, in bassoons, baritone, and cello. As the statement cadences into measure 319 a fanfare-like flourish is stated in the French horns and trumpets (Example 5-17).²⁴⁷ The flourish may be derived from Theme 4 materials.

²⁴⁷ Willson has sometimes not transposed the horn parts in this score, and sometimes forgotten to write in a key signature for them, so the horns consistently appear in C major. The figures which follow have all been transposed in order to better display the correct tonalities.

Horn in F

Trumpet in B \flat

f

cresc.

Example 5-17. Fanfare-like interjection, mm. 319-323.

As with the interjection of Theme 2 materials in measure 311, this flourish anticipates, and then coincides with, yet another entrance of the introductory thematic materials (Example 5-18). This time the presentation is in low woodwinds and low strings, and similar to that seen in measure 249, example 5-15.

Bssn., Baritone, Vc., Bs.

Example 5-18. Introductory thematic materials restated at measure 321.

Almost predictably the flourish recurs in measure 323, and the key modulates to E-flat minor.

Trumpet in B \flat

Example 5-19. More flourishes, mm. 323-326.

From the modulation to E-flat minor in measure 323 the work enters a section of transitional material, a transition towards the first section, in measure 328. Not truly thematic, this material seems to facilitate another key change, this time to F major, the parallel major, in measure 332. Here occurs an *a tempo* and the first statement of the Theme 1 in a major key. This is a new Theme 1 derivative at triple *fortissimo*, and one of the high points of the first movement. The theme is stated in the bassoons, baritones, and low strings, and the remainder of the orchestra plays a chordal outline (Example 5-20).

Example 5-20. Return to Theme 1 derivative materials, mm. 332-336.

The conclusion of the Theme 1 derivative statement is also the beginning of development of the introductory material, still augmented. Here, yet again, Willson writes for the instruments he seems to prefer for the introductory materials - the bassoons, baritone saxophones, trombones, and low strings. This section begins at measure 340 and is marked *Bravura* (Example 5-21).

Example 5-21. Development of augmented introductory material, mm. 340-347.

The development of the introductory material continues for several pages, moving around harmonically. In measure 356 the work arrives at a first ending, with a return to Theme 1 in F minor in the clarinets. The work repeats to the B section, and goes to the second ending on its return to measure 366. Transitional materials appear at measure 367 in the form of sustained chords. These seem developmental but are short lived. Instead Willson introduces a new theme, Theme 4, which is rather loosely based on Theme 1. Like Theme 1 it is an arpeggio, and the upwards melodic direction, along with downwards jumps, parallels that of Theme 1. The first presentation of Theme 4 in measure 374 is in F minor (Example 5-22). Immediately upon completion of the initial statement Willson begins to restate Theme 4, always in the flute, in different keys. There is no variation of the theme, but direct repetition in a procession of different keys.

The image shows a musical score for two instruments: Flute and Clarinet in B-flat. The Flute part is written in a treble clef with a key signature of two flats and a 6/8 time signature. It features a melodic line with various ornaments and dynamics, including 'Solo', 'poco meno', 'p', and 'espress.'. The Clarinet part is written in a bass clef with the same key signature and time signature, providing a harmonic accompaniment with dynamics 'Solo' and 'pp'.

Example 5-22. Introduction of Theme 4 as flute solo, mm. 374-382. The first modulation and restatement of the theme begins in the last measure of this example.

In measure 382 Theme 4 is presented in D minor, in measure 390 in appears in B-flat minor, and in measure 400 the motive is reduced to its sixteenth-note runs as transitional materials. Here the key shifts to D major, a key related to the F minor in which the theme was first presented. As this plays, at measure 402, the tympani and low strings play a flourish-like heraldic figure, similar to those previously presented (Example 5-23). This is very much like the figure stated in measure 319, and previously presented in Example 5-17.

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Timpani, Violoncello, and Double Bass. All three parts are written in a bass clef with a key signature of two flats and a 6/8 time signature. The Timpani part consists of a series of rhythmic strokes. The Violoncello and Double Bass parts play a similar rhythmic pattern, marked with a forte 'f' dynamic.

Example 5-23. Flourish, mm. 402-403.

The flourish leads to measure 404, where Theme 2 returns in B minor (Example 5-24). This *Tempo commodo* section marks development of Theme 2.

Fl., Ob., Cl.,
Eb Alto Sax., T Sax.

Tempo comodo

Sing!

Bssn., Bari Sax.,
Vln., Va., Vc.

Sing!

Example 5-23. Hyper-expressive development of Theme 2 material in the key of B minor, in which Theme 1 forms the basis for the accompaniment, mm. 404-411.

In this presentation of Theme 2, the accompaniment material is reminiscent of Theme 1 in its scale-like movement. Willson does little in the way of development beyond restating Theme 2 in different keys. This passage is hyper-expressive, decidedly influenced by the late romantics, and especially reminiscent of the works of Tchaikovsky. The Theme 2 statement ends in measure 418, and the next few measures are transitional materials. The frequently used flourish reappears in measure 424, and announces the onset of a recapitulation of sorts (Example 5-24). This time the flourish sounds in the low strings, tuba, and bassoons.

Bssn., Tuba, Vc., Bs.

Ritenuito

Example 5-24. Return of the flourish, mm. 424-425.

Measure 426 marks a recapitulation of sorts. This is an unusual recapitulation in that it features Theme 2, making it almost a replacement of Theme 1, which is scarcely in evidence. The only change is a key change; this statement of Theme 2 is in C minor. Theme 2 is recapitulated in a verbatim repeat of measure twenty-seven. This recapitulation continues until

measure 466, where variants of the introductory materials reappear, much like the previous restatements in measures 240 and 349. Here the entrances are *stretto*, in C major, and like the introduction at the beginning of the symphony, move towards a *marcato* presentation of a Theme 1 derivative in measure 470 (Example 5-25).

The image shows a musical score for four instruments: Bassoon, Tuba, Viola, and Vc. The score is in 6/8 time and features a descending melodic line in the upper instruments and a sustained bass line in the lower instruments. The Bassoon staff has a dynamic marking of 'f marcato'. The Vc staff has a dynamic marking of 'marcato'. The music is in C major and features a descending melodic line in the upper instruments and a sustained bass line in the lower instruments.

Example 5-25. *Marcato* Theme 1, mm. 470-474.

These entrances are moving towards E-flat major, which arrives in measure 474. Here Theme 1 concludes its *stretto* entrances and is stated in a unison *sostenuto fortissimo* by the violins. The statement comes to a quiet cadence on a sustained A-flat in measure 481.

In measure 482 Theme 3, after making only a single previous appearance in measure 137, is reintroduced as a derived Theme 3 in A-flat major. In its initial statement the timpani solo provided both a rhythmic intensity and a pedal point. In this current statement of Theme 3 there is no timpani and no driving rhythmic pattern, but a bassoon which serves to provide a pedal point. The melodic progression is characterized by its descending motion in the upper instruments, which move chromatically in series of long chords. As in the first presentation the thematic material is not particularly striking (Example 5-26).

Flute *appassionato*

Oboe *dolce ma espress.* *poco cresc.*

Clarinet in B \flat *Solo* *poco cresc.*

Bassoon *dolce ma espress.* *poco cresc.*

Fl. *p espress.*

Ob.

B \flat Cl.

Bsn. *espress.*

Example 5-26. Theme 3, mm. 482-489.

At measure 510 the introductory material returns again, this time in A-flat major (Example 5-27). At last this seemingly insignificant motif has emerged as being more important than its brief statement at the beginning would indicate. This statement is *marcato*, and stated in the low instruments, bassoon, baritone saxophone, viola, cello, and bass.

Ob., Cl. *fff*

Bssn., Bari Sax.,
Va., Vc., Bass *mf marcato* *f* *ff*

Example 5-27. Development of introductory motif, mm. 510-516.

In measure 514 the introductory theme joins with the ‘flourish’ in a series of *stretto* entrances. The flourish ends on a cluster of notes that do not truly form a chord, a presentation which heralds a section of tonal ambiguity. The introductory theme is stated again, starting on a D sharp, and the flourish is presented several times in an ascending pattern. The theme has an apex in measure 522, with a fortissimo statement of the flourish and woodwinds and violins and, one measure later, the entrance of a derived Theme 1 in trumpets and tenor saxophone (Example 5-28).

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Flute, Oboe, and Clarinet (Fl., Ob., Cl.), Alto Saxophone (Alto Sax.), and Trumpet in B-flat (Trumpet in B \flat). The score is in 6/8 time and features a key signature of two flats (B-flat major). The Flute, Oboe, and Clarinet parts play a series of chords in a *stretto* pattern, starting with a cluster of notes. The Alto Saxophone part enters in measure 522 with a fortissimo (*fff*) statement of the flourish, which is a cluster of notes. The Trumpet in B-flat part enters in measure 523 with a fortissimo (*ff*) statement of the Theme 1 derivative, which is a melodic line. The score is marked with *fff* and *ff* dynamics.

Example 5-28. Theme 1 derivative development and ‘flourish’ in *stretto*, mm. 522-526.

The trumpet statement of the Theme 1 derivative is doubled in the tenor saxophone. This is a technique Willson uses frequently in this symphony, doubling standard orchestral instruments with one of the four saxophones. In measure 531 he makes the Theme 1 derivative even more important, moving to an *a tempo* A-flat major, the relative major of the original theme, and stating the theme in a high pitched *fortissimo* in nearly every instrument. Only four measures later, in measure 535, the movement lands on a five chord in A-flat major, and progresses using diminished sonorities.

In measure 539 the introductory theme returns, now in A-flat major. In measure 545 the work enters another transition, again using diminished sonorities. Here Willson is beginning to move towards F major; the melodic material is largely drawn from the introductory motif. The

piece arrives in measure 555 with a statement of the Theme 1 and a written key change to F major. Also at measure 555 occurs the first appearance of a set of chords which constitute a coda theme. This section makes a crescendo towards measure 563, the first push towards the end of the first movement. Here the key changes to A major; the coda theme is stated in an augmented *poco largo* at a quadruple *fortissimo* dynamic level. In measure 568 the flourish reappears as a brassy fanfare in a prolonged form. The coda begins in measure 579. It is in the key of A major and utilizes both Themes 1 and II (Example 5-29).

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Flute, Oboe, and Bassoon, Vc., Bs. The score is in 6/8 time and one flat key signature (B-flat). It consists of six measures. The Flute part has a melodic line with a crescendo hairpin. The Oboe part has a series of chords. The Bassoon, Vc., and Bs. part has a melodic line with a crescendo hairpin. The key signature changes from one flat to no flats (A major) in measure 563, and the coda begins in measure 579 in the key of A major.

Example 5-29. Beginning of coda, mm. 579-584.

As the work moves towards measure 589, theme fragments begin to appear in different keys, though without ever making a cadence in a particular key. This sort of chromatic manipulations without ever establishing a key was a technique used by nineteenth-century composers. The motion eventually resolves in F major, in measure 595, with a sudden *vivace*. This is also the beginning of an eight measure repeated passage. Willson has added a handwritten note to the score, “2 X only.” Theme 1 is brought back in its original instruments - bassoon, baritone saxophone, and low strings. The melodic material of this section is unremarkable, consisting of fragments from various themes.

In the second ending of the passage, measure 610, the piece goes to the key of A major, again moving through chromatic manipulation. As in the previous section of chromatic

movement, the resolution is in F major, with the Theme 1. This occurs in measure 631, the beginning of the last small section of the first movement, a codetta making use of Theme 1 material in F major. At only fourteen measures this small section is not big enough to constitute a full coda. The final six measures consist of a sustained three measure antecedent chord, answered by a subsequent chord in a rhythmic pattern, and the first movement ends with a ‘bump’, reminiscent of show tunes (Example 5-30).

The musical score shows six staves. The top staff is for Picc., Fl., Ob. and the bottom for Vc., Bc. The middle staves are for Cl., Trpt., in Bb; Baritone Sax.; and Bassoon. The Violin staff is also present. The music is in 6/8 time. The first three measures are marked *ffff*. The last measure is marked *sfz*. The score is marked 'In Tempo' and ends with 'Fine'.

Example 5-30. Conclusion of first movement, mm. 639-543.

Second Movement, *Andante*

Willson called the second movement of his *Symphony of San Francisco* a passacaglia. Programmatically the movement is meant to reflect the desolation in the city as a result of the great earthquake of 1906. The variations are presented in a gradually ascending order, which Willson intended to represent a “civic renaissance.” About this movement the composer wrote:

The second movement is an Andante in Passacaglia form, and here I have tried to express in music the rebirth of a great city from smouldering ruins and ashes. The theme of this movement begins in a scarcely audible thread of sound from muted violi, celli and harp, and with each subsequent variation on the theme hope rises higher and higher.²⁴⁸

The piccolo plays a major melodic role here, buoying the more somber instrumentation in the lower instruments. “The second movement,” he said, “shows desolation. It shows ashes and destruction and trailing wisps of smoke. San Francisco in April of 1906. Hope is dead. People are lost, destitute. You hear their complete despondency. But not for long.”²⁴⁹

The actual form of this movement is somewhat problematic. There is virtually no fixed or consistent bass pattern and the work is in 4/8 with a sort of overall triple feel, rather than a triple meter. In a more historically typical aspect of a *passacaglia* the character of the movement does remain essentially grave, in minor keys. Analysis reveals a formal character which better fits a concept of a mix of passacaglia with Theme and variation structure. The movement begins with a statement of the *passacaglia* theme, a chromatic descending melody presented in the viola, cello, and harp, in A minor (Example 5-31).

Example 5-31. Statement of *passacaglia* theme, mm. 1-8 of second movement.

²⁴⁸ Program notes from first performance, War Memorial Opera House, April 19, 1936.

²⁴⁹ Anspacher, ‘S.F. ‘Lives’ in Music...’, 11.

The first variation is presented in measure 25. The work is still in the key of A minor (Example 5-32).

Example 5-32. First variation, mm. 25-30.

The second variation occurs at measure 41, in D minor. This presentation is dominated by the double reed instruments, with flute added on top (Example 5-33).

Example 5-33. Second variation, D minor, mm. 41-46.

The theme and filler material continue until measure 49 where the musical materials become transitional. The third variation is found in measure 57, a variation more diverse than the others (Example 5-34). It is so removed from the original thematic idea that it almost appears as a second theme.

Example 5-34. Third variation, mm. 57-62.

Beginning at measure 81 a fourth variation seems to begin emerging, in D minor. This is not a true statement, but rather introductory or transitional. This continues until the fourth variation fully emerges in measure 89, in D minor (Example 5-35).



Example 5-35. Fourth variation, mm. 89-97.

The orchestration of the fourth variation is surprising. The theme is played *fortissimo* by the first and second horns, but they must project over a host of instruments playing a simultaneous *forte*. The full saxophone quartet is playing, along with the first and second trumpets, all the trombones and tuba. At measure 97 there is a large restatement of the first variation in all the winds. The string section reenters in measure 104 and presents general transitional material until measure 111. Here the movement begins modulating towards its home key.

Measure 114 represents the apex of the second movement. The movement has undergone a gradual *crescendo* to this point, about which Willson wrote, “San Franciscans don’t stay lost, they find their way back always. Listen to them rebuilding their city.”²⁵⁰ The person interviewing Willson for an article on the symphony in the San Francisco Chronicle related a trumpet call to, “...the song of San Francisco’s reclamation,” which, “... went on and up.”²⁵¹ That statement is not known to have come from Willson and cannot directly be tied to the work.

At measure 114 the original theme restated *sostenuto* in the violins, in the original key of A minor. This statement is declamatory, played by most of the instruments. At measure 130 is a restatement of the original thematic material, but in a very slight variation, not distinct enough to be called a separate variation. This seems to reset the listener’s ear to the original theme,

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

perhaps to provide more marked contrast for the next presentation of a new variation. Only eight measures later comes the statement of a true new variation, the fifth. This variant is stated in A major, though subtly, as a lot of E minor tonality is suggested (Example 5-36).



Example 5-36. Fifth variation, mm. 138-144.

At measure 138 the original theme is restated in the flutes in A minor, and at measure 146 the theme is outlined by the horns in D minor. From here the work modulates to A minor in measure 149, then back to D minor in measure 153, in which key the movement concludes.

Third Movement, *Presto*

The next movement of the symphony, the third movement, begins in A major. This movement is a *presto*, a tribute to the city's diverse population. In the program notes for the premier performance Willson described the movement as:

... a happy little piece picturing the almost childish delight of a people who have a continental love for artistic pursuits; a music loving sincerity that thronged the streets on Christmas eve to hear Tetrzzini's *Caro Nome* at Lotta's Fountain. The two themes in this Scherzo are introductory to the fourth movement, which follows without pause.²⁵²

In this statement Willson is referring to soprano Luisa Tetrzzini (1871-1941), famed for her vocal technique. Tetrzzini had been scheduled to sing in San Francisco, but was blocked by legal issues about who owned her contract. Attempts were made to secure an injunction from singing in any theater until the issue could be legally resolved. On her trip to San Francisco she was queried about the injunction and responded, "I will sing in San Francisco if I have to sing

²⁵² Usher, Program notes, 158.

there in the streets, for I know the streets of San Francisco are free." This statement has become almost legendary among opera aficionados. Though an injunction was never issued and Tetrizzini was free to sing in the theaters, she announced through her agent that she would still sing in the streets of San Francisco. On Christmas Eve, 1910, at the corner of Market and Kearney, near the city landmark, Lotta's Fountain, Tetrizzini climbed a stage platform. She serenaded a crowd of an estimated two- to three-hundred thousand San Franciscans.

Willson was moved by the Tetrizzini incident, referring to it again in a newspaper interview just after the premier. The reporter noted that Willson specified themes for various images, and that the composer called the movement, ". . . a delineation of the spirit of the people, their laughter, their naiveté." The interviewer went on to relate Willson's musings, describing that, "Willson's fingers played laughter. They played the song of the beloved Tetrizzini as she sang at the base of Lotta's Fountain and the song of the thousands who thronged to hear her. They played the continental charm of the city and of the fusion of its peoples."²⁵³

Willson begins this *presto* movement by stating functional thematic materials right away. It would be a valid position to argue that these are not a true theme, but transitory materials. In this movement, though, the materials are used frequently enough that they will be referred to as the Theme 1 for the purposes of this analysis. Almost certainly Willson was thinking of Tetrizzini and Italian opera when he composed this theme, for it is opera music, the sort frequently used in Italian opera. The Theme 1 could even be used to introduce an aria, perhaps the scene Willson intends to set here. It is set in A major, played exclusively and lightly by the woodwinds. This movement calls for clarinet in A, while the first movement used a B-flat clarinet, and the second movement used no clarinets at all. Because of its nod to opera, the entire scoring is worth reproducing in its entirety (Example 5-37).

²⁵³ Anspacher, 'S.F. 'Lives' in Music...', 11.

PRESTO

Flute

Oboe

Clarinet in B \flat

Bassoon

Fl.

Ob.

B \flat Cl.

Bsn.

Example 5-37. Theme 1 of movement 3, mm. 1-8. The rapid sixteenth-note runs and busy accompaniment parts are reminiscent of Italian opera music.

Just as the bassoon completes the downwards run, Theme 1 is restated in a modal fashion (Example 5-38). This mode is not exactly Phrygian, but similar enough to present and sound like the Phrygian mode. As a composer Willson seems to have a fondness for this pseudo Phrygian tonality. In addition to its use here, the composer makes frequent use of the device in his *Second Symphony*. He generally makes use of the Phrygian-like tonality when making musical reference to something historical. It is also noteworthy that the Phrygian mode is commonly found in his symphonies at the same time a double reed instruments are being utilized, in this case the bassoon.

Example 5-38. Theme 1 restated in a modal fashion, mm. 9-16.

Immediately at the end of this modular echo of Theme 1, a new theme is introduced in measure 17 (Example 5-39). Theme 2 is lyrical, with a touch of ethnicity to it, perhaps a gypsy-like flare. While not a quote from the *Caro Nome* which Tetrizzini sang at the fountain, this melodic theme is certainly meant to evoke the spirit of an Italian aria. It is also reminiscent of the motive played by clarinets in the third movement of Mahler's *First Symphony*.

Example 5-39. Lyrical Theme 2, mm. 17-24.

Theme 2 is repeated four times, with small variants the third time. This pattern is intriguing for its modernity, as it is the standard blues form. Willson may or may not have been aware of his utilization of this modern form, but it is an influence, bidden or unbidden, of the twentieth-century. In measure 48 the work enters a transitional section (Example 5-40):

The musical score for Example 5-40 consists of four staves: Oboe, Violin I, Violin II, and Cello. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#) and the time signature is 6/8. The Oboe part begins in measure 48 with a melodic line marked *mf* and features several slurs. The Violin I part starts in measure 50 with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, marked *p* and *pp*. The Violin II part enters in measure 52 with a similar rhythmic pattern, marked *mf*. The Cello part begins in measure 49 with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, marked *mf* and *pp*.

Example 5-40. Transitional materials, mm. 48-53.

A solo oboe sustains the root of A major, while the strings play upwards patterns below it. From the transition the work goes to the materials stated at the beginning, theme A. At the end of the two Theme 1 statements is material based on Theme 2 which, at measure 71, marks the beginning of a codetta (Example 5-41). Theme 2 fragments are interrupted by a brief horn solo, the pattern of three notes which Willson favors throughout the symphony.

The musical score for Example 5-41 consists of three staves: Horn in F, Violin I, and Cello. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#) and the time signature is 6/8. The Horn in F part begins in measure 71 with a solo marked *mf*. The Violin I part enters in measure 72 with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, marked *f* and *tutti*. The Cello part begins in measure 71 with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, marked *f* and *tutti*.

Example 5-41. Transitional materials with Theme 2 fragments, mm. 71-75.

The transition leads into a first ending at measure 78. The triplet rhythmic motif just played by the horns is taken up by the flutes, and the work returns to its beginning at measure 85. The second ending is found on page 133, and uses simple transitional material to introduce the next section, as well as a modulation to F-sharp minor. Here the triplet motif is in the violas. The second section of this quick-moving presto begins in measure 95. A new theme is introduced at the onset of this section, Theme 3, in F-sharp minor (Example 5-42).

The musical score for Example 5-42, Theme 3, in F-sharp minor, measures 95-102, is presented in two systems. The first system includes parts for Flute and Violin I (Fl., Vl. Cl. I), Clarinet in A, Bassoon, Viola, and Cello. The second system includes parts for Flute (Fl.), Clarinet in A (A Cl.), Bassoon (Bsn.), Viola (Vla.), and Cello (Vc.). The key signature is F-sharp major (three sharps). The time signature is 6/8. The first system has dynamics markings of 'meno espress.' and 'mf'. The second system has dynamics markings of 'mf' and 'f'.

Example 5-42. Theme 3, with a significant 'nod' to Italian opera, mm. 95-102.

Theme 3 is expressive and lyrical. Like the other themes thus far introduced, this theme is quite reminiscent of opera. Here the flutes, violins, and clarinets play the melody. In a sense they are taking over the role of a vocalist, while the rest of the orchestra provides an accompaniment. The tunefulness, lyricism, accompaniment movement, and bassoon outlines all indicate a nod to Tetrazini and Italian opera. Just a few measures later, in measure 110, the theme continues with a short flirt in A-flat major. Beginning in measure 115 a Theme 3 derivative is stated again, up a third, but still in F-sharp minor (Example 5-43).

The image shows a musical score for five instruments: Flute, Violin, Clarinet in A, Bassoon, Viola, and Cello. The score is in F-sharp minor (three sharps) and 6/16 time. The first staff (Flute and Violin) starts with a dynamic of *mf* and includes markings for *meno* and *cspress*. The Clarinet in A and Bassoon parts also feature *mf* dynamics. The Viola and Cello parts provide a rhythmic accompaniment. The score spans five measures, with a double bar line at the end of the fifth measure.

Example 5-43. Modulation of Theme 3 fragment, mm. 115-119.

At the end of this Theme 3 fragment, on page 136, in measure 122, another theme appears (Example 5-44). This is a *dolce* lyric theme presented in D minor and distantly related to Theme 3. Once again the salient features of the theme center around an upwards arpeggio. While it is possible that this theme could be considered a Theme 3 derivative, it is different enough that it will be labeled Theme 4 for purposes of this analysis. This similarity of themes, a technique frequently adopted by Willson, serves to tie the work together.

The image shows a musical score for four instruments: Violin, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. The score is in G major (one sharp) and 6/16 time. The Violin part is marked 'SOLO' and 'dolce'. The Viola part is marked 'dolce'. The Cello part is marked 'dolce' and 'mf'. The Double Bass part is marked 'dolce' and 'Pizz.'. The music features sixteenth-note passages and rests.

Example 5-44. Theme 4, loosely derived from Theme 3, mm. 122-128.

At this point Theme 3 and Theme 4 begin to be applied quickly. In measure 134 Theme 3 returns in G-sharp minor and in measure 138 is a short presentation of Theme 4, this time as a derivative. This plays out for several measures, until Theme 4 begins a restatement in measure 150, and in measure 154 Theme 3 returns in D-sharp minor. The section ends with a restatement of Theme 4 in measure 162, and a *ritardando* into measure 167.

Measure 168 is an *a tempo* and restatement of the beginning of Theme 1 in A major. This opera-like sixteenth-note passage begins and presents like a recapitulation, but ends in a tympani roll which crescendos and segues to the fourth movement of the symphony. This makes the final seven-measure Theme 1 statement a tag, *codetta*, or possibly a false recapitulation. The two main themes in this *Scherzo* movement are introductory to the fourth movement, which follows without pause.

Fourth Movement, *Allegro*

The fourth movement begins with an orgy of thematic material found in multiple instruments -saxophones, bassoons, horns, trombones, and tuba. Theme 1 is stated in F major in the first measure, in low instruments and saxophones. (Example 5-45)

Bsn., Alto Sax.,
T Sax., Bari Sax.

Hn., Tpt.,
Trb., Tuba

Example 5-45. Theme 1 introduction in F major, mm.1-7 of the Fourth Movement.

As the first theme cadences, materials which seem to be transitional are introduced. The most striking feature is a triplet pattern which begins in measure 11 (Example 5-46). The materials are more substantive than they initially appear to be, as they reappear as closing material for the section. The instrumentation is unique, for the triplet figures are presented by cellos and three baritone saxophones, with a slight boost from the bassoons. The heavy scoring of the baritone saxophones is noteworthy, for they can easily overwhelm other instruments.

Baritone Sax.,
Cello

Bassoon

Example 5-46. Seemingly transitory triplet figures, mm. 11-15.

Derived Theme 1 is presented immediately after the first statement of Theme 1. This variant is in a somewhat ambiguous key (Example 5-47). The basses play a pedal point on a C, which serves as the fifth of the chord, and helps to establish the key as F major. The theme is also somewhat transitional, neither extended nor developed.

Fl., Ob., Cl.,
Vln., Va

Example 5-47. Theme 1 with transitional material, mm.17-23.

During this presentation of Theme 1 there is a brief flirt with F minor in measure 20, with a return to the ambiguous F major in measure 21. In measure 25 yet another variant of Theme 1 appears, this time fully transitional and moving downwards by half steps. This Theme 1 derivative is somewhat sequential and becomes more so as the section progresses. This statement also hints at D major, the V/V chord of C major. At measure 29 Theme 1 fragments begin a *crescendo poco a poco*, a notation Willson has written in capital underlined letters spread across two measures. This begins a long section where there is frequent fragmented chromatic movement of a Theme 1 derivative. In measure 36 the pace of the chromatic changes speeds up, with the key modulating every two beats. In measure 46 the fragmented Theme 1 derivative begins again, and lands in C major in measure 54, fulfilling the tonality suggested in measure 25.

It is here, in measure 54, that Theme 2 is first stated (Example 5-48). The fact that only a single theme has been used for fifty-four measures is significant, as Willson typically states both the first and second themes early in every other movement of both of his symphonies. Theme 2 is a grandiose statement in C major, noteworthy for its ascending half notes. Immediately following the initial completed statement, Theme 2 begins to undergo a brief development, which begins in measure 62. As with the development of Theme 1, this development is characterized by the introduction of brief fragments of the theme and ambiguous tonality. In the development of Theme 2 Willson also uses many *stretto* entrances of the dotted-eighth to sixteenth-note followed by a sustained chord pattern.

Example 5-48. Presentation of fourth movement Theme 2, mm. 54-62.

Of note here is an indicated fast instrument switch between alto and baritone sax. In cut time, the two alto saxophone players are given the instruction to (*Change to Baritone saxophone*) and less than a complete measure to complete the required instrument switch. Four measures later, in measure 66, the players are instructed to *Change to Alto*, and this time given two measures to complete the change. The likelihood was that Willson was unfamiliar with how much time it would take to change instruments. It is unreasonable to expect the players to make the change in the limited amount of time provided. The heavy use of saxophones also has a tendency to overwhelm the orchestration. In the sole recording of the work only a single alto saxophone usually plays in place of three scored instruments, the two altos and one tenor saxophone. Fragments of Theme 2 continue to be developed through measure 78, at which point transitional material enters in C minor (Example 5-49). This material is characterized by its triplet pattern, and is similar to the transitional material found in measure 11 (Example 5-46).

Flute

Oboe

Bassoon

p dolce *p*

Example 5-49. Transitional material, mm.78-83.

The transitional material continues in measure 86, and at that point shifts to a downward sequence with *planing* in the strings. This sequence reappears and is distinct enough to be called Theme 3 (Example 5-50). The key modulates to an indeterminate flat key, centering on E-flat major, with a *planing* progression of dominant 7th chords. Since the sequence never truly cadences, a key center is never established.

English Horn

Bassoon

Violin

Viola

Cello

Bass

pp *p* *p*

Example 5-50. Transitional material presented as a *planing* progression of dominant 7th chords, mm.86-90.

The chordal movement continues for several pages, centering most frequently on B-flat and E-flat major. In measure 118 are found a set of features similar to those found in measure 86. The thematic material is defined enough to be called Theme 4, though it does not reappear and is not an important theme. At the same time the musical materials are transitional and marked by chromatic sequences and frequent modulations, creating an ambiguous tonality. Again, triplet figures are significant features in the theme, and occur in both ascending and descending patterns (Example 5-51).

The musical score for Example 5-51, Theme 4, measures 118-121, is presented in four staves. The top staff is for Flute, Oboe, Alto Saxophone, and Violin. It begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a triplet of eighth notes. A crescendo (*cresc.*) marking is placed below the first staff. The tempo is marked 'TEMPO 1'. The second staff is for Viola, the third for Cello, and the fourth for Double Bass. The lower staves feature sustained chords and chromatic sequences. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is common time (C).

Example 5-51. Theme 4, mm. 118-121.

The pace of the theme increases in measure 124. This quicker pace is not achieved through a tempo change, but through rhythmic diminution. Here the thematic material stays in the flutes and violins, with the other instruments playing sustained chords. Once again the movement is chromatic. This continues through measure 127, where the score notes a *crescendo poco a poco*. The first section of the fourth movement begins to push towards its end in measure 132, where the key lands in C minor (Example 5-52). Here is another presentation of the triplet figure similar to the A transitional material which first appeared in measure 25, this time at a *fortissimo* dynamic level.

Flute

Clarinet in B \flat

Cello

Example 5-52. Closing theme in C minor, mm. 132-135.

At measure 139 the first section ends with a diminuendo in a series of V7/B9 chords. There is a repeat to the beginning of the movement in measure 143, and the B section of the movement begins in measure 144 (Example 5-53). The B section is in F major and is clearly the developmental section. It begins with a statement of Theme 2 variant.

Flute

Clarinet in B \flat

Example 5-53. Theme 1 development, mm. 144-148.

A few measures later, in measure 150, a transition begins and the triplet closing materials from the first section return. Here the key is E-flat minor, and the triplet motif is largely used in the role of transitional material. The same materials reappear in measure 165. This small triplet theme also appears later in the movement. At measure 171 there is a *poco ritardano*, and a new theme, Theme 5, is stated at measure 172. Theme 5 is characterized by sequences of triplet figures in a *meno* presentation marked ‘in 4’ and meant to be played slowly and broadly. The theme makes a *crescendo* throughout its presentation (Example 5-54).

Example 5-54. Theme 5, mm. 172-175.

Like Theme 3 and Theme 4 this new theme is transitional and highly chromatic in nature. Theme 5 is stated largely in the oboe and tenor saxophone. It is more a texture than a motif. Triplet figures are the most identifying feature of this theme, and continue throughout the section. At measure 180 the tonality settles in B-flat minor, and Theme 5 is stated again in an abundance of developmental materials. Here, too, the materials begin a gradual crescendo. By measure 183 the score notes a *molto crescendo*, and the tonality briefly focuses around a V/B-flat minor, then lands in B-flat minor in the next measure, 184. Measure 187 closes with a double bar, and measure 188 initiates a new section of the movement.

At the beginning of this new section, measure 188, Theme 1 is restated in D minor at a triple *fortissimo marcato*, with a *tempo 1* marking. This Theme 1 presentation is significant for its inclusion of the Alto, Tenor, and Baritone saxophones, which present the theme along with the flute and oboe (Example 5-55). While this statement begins in the key of D minor, it quickly becomes highly chromatic.

Fl., Ob. *fff* marcato

Alto Sax. *fff* marcato

Tenor Sax. *fff* marcato

Baritone Sax. *fff*

Trumpet in B- *fff*

Trombone *fff*

Tuba, cello *fff*

Vln., Va. *fff*

Example 5-55. Tempo I *marcato* statement of Theme 1 derivation, mm. 188-191.

This continues through measure 196, where fragments of the theme evolve into transitional material. The sequence ends abruptly in measure 204, where all instruments drop out to highlight a tympani solo (Example 5-56). The solo on the same note, C, as the tympani solo in the first movement, and is reminiscent of that solo. Willson is either referencing that movement or using the same musical device.

Timpani *fff*

Example 5-56. Tympani solo, reference to first movement, mm. 204-209.

major, and in measure 269 undergoes some development. In measure 273 a Theme 5 derivative is presented in E minor. As in its first statement the theme is more textural than melodic, defined by its triplet figures. The Theme 5 sequence continues until measure 280, when it begins to repeat in E minor. This statement features more layered instruments and a notated *crescendo molto* in measure 282. The pace begins to push towards the finale. In measure 284 the tempo is marked 'in 2', suggesting the conductor should push the tempo. Another herald of the finale is the return of the closing material previously seen earlier in the movement (Example 5-52). The closing material enters in C major as a slight variant of the original, in measure 288. Four measures later the closing theme converts to transitional material, at a triple *forte*, in measure 292. This builds to an enormous climactic two-measure chord in measure 298. Like compositions of the romantic composers whom his music frequently emulates, Willson's work does not end here. A *codetta* begins in measure 300, in F major, and based on the same triplet-based closing material. The final few measures delineate a plagal cadence, rather than the authentic cadence usually expected at symphonic conclusions in traditional symphonic writing. The fourth movement of Willson's *First Symphony* ends with a sustained large F chord in measure 306.

General Analytic Summary

Willson's *Symphony of San Francisco* displays challenges that might be expected in a first symphony. The most obvious of these is with the orchestration. In his role as a composer for radio he was composing and scoring on a weekly basis. He was experienced with orchestration, though his experience was in scoring for studio orchestras. Still, he scored the *First Symphony* himself. In a studio environment he no doubt had far more rehearsal opportunities, and could easily have instruments drop out if they covered other parts. This was not an option with a symphony Willson likely heard for the first time at the dress rehearsal. The saxophone quartet is

somewhat novel, but is used frequently and scored so heavily that the saxophones easily overwhelm other instruments. As previously noted, in the sole professional recording made of this symphony, conducted by William Stromberg the saxophone quartet is replaced by a single alto saxophone.

The saxophone quartet is unique, though, and its inclusion provides some insight into possible sources of influence. George Gershwin utilized a similar orchestration in his *Rhapsody in Blue*, first played by piano in 1924. *Rhapsody in Blue* was orchestrated by composer Ferde Grofé in 1924. Grofé was orchestrating for a specific performing group, the Paul Whiteman band, and included five saxophones; soprano, alto, tenor and baritone. A reorchestration done in 1926, again by Grofé, reduced the number of saxophones to three, two altos and a tenor. Whiteman's band, however, was a small jazz band, not a major symphony orchestra with full instrumentation. Whiteman's musicians also doubled instruments, and there were seldom more than two saxophones playing at a single time.

There are other aspects of Willson's orchestration which lack practicality. In several places the melodies played by solo woodwinds are covered by brass parts scored at a *forte* dynamic level. The second movement provides a similar example, in the fourth variation. The theme is played *fortissimo* in two horns, but they must project over a host of instruments playing a simultaneous *forte*. The full saxophone quartet is playing, along with the entire brass section. The French horns are easily buried in the mix.

The *Symphony of San Francisco* is marked by quick transitions, expressive melodies presented in episodic fashions, and narrow development sections. There is a certain lack of depth, not necessarily a surprise to find in a composer's first attempt at composing a major symphony. The application of musical elements prompt thoughts of a film score, and that is how

the work presents to an audience. The *Symphony of San Francisco* seemed a good fit for the anniversary remembrance of the great earthquake. The work was well enough received that Willson conducted the work again the following year, with the same orchestra, on 20 April 1937.

CHAPTER 6 SYMPHONY NUMBER II, THE 'MISSIONS OF CALIFORNIA'

Background

Willson began work on his *Second Symphony* soon after the premier of his *First*, probably sometime in 1936. Despite the critical comments which followed his *First Symphony* and advised that he dispense with symphonic programs, the composer included a programmatic slant from the inception of the *Second Symphony*. Willson was always a composer who imitated his own success, thus the programmatic direction of the *Second Symphony* emulated the *First*, centering on a CaliforniTheme 1. Rather than representing a single modern city, this symphony presents multiple small communities, the early mission settlements of California.

The work was well underway when the composer showed the score to conductor Albert Coates (1882-1957), conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Coates was an Englishman, born in Russia, who had a propensity for interpreting romantic scores. He was also a prolific composer who had had varied success in getting his own works performed. Perhaps these factors influenced his conducting decisions, for he was generous in helping new works gain performance, and displayed a preference towards programmatic works. Coates suggested that if Willson were to complete the work, Coates would have the Los Angeles Philharmonic premier it. One article states that it took Willson four years of effort to write his *Second Symphony*.²⁵⁴

The completed symphony was titled *Symphony No. II in E Minor*, and included the programmatic subtitle, *The Missions of California*. For unknown reasons Willson chose to write this work on oversize score paper. Each sheet measures 20 inches high and nearly 13 inches wide, making the score quite large, bulky, and difficult to handle. The second page is titled *Part One* and followed by the subtitle of the first movement, *Junipero Serra*. The bottom of the page

²⁵⁴ 'Meredith Willson's Work on Sunday KGLO Concert,' *Mason City Globe Gazette*, August 9th, 1941.

displays Willson's gratitude to Coates with the proclamation, "Dedicated to Albert Coates and the Philharmonic Orchestra of Los Angeles."

True to form, Willson related his own highly entertaining version of how he came to write the *Second Symphony*, this one a tale about meeting Coates at a luncheon:

I got up the nerve to ask him if he would care to play my *First Symphony* at any time in the near future, and he said, 'I'd rather play your *Second Symphony*,' and I said, 'I haven't written any *Second Symphony*,' and he said, 'Exactly.'

However, I preferred to take the kindlier interpretation of his remark, so I immediately started writing a *Second Symphony*. It was about the missions of California, and when I finished it Mr. Coates said, 'Bully, I'll play it.'²⁵⁵

Despite the dubiousness of the proper English conductor using an exclamation such as "Bully," and regardless of which account most authentically relates the actual circumstances of the composition, Coates conducted the premier of Willson's *Second Symphony* with the Los Angeles Philharmonic on April 4th, 1940. The program notes for the premier included descriptions of each of the California Missions on which Willson based the movements.

Part One: *Junipero Serra*

The first movement of the *Missions Symphony*, which Willson curiously called 'Part One,' rather than 'movement one', is based not on a mission settlement, but on Father Junipero Serra, a priest who lived from 1713-1784. Serra is remembered as an icon of California's colonial era.²⁵⁶ A member of the Franciscan order, the priest became a driving force in the Spanish conquest and colonization of the Pacific coast. Serra remains a well-known figure in California. Statues of him

²⁵⁵ *There I Stood...*, 165.

²⁵⁶ Padre Junipero Serra was beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1987, the first step in the process towards sainthood which, thus far, has not continued. The beatification was condemned by Indians and civil rights groups who particularly objected to Serra's hard-handed treatment of the natives, a treatment which included frequent beatings. In 1780 Serra wrote, "...spiritual fathers should punish their sons, the Indians, with blows appears to be as old as the conquest of [the Americas]." Defenders of Serra cite exonerating factors such as the context of his times, his enormous personal sacrifices and religious zeal, and his opposition to military expeditions against the Indians. Serra continues to be a pivotal figure in California history, most currently as a flashpoint for controversy over European treatment of Indians.

can be found in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park and in the U.S. Capital.²⁵⁷ Willson declared that Serra had been the inspiration for the entire symphony, praising the priest as a “padre-pioneer – a true philanthropist and an earnest soul without peer among the disciples of his order.”²⁵⁸ Willson seized upon a description of Serra written by an unknown ‘Protestant biographer’ and published in one of the works of pioneer-activist Helen Hunt Jackson. “So far as can be made out, he (Serra) thought little of himself, even of his own soul to be saved, all his life. The trouble had been on his mind how sufficiently to work for God and to help men.”²⁵⁹

The first movement opens with a four-measure declarative motif which recurs throughout the symphony, a motif which Willson described as the “Serra” theme. This is the Theme 1, played by clarinets, bassoon and double bassoon, horns, chimes, piano, harp, violas, cellos, and bass, and characterized by an upwards motion:



Example 6-1. ‘Serra’ theme, mm. 1-4.

In the program notes for his *Second Symphony*, Willson wrote that this first *Lento-Allegro* movement was a musical effort to “convey the strength of this steadfast soul [Serra], who so completely conquered physical hardships, ignorance and pagan superstition against overwhelming odds.”²⁶⁰ This is achieved through the declamatory nature of the ‘Serra’ theme; the ascending accented progression provides the listener with a musical impression of strength and mounting anticipation.

²⁵⁷ James A. Sandos, “Junipero Serra’s Canonization and the Historical Record,” *American Historical Review* 93, (1988), 1253-1269.

²⁵⁸ Bruno David Usher, Program notes, premier performances, April 4th and 5th, 1940, 158.

²⁵⁹ Helen Hunt Jackson, *Glimpses of California and the Missions*, (Boston, Little, Brown, & Company, 1902), 4.

²⁶⁰ Bruno David Usher, Program notes, premier performances, April 4th and 5th, 1940, 158.

A brief seven measures into the movement, the ‘Serra’ theme is interrupted by an *Allegro* motif, Theme 2, about which Willson wrote “in its development is at once Spanish, yet pagan in character.”²⁶¹



Example 6-2. Theme 2, which Willson calls both ‘Spanish’ and ‘Pagan’, mm. 7-11.

Theme 2 is not easily defined, as it lacks notable melodic elements and is presented more as a rhythmic, than melodic motif. This rhythmic focus may represent a compositional illumination of Willson’s definition of ‘pagan.’ The outstanding characteristic of Theme 2 is a dotted eighth note followed by a sixteenth note, then followed by eighth-note triplets. As Theme 2 reappears throughout the movement, the musical elements are found in many variants, each of which is usually repeated several times.

A mere seventeen measures into the first movement the ‘Serra’ theme is restated. This quick statements of themes, Theme 1 in measure 1, Theme 2 in measure 7, Theme 1 again in measure 17, is continued throughout the symphony and indicative of rapidity of change, a distinctive feature of the work. Transitions come quickly, sometimes with a frequency of every two measures. It is possible that Willson meant this to be a musical representation of Father Junipero Serra encountering and subjugating the natives, whom the composer sometimes referred to as ‘the pagans.’ The themes might serve as a musical dialogue between the old world and the new, one vibrant and pagan, the other emphatic and ascending.

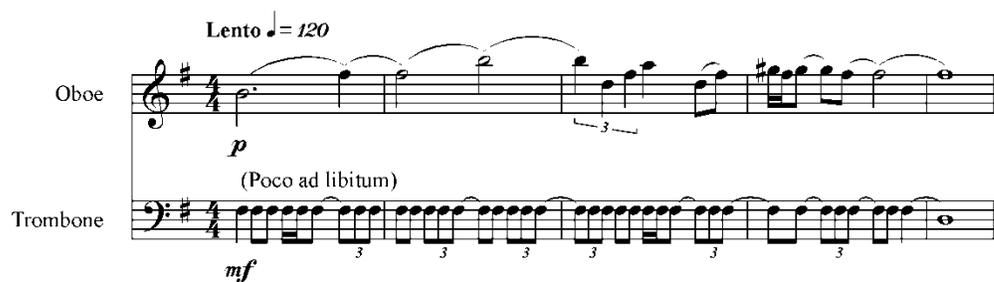
²⁶¹ Ibid.

The theme reappears in measure 23, this time the first of many variants, so it is designated Theme 2. As previously indicated, Theme 2 is largely characterized by triplets. While Theme 2 seems altered from its first appearance, it contains many of the elements of its first statement and does not have enough dissimilarity to be considered a different theme. This presentation is in the piano and first violins:



Example 6-3. Triplet-dominated theme 2, mm. 23-26

With no transition whatsoever, the Theme 1 is stated immediately upon the conclusion of Theme 2. This statement is particularly intriguing aurally due to its statement by a solo oboe part, and is accompanied by a trombone solo played entirely on a single tone:



Example 6-4. Solo oboe presentation of Theme 1 derivative and solo trombone with rhythmically driving triplet pattern, mm. 27-31.

The trombone solo is driving and rhythmic, heavy with triplets, and reminiscent of Theme 2. In the only commercial recording made of the *Second Symphony*, the program notes suggest that Willson considered this sort of rhythmic passage to be reminiscent of Latin chant - one assumes Gregorian.²⁶² These solos seem to exemplify Willson's programmatic intent for the

²⁶² Ibid.

Junipero Serra movement. The ‘Serra’ theme soars and rises elegantly above the ‘pagan’ theme – the former characterized by smooth, rising melodic elements; the latter by driving rhythmic figures. The key is a firm B minor, outlined in the ‘Serra’ theme and emphasized by the second theme presented at the fifth. Willson has the ‘Serra’ theme musically dominate the Pagan theme, almost certainly a deliberate musical direction. Perhaps his intent was to musically emulate Father Serra leading the Spanish missionaries in subduing the native population. It is also notable that only twenty-seven measures into the work Willson has completed the statements of his two main themes and even combined them.

The rapidity of change continues when, rather suddenly, the symphony takes a turn towards tonal ambiguity. Measure 32 marks the presentation of a clarinet cadenza. Instead of the traditional 6/4 cadenza presentation on the root chord, Willson’s approach is a German 6/5 in B minor, including a pedal tone on 5, sustained in the string section.



Example 6-5. Clarinet cadenza at measure 32.

From measure 32, a series of simple key changes takes place. Essentially, Willson uses these rapid modulations as a developmental device. The modus is a statement of a theme, then it is varied, a quick key change, exact statement of themes in the new key, then a rapid move to yet another new key. In the *allegro* at measure 33, for example, Theme 2 is stated in F-sharp minor by clarinets, bassoon, horns, violins, and violas, while a variant of the ‘Serra’ theme is played by flutes and oboes. In measure 36 there is a sudden *lento* and Theme 1 is also stated in F-sharp minor, this time similar to that found in measure 27, with the ‘Serra’ theme played by solo flute and oboe, and with rhythmic elements in the trombone, so that both themes sound together:

Example 6-6. *Lento* Theme 1 derivative flute and oboe solos in F-sharp minor, with rhythmic passage as a trombone solo, mm. 36-40.

Measure 40 marks a second cadenza, this one played by Willson's own instrument, the flute (Example 6-7). It is notable that this cadenza occurs only eight measures after the clarinet cadenza, for there is scarcely time to develop any musical materials in eight measures. It is stylistically unusual in symphonic writing to find two cadenzas so close to one another, in this case separated by only eight measures. This is yet another example of Willson's rapidity of musical development and change. The flute cadenza uses the same tonal approach as in the previous, clarinet cadenza, a German 6th chord with a pedal tone on the fifth of the chord, this time in F-sharp minor:

Example 6-7. Measure 40, flute cadenza.

The two cadenzas are strikingly similar; the principal difference is the presentation of the flute solo up an interval of a fifth from the clarinet cadenza. The flute cadenza is also slightly longer than the preceding oboe cadenza. In the measure following the cadenza, measure 41, the work jumps to an indeterminate sharp key, most likely C-sharp minor, which includes a short

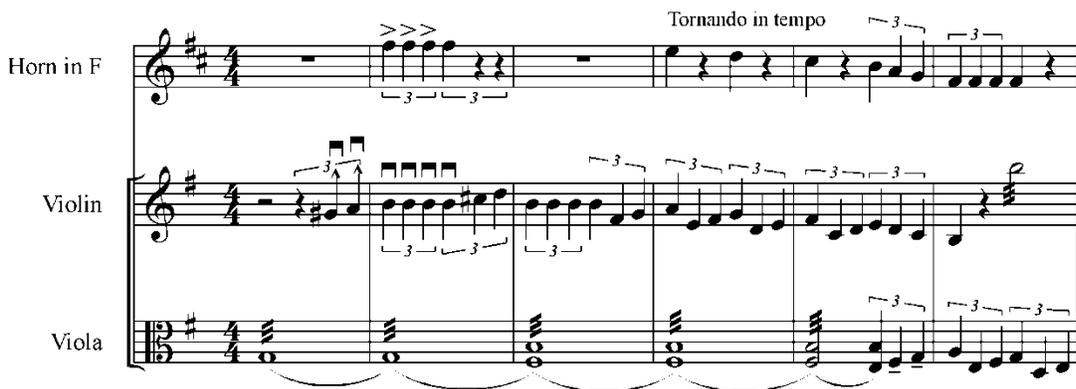
and quick, two measure statement of Theme 2, marked *furioso* (Example 6-8).



Example 6-8. *Furioso* Theme 2 in clarinets, bassoons, horns, tympani, and strings, mm. 41-43.

Here Willson is employing the use of Phrygian modes. At the time he composed his *Second Symphony* this was a clichéd, though stylistically inaccurate, approach used to make a piece sound Spanish and/or exotic to a listener. The Phrygian application was primarily used in popular music and show tunes, and Willson’s familiarity with the world of popular music suggests he borrowed this approach from the world. In 1932, only eight years before Willson premiered his *Second Symphony*, George Gershwin also used Phrygian modes to create an exotic or Spanish sound in his *Cuban Overture*, a work Willson almost certainly knew.

At measure 44, Willson introduces material which serves as Theme 3. This is not a melodic theme, but rather rhythmic and tonal material which serves to direct the listener’s ear away from the two main themes, thus providing them with stronger emphasis when they are reintroduced. Theme 3 is defined by its triplet patterns:



Example 6-9. Triplet pattern which loosely represents Theme 3, mm. 44-49.

Throughout the movement Theme 3 derivatives are found in slow sections, generally before a significant statement of the Theme 1 or Theme 2. On page eighteen, at measure 64,

Willson presents a massive pedal point. This is a huge fifth chord, with no stirring of the tonal pot. The fifth of G major, this massive statement creates a smooth transition to the development section by way of a shift to the key of E minor in measure 68. Measure 72 marks the first real departure from conservative composition, as Willson writes an E flat in the bass lines, while staying firmly in A minor in the treble. This approach suggests bitonality or, since the passage is not truly bitonal, what may be termed ‘shades’ of bitonality. This is a clear indication of the influence of the so-called ‘German school’ of composition, and such devices can be found in the works of Wagner and Strauss.

Immediately following the pedal point section, there is a sudden change to an *allegro non troppo* marking at measure 68, and a move to cut time; this is the beginning of the development section. The development section is marked by chromaticism, as well as by rapidly changing keys:

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Flute, Violin I, and Violin II. The score is in 2/4 time and features a key signature of one sharp (F#). The music is characterized by rapid chromatic runs in all three parts. The Flute part starts with a series of eighth notes, followed by a sixteenth-note run. The Violin I and II parts mirror this chromatic motion, with the Violin II part showing a prominent downward chromatic run. The score includes dynamic markings such as accents (>) and slurs, and is numbered with '5' at the end of the first and second measures of the excerpt.

Example 6-10. Beginning of chromatic motion, mm. 73-74.

Both Themes I and II are stated in E minor at measure 70. Measure 72 presents a variant of Theme 1, first in A minor, then E-flat major. Measure 73 features downward chromatic runs in the flute, piccolo, and violin parts, the beginning of several measures of chromatic material:

Several pages of key shifts and chromatic statements of the two main themes follow this chromatic run, and it is chromatic movement which characterizes this section. Measure 77 is in

F-sharp minor, and measure 78 in B minor. Here Themes I and II are stated in their original forms. Several pages of filler material follow, and measure 96 begins transitional material towards a restatement of both themes at measure 100. The theme goes immediately to another key, for only two bars later, in measure 102; there is a dominant prolongation in A. Measure 106 shifts to A major via chromatic materials and these continue in the subsequent transitional section through measure 112. At this point a variant of Theme 1 appears in B minor, an excellent example of the way in which Willson uses the same theme in various keys.

Pages thirty-three through thirty-six are representative of Willson's developmental approach. Here he uses the one theme, stating it in various keys and interspersing the second theme after every two presentations of the first. Here, too, is a hint of the modern era in the way in which the overall form falls in this section, into an AAB(A) presentation. This is a standard blues and jazz approach, one with which Willson was certainly familiar, given his record of writing successful popular songs which utilized jazz elements. Shades of bitonality also continue to appear, with both B and G-sharp major appearing in measures 137 through 144. The tonal center is unclear, leaning somewhat more towards C sharp. Yet another variant of Theme 1 is stated in measure 148 by a solo English horn, and this statement resolves the key into D-flat minor. While related to F-flat major, the key signature is two sharps:

quasi ad libitum ♩ = 120

English Horn

p sonore

Example 6-11. Solo English horn stating a rhythmic variant of Theme 1, mm. 148-150.

The tonality quickly shifts to D-flat major in measure 151. The tempo moves from *Andante quasi ad libitum* in measure 148 to an *allegro*, this time with a note in parenthesis which instructs, “gaily.” Here, Theme 2 is stated by the in D major by the violins (Example 6-12).

Allegro (gaily)

Violin I *f* espr.

Violin II *f* espr.

Example 6-12. ‘Gaily’ played *B* theme, mm. 151-155.

This rapid passing of the theme among different instruments, and through various keys, is the mark of musical development, Willson style. Another tempo and key shift occur at measure 168, in this instance to a *piano* dynamic, cut time tempo marked *meno*, and Theme 2 in the violins moves to an indeterminate sharp key, perhaps F-sharp major, perhaps C-sharp major:

Violin I

Example 6-13. Theme sequences, mm. 168-174.

Only two measures later, in measure 170, the same theme is moved down a step, another example which illustrates Willson’s quick changes:

Violin

Example 6-14. Modulated Theme 2, mm. 170-171.

These restatements of Theme 2 culminate in measure 176, page 41, in a full declamatory statement of Theme 2 in all the string instruments. The violins double the melody at octaves, giving it added volume, while the basic chord structure is outlined by accented longer notes in the lower strings. This *tutti* statement is in F-sharp major, again a transposition of a third from the previous statement:

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Cello

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

Example 6-15. Theme 2 in F-sharp major, mm. 176-179.

At this point Theme 2 has been presented and modulated multiple times as a manner of developing it. The presentation and development of Theme 2 is briefly interrupted in measure 180 with the reappearance of the material which loosely serves as a Theme 3.

Violin

Viola

Example 6-16. Reappearance of Theme 3 materials, mm. 180-182.

These repeated triplet patterns which indicate the Theme 3 materials continue through the next several pages, and correspond with an episode of tonal ambiguity. In measure 184 a *Meno* in 6/8 appears in two keys, C-sharp major and D-sharp minor; another presentation of bitonality. By measure 188 the key shifts to what might be considered G-sharp minor, but is more accurately a section of tonal ambiguity. To achieve these effects, Willson uses pedal points which begin in one key and extend into another key in order to establish the new tonality. The overall effect is to aurally destabilize the tonality of the original key, while establishing the key towards which he is moving. This phenomenon continues through measure 192, where a second short clarinet cadenza lands the piece in a solid A major for a single measure.



Example 6-17. Measure 192, second clarinet cadenza.

This single measure chord on page forty-four is the apex of the movement. It is the high point, both in pitch and volume. In the very next measure there is a flute cadenza, the second of the movement, which sounds virtually identical to its first incarnation. Its close placement to the clarinet cadenza suggests a certain franticness of musical devices, almost an arc form; the high point of the movement bordered by cadenzas. The only substantial difference between the second flute cadenza and the first, in measure forty, is the lack of triplet notations for the figures of three sixteenth notes. One wonders if this was just an oversight and the figures were intended to be triplets, but at the tempo the cadenza would be played there would be virtually no discernible difference to the listener. Willson, as an exceptionally fine flute player, may have had a particular leaning towards providing virtuosic cadenzas for the woodwind players who

would perform his symphony. It is notable that there are no brass cadenzas in either of his two symphonies.



Example 6-18. Second flute cadenza, measure 194.

From this point, the pace of key changes slows down, and the movement rests for a while in C-sharp minor. In this key Theme 2 is stated in a cut time *allegro* in measure 195, and the Theme 1 in a 2/2 *lento* in measure 197. Theme 1 is drawn out through measure 204 where the piece begins a *poco accelerando* using Theme 3 material. In measure 209 the movement shifts back to F-sharp major. The use of the major key seems to herald the conclusion of the movement, and also begins a series of several false recapitulations. Measure 214 begins a surprisingly short retransition, which abruptly shifts to a full recapitulation in measure 220. Here Theme 1 is stated in E major. The only item of significance is Willson's treatment of the accompaniment as the strings begin a series of leaps using the triplet motif.

From the recapitulation, the piece drives towards its conclusion. In measure 232 there is a restatement of a *Deliberamente* Theme 1 derivation in E minor, and a *cresc. Poco a Poco* marking which begins a final series of *crescendi*. The original Theme 2 is restated in B major, the fifth of E, in measure 136. Here, too, the piece shifts to cut time and moves to an *allegro* tempo. To fully make his point, the composer has indicated a triple *fortissimo* in the brass and woodwinds. The strings re-enter in a three measure *lento* passage in measure 238, and the piece moves largely and broadly towards a 4/4 *allegro* in measure 241. On page 56 the first movement ends with an E minor coda in 6/4 time. The harmonic treatment and the length, only four

measures, define this as more of a *Codetta*. Interestingly, Willson ends this movement with a final representation of show music, as the *codetta* sounds like a musical tag. In an amazing feat of compositional directness, Willson has written the entire first movement of his *Second Symphony* in only fifty-five pages. Even given the large size of the score, the completion of a symphonic movement in 300 measures is an indication of the composer's compositional brevity.

Part Two: *San Juan Bautista*

The second movement, an *Andante* Willson titled 'San Juan Bautista,' which translates as 'Saint John the Baptist', begins on page fifty-eight of the score. For this movement Willson used as inspiration the San Juan Bautista mission. While Willson apparently never gave a reason for including this particular mission, a brief study of its history reveals one possible reason for the addition of this mission, for at one time it was known as the 'Mission of Music'. The program notes from the symphony's premier provide a romantic history of the Mission and its region:

A most beautiful and fertile valley surrounds this peaceful mission, where hung the sweetest-toned bells in all California. They were cast in Peru by an old master – skilled in the art of music, who had so contrived the relation and intermingling of tones that they resulted in composing a chime of incomparable sweetness. Subsequently some of the bells were recast, but the secret of the relations of metals, temper tones was lost and this charm was broken. The bells have disappeared and the ruins only remain.²⁶³

The actual mission records wax less lyrically, recording only that one Father Rubio became pastor in 1865 and built a bell tower, and that the bell tower was remodeled in 1923.²⁶⁴ The mission was established in 1797 by Father Fermin de Lasuen, president of the California missions and successor to Junipero Serra, who was the inspiration for the first movement of Willson's *Second Symphony*. Sometime in the nineteenth century, Padre Esteban Tapis, President of the Missions, retired to San Juan Bautista and applied his musical talents to the

²⁶³ Usher, Bruno David, Program notes, premier performances, April 4th and 5th, 1940, 157.

²⁶⁴ The bell tower was removed in 1949 and a new one built in 1976, though these events occurred subsequent to Willson's composition.

establishment. Two of his handwritten choir books survive in the current mission's museum,²⁶⁵ and it is from Tapis's tenure that the mission gained its musical moniker. The legend of the Peruvian bell maker appears to be just that, especially when taking into consideration the late date of the Mission's founding.²⁶⁶

Overall, 'San Juan Bautista' comes across as the best movement of the symphony. This second movement of the *Missions Symphony* begins in A-flat major and features four identifiable themes. In true Willson fashion, there is little by way of introduction. The first theme is stated in the opening measure by the woodwinds, though it actually serves as Theme 2 in analysis.

Willson provided an outline of the theme in his autobiographical *And There I Stood with My Piccolo*:²⁶⁷



Example 6-19. The lyric theme of 'San Juan Bautista' as outlined by Willson in his autobiographical, *And There I Stood with My Piccolo*.²⁶⁸

In its first presentation in the symphony itself, however, the theme is more involved. It is introduced by oboe, clarinet, and French horn, and further outlined by flute and bassoon. It is notable that Willson refers to this as the main theme while functionally utilizing it as a secondary theme, thus its designation as Theme 2 in this analysis. The theme is characterized by its slow, ascending half notes and its expressive dynamic and lyric qualities. Willson establishes this as a lyric theme from its onset, marking it *espressivo* and including dynamic markings for *crescendo* and *diminuendo*, as well as writing a *crescendo poco a poco* in the musical notes (Example 6-20).

²⁶⁵ Old Mission San Juan Bautista, <http://www.oldmissionsjb.org>, accessed June 29th, 2007.

²⁶⁶ The Mission maintains its own website, including a general history of the Mission and further information about its contemporary accessibility: <http://www.californiamissions.com/cahistory/sjbautista.html>, accessed August 2nd, 2006.

²⁶⁷ Willson, *There I Stood...*, 171.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Flute
mf espr.
cresc. poco a poco

Oboe
mf espr.

Clarinet in B \flat
mf espr.

Bassoon
mf espr.

Horn in F
mf espr.
cresc. poco a poco

Example 6-20. First theme of San Juan Bautista, which serves as Theme 2, mm. 1-8.

At measure 15 a second theme is stated by the first horn, this one a direct quote from Beethoven's *ninth symphony*. The meaning of this 'Ode to Joy' snippet is unclear. Perhaps Willson meant to imply the idea of universal brotherhood, tying the idea of peace to the Mission founders, or perhaps as a composer he simply wanted to provide a melodic fragment which would catch the ears of the listeners. In his *First Symphony* there is a hint of homage to Beethoven; perhaps this 'Ode to Joy' quote is meant to represent a more overt tribute. Two measures later, as part of the same musical figure, the second horn plays a triplet figure. This triplet figure derives from, and is a reference to the Theme 1 of the first movement. These are hints of ideas from the first movement, ideas Willson referred to as both 'Gregorian' and 'pagan'. They are definitely meant to convey the programmatic content of the first movement. Since the California missions and their founders are the subject of the symphony, these triplet figures serve as a unifying motive among movements (Example 6-21).

Example 6-21. Beethoven quote and musical reference to first movement in the French horns, mm. 15-22.

It is in measure 21 that the movement begins to move forward. Here the work quickens with a *Piu mosso* in triple meter, and modulates to A-flat minor. Two themes are presented simultaneously, one in the clarinets and the other in the violins (Example 6-22).

Piu mosso ♩ = 72

Example 6-22. Page 61, mm. 21-24, horn and violin themes. Jump of the 4th is the most identifiable feature.

The clarinet theme is vague and presents less as a stated theme than a passing one, perhaps not truly a theme which will be restated. The violin theme is the more declamatory theme in the passage, reappears frequently throughout the work, and is thus called Theme 1. The

thematic materials in these measures are musically ambiguous; the only remarkable aspect of these themes is their lack of strikingly identifiable features. The most prominent feature is the jump of a fourth in the violins.

Throughout the movement, however, the violin theme, Theme 1, develops little. It is hinted at through a series of sixteenth notes in the strings, and is restated in a variant form in measure 36. In Example 6-23 Theme 1 is presented as a solo by Willson's preferred instrument, the flute, along with a solo oboe.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for flute and oboe. The first system shows the initial four measures (36-39) of the theme. The flute part begins with a quarter rest followed by a half note G4, then a series of eighth notes: A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, B5, C6, D6, E6, F6, G6, A6, B6, C7. The oboe part begins with a quarter rest followed by a half note G4, then a series of eighth notes: A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, B5, C6, D6, E6, F6, G6, A6, B6, C7. Both parts are marked 'Solo espr.'. The second system shows measures 40-43. The flute part continues with eighth notes: D6, E6, F6, G6, A6, B6, C7, D7, E7, F7, G7, A7, B7, C8, D8, E8, F8, G8, A8, B8, C9. The oboe part continues with eighth notes: D6, E6, F6, G6, A6, B6, C7, D7, E7, F7, G7, A7, B7, C8, D8, E8, F8, G8, A8, B8, C9. Both parts are marked 'Solo espr.'. The flute staff has an '8va' marking above it. The oboe staff has a measure rest above it. The music is in 3/4 time and F minor.

Example 6-23. Flute and oboe presentation of Theme 1 variant, page 63, mm. 36-44.

On page sixty-five, measure 45, Willson makes a retransition to the introductory materials with an *a tempo*, a single measure in 4/4, followed by a return to 3/4 in the following measure. Here Willson uses a modern technique as he writes the wind parts in F minor, with a five measure chromatic transition to E-flat major, and the string parts in the key of A major.

Despite the two keys, there is not quite enough harmonic progression to establish bi-tonality. Rather, this section is a musical diversion, the intent of which is probably to surprise the listener. For the next sixteen or so measures Willson uses pedal tones in E-flat major, in a

passage which presents almost as extended bell-like harmonies. In measure 66 he restates Theme 2 first heard in the introduction, this time in an augmented fashion (Example 6-24).

Example 6-24. Page 68, mm. 66-73, augmented muted string presentation of *B* theme in E-flat major.

From measure 66 the work continues in an almost bitonal fashion. The winds play bell-like chords in F minor over the strings, a presentation which makes the passage seem almost like extended harmonies. This continues for several pages. In measure 80 Willson begins what might be called a developmental section. Here he develops Theme 1 in C-sharp minor. This time the theme is stated by a solo oboe (Example 6-25).

Example 6-25. Theme 1 derivative as stated in the oboe, mm. 82-90.

Another developmental technique Willson uses at this point is a gradual removal of the string mutes. The first violins remove their mutes in measure 83, the second violins in measure 87, and the cellos are given a general instruction to ‘remove mutes one at a time.’ As in the first movement, much of Willson’s technique is to restate themes and portions of themes in different keys. He makes a chromatic move to D major in measure 90, and restates Theme 1 in the solo clarinet (Example 6-25).



Example 6-25. Clarinet solo, Theme 1 derivative, mm. 90-94.

After more chromatic motion, Willson reestablishes the D major tonality in measure ninety-seven, probably in order to make the upcoming shift more dramatic. In measure 101 there is a sudden move to G major, and a shift to an *Andantino*, 6/8 time. A Theme 2 derivative is stated in G major (Example 6-26). Again the statement is as an oboe solo, and this time it is accompanied by bassoon and horn solos stating a secondary theme reminiscent of the cadenzas in the first movement.

Andantino ♩ = 120

Example 6-26. Theme 2 derivative in G major, mm. 101-105.

Four measures later, in measure 105, there is yet another dramatic change. The meter becomes 4/4, the dynamic level *forte*, and Willson continues development of Theme 2 by presenting it in various keys. Through a series of quick chromatic changes, the key shifts first to G major; then to B major in measure 108; in measure 112, E minor; and in measure 114, a return to D major, along with another triplet-based reference to the first movement. The dynamic level gradually decreases through these changes, then, begins a gradual crescendo from measure 111. This culminates in a quiet English horn solo in measure 114, during which the strings play a soft descending accompaniment (Example 6-27).

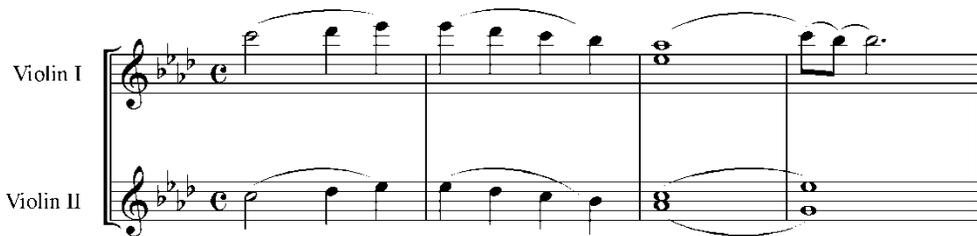
The image shows a musical score for five instruments: English Horn, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello. The English Horn part is at the top, featuring five triplet markings over eighth notes. The string parts (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello) feature a melodic line with slurs and 'Portamento' markings. The music is in 6/8 time and B-flat major.

Example 6-27. Triplet reference to movement 1, mm. 114-118.

At measure 119, a Theme 2 derivative appears in the woodwinds in B-flat major, 6/8 time. The same secondary theme that the bassoons and horns played in measure 101 is now heard in a solo clarinet. Measure 123 on page 78 marks the introduction of transitional material, *Appassionato*, and the use of much chromatic movement. Here, Willson has added a handwritten note, “NOT TOO FAST.” This material resolves into a variant of the Theme 1 in E-flat major in measure 130, where another handwritten note in the score serves as a reminder to “fix horns.” Willson apparently forgot to transpose the horn parts. At measure 140, presentation of Theme 1 is presented in an extended manner and continues for several pages.

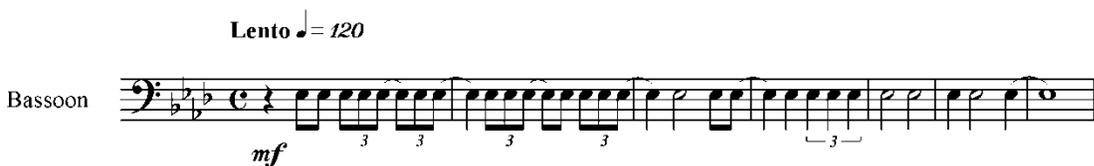
A coda begins at measure 156 and the work returns to 4/4 time in a firm A-flat major. There are no other score markings in this section, though of particular interest is Willson’s scrawled handwriting in the score which comments, “Drama! Not too FAST!” There is more drama to follow, for just four measures later there is a quote from Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*, the second such quote found in this movement. The statement is again from the ‘Ode to Joy’

melody, and one is again left to conjecture that Willson intended this as some sort of message of peace in this programmatic work (Example 6-28).



Example 6-28. Second quote from Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, mm.160-163.

Two measures later, at measure 162, there is another quote from the first movement, this time by a bassoon and accompanied by quiet extended chords in the strings (Example 6-29). It is relevant that Willson frequently chooses a double reed instrument to play the triplet figures from the first movement. The triplet figure is the one he referred to as “pagan”, and it seems likely that the double reed sounds are meant to be an instrumental suggestion of the pagan character. The final chord is sustained over several measures and brings the movement to a quiet conclusion in measure 171.



Example 6-29. Thematic reference to movement one, mm.162-168.

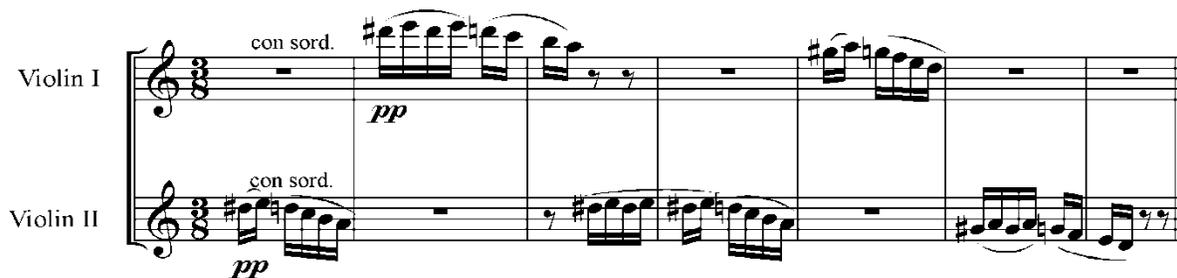
Part Three: *Scherzo, San Juan Capistrano*

This third movement begins on the eighty-seventh page of the score and its subject is the San Juan Capistrano mission. The musical ideas center around the well-known occurrence of the yearly return of swallows to the San Capistrano mission, and this movement of the symphony presents the greatest challenge for a traditional symphonic analysis. The Scherzo lacks melodic contour identifiable as a true theme until measure twenty-one, and this is the first of the unusual elements which mark the movement as the least traditional in terms of symphonic form.

The phenomenon of the San Juan Capistrano (Vivace) swallows is well known – how they arrive year after year on St. Joseph’s Day (19 March) and leave on St. John’s Day (23 October). Since no one has a scientific explanation, perhaps there is a spiritual one. The swallow theme pervades the entire Scherzo. The trio section introduces a chant traditional at the mission, handed down from the 18th century to Ramon Yorba, last of the Indian chanters at Mission San Juan Capistrano. My deepest thanks to Sister M. Agnes and Sister M. Loyola of the mission, who wrote it down for me.

After this theme is introduced by brass and woodwinds it is sung by muted strings under the swallow theme developed in three-part canon by flute, clarinet and oboe. The theme recurs later in the horns with the canono in muted strings. A restatement of the ‘Serra’ theme leads directly into the final movement.²⁶⁹

The third movement provides the biggest challenge in formal analysis. The musical material, like the swallows upon which it is based, is flight-filled and transitory, seldom alighting enough to form a true melody. Simply put, it is difficult to find something identifiable as Theme 1 in this movement. The piece begins with introductory material in A minor, 3/8 meter, *vivace* tempo, and *pianissimo*. Two muted violins play brief runs against each other, no doubt representing swallows in flight.



Example 6-30. Initial through seventh measures of the *scherzo* movement.

In measure twelve a viola is added and in measure thirteen, a cello. The first true theme of ‘San Juan Capistrano’ begins with the entrance of a piccolo in measure 20. The presentation of

²⁶⁹ Bruno David Usher, Program notes, premier performances, April 4th and 5th, 1940, 158.

this theme illuminates the previous materials as fragments of the intended Theme 1 which preceded its initial statement.



Example 6-31. First melodic presentation which could be defined as Theme 1, mm. 20-23.

Willson sticks with his compositional habits of quick change and moves to E minor with a series of woodwinds passing the melody, beginning with an oboe solo in measure 25. This is picked up by the first clarinet in measure 27:



Example 6-32. Oboe and clarinet solos, mm. 25-29.

The solo is immediately picked up by the first flute in measure 29. This is a smooth hand-off of the theme between woodwind instruments, from oboe to clarinet to, finally to Willson's favored instrument, the flute:



Example 6-32. Flute solo, mm. 29-32.

In measure 33 the scherzo shifts to C minor and the melody continues to be passed around by the flute, oboe, and English horn. This presentation focuses on the upwards movement of the melody. Interestingly, while the melody moves upwards in direction, it is passed from higher to lower instruments:

Flute

Oboe

English Horn

Fl.

Ob.

E. Hn.

Example 6-33. Theme 1 passed among woodwinds, mm. 35-42.

This also marks a musical retransition, and the original Theme 1 in A minor, as stated by the piccolo in measure 20, is re-presented in slightly varied form by the violins.

Violin

mf

p

Example 6-34. Violin retransition, Theme 1, mm. 43-47.

From here the low strings begin a dominant prolongation in measure 47 as they pass chromatically ascending materials from lowest to highest. This peaks in measure 54 with a short flute statement, and then begins to descend in measure 55. This ends in measure 60 with the introduction of a new section.

Measure 59, on page ninety-two, sees the introduction of a Theme 2. This theme is stated in the bass clarinet and bassoons, and characterized by jumps, then steps.²⁷⁰ Because of its chordal nature, Theme 2 could be defined as ‘hymn like’.

Example 6-35. Initial presentation of Theme 2 in low woodwinds, mm. 59-64.

Also at measure 59, Theme 1 materials are stated by the violas and violins. Here begins a series of minor key changes, a 5th progression. From A major in measure 59, the piece moves to G minor in measure 64, and F minor in measure 72. Theme 2 is stated in measure 85, this time in E major, and by measure 86 the piece is in the five of A major. It does not resolve in A major, but the theme is presented in B major, though there is never truly a root chord. In measure 95 Theme 2 is restated in A major, a motivic shift. With its chordal implications and lack of traditional resolutions, this presentation is Wagnerian. What Willson leaves out in tonal clarity he makes up for in form, for the end of section A is clearly marked by a first ending and repeat sign at measure 101. The repetition is a literal repeat, the second ending providing only a single brass pick-up note to differentiate it from the first ending. Here Willson has drawn eyeglasses into the score, standard notational shorthand for ‘watch out!’ and written in large letters “BRASS!” This is surely a conductors’ note to remind himself to cue the brasses in the second ending, as they do not play in this piece until measure 105.

²⁷⁰ In the only known recording of this symphony, the bass clarinets are too loud in this section and overwhelm the chordal nature of this theme.

At measure 105 the work shifts to 4/4 time and one also discovers that Willson's imitation of Wagner is deliberate. Here he jotted another handwritten note, "Small Wagner!" Indeed, measure 105 presents a chorale which could definitely be called 'Wagneresque'.

Example 6-36. Brief chorale in the style of Wagner, p. 96, mm. 105-108.

At the end of the Wagnerian presentation, the scherzo makes a sudden transition back to Theme 1, and introduces Theme 3 in the strings. This is thematic material Willson obtained directly from his programmatic source, the San Juan Capistrano mission.

...I went to visit San Capistrano, because this scherzo was to be about the Capistrano Mission. I asked two very sweet sisters at the mission if there was any characteristic music that had been handed down from the eighteenth-century days of Father Junipero Serra, the founder of the missions, a great, great man whose life should be taught in all the public schools. They said there was one typical chant handed down from those times, and they gave it to me. In fact, Sister Agnes wrote it out right then.²⁷¹

²⁷¹ Willson, *There I Stood...*, 171.



Example 6-37. The ‘chant’ which Willson obtained from the nuns and included in *And There I Stood with my Piccolo*.²⁷²

As Theme 3 in D major, the melody provided by the nuns appears somewhat differently in the San Juan Capistrano movement. It is played in the string section while Theme 1 is once again passed among the woodwinds.



Example 6-38. Application of the San Juan Capistrano melody as Theme 3, mm.113-145.

The two themes are presented together until measure 149. At that point there is a retransition which moves to the introductory materials. The retransition begins in D minor, then, in measure 153, moves to A minor and, finally transitions into the coda in measure 165. In measure 164 is a *Del Signo* which takes the work back to measure 21, where Theme 1 was first stated. The coda, measure 165, is significant for an alto flute solo which uses materials reminiscent of Theme 1.

²⁷² Ibid.



Example 6-39. Alto flute solo, mm. 167-174.

In measure 175, Theme 2 returns in A major, along with variants of the Theme 2 and 3 derivatives. The themes sound together for several pages. At measure 211, Theme 1 returns in a flute solo in A minor, the first two measures of which are played by the first violin. As in the introduction, single measure solo snippets of the melody are then passed among the woodwinds in an ascending order from measure 215 - first the bassoons, then clarinets, then oboes, and, finally, flutes. The violins play portions of Theme 1 throughout this section. The scherzo concludes with a *codetta* in A minor, and a surprising statement in the bass, Theme 1 from movement one.



Example 6-40. Chorale, mm. 215-226, Theme 1 and transition back to the beginning.

The final measure of the *scherzo* holds three handwritten diagonal slashes and a simple conducting note Willson penned to remind him to conduct the measure ‘in 3.’ The fourth movement begins on the same page. Overall, this movement presents more like a classic scherzo with more literal repeats. There is a more literal 2-5 circle of fifths progression, not diatonic. This derives from what, in the era, was called jazz. It was not true jazz, but a popular application found in music of the time, meant to evoke a jazz-like feeling.

Part Four: *El Camino Real*

‘El Camino Real,’ or ‘The King’s Highway,’ is the name of a series of roads, running along the California coast, which linked together twenty-one Spanish missions. Two of these were the San Juan Bautista Mission and the San Capistrano Mission, upon which the second and third movements of this symphony were based. Beginning in the late nineteenth century a series of around 150 bells were erected at various sites alongside the road as markers commemorating the road’s historic past.²⁷³

It is notable as the site of some of the first cultivated orange groves in the New World. “The trails made by the padres leading from mission to mission – one day’s journey apart – were linked together to form El Camino Real (*Allegro*, a la Marcia), the Royal Road, now one of the great highways of California. The marching rhythm that opens this movement is a memory of the patient tread of those tireless Franciscan Crusaders who were bringing civilization, courage and Christianity to California for the first time. This theme is a variation of the chant introduced in the *Scherzo*. The second subject is of the Mission bells. A fugue for brass follows in which the ‘Serra’ theme is again heard. After a brief recapitulation, the ‘Serra’ theme once more transcends the other subjects to lead into the closing moments in which all themes are heard together (Naxos)

This movement “pictures the broad and sweeping valley around the mission, where hung the sweetest-toned bells in all California. Here the Gregorian influence is felt and in the religious motif which pervades this portion, the rhythm of a Latin chant is heard.”²⁷⁴ It is likely that Willson intended the lower of these lines to represent what he termed ‘Gregorian’:

²⁷³ California Highways, Trips and Trails, ‘El Camino Real’, <http://www.cahighways.org/elcamino.html>, accessed December 12th, 2007.

²⁷⁴ ‘Meredith Willson’s Work on Sunday KGLO Concert,’ *Mason City Globe Gazette*, August 9th, 1941.

Example 6-41. Willson's melody set with the Capistrano melody.²⁷⁵

The fourth movement begins with low-pitched beat-oriented pattern in E major. These musical materials, Example 6-41, are reminiscent of the "I pini della Via Appia" movement of Ottorini Respighi's *Pines of Rome*. Willson is almost certainly providing listeners with the musical image of travelers walking on a road.

"El Camino Real"
Alla Marcia

Example 6-42. 'Traveling' pattern, mm. 1-4.

²⁷⁵ Willson, *There I Stood...*, 156.

The steady beat played by the tympani is doubled in the cellos and basses, and the syncopation played in the right hand of the piano is doubled in the double bassoon and bass clarinet. In the one publicly available recording of the work, the volume of the bass clarinet overshadows the other parts. This includes the first statement of Theme 1, which occurs in the cellos in measure five.

Violoncello

p

Example 6-44. Theme 1 as introduced in the cellos, mm. 5-20.

The traveling pattern continues through the first statement of Theme 1. At measure 19 the clarinets and bassoon begin Theme 1, the same measure the statement by the cello concludes. Only two measures into their statement of the theme they sustain four measures on the note B, while the violins play Theme 1 materials. The clarinets pick up the theme in measure 25. They continue to play Theme 1, though every whole note is now sustained for several measures, and every time the sustained notes are played the violins play Theme 1 materials through the sustained pitch. This, along with a gradual increase in dynamics, builds musical momentum and anticipation. In measure thirty the flutes enter and complete Theme 1 with the clarinets. This build up culminates with a declamatory statement in measure 39, played in all the woodwinds and French horns (Example 6-45).

Flute

Horn in F 1

Horn in F 2

p

Example 6-45. Declamatory statement, mm. 39-44.

This material is dramatic, and a highlight of ‘El Camino Real’ thus far. While it would seem likely the material would recur and, perhaps, undergo some development, this is its sole statement in the work. Concurrent with the declamatory statement, another theme is introduced in the cellos and basses. In its first presentation this material is virtually inaudible due to the volume of the concurrently played declamatory materials. It might be considered part of the other materials, a sort of supportive outline. Since it later recurs as an independent theme, however, in this analysis this new theme will be considered as independent and, therefore, called Theme 2:

Cello

Double Bass

Vc.

D.B.

Example 6-46. Introduction of Theme 2, mm. 39-46.

The D pitch at the end of Theme 2 is sustained for several measures, establishing a pedal point. At measure 46 is one of the compositional highlights of the piece, a true polytonal section, in F major and C major. This is reminiscent of Stravinsky's *Petroushka*, which premiered in 1910. Here, too, Theme 2 is presented by solo flute, oboe, bass clarinet, and bassoon. In measure 49 thematic materials are presented which seem to be based loosely on Theme 3. This material, like Theme 2 which immediately precedes it, is presented by solo flute, oboe, bass clarinet, and bassoon and sits squarely in C major (Example 6-47):



Example 6-47. Thematic material loosely based on Theme 3, mm. 49-53.

The establishment of C major continues several measures later with Theme 1 derived materials in the string sections. Here too, at measure 54, the tympani and cello establish a pedal point on the pitch A, the fifth of D, in anticipation of a key change to D major which will occur in several measures:



Example 6-48. Pedal points, mm. 52-59.

The key change to D major occurs in measure 59, and it is here that one of the outstanding features of the movement is found, an alto flute solo. The alto flute plays a fragment of Theme 2 (Example 6-49). In order to highlight the solo, all the wind instruments are at rest and the strings sustain long pitches at a *piano* dynamic level. This is an example of *planing*, another twentieth-century compositional technique Willson includes in this movement:

Alto Flute

Example 6-49. Alto flute solo, derived from Theme 2, mm. 59-66.

The alto flute solo serves as an antecedent phrase to a clarinet solo in measure 6 and provides the subsequent phrase, also using Theme 2 derivatives (Example 6-50).

Example 6-50. Clarinet solo derived from Theme 2 materials, mm. 67-74.

The clarinet solo plays a role in establishing a bitonal section of the “El Camino Real,” for the solo is in B major and the accompanying materials in F major. This is a device, almost a ‘trick’, used in jazz; the tritone substitution. Willson certainly borrowed this device from his popular works. He uses the same device only three measures later, in measure 70, as the work sits in E major with a tritone dominant substitution. Most instruments drop out, and the work undergoes a diminuendo from measure 70 to measure 76, and in measure 77 enters a new section in 4/4 time. This new section is in E minor, and features a new, Theme 3:

The image shows a musical score for Violin and piano. The violin part is in E minor, 4/4 time, and is marked 'espr.' (espressivo). It features a melodic line with a tritone substitution. The piano part is marked 'mf' (mezzo-forte) and 'cresc.' (crescendo). It features a rhythmic accompaniment with a tritone substitution. The key signature is E minor and the time signature is 4/4.

Example 6-51. Introduction of Theme 3, mm. 77-88.

In the second such presentation in ‘El Camino Real,’ Willson concurrently introduces a second theme. As in measure 39, the second theme is more declamatory and identifiable, yet does not undergo any development. This motive, meant to sound like chimes, is not thematically strong (Example 6-52), but is aurally striking. The chime motive is stated by the horns, chimes, piano, and harp. The syncopated entrances serve to accentuate the motive and also to provide a resonance to the pitches:

The image shows a musical score for Horn in F 1, Horn in F 2, and Chimes. The horns and chimes play a syncopated chime motive. The key signature is E minor and the time signature is 4/4.

Example 6-52. ‘Chime’ motive, mm. 79 and 80.

This section, which began in measure 77, is notable for its rapid key changes. From its onset in the key of E minor, there is a shift to C-sharp minor only four measures later. Here the ‘chime’ motive is played, again in the horns, a half step below its first statement. The motive concludes in measure 84, and a slight variant of the ‘chime’ motive moves to the woodwinds in measure 85. It is outlined by half notes in the French horns and string section, yet another example of *planing*. In this instance the *planing* is harmonically ambiguous and brief. Just two measures later, measure 85, the key shifts to G major, another key that lasts for only two measures. From that point there is a distinct lack of key as elements of Theme 1 undergo a chromatic ascendancy in measure 90 (Example 6-53):

The image shows a musical score for four instruments: Clarinet in Bb, Bassoon, Violin, and Viola. The score is in 4/4 time and D major (two sharps). It features a 'Poco cresc.' marking and a 'p' dynamic marking. The Violin and Viola parts are marked 'Solo'. The score shows chromatic motion in measures 90-94.

Example 6-53. Chromatic motion, mm. 90-94.

The chromatic section lands the piece in D major in measure 93, where the first violin and first viola play a solo. This melody is hyper-expressive, reminiscent of a film score, and is notable for its brief triplet figure, one in an upwards direction, and the other in a downwards. In all, the theme ascends to land on a high B. This is the presentation of another new theme, Theme

4. Willson intends the dramatic nature of the theme, for he marks the passage, *doce ma espressivo* (Example 6-54).

Example 6-54. Expressive string solos, Theme 4, mm. 93-96.

From here the keys continue changing rapidly. At measure 97 is another section of transitional chromaticism, the same materials used at measure 90. This appearance is in the flutes, oboes, and English horns, beginning on a B pitch. Willson seems to use this as a device to move from one key to another. In measure 101 the ‘chime’ motive and Theme 4 are stated together, the ‘chime’ motive in the chimes and piano, and Theme 4 *appassionato* in the violins. Continuing the pattern of rapid change ‘El Camino Real’ shifts to 3/4 meter in measure 106, then back to 4/4 in measure 100. The four measures of 3/4 feature the ‘chime’ theme materials in a transitional movement towards a retransition and *allegro moderato* which occur in measure 110.

Measure 100 is the beginning of a new section of the movement. The frequent modulations, meter changes, and statements of Theme 5 variants in this section indicate that this is Willson’s development section. The materials here are fragments of Theme 1 in B-flat major, and the meter shifts frequently between cut time and 4/4. A Theme 1 derivative is begun in the French horns and trumpets in measure 114 (Example 6-55), trombones are added in measure 116, and tubas in measure 119.

Horn in F

Trumpet in B

Example 6-55. Retransition utilizing both Themes I and II, mm. 114-116.

The Theme 1 derivative continues in measure 119, Theme 2 moves to a variant, and the key shifts to E-flat major. The work shifts to an *allegro* in measure 124, with a new Theme 1 derivation in the strings. This is more development of the theme, and here Willson adds a snare drum to help build tension. The work shifts again, to B-flat major with shades of E-flat major in measure 127, to G-flat major in measure 129, and to E-flat major with Theme 2 fragments in measure 131. In measure 133 the work makes a sudden shift to A-flat minor, and there are numerous imitative entrances based on Theme 1 (Example 6-56).

Flute

Oboe

Clarinet in B

Violin

Viola

Example 6-56. Theme 1 derivative stated in imitative entrances, mm. 133-137.

and Theme 2 derivatives returns in solo flute and clarinet. Theme 3 also returns, in the string section, with a note to the players to ‘sing!’

In measure 210 Theme 4 returns in the flutes and clarinets, as the chime motive continues to sound sporadically in the French horns and piano. In measure 118 the chromatic transition previously seen in measure ninety, returns. The work lands in G major with a Theme 4 statement in measure 222, and a *Meno* marking. The chromatic transition returns in an *A tempo* in measure 226, and moves the work to another *Meno* in E major in measure 230. This time a variant of Theme 4 appears in the strings and ‘El Camino Real’ begins to both *crescendo* and *Poco ritardando*.

This movement culminates in measure 237 with a retransition section in 12/8 time. The score note here is ‘Broad (in 12)’. Willson has handwritten his own note, ‘Slow,’ and sketched out slashes which represent subdivisions as four sets of three. There is a dramatic restatement of the ‘Serra’ theme from the first movement, unison in all the strings. Above the Serra theme all the woodwinds play a rhythmically challenging fragment that may be new material, or derived from one of the other themes; its origin is not clear (Example 6-58).

Broad (in 12)

Wws

ff

Free bows

Strings

fff with fervor

Example 6-58. Beginning of retransition, mm. 237-238.

This retransition makes a *Poco accelerando* towards an *Allegro non troppo* in cut time at measure 241. This is the restatement of a Theme 1 derivative stated in the bassoons and low strings. Theme 2 is also stated here, in the flutes, and the key is C-sharp minor. This is another

section of rapid key change. In only three measures F-sharp major is added, for four measures of bitonality. In measure 249 a Theme 2 derivative appears in a single measure of F-sharp major, and the work moves to E major by measure 250.

The final push towards conclusion begins in measure 254 with an *Allegro molto* also marked *stretto*, in E major. The *stretto* note probably alerts the instrumentalists to upcoming entrances based on Theme 1. In measure 254 the woodwinds and strings make a declamatory Theme 1 statement, while the brasses play separated quarter notes which relate to the chime motive (Example 6-59).

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff is labeled 'Fl., picc., vln.' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Brass, vc., bass'. The tempo is marked 'Allegro molto (stretto)'. The key signature is E major (three sharps). The woodwind and violin staff features a melodic line with a slur and a fermata. The brass and string staff features a rhythmic pattern of quarter notes with accents.

Example 6-59. *Allegro molto* in Theme 1 fragments, mm. 253-254.

Two measures later there is an imitative entry in the clarinets and second violins. Again Willson rapidly changes keys. In measure 260 there is another Theme 1 derivative entry in French horns and strings, and only one measure later a shift to Bb major and Theme 1 derivative entries again in the French horns. The modulations reach a near frenzy; measure 261 is in G major, measure 262 in F-sharp major, and measure 263 in E major. Each key change is delineated by both a chordal shift and an entrance of a Theme 1 fragment.

The work reaches a slower *Poco meno* in measure 267. This is the first of a measure by measure bitonal progression; in measure 267 both C and F major, in measure 268 both G and C major, and in measure 267 both D and G major. As in the previous section the keys are delineated by chord shifts and stretto entrances of Theme 1 fragment. In measure 270 the

entrance is in the single key of A major, and an *accelerando* into an *A Tempo* in measure 271.

The Theme 1 derivative entrances continue, and here Willson moves to chromatic *planing*, using half notes in the brasses, English horn, and clarinet.

In measure 277 the work gets larger and broader with a *Poco Largo* note, continued stretto entrances of Theme 1 fragment, and a final reference to the first movement. This reference, the ‘Serra’ theme, is stated in the trombones and tubas (Example 6-60).

The image shows a musical score for Trombone and Tuba. The score is in E major (three sharps) and 4/4 time. The tempo marking is 'Poco Largo'. The music consists of six measures. The Trombone part starts with a half note G2, followed by a half note A2, then a half note B2, and finally a half note C3. The Tuba part follows a similar pattern, starting with a half note G1, followed by a half note A1, then a half note B1, and finally a half note C2. There are accents (>) over each note. The final measure (measure 282) features a triplet of eighth notes: G2, A2, and B2 for the Trombone, and G1, A1, and B1 for the Tuba.

Example 6-60. Final reference to first movement theme, mm. 277-282.

Willson begins a coda in measure 283 with a compositional move to augmented note values, all half and whole notes, and the conducting note *Slower (in 4)*. Given his established preference for short forms it is not surprising that ‘El Camino Real’ ends only nine measures later. The section, then is more accurately a *codetta*, and stays firmly in E major until the end of the piece. There is no new material here, only large chords and descending half and quarter notes in the chimes, piano and harp. The piece ends with a single showy ‘bump’, whole notes followed by an accented downbeat quarter note played by the entire orchestra, a grand E major chord.

General Analytical Summary

Several general conclusions can be drawn about Willson’s compositional style in this work, *The Missions of California*. The first issue is whether or not the work is truly a symphony. Willson calls it such, but it lacks the true sonata form generally found in classical symphonic writing. The overall structure, though, is loosely based on sonata form. The work is large

enough, and follows traditional symphonic form closely enough that it can rightly be called a symphony. Throughout the work Willson shows a preference for small forms which he then combines or stacks, a binary plus binary approach. Overall the work is presented as a form of verse, chorus, verse, chorus, etc..., plus bridges, an almost song-like pure binary form (ABABAB). This binary song-like approach is significant when taken in consideration with Willson's long and successful career as a songwriter, for it suggests his basic compositional style, especially structural form, was established long before he composed his *First Symphony*. Aurally, the constant re-entry of the same theme, usually Theme 1, causes the work to sound like a rondo, though it is not.

From a perspective of tonality the symphony is unabashedly melodic and tonal, rather remarkably so for its date. While Willson touts this as a symphony based on Spanish themes, there is a notable lack of Spanish music or musical derivation to the symphony. Willson instead relies on devices such as the use of Phrygian progressions, a popular compositional device which implies, though inaccurately, a Spanish character. Even the supposedly Spanish melody Willson obtained from the nuns shows no striking musical characteristics, but is simply a general melody.

Willson achieves tonal development almost entirely through a rapid speed of key changes, frequently every two measures. While this approach creates a certain aural excitement for the listener, it also results in a lack of focus on what might otherwise evolve as important and well-developed melodies. Overall, Willson treats melodies as 'hooks', presenting them in a manner which engages the interest of the listener, but doing little to develop melodic materials.

One of Willson's great limitations as a symphonic composer is the lack of formal development in his work. Willson takes two common approaches to development. The first is to state a theme, then to restate it in different keys. This simple modulation provides little alteration

to the musical materials. Willson's second developmental approach is rhythmic variation of tonal material, frequently involving triplets. It is inaccurate to define these approaches as developmental as pertains to the classical definition of the word, as the thematic material is not truly developed. With this approach the melodic materials take on characteristics more rhythmic than melodic. Still, the *Missions Symphony* has more depth than Willson's *Symphony of San Francisco*, and is the more mature of the two works.

Also ambiguous is Willson's use of transitional material. These materials are usually brief, sometimes thematically originating from stated themes, sometimes seemingly randomly chosen notes and rhythms. His consistency with transitional material is in his preference for triplet patterns; these are found throughout his two symphonies. In formal analysis it can be a challenge to figure out Willson's thematic intent. In some instances melodic material which initially seems to be introductory actually turns out to be a main theme. In other cases material which is tonally ephemeral, hardly worthy of being labeled a true theme, is restated several times to establish it as thematically important. In his scoring Willson sometimes writes confusing enharmonic spellings which result in harmonically misspelled chords. This does not impact the delivery of the piece, but rather suggests a certain lack of formal training.

In his orchestration Willson calls for an expanded orchestra, or extended orchestra, since he includes saxophones. Given the sheer numbers of instruments and musicians, a casual look at the work suggests a complexity reminiscent of the huge Germanic orchestras of the late romantic age. There is even an alto flute part in the fourth movement. Willson's score layout is misleading, however, for many of the instruments double parts. There is little division between the first and second violins, for example. Another composer would have combined parts for ease of use, notating part divisions. The percussion section appears particularly impressive, utilizing

four tympani, harp and even celeste. But while he scores for four tympani, Willson utilizes only two at a time, and these always tuned to the tonic and dominant. While he uses some novel devices such as planning and implied bitonality, Willson's orchestration is adequate, though not remarkable.

Overall, *The Missions of California* falls short in its evolution. It is almost a partially finished symphony, one which could easily be expanded and further developed to a more classically symphonic conclusion. What the work lacks in profundity it attempts to make up for in excitement. Willson gravitates towards the musically dramatic. His preference is for sudden changes in tempo, key, or instrument, almost certainly designed to catch the ear of the listener. On the other hand, the work is unusual for its date. It is blatantly tonal in an era when composers were moving away from traditional forms of tonal composition. The *Missions of California Symphony* does demonstrate that Willson is musically aware of many contemporary musical devices. He uses, for example, Phrygian modes in an early twentieth-century popular application meant to imply a Spanish musical character. He also presents certain chords in their jazz spellings, and uses blues forms. He also delves into bitonality and polytonality, albeit cautiously, though is always careful not to sacrifice tonal appeal for a casual listener in order to try a new compositional device.

The Missions of California Symphony is not one of the striking works of its era. It is not explorative, nor does it present new musical ideas. Instead, the work is important for its homage to older styles; a classic approach in the midst of a musical age during which many composers deliberately moved away from their musical roots. The work is also notable for its romantically programmatic approach. Willson hinted several times that he was intending and/or working on

further symphonies. This was probably typical Willson bluster, for no sketches or materials for other symphonies have been found.

Reaction to Symphony

In addition to its premier performance, *The Missions of California Symphony* was broadcast over KGLO on its regular Sunday concert, directed by Howard Barlow, in August of 1941. Also included in this broadcast were *Les Preludes* by Liszt, and an unnumbered Mozart *Symphonies in G-minor* (likely number forty, as that is the better known). Its inclusion in a program of heavily classical works suggests that this is the direction intended by the composer, who was also a studio director and, thus, familiar with programming implications.

An incident happened just after this which illustrates the increasing divide between music styles. Dr. Albert Coates, the distinguished British orchestra conductor who encouraged Willson to compose his *Missions of California Symphony*, asked to attend a radio broadcast, and Willson arranged for the conductor to attend the Maxwell House show in the week following the premier of *The Missions of California*. Willson later joked about Coates' reaction to radio revelry, recounting that Coates felt it to be his "...jewty (sic) to keep up with all the modern Ameddican (sic) activities." He had heard about Willson's "wireless" work, and asked when he might attend a broadcast. Willson excitedly invited Coates to attend the *Maxwell House Show* broadcast in the following week. According to Willson, Coates's reaction was one of quiet shock:

He stayed just long enough to see me put down the baton, walk to the microphone with a piece of celery in each hand and an old light bulb between my teeth, and engage in a bit of stooage dialogue with Frank Morgan, which ended, as usual, with Mr. Morgan saying, 'Get out of my sight, you bucolic nincompoo, you country bumpkin, you-you-you peasant!

Mr. Coates rose to his feet and quietly left the studio, and I have never laid eyes on him since.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁶ Ibid, 165-166.

Another version of the incident includes Coates' comments on Willson's antics:

I played your 'Missions of California' symphony in concert because I considered you one of the most promising of the young American composers, Dr. Coates told Willson afterward.

But when I saw you doing that. . . . that slapstick . . . , it was just too much. I was horrified.

Versatile, Affable Willson...laughed.

I try to enjoy everything I do. It is fun to do comedy lines. And I don't believe this outlet has in any manner injured my reputation in the field of music.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁷ AP Special advanced for AMS of Sunday, Nov 22, 1942.

CHAPTER 7 SUMMARY

This study included historical, analytical, and critical examination of Willson's available orchestral works. Since their premier performances, most of Willson's orchestral works have not been given professional performances. This examination of his orchestral works, along with Bill Oates' illuminating study of Willson's radio career, provides a basis for further investigation of Willson and his music making process. Positive response to the recordings of Willson's symphonies, issued in 1999, suggests an interest in Willson's orchestral works. The lack of score availability, though, continues to present significant challenges to the dissemination of the bulk of Willson's orchestral works.

Although not as extensive as his popular vocal output, Willson's orchestral works warrant study. As outlined in Chapters 3 and 4, the 1930s and 1940s were decades of musical change in the United States. Significant developments in radio, film, and recording, are clearly reflected in the scope of Willson's varied musical careers and compositional output. Studies of his popular and radio contributions have been made, and the current examination of Willson's contributions considerably augments a growing body of literature. A comprehensive examination of these and other works of the period would contribute to a greater understanding of Willson's popular and orchestral music as a mirror of the increasingly diverse musical foci of the age.

Throughout his career, Willson was a central figure for the fusion of popular and classical music, as well as being a pioneer in the important medium of radio music. He mixed styles only slightly, unlike contemporaries Gershwin and Copland, in whose works symphonic jazz became a significant idiom. Rather, Willson used his radio shows to expose and promote various styles, and his fusion of styles was of popular idioms. In his orchestral compositions there is enough variety of writing to indicate he possessed the compositional skill to fuse styles, but he made

compositional decisions to keep his symphonies largely traditional and programmatic. The limited recordings available of other orchestral works suggests that he was somewhat bolder in fusing jazz and popular film idioms with traditional orchestral forms in these works, but too little exists to draw a firm conclusion.

Willson's orchestral works were mostly written at the beginning of his career, and it is significant that none were written after his huge successes in musical theater. Though hard figures are not available, it is known that Willson made a considerable amount of money with his popular music. He was quite a successful songwriter during the time he wrote his symphonies and symphonic poems, and wealthy long before *The Music Man* brought him millions more. A single letter written to Dixie during their arguments over the provenance of *The Music Man* indicates that Willson also held sizable investments, including filling stations, several of which he gave to his sister in exchange for her silence; his holdings were in the tens of millions. Willson was appreciably more financially successful than his art music contemporaries, Gershwin, Copland, and perhaps even Bernstein.

This financial success illuminates two salient points. First, Willson did not compose orchestral music for financial gain or necessity. Rather, his art music compositions were written for his own self-gratification. These works were a self-challenge, one from which he likely hoped to gain increased public acclaim. Second, though his writings were fairly well accepted and certainly well crafted, Willson did not receive from them the glowing acclaim that he did for his popular works. The audience of hundreds of thousands of radio listeners for his popular works was vast, where his orchestral reached a much smaller, more critical, audience. After the second symphony there must have seemed little reason to continue composing art music. Willson had proved that he could write in the forms, and write well. His popular output received

more enthusiasm and was far more financially lucrative. While he had a talent for orchestral composition, Willson almost certainly saw little reason to continue.

The distance of several decades has not helped his orchestral reputation, for *The Music Man* damaged Willson's eventual reputation as a composer. Posterity remembers Willson almost solely for this musical, with no heed paid to his significant output prior to the *The Music Man*. A general statement is frequently made about Willson in reference to *The Music Man*, that, "Meredith Willson had one masterpiece in him, and it will live as long as there is anything like musical theater."²⁷⁸ This opinion neglects not only the orchestral works, but the dozens of top selling songs written by Willson. In part, Willson's very talent is responsible for his current lack of recognition, for his diversity presents a challenge in categorizing him. Instead of being recognized as a significant talent in American music, Willson is remembered as a minor talent in several genres of American music.

Another point of obfuscation is Willson's perceived association with marching bands. Willson wrote only a few band works, all for specific school bands, and these were not widely published. Rather, his frequent appearances as a guest band conductor and the wide distribution and success of the band favorite "Seventy-Six Trombones" from *The Music Man*, has assured Willson's legacy in the marching and concert band arenas. Subsequent to the success of *The Music Man* Willson was increasingly asked to make guest appearances at band events, where his roles ranged from conducting to serving as event Grand Marshall. The plot of the musical, based around the establishment of a town band, combined with the piece *Seventy-six Trombones*, frequently arranged for and played by bands, gives Meredith Willson a certain status among band aficionados.

²⁷⁸ *National Review*, June 5, 2000, 53.

A versatile and accomplished performer first, in both popular and classical idioms, Willson borrowed from his performance experiences when he began composing. Willson was a talented and capable composer. His output was vast, more significant than will ever be realized, for in addition to his recognized published compositions Willson daily arranged works for his studio orchestras for approximately thirty years. He utilized diverse musical models, from popular song to American dance music and classical forms. The present document has made a significant attempt to clarify Willson's factual accomplishments.

The primary reason Willson's orchestral works are not better known or more often performed is their lack of availability. Scores are not known to exist for several of the works, and are found in reduced or piano transcriptions for other works, formats not accessible for performance purposes. But the works are musically accessible to both audiences and musicians, with few technical difficulties, and compositionally worthy of more attention.

In conclusion, Willson's orchestral works, especially the two symphonies, add an important dimension to the repertoire of music of the United States. Though not as well known as similar works by such contemporaries as Bernstein and Copland, they nonetheless warrant the attention of both audiences of academics and the more general public.

APPENDIX A
JOHN WILLSON LETTERS TO ROSEMARY, DIVORCE PAPERS

Exhibit A
Feb. 5 1920
[*indistinct*]

Rose:

For the past twentyfive [*sic*] years it has been plain to me, and probably to you, that we are a mismated couple. Our view of life is so diametrically oposite [*sic*] that no harmony has been, or can be possible, except by keeping away from one another. In view of the fact that we have three children, whose future has been a claim upon us, I have stayed with you and done the best I could to help rear them to manhood and womanhood. This being now accomplished there is nothing now to hold us together except the bonds of a sinful union. I regret that the children have had to listen too [*sic*], disagreeable and inharmonious conversations, and have naturally acquired a querulous demeanor that will handicap them in life. I hope and believe tho [*sic*] that they have, in the same time acquired some practical common sense, otherwise our sacrifice will have been worse than in vain.

In the past you have accused me openly and insinuated that I was every thing mean and crooked. You have misjudged and twisted in crime every act of mine, therein I sought my own kind of companionship. You have never liked the same kind of people or entertainment that I enjoy. Your attitude has been one of bigotry [*sic*] and a determined obstinacy to make me go your way or destroy me. The children have been put up to doing things contrary to my desires., You have searched my pockets, stolen, destroyed or concealed property some of it belonging to neither you or me. You have at all times refused to go with me to live any place except your own choice. You have always refused to sign any papers, thereby humiliating me, before business men, and injuring my standing and business ability and credit. I dont [*sic*] know whether it was jealousy that caused your action or not, but this kind of treatment has caused me to despise you and your ideas. You have always ignored my desire for personal contact and companionship, and your every word and act grates on my nerves, until they have become raw and unstrung and are a menace to my health and usefulness [*sic*] in life. Life to me in your company has become simply a hell, and not to be endured. I have become cross artd boorish, and try as I may, I cannot be myself. I have no heart to work, as my mind is in a constant turmoil: If I force myself, while alone, into a trnquil [*sic*] state of mind, one insulting word or insinuation, or some inane remark from you, will make me ugly and miserable. No one else in the world affects me this way. To me you are inane and ignorant. You embody all that I despise. You are a good woman according to your lights, and if you lived in this world, instead of on some visionary and impractical plane, it would not be so impossible. As you are, you are to me as a red rag to a bull, and it is nothing short of a crime for me to continue to ruin your life and for you to ruin mine as we have been doing for the past years. Better a thousand times that we go our separate ways, as you have told me so often to do, in the past when I could not leave the children, and give each other a chance to get out of the remaining years of life whatever happiness we can.

You are hampered by me in a thousand ways. If I were out of your way, you would be free to pursue your own ideas of life, and no doubt would feel a great burden lifted from your mind, even tho [*sic*] the [*indistinct*] exaggerated notions, at the first glance. A quiet analysis of the situation, will, undoubtedly, tend to confirm you in the same conclusion to which I came long ago, that we will only have a fair chance to enjoy life when we are apart.

If we take the other horn of the dilemma, and you insist on keeping me to the marriage vow, I would, if I remained in your company, continue to grow more disagreeable than I have been, unsatisfied with life, unhappy, unsociable, as far as you are concerned, because as I see the helplessness of the struggle, I naturally see less to live fore, and at the end I would probably choose to go out of my life before my natural time, seeking oblivion rather than hell on earth. It certainly would be no great comfort to you knowing how I feel.

I ask you therefore to let us separate as all decent and well meaning persons ought to do, who find that they are absolutely unsuited to each other. Let us at least be kind to each other and sensible, in this.

In my opinion, there is but one life to live, and that is the one here on earth. I am entitled to my opinion as much as you to yours. Thinking as I do, I believe I am entitled to get at least something out of this life, if possible. I have an honest effort to so change my nature as to comply with the environment that I have found myself [*indistinct*] by our union, and I have found that it cannot be done. To try is simply to destroy all that is good in me and all that is good in you. The greatest crime that can be committed by two people, is to ruin their own lives and all those who come in contact with them, by forcing themselves to live together when every instinct of their better natures tells them that they should be apart. I further believe it is the worst kind of adultery to cohabit with a person whom you dislike and with whom you have no friendly feeling, even tho [*sic*] married to that person.

Your live has been so far, a failure to you. I know you so admit and I agree with you. Mine has been the same. Due to our marriage and living together. Both will continue to be so unless we do what we should do, get away from each other and give each the chance to repair the damage that that has been done so far as possible in the years remaining. there is nothing to be gained by the continuation of the farce. In fact I have made up my mind that I will not continue thus. If I did I would go crazy and I don't believe I am required to go that far. I should in time come to hate you so that I do not know what I might not do.

When you came to me you had nothing of this worlds [*sic*] goods. I do not propose to leave you in this condition. I propose to endow you with \$25000.00 worth of property, which will yield you a good substantial living, and a chance to sell and reinvest in someother place or with a good prospect of advance here. As far as the children are concerned, they will be assisted by me to the limit of my ability as in the past. Their status will in no wise be changed. We cannot live their lives, we can only guide them, and will be far better able to do so if we are apart, than in the turmoil of a disrupted home.

You will be able to pursue the course you see fit without the hampering of my ideas. Your property will be unencumbered and you will have the chance to show how much better you can do with the pay envelope than I can. You will have a \$25000.00 start which I did not have, and no mill stone around your mental apparatus, which I have always had. We owe, that I know of (I dont [*sic*] know your debts) about \$25000.00 and I will take over that burden leaving you clear.

My expenses in taxes, interest and paying this \$25000.00 debt will take about all of the income of the property I keep, the same as it always has, but I can earn my living, I think and give you yours, when I get free of the strain of the past years.

If you will agree to it, I will go to some distant point in Iowa, there take up my residence, and procure a divorce quietly by default and without any publicity or annoyance to you, deeding you the property proposed beforehand. If you will not agree, then I will go somewhere and try to get it anyway, because I think that when we separate, for the rest of our lives, we should not be subjected to embarrassment as to our future movements, There can be no restitution to happiness and contentment if a shadow still hangs over us.

I will go away to live, and you can do as seems best to you. Please consider this kindly, in the christian spirit that you so conscientiously profess, and with the full knowledge that it is the only possible way to treat each other fairly and right. There can be no compromise, as I have reached the end as far as this way of living is concerned. There has got to be a change an end of this, and the time has come to be sensible.

It is my [*indistinct*] to get this matter settled at once, so that I may seek some business which will be satisfactory and remunerative, so that I may be able to help Ced thro [*sic*] his education, and Meredith if he shall need my help. I am not young and the days of labor for me are short, and the time is ripe for new fields. I wish to get at it now. There is nothing to wait for except to get at a fair division of property, and get what we have into such shape that it will not be endangered by extraneous circumstances. I do not wish to have more than I can give you. The only way I can engender a kindly feeling for you, is for you to show me this once that you

wish to have some respect for my feelings, in this matter. You are set and stubborn, biggotted [*sic*], vain, and have an insatiable desire to ape after people that are in better circumstances than we, you travel alone in your chosen sphere and I wish to get out of the way so that you may follow those inclinations unhindered. You will not go my way, you sneer at my friends and associates, and I want to get you out of my way so that I can, without fear of insinuation or insult, associate with the class of people that I find to be most honest and kind hearted, and less hypocritical than the ones to whom you wish to attach me and yourself. You have never given an inch. In your heart you still believe your ways are superior. You are a "Reiniger." I am not and cannot become one. When I think of the times you have humiliated me before business men, even until your grown children have been ashamed of your actions & begged for me, I grow to hate. It makes me rage inwardly now to think of the times without number that you have told me to pack up and go.

I don't think it best to tell the children, as it would simply upset their work and their minds and do no good. We are farther apart then Lucile and Ben ever were, and even you would say they are better as they are. I will get a petition on the Jan. or Feb. term of some court and we will get it over and start on a new life unhindered by the divorce, because I take it that you would not do so on account of what people will say. If you will I am more than willing. I will only include such matters in my petition as will be sufficient, and it will never be read by any one but yourself, and your brother who can and will act as your attorney to see that your property is secure. Please do this for me and yourself and let me go away thinking kindly of you at last.

Rose: --

Will you be kind enough to tell me what you have decided to do in the matter of a settlement of property, and who you intend to get to represent you and when. If you have not gotten Olin yet, I will write to him right away, as I expect to have the papers filed by a week from today, and the case will come up in the Feb. term of court, which begins on the second of that month.

What I had in mind to deed to you as your share of the property was the home and its furniture, the house and lot at 611 N. Monroe, the lots in the Parker Add. four in number, and the sale contract of the corner lot, for \$1500.00, which is payable at the rate of \$200 per annum, with interest amounting to \$[*indistinct*] this year and 7% on the deferred payments thereafter, making an income of about \$[*indistinct*] per month from that source. Of course, I want to get this part of the matter settled before the court sets, so that the papers can be made. Another thing is to have [*indistinct*] before the [*indistinct*] case come up here in this court so that there will be no lien on the property. I shall be glad to talk it over with you, if you will have your seamstress out of the way, long enough. I had enough of discussing my affairs before her when I was trying to get those [*indistinct*-- mortgages?] signed. I will write Olin myself now and see if he can come here at this time.

This property is worth \$25,000 and is fully a third of what I have and has no incumbrance [*sic*], which [*indistinct*] will be encumbered, to about that amount and the income will put the interest [*indistinct*], if nothing happens. What is left when I [*indistinct*] to the children.

IN THE DISTRICT COURT OF THE STATE OF IOWA

IN AND FOR CERRO GORDO COUNTY

ROSALIE R. WILLSON, PLAINTIFF, :
VS. : AMENDED AND SUBSTITUTED
JOHN D. WILLSON, DEFENDANT. : PETITION IN EQUITY.
-----:

The plaintiff, for cause of action against the defendant, states:

Paragraph 1

That the plaintiff, Rosalie R. Willson, was born at Charles City, Iowa, and has been a resident of the state of Iowa nearly all of her life; that she has resided continuously in the state of Iowa since the year 1889, and has resided continuously in the city of Mason City, Iowa, in Cerro Gordo County, since May 30th, 1894.

Paragraph 2

That plaintiff and defendant were married at Brighton, in the state of Illinois, on the 28th day of August, 1889, and continued to live together as husband and wife until the 10th day of January, 1920.

Paragraph 3

That this action for divorce is begun in good faith and for the purposes set forth herein; that the plaintiff's residence in the state of Iowa has been in good faith, and not for the purpose of obtaining a divorce only, or the purposes of this action; and that the plaintiff has at all times conducted herself toward her said husband as a dutiful and loving wife.

Paragraph 4

That there were born of said marriage six children, three of whom died in infancy and three are now living, two of whom are

minors; one daughter, Dixie Lucile Willson, was born August 6th, 1890; John Cedrick Willson was born October 26th, 1900, and Robert Meredith Willson was born in May, 1902, and that both of said minors are now attending school, but have made their home continuously with the plaintiff.

Paragraph 5

That the defendant has been guilty of such cruel and inhuman treatment toward the plaintiff as to endanger her life, and has, for the purpose of harassing and annoying the plaintiff, been guilty of such cruel and inhuman treatment as to endanger the life of the plaintiff; that for many years last past the defendant has taunted the plaintiff with the fact that she was not a fit companion for a man of such mental attainments and superior temperament as that of the defendant, and that therefore the defendant was compelled to seek proper society and proper associates outside of his own home, and would absent himself from home for months at a time.

Paragraph 6

That on or about the 11th day of January, 1920, the defendant delivered to the plaintiff a letter in which he tells the plaintiff that for twenty-five years it has been plain to the defendant that he and the plaintiff were a mis-mated couple and that they must keep away from each other; that their union has been sinful, and that the home life of their children has been such as will handicap them through life; that the attitude of the plaintiff has been one of obstinacy and bigotry; that the treatment the defendant has received has caused him to despise the plaintiff and her ideas; that every word and act of the plaintiff has grated upon the defendant's nerves, and that such conduct is a menace to the defendant's health and his usefulness in life. The defendant further tells the plaintiff in said letter that she is inane and ignorant; that she embodies all that the defendant despises; that

the plaintiff is to the defendant as a red rag to a bull, and that it is a crime for the defendant to ruin his life as he has been doing in the past.

The defendant further states in said letter:

"If we take the other horn of the dilemma, and you insist on keeping me to the marriage vow, I would, if I remained in your company, continue to grow more disagreeable than I have been, unsatisfied with life, unhappy, unsociable, so far as you are concerned, because as I see the hopelessness of the struggle, I naturally see less to live for, and at the end I would probably choose to go out of my life before my natural time, seeking oblivion rather than Hell on earth".

"I further believe it is the worst kind of adultery to cohabit with a person whom you dislike and with whom you have no friendly feeling, even though married to that person. Your life has been, so far, a failure * * * *. In fact I have made up my mind that I will not continue thus. If I did, I would go crazy, and I don't believe I am required to go that far, and I do not believe you would like to take the responsibility for such a crime. I should in time come to hate you so that I do not know what I might not do".

"If you will not agree, then I will go somewhere and try to get it anyway, because I think that when we separate for the rest of our lives we should not be subjected to embarrassment as to our future movements, there can be no restitution to happiness and contentment if a shadow still hangs over us".

"Please consider this kindly, in the Christian spirit that you so conscientiously profess, and with the full knowledge that it is the only possible way to treat each other fairly and right. There can be no compromise, as I have reached the end, so far as this way of living is concerned".

"You are stubborn, bigoted, vain, and have an insatiable desire to ape after people that are in better circumstances than we, you travel alone in your chosen sphere, and I wish to get out of the way so that you may follow these inclinations unhindered".

"I will get a petition in the January or February term of some court, and we will get it over and start on a new life, unhindered by each other, at once. No use procrastinating. I will only include such matters in my petition as will be sufficient, and it will never be read by anyone but yourself, and your brother, who can and will act as your attorney to see that your property is secure. Please do this for me and yourself, and let me go away thinking kindly of you at last".

Paragraph 7

That the defendant has at all times, as this plaintiff verily believes, planned and intended to abandon the plaintiff and to either get a divorce from the plaintiff or force her to get a divorce from him.

Paragraph 8

That the defendant is a man of considerable means, and is the owner of a large amount of real estate in Mason City, Iowa, and is the sole owner of all of the stock of the Alenco Willson Company, a corporation organized and existing under the laws of the state of Iowa, said corporation being the holder of a large amount of real estate and other property, and that this plaintiff has been informed by the defendant that he is worth at least the sum of \$100,000.00, and that the defendant has an income of about the sum of \$700.00 per month.

Paragraph 9

That this plaintiff has always kept a clean and comfortable home for the defendant, and has always tried in every way to make the home as pleasant and attractive as possible for the defendant,

but that whatever this plaintiff has done for the defendant, he has been dissatisfied with same, and has found fault and complained, and for months at a time would not speak to nor have anything to do with the plaintiff.

Paragraph 10

That at Christmas time in 1919 the plaintiff prepared Christmas gifts for the defendant and placed the same at the defendant's place at the table, and that when he came to the meal and discovered the Christmas remembrances and gifts from the plaintiff he pushed the same aside and would not speak to the plaintiff nor give her a kind look or word, but refused absolutely to accept her Christmas remembrances or good cheer at that time, and that the conduct of the defendant caused the plaintiff to become sick and nervous.

That the plaintiff is a member of the Congregational Church of Mason City and has been an active worker therein, and that the defendant has scoffed at the plaintiff's religion, and to others in the presence of the plaintiff has made derogatory remarks in regard to the plaintiff and her religion, and that said acts were done for the purpose of harassing and annoying the plaintiff and of making her unhappy and forcing her away from home, and that the defendant has at various times written the plaintiff criticising her attitude toward the church and toward religion generally, all of which acts have caused the plaintiff great mental suffering, until the same has affected her health.

Paragraph 11

That the defendant, by his conduct toward the plaintiff, has caused her to become sick, and in an extremely nervous condition of health, and that it is absolutely impossible for the plaintiff and defendant to live together as husband and wife without endangering the life of the plaintiff.

WHEREFORE, plaintiff prays that she may be granted a decree

of absolute divorce from the defendant, and that she be awarded alimony in the sum of \$25,000.00; and that the title to the homestead, which now stands in plaintiff's name, and the personal property therein, and other personal property of the plaintiff, be confirmed and established in her; and for such other and further relief as may be just and equitable, including the costs of this action.

Rheta Markley Paul Smith
Plaintiff's Attorneys

State of Iowa,
Cerro Gordo County, ss.

I, Rosalie R. Willson, being first duly sworn, on oath depose and say that I am plaintiff in the above entitled action; that I have read the above and foregoing petition, know its contents, and the statements therein made are true, as I verily believe.

Rosalie R. Willson

Subscribed and sworn to before me this January 5th, 1920.

W. L. Nelson
Notary public in and for
Cerro Gordo County, Iowa

APPENDIX B
DIXIE WILLSON LETTERS ASSERTING AUTHORSHIP ROLE IN *THE MUSIC MAN*

Included in this appendix are photos of eight pages of a letter typed in 1954 by Dixie Willson, addressed to an unknown party. She asks the addressee to forward the letter to Earl Hall, then editor of the *Mason City Globe-Gazette* and long time family friend of the Willsons. Hall's widow and son donated his papers to the University of Iowa libraries. These are currently Papers of Early Hall, a 6 linear foot collection, in the Special Collections Department at the University of Iowa. Copies of the letters are also in the possession of the Mason City Public Library Archives.

In Dixie's letter she details her role in the creation of *The Silver Triangle* as a play and asserts Meredith's use of the manuscript as the basis for *The Music Man*, as well as his subsequent refusal to acknowledge her contribution. The final page is Earl Hall's response to Dixie's claims. It is most noteworthy for Earl's basic acknowledgement of Dixie's position, and his subsequent plea for her not to pursue the matter.

Summer 1954

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Here's the story I want to tell you; read it and then mail it to Earl. Qui a story. I can't believe it even as I tell you but it has happened just the

For 20 years I did business with a grand guy named Jake Wilk who bought pictures for Warners. About 2 years ago he gave up pictures and took over people to manage in whose talent he had confidence. Luckily I was one of t

Among his best friends were Ernie Martin and Cy Feuer a couple of Broadway producers with an uncanny sense of picking things out. If they said a show was going to be a hit..it was. So they had become Broadway's top producer and Jake asked them what they wanted in the way of some plays.

They said one thing was a show for which Meredith would do the music. Jake said that was a hot idea because he was managing Dixie who would write a great book. Why not make a brother and sister playwrighting team since Dixie had a lot of other very unusual play ideas; plays by Dixie music by Meredith. The boys said that was a great idea and to have me come in.

So Jake took me and we discussed possibilities. I said M. was a fine actor and I'd like to make our play one which would star him in the lead. They said fine if he could do it; I could write it that way anyhow and if he couldn't play it somebody else could.

So I went to work, thinking in terms of the special kind of role he could play.

Nobody realizes how tough it is to think. Week after week, just thinking, thinking, studying notes made in little books over a period of years. Taking all the thoughts and accumulated ideas you have gotten together, balancing and weighing possibilities and values and details and figuring out personalities and what they would say and do and how they would behave under certain conditions which would make a tight story. With men there are a thousand kinds and types and professions. You have to weigh and measure and sift and balance, take one kind of man along with you for days before you find out that he would be the right one. Then try another. And the same with your other characters and possible situations until they jell. My net for a play is to start with an ending because that last punch must be the terrific one.

But juggling all these values I finally got the right leading personality, a small town professor of music who leads the church choir, the band, the parades, teaches kids for nothing and organizes a quartet of men who like to sing; perfect for Meredith, so I went ahead with supporting characters. My theme and purpose..the power of music.

I first decided on a town stinker, an Art Sale, a miserable old skin flint who provided my terrific ending by finally breaking down and asking if there could be such a thing as a quartet with five in it. Meredith and I together decided the date should be 1913..with the town Mason City of course I reported to the producers who loved it; said they'd pay me a thousand dollars advance when I was ready with a one page outline. It was fully understood by all of us that Meredith and I were collaborating though we made no black and white deal. It didn't occur to me I should protect myself against Meredith!

Every bit of progress I made I reported to him and we got more and more excited, foremost in my mind that thousand dollars, which would enable me to finish so many other things like my last very fine book. Meredith kept urging me to hurry and I wanted to hurry myself but I had to make current expenses by stopping for other things so he became very impatient.

a st.
I was astonished when I went to the coast at Christmas, to have him outline the Professor whom I had built so carefully into the theme I had built so carefully. (all of which was my thinking and my play property for some other play if not this one for Meredith)..as a man who was just a phoney instead the real thing.

Of course a man can not be a phoney musical inspiration to a community, because if he inspires them to music..he ~~does~~...rather he is an Academy graduate or not. But since my whole idea was to eulogize the small town musical leader, I didnt like making him a phoney, but that took second place as compared to the fact that Meredith felt free to take my character and my play idea and use it as he wanted to!!! My impulse was ~~to say~~ to say.."But this is my character and my idea! I want it for a play of my own! I have sweat over it for months..to write my own play!"

After all it wasnt up to me to defend myself, but up to Meredith to ask if he could use it, if such was his intention, and under what terms. Even then..he had no right to put me on the defensive and make me feel like a heel and a trouble maker to have to speak up and say.."But you're stealing!" Also he had me under the very great disadvantage of being a guest in his house after a trip which he was giving me. That was a spot where it was pretty rough for me to have to remind him that he was just taking my material without asking if I cared. Also of course since our only thought had been collaboration, this appeared to still be collaboration; at least he said nothing to the contrary.

After all if you just pick up someone else's property...it is up to you to say "Do you mind if I take this?" It isnt up to the owner to say.."Wait a minute; that's mine."

using
It certainly had me on a funny spot..I had worked ~~hard~~ hard on the basic thought that he was ~~working~~ Thinking is hard. So hard that he can't do it. He can't even understand that it has to be done. He has the idea that you can just go ahead and write something down and it will assume its own strength. This isnt true. You cant make a book or a play with depth and strength until you first of all create a purpose which stands on strength and depth. When that is done, and characters are worked out to carry your purpose on..then the writing is comparatively easy.

In a play if you have the theme, the purpose, the leading character and other personalities, you are well on your way. Then comes a sparkling beginning and an end which will suddenly button up your purpose and hit the audience broad. To get this kind of a crack-the-whip moment is something a playwright can sometimes struggle a life time for and never get but once. It is so hard to get and so important that it can almost make the difference between a hit play and a flop. I had thought out all these things complete when Meredith decided to take over because I was using up too much time.

The reason it took me so long was because at no time did I have enough capital in the bank to sit down and write the play exclusive of anything else. I didnt explain this to him because I didnt want to be hinting for him to give me the financing it would take. I didnt want to even be indebted to him to the extent of borrowing it. But the fact that it took me a long time didnt make it any less MY property. The fact that it had been long tough thinking just made me need it and cherish it the more. But I needed that thousand dollars advance royalty so much that I was willing to let him go ahead his way, if that would complete the play and bring me a check sooner. I figured I had already done all the basic work...so that maybe, though he is not good on plots, he could do the rest.

The only new thing he had introduced was bringing in a spastic boy. He illustrated with heart breaking realism how they walk and talk and stumble along with distorted bodies and faces and said that people should be told how cruel it is to shun these people.

I told him he could not put that into a play and make an audience accept it. They just would not take it, and I didnt think they should be expected to. I told him the only way he could bring in a spastic was to have him motionless in a wheel chair working up to one thrilling movement in the end.

This is exactly what he has done so it is not offensive, although I am sure I could have done a better play and a stronger finer one without the spastic and with the professor as I intended him, though that doesnt matter much.

The first draft he sent me in about April was not good. It was heavy and thick with long dull speeches, no sparkle in the beginnning and no thrill in the end

He had put in a middle aged romance treated lightly which I had said we needed and he had insisted we should not include..but he had changed my beginning, my ending and had left out the water-across-the-lake trick which I wanted to put in so much and he wanted to leave out.

But he had my characters, almost all of them, my purpose, my theme, and of course the Professor as the leading character.

7 When I returned it, evidently someone else had read it who had pointed out its weight and lack of high spots and strength, so he went to work on it, cut the speeches, put back my beginning, my ending, put in the water-across-the-lake, and with these changes, all my basic pattern, he had a fine tight play.

I was still astonished and pretty much stunned that he would take MY material of which I myself was so proud and with which I myself could have so easily constructed a hit play, having carried it out so far, and just go ahead and use it without one word of question or explanation..or asking if that was okay with me, but again I was at the disadvantage of having accepted ~~these~~ salary checks...and I must say it never really occurred to me that he would make use of this without considering it my play just the same. I was as anxious as he to get it into the final form and start it rolling. In fact I was more anxious than he because I needed that initial check so much. I felt that even though I could make a better final play of my basic thoughts within the next six months it was more important to button it up as soon as possible..so ~~was~~ ^{was} ~~with~~ ^{with} compromise with his.

And I certainly dont belittle his work. He has done a beautiful job of story and dialogus. It is a grand job. But he never could have, or would have, been able to think out the basic values which I spent so many months on and which enable him to make it a strong fine piece of work. A house is as good as its foundation, a chain only as strong as the links which hold it together.

My next astonishment was when he brought it to New York a month ago, finished and ready to present to the producers. When he handed it to me at the Waldorf.. and I saw "Play by Meredith Willson"...I was as stunned as I'll ever be.. unless it was when he told me he expected to have the meeting, without my being there. Both these things hit me so hard that I just couldnt think what to say.. so I said nothing at all. Again he put me at a total disadvantage. I see him seldom, hadnt seen him for six months, would see him only that one day...so I hated to make it unpleasant in any way, though of course what I resented was the fact that he had maneuvered things around so that I would have to seem the argumentative one among the two of us...if either of us mentioned the fact that

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after all this "Play by Meredith Willson" was at least half mine..much more than half, actually, because the basic thinking, the beginning and the end, the theme and the characterizations are more than half of a strong play.

After all, I had started the thing with the producers..it was understood to be collaboration...so what right had he to assume the top spot in presenting and selling it? The meeting with them was as much my business as his!

But you just dont expect your brother to steal from you... ^{He} would ^{be here} ~~steal~~ only that one day, I'm not well enough these days to get into any heated discussion about anything..Meredith is very difficult to talk to because he can never see that anyone else can possibly be right...the whole thing was such an unbelievable situation that I scarcely knew what to say...I kept thinking and expecting that he would say something, rather than leaving it up to me to either defend myself ..or take it on the chin...I knew that if he was on the eve of this important meeting he should not be upset in any way.....it seemed that maybe the sale of the play was more important than even my feelings... and principally because this was the key to the money I needed so very very much...which WAS more important than my feelings....I just let it hapoen and said nothing whatever. I simply couldn't believe that.."PLAY BY MEREDITH WILLSON" ..I simply couldnt believe that he would do such a thing..I still cant believe it!

He included me in every detail of the report of the meeting; called me early next morning to say it was sold and they said it was a smash hit...called me during the following week when he was in or near New York and they were in touch with him about it..acknowledged my connection with it in every way but putting my name on it, BUT it seems that he did this only between the two of us...never in the company of the producers or anyone else. Everywhere else and with everybody else, it was merely a "play by Meredith Willson".. When Jake went to see them about it after a few days, to remind them that I had started it and that it was my idea and theme..they said yes they knew that, and had been surprised themselves that Meredith had never once mentioned me in connection with it.

Its a peculiar thing that success can have spoiled him so much that he now seems really avaricious to claim attention. Or maybe its because he hasnt had enough of it..for so many of his own things have just missed. Maybe it is Rini who after all doesnt want to share the spotlight...Meredith and I are an unusual pair as far as talent goes. ~~That~~ we had written the play together...I mean to say a brother and sister playwrighting team..would make us interesting ~~material~~ and team us together with the producers and the public, reviews etc...and this would put Rini in the background somewhat..at least would make me ~~more~~ important and more closely connected with Meredith in the thing...and she would hardly be able to take that...so maybe THAT is the thing behind my having no credit.

I can see how Meredith would hate to share credit with me at the meeting which sold the play..or on opening night..or in reviews or interviews which follow a hit show..He hates to even share the limelight with me at home. Both he and Rini want this to be just a total Meredith Willson success and that's that. That's how they presented it to their friends..and even my friends on the coast..I'm sure that's how Sterling has had it reported to him..and I'm sure that's how Earl Hall heard it.. As far as I can find out, the only one he has acknowledged collaboration to.....is me. When he talks to anyone else it is

strictly a ^{our} play by Meredith Willson. This is what it is pretty hard for me to believe. I would be so proud and so thrilled to share credit with him.

SO...he sold the play as his and went back to the coast without saying one word to me whatever about either money or credit...Not one word. Leaving it up to me to start defending myself, or else letting him just take it as his own

He told me Ernie and Cy would be out there to start casting during the last part of July, and that production would start in January. He didn't once mention a contract, money or credit..or any arrangement whatever with me for the fact that it was fundamentally my play!! The whole thing is just too fantastic to believe, especially from someone who is usually as direct as Meredith

It was a pretty dirty trick I think, to create a situation where I have to start whatever talk there naturally has to be about it. For him to just take my play...sell it...say nothing whatever about it..leave town...and let me have to either speak up or...fold up..seems to me a pretty cruel thing to do.

Bill says he has seen that happen in business many times. Somebody will make a way to do something underhanded which puts somebody else in a tough spot.. and then the guy on top will just keep quiet so that the guy he has stepped on will have to either just take it and keep quiet...or start the fight and seem to be trouble maker, and usually the guy on the little end of it doesn't dare fight,,or hates to start an argument so much that he won't, so the big guy has just put himself in the place of advantage knowing that he is pretty safe.

Of course what I resent the most and what really just makes me ^{feel that they} boil..is that Meredith thus puts me in a place where I have to either accept nothing at all. or take whatever he chooses to give me...as charity!!! Under the circumstances this is really unthinkable..it is so dirty. Nobody should ~~be~~ condescending to give me any part of this play..either money or credit. Both are mine, fairly worked for and fairly earned. I have given him a basic idea and details for a play which all his money and prestige couldn't buy anywhere else. He has tried ⁷ it. Stage stars from all positions of importance have tried it..You just can't find or buy or get writers who can think in terms of big ideas. Thousands of dollars in advances are paid to writers ahead of time on the expectation of their coming thru and then they can't..and don't...Meredith knows this well enough. He himself has tried to get them and they are not to be had.

In this case they don't have to take a chance on advancing me money. I have already delivered the goods. And I not only gave him the stuff that enabled him to write dialogue for a play and work out a story..he did it with material which I myself could have made good use of to the same end. It was as valuable a foundation for me as it proved to be for him. A play very definitely as much by me as by him...and he has no right whatever to claim credit or to sell it on his own terms. This is just a situation ~~which~~ which he has created to his own advantage..and into which he has maneuvered himself because he could ~~after~~ after I gave him the basic material which made it possible.

If he ^{wanted} ~~could~~ wanted a whole play by Meredith Willson, why didn't he work on Fedalia? That's a sample of his ability to think and create a play base!!

Well..so he went back to the coast without any mention to me at all of either money or credit..He only said that he had decided to put my opening scene back in place of his and would I rewrite it for him..which I did, two weeks ago. He promptly phoned and also wrote and said it was elegant, spots that were sensational, handled as deftly as I always handle things etc.... discussed another spot or two with me, but still no mention of money or credit, so I wrote just one line..I said "What about money for this play?"

Jake had meanwhile seen Ernie and Cy who said they knew I had worked out the basic idea for the play, the leading character etc..but they wanted to keep their association with Meredith friendly and so they were not going to stick their necks out to settle any "family quarrel"...

So Meredith had accomplished just what he had tried to do; he had put me in a spot where to get just fair credit and money for my work..both the producers and I would be "sticking our necks out" to speak of it..and if I did I would be made to feel that I was starting a "family quarrel"...

They were about to go to London, and said they would continue with the business with Meredith when they returned. They are due back today, the 24th...and Jake has a meeting about my position in the thing next Monday. What he expects to do or what I can do..I'm sure I don't know. I assume they will go to the coast right afterward.

Jake is as baffled as I am. Of course he knows as well as I do how much of this is mine and he saw the last scene I wrote which Meredith has used word for word and which, as I say, is almost the difference between a good play and a bad one.

He thinks I should just state my position squarely to Meredith, demand full credit as a co-author and a full share of the money. And maybe I will, I think I might as well..I've lost Meredith anyway as a brother so I suppose I might as well get what I can from the wreck of the relationship. No matter how it comes out from here on he can never seem the same to me.

Jake says that even if I am willing to sit down and keep quiet and take it on the chin, he is entitled to an agents commission after all and he is not so sure he will sit down and take it. I don't yet know what we will do..I'll see him on Monday before he sees Ernie and Cy and I have a hunch they are going to avoid him and there won't be any meeting at all. I think that as they said to Jake before, they are just going to get behind their locked doors and leave me to battle it out with Meredith alone.

But now as to his reply to my question about money:

When ^{his} the letter first came, I read it quickly and the thing that gave me a shock was his saying he had "given me" \$23,000 in the past and figured that was enough. Also that he had considered giving me some kind of credit but had decided not to

~~.....~~ I didn't have the courage to read the letter again until yesterday. And re-reading it I found a somewhat different construction to what he said..which isn't quite as bad, though still pretty rotten. The only difference is that instead of being total zero..this is slightly above zero.. since it will, I hope, enable me to work something out which is a little bit fair...without getting to a place where I just can never want to see him again to the end of our lives which would be an awful thing. He'll never seem the same to me..but it would still be better to be able to see each other, even with a different feeling toward each other, than to be cut off from relationship entirely. I don't know whether anything can work out or not..but this gives me a little hope at least whereas before I felt that there was none.

What he said was exactly this: "I do not expect any remuneration until the play is produced. If there is any then I will share it with you as I have shared everything I have ever made with you which, as I look back, adds up to about \$23,000. I also considered giving you some kind of collaboration credit but didn't, because I didn't know what kind you would want since I made the professor a phoney musician and put in the spastic boy both of which you were opposed to."

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This makes the situation only slightly better...it still does not change the fact that he has created a spot for himself where he puts me on the defensive which is most unfair, and that he has assumed charge of both the money and the credit which is also unfair..and dishonest. He has no right to either, any more than I have. It is better only in that he does admit that some of both is due me..it also gives me opportunity to reply to him without openly starting a fight about the thing.

On the other hand it is still pretty sickening that he would take such an almighty attitude..and be able to think himself into a position of such condescension about it..doling anything out to me..as if it were his to dispense any money or credit he feels like tossing at me I can get down on my hands and knees to pick up.

I am sure I dont know of his "sharing" any money with me that he has made. The salary he paid me, I worked for in digging up material. I'm sure he doesnt speak of "sharing" with his arranger or secretary as though he were a big bear guy putting them on a personal pension. Outside of the salary I worked for, he has lent me money three times, \$200.00....\$150...and \$75.00. I never would ask him for money no matter how much I needed it because he always made it difficult and embarrassing; never with affection or glad that he could do it. or "You're so welcome"....he always made me feel small and desperate and this isnt the first time he has thrown ^{his help} up to me.

It makes me wish I had never accepted a gift from him, or even a dinner, or a trip. He can be sure I never will again.

However what he has "given" me or paid me in the past has nothing whatever to do with what I have earned by working out this play; good hard sweat and work. I am not asking or expecting him to share anything with me..and certainly never will take a dollar or a favor from him again and I only hope they do not send me any more gifts, although the only thing he ever gave me of value was a diamond and ruby ring which I think you remember and which I shall certainly return to him as soon as this is settled about the play.

As for his not receiving any remuneration until production, that is ridiculous and not at all a business procedure. I am sure George Gruskin wouldnt permit it and I dont see how Meredith would himself. The only reason for any such thing would be that he wants to be the big guy with Ernie and Cy and say he doesnt need any money now and just never mind..doing it all on a friendly basis. But he has no right to do that under the circumstances. Maybe he doesnt need any money and doesnt want any business arrangement but I am half of the play and I want both. He had no right to button up a deal without asking me if it met with my approval..or Jake's. If they would pay me a thousand dollars for a one page outline they would pay a good sized check for a finished play. If he doesnt want his half..I do want mine. Ernie did tell Jake there "wasnt going to be any contract" which Jake couldnt understand and neither can I. If there isnt any contract there isnt any sale.

As for credit..if he didnt know what I would want, all he had to do was ask me. He could have said "Look, Sister how do you feel about this? Do you think half of the work is yours..or more..or less or what? Do you mind if I use your professor and your basic idea and people and end and beginning, or do you prefer to finish them up yourself in your own way?" No reason why he couldnt have said that/ Why leave it to me to defend my right to credit, and ask what he means to do about it.

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Jake expects to talk to the producers tomorrow and see what they will do. They know all about how much of it is mine but they probably will not be willing to do anything because as they say, they don't want to be in a quarrel or get Meredith mad at them. They say if he is going to be mad at anybody it better be me. I just cant believe he would do such a lousey trick. Maybe its up to me to write him and go thru the miserable routine of asking for the money I have ~~earned~~ earned with work on this thing..and the cre

Or maybe I'll just take the easier way and skip it. The horrible thing is that he has put me so unfairly in a position to have to take what he chooses to give me rather than to get what I have earned.

Well..I'm still too stunned and amazed by the whole thing to know what to do. It's an awful ending to such a big hope and so sure a dream because for over a year they have told me it would be a hit..and all the while I knew it was mine....Now, after all the work and hope and waiting..Meredith just steps in and takes credit for it...I jst cant believe it..I sure dont know where we go from here. I suppose that's why I'm writing this letter.

Well....maybe if he can do it..I can take it. Right now I dont know whether I can or not..Anyway that's it to date.

Lots of love

Dixie

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City Editor

MASON CITY GLOBE-GAZETTE

A LEE GROUP NEWSPAPER

LEE P. LOOMIS, Publisher

MASON CITY, IOWA

Aug. 26, 1954

RECEIVED DEPARTMENT

Dear Dixie:

Your letter about the play
has just caught up with me.

It saddens me.

Two such wonderful people
should be able to work out their differences.

And this you MUST remember, Dixie:

The thing is going to rise or fall
on its music, not the plot. That's my studied
conviction after a couple of hours' exposure
to it.

Don't--Please DON'T--let the matter
develop into a family brawl. Everybody--including
your old home town--would be hurt by that.

Believe me to be

Sincerely yours,

Earl

APPENDIX C
PAGES OF DIXIE WILLSON'S THE SILVER TRIANGLE

This appendix consists of photographic reproductions of the first four pages of Dixie Willson's manuscript for *The Silver Triangle*. It was located in 2002 in boxes containing her manuscripts and personal papers, currently in the holdings of Music Man Square. The poor quality of the reproduction is due in large part to the fact that it was made from the third carbon copy, the only known surviving copy, as the other carbons have since disappeared. It is suspected that the carbon copies were destroyed in an attempt to keep Dixie's claims about authorship from becoming public knowledge.

THE SILVER TRIANGLE

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

River City High School Assembly Room on the evening of July 4th 1918.

About a minute and a half before rise of the curtain, as house lights very slowly dim, we hear an intermittent POP...BANG...BIFF...of fire crackers, irregular in timing, also in volume. Thirty seconds of this is followed by a spirited chord on the piano, prefacing an introduction to COLUMBIA THE GEN OF THE OCEAN which equally spirited voices (in the volume and quality of a small town public gathering) proceed to sing, the leading soprano being the high pitched tremble of Eulaly Breen, with the next most prominent singer, a male bass's hum drum unmelodic harmony.

On this singing, the curtain rises to disclose the evening's exercises. The Assembly Room appears to be well filled. The rostrum and seats are set at a 3/4 angle to the actual theater foot lights, the rostrum i.e., extending catty-corner from the second or third wing toward stage center and the back drop of a black board on which large letters in colored chalk read "July 4th, 1918." Above the board are steel engravings of Rosa Bonheur's Horse Fair and a head of Shakespeare. Also a large map and two bunting rosettes. Standing alongside the board is a table holding a globe of the world, ~~and~~ a huge encyclopedea and a bust of Lincoln. Adjacent to this is an upright piano which can also operate as a piano and at which Patty Washburn is playing Columbia.

The rostrum's proscenium is framed with local ads featuring properly dated commodities such as Fairy Soap, Iard, Cadwell's Livery Stable with fancy rigs for hire and Barney Howell's dependable hack and bus service to and from the depot.

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Connecting the rostrum with the stage floor are three or four cloth steps, or red one white one blue.

A row of not-too-professional looking footlights is lighted. The rostrum stage background is a painted "palace" drop. The seats of the assembly room are folding chairs at a corresponding angle to the rostrum and facing it, of course with a proper space between ^{the} rostrum, ~~stage~~ and the first row of seats which angle into the right wings of the actual theater so as to create the illusion of a complete auditorium, this effect materially assisted by lighting which fades them out behind the first two rows so that persons in the third row and the fourth are little more than shadows fading out entirely so that the seats appear to go on for several more rows behind these first four, the rostrum lights played up brightly and the auditorium lights played down.

Persons in the first two rows of the Assembly room audience are largely those whom we will later know as persons of the play, among them Oliver Hicks, George Green, Mrs. Britt and her son Tommy holding a 22 caliber rifle. Nancy is in the first row in a pretty summer dress complete with blue sash. There is a sprinkling of children, all ages and in the seats behind with other personalities of the play are extras who will be needed later for street scenes, singing of hymns, another Assembly room scene et al.

The irregular sound of outside firecrackers of all sizes continues throught the entire scene; for the most part small ones but an occasional buster and one entire bunch.

At rise of the curtain, with Matty at the piano, the singing is being led by Hulaly on the rostrum. She may wear either a fancy summer evening dress with a small plume in her hair, or be costumed as Columbia. In the latter guise she will lead the singing either entirely or partly with her torch, but whip-

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ping it in place for the finishing note for which she takes a high one!
Or it may be funnier for her to proudly hold it aloft throat, leading with
her free hand.

In the rostrum's right front corner is a stand on which we see a large
handsome white frosted cake conspicuously trimmed with an icing flag. It
stands against a placard reading "Compliments of the Busy Bee Bakery."

With the finish of COLUMBIA, Eulaly takes over in a way which establishes
her unmistakably as impressario of the evening and of the community. Stepping
as far forward on the rostrum as possible, she clasps her hands at waist level
(putting down the torch if she is costumed with one).

EULALY:

Now may I take a few moments of this glorious Fourth in our..ahem..

(she continues two keys higher)

..glorious country, to thank each and every one of you patriotic
River Citizens for your presence here tonight bringing in the bacon as
it were..

a twitter of laughter at her own light phrase

...for our hope to build new benches and tables in the Clay Banks
Picnic Park. As the day folds its wings ..

she speaks a bit dramatically now

...as night steals away, and this glorious 4th is lost in the great ^{limbo}/~~land~~
of forgotten things, we will leave...

a hasty glance at a card in the palm of her hand

...we will leave our dear posterity a heritage of tables and benches
under the spreading trees of the Clay Banks. Every fifty cent ticket
here tonight will add a board or a nail to a table or a bench where dur-
ing the years to come, our children and our children's children, will

gather together in the joy of light hearted abandon.

She wipes her eyes; recovers herself with a bit of effort
Now Uncle Sam, Martha Washington and Paul Revere, impersonated by three little
tykes from the second grade, will entertain us with a flag drill.

She glances into the wings

Ready children?

She nods to Fatty at the piano

Mr. Washburn, are you ready?

She lightly taps her left hand on her right in time to the music as it
begins..irresistably directing as the three children march on stage with
which Eloyly herself retires, walking backward into the rostrum wings.

Fatty plays enough of some patriotic march (his improvised bass chords
missing harmony by quite a margin) to bring two boys and a little girl
to the center of the rostrum stage where they face the assembly room audien
I would very much like Martha to be a colored child. They are dressed in
home-made costumes with very bad, slightly awry white cotton wigs upon which
tri-corns perilously ride. They carry small American flags. As they reach
the right spot, the music stops abruptly in the very middle of a phrase, an
Uncle Sam/^{comes}~~steps~~ forward to the to- rostrum step where, holding his flag at
arms length, he speaks:

UNCLE SAM:

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States and to the
republic for which it stands. One nation indi-

He swallows, head on one side, chin ducking emphasis to the
effort as he finally accomplishes the word

...wizable, with liberty and justice for all.

He bows as Martha comes forward and takes a position on the
second step.

APPENDIX D
CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF WILLSON'S WORKS

Willson's works are here listed by copyright date. In some cases this can be confusing, as the composer is known to have written several works well before they were copyrighted. Significant examples of this are the dates of the two symphonies, which herein appear as 1946 and 1948, *The Missions of California symphony* listed before the *Symphony of San Francisco*, which was Willson's first. If the copyright date is unknown, then the work is listed by the date of its first appearance. This list should be considered 'fluid', as works continue to be identified from various sources such as old radio broadcasts.

- 1927 *Two*
- 1928 *Parade Fantastique*
My Cavalier (with Hugo Riesenfeld)
American Fox Trot
- 1929 *Skyline*
The Tornado
The Seige
The Phenomena
Aramis March
Defiance
Odalisque
- 1930 *The Jamboree March*
- 1931 *One Day of Love*
Woe Is Me
- 1933 *Show Us The Way, Blue Eagle*
- 1934 *The Song of Steel*
O.O. McIntyre Suite: Thingamabobs, Thoughts While Strolling, Local Boy Makes Good
- 1935 *Radio City Suite*
- 1936 *Smile With Me*
contributed music to Republic serial *Undersea Kingdom*
- 1937 *House of Melody* (John Nesbitt lyrics)
Our Destination Is Heaven (music to Edna Fischer's lyrics)
- 1938 *Wings on High*
- 1939 *Rhapsody in Green*
- 1940 (*The Liberty Bell* - arrangement of Sousa march)
Rock-a-Bye Your Baby with a Long Underwear Song (for Maxwell House Coffee Time)
The Great Dictator piano score (ten items)
The Great Dictator cues
The Great Dictator - The Incident
Zigeuner (with Charles Chaplin)
- 1941 *Falling Star* (with Charles Chaplin and Eddie Delange from *The Great Dictator*)
Never Feel Too Weary To Pray (from *The Little Foxes*)
Little Foxes cues
You and I
Two in Love
- 1942 *America Calling*

- Remember Hawaii*
My Ten Ton Baby and Me
And Still the Volga Flows
The Tuscarora
Gangway, You Rats, Gangway
 1943 *Fire Up – Carry On To Victory*
Yankee Doodle Girl
Mind If I Tell You I Love You?
KC-Toky-I-O
The Jervis Bay
 1944 *Iowa*
Hit the Leather
Mail Call March
 1945 *Whose Dream Are You?* (from "O.O. McIntyre Suite" 2nd Movement)
The Same Little Chapel
Happy, Happy, Happy (+8 more) Wedding Day (for Command Performance)
 1946 *The Missions of California* (2nd Symphony)
Pi Phi Sweetheart
There Must Be Little Cupids in the Briny
Moon, Moon
Canada Dry Show cues
Radio Suite: Gracie, George, Postman, Postman Visits the Burns House, Bill
 1947 *I'd Like a Memory*
Canada Dry and I
Ford Summer Series cues
Oh, I Wanna Go
 1948 *Symphony of San Francisco*
Iowa Indian Song
Just Becuz
San Gabriel
Symphonic Variations on an American Theme
Cow Ponies Always Weep Just a Little
All Puckered Up For Love
 1949 *Gone To Chicago*
Every Day (radio show theme)
The Peony Bush
Memories I'll Never Forget
JELLO Pudding Sounds
JELLO Shimmer
Old JELLO Theme
JELLO Family Round
Willson Tag
Tapioca Polka
 1950 *An American Anthem*
The California Story
May the Good Lord Bless and Keep You

- Derry-Up, Derry-Down Dey*
Anthem of the Atomic Age (with Pastor Mark Hogue)
The Falstaff Meredith Willson theme song
This Is It
While We Were Young
And There I Stood With My Piccolo
The Big Show incidental music
Iowa Fight Song
Till I Met You/Till There Was You (The Music Man)*
 1951 *I See the Moon*
Let Freedom Ring
It's Easter Time
Any Town Is Paris When You're Young
Here Comes the Springtime
It's Beginning To Look Like Christmas (Here's Love)*
Laura Lee (lyrics and waltz adaptation of Aura Lee)
Don't Put Bandanas on Bananas
The Little Hours Music
Hullabaloo (for The Big Show)
How I Love the Music of a Band (for The Big Show)
You Can't Have a Show Without Durante (with Sammy Cahn for The Big Show)
Three Chimes of Silver
Zing Zing, Zoom Zoom
 1952 *I Take a Dim View*
Banners and Bonnets (for The Salvation Army)
Answer the Call (for The Red Cross)
I Got News
The Margarets' Waltz (for The Big Show)
Let's All Do the Festival Waltz
Who Needs What Moonlight?
Hallelujah, It's Tallulahvision at Last (for All Star Revue)
It's Half Past Kissin' Time and Time To Kiss Again
Fedalia
Chords
 1953 *Practice Makes Perfect*
Music Across the Waters
Mother Darling
Piccolo Polka
I Take Just as Much Pride in My Dear Little Bride
Finagle
A Child's Letter
Ignore Dior
I'll Never Say Goodbye to You Again
Cherokee Kid
Thirty-two Bars of I Love You
Nylons

Politely
The World's Your Oyster
You Will Hear It Soon
My Little Bird
Lawn Mower Waltz
Sneezing Violins
Ike's Golf Game
Annaconda Copper
Arkansas
We're Spending Our Honeymoon in Escrow
A Chuckle a Day
Indian Music
Centennial March
If There Were No Women at All
If There Were No Men in the World
Chestnut Street
I Know It and You Know It
My Grandmother's Grandfather's Clock
Husband
It's Good For You
My Signature
Afraid
Dining Car
Mule Horse Sense
Running Water
The Last Word
Magic Valley
Fan Mail
I Love You
Old Fashioned Waltz
Spindletop
Passengers Will Kindly Step to the Back of the Bus
Callico Square Dance
Fillamaroo
Occupancy of this Building is Limited to 382 Persons by Order of the NY Fire
Department
Three Ways Up
Lift Up Your Voice
I'll Sing No Duet with You
Baie Verte La
Timbuctoo
Crypto-Vestimenta-Cyclo-Furo-Mania
The World Famous Horseshoe Curve
Rosalie
At the Junction of the Chenango and Susquehanna Rivers
Boy Meets Girl

Bluestem Bowl
Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina
Palmy Pinellas Peninsula
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Chuck Wagon Gang
Everybody Knows Everybody
Toot-a-Loor
Gold Rush Towns
Waukegan Was a Thriving and Prosperous Town Before Jack Benny Came Along
Dynamite Blasting
Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina
Timpanogos Glacier
The Doors of the World Swing on New Britain Hinges
Bowbells, North Dakota
Cadenza
Blue Ridge Mountains (Tennessee style)
Florida Oranges
Complexities of Radio
Two Famous Words
To Shorten or Not To Shorten
Twenty-First Century
The City (background music)
A Song Coming On (for All Star Revue)
Mason City, Go
Green Bay, Wisconsin
1954 *Alabama Christmas*
Blow
Wisconsin Cheese
Jamboree
Gary, Indiana (The Music Man)*
Canada Dry Water
Ford's Out in Front
On The Big Red Letter
God Bless the One I Love
Roving and Dreaming
Hi Lee, Hi Low
We're Going to Schenectady
Wonderful Plan
Eat, Drink and Be Healthy
I Want To Go To Chicago
Kiss the Girls Good Morning
For I For S Forever
Florida Fresh Frozen Concentrate
1955 *Freedom Song*
1956 *Share the Luck (for the Red Cross)*
1957 *(The Music Man – see also above for additional titles*)*

Rock Island
Iowa Stubborn
Ya Got Trouble
Goodnight, My Someone
Seventy-Six Trombones
Sincere
The Sadder But Wiser Girl for Me
Pick-a-Little, Talk-a-Little/Good Night, Ladies
Marian the Librarian
My White Knight
The Wells Fargo Wagon
It's You
Shipooopi
Lida Rose
Will I Ever Tell You?
 1960 *(The Unsinkable Molly Brown)*
Belly Up to the Bar Boys
I Ain't Down Yet
I'll Never Say No
Are You Sure?
Leadville Johnny Brown
My Own Brass Bed
Dolce Far Niente
Chick-a-Pen
Bon Jour
If I Knew
Happy Birthday, Mrs. J.J. Brown
Bea-u-ti-ful People of Denver
I've A'Ready Started In
Keep-A-Hoppin'
The Denver Police
 1961 *My Kansas, My Home (Here's Love*)*
Newman High School Fight Song (lyrics to Paul Yoder's "The Band")
 1962 *(from The Music Man motion picture)*
If You Don't Mind My Saying So
Being in Love
 1963 *(Here's Love)*
Parade
The Big Clown Balloons
Arm in Arm
You Don't Know
Adeste Fidelis March (arranged by Meredith Willson)
The Bugle
Here's Love
My Wish
Plastic Alligator

- Pine Cone and Holly Berries*
Look, Little Girl
Expect Things To Happen
Dear Mister Santa Claus
Love, Come Take Me Again
She Hadda Go Back
That Man Over There
 1964 (from *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* motion picture)
Colorado, My Home
Star Parade cues
He's My Friend
 1968 *The American Legion March*
 1969 (1491)
Pretty Girl
Get A Map
The Silken Song
Birthday ...
The Siege at Loha 3
I For My Glory Land
Sail On
Woman
Every Woman Is A Queen
But I Will Never Say
Tio Paco
Isabella Catholica
The Trastamara Rose
The Queen and the Sailor
The Wonderful Plan
Genius
With Love
Why Not?
Lady
Lash the Wheel
What Does A Queen Have?
 1970 *Iowa - A Place To Grow*
Mass of the Bells
Alma Mater Hanover College (music)
 1971 *Ask Not* (first played on CBS television 1964)
 1974 *A Suite for Flute*
W.I.N. (Whip Inflation Now)

Works with uncertain or unverifiable copyright dates:

And That Is That
Answer Me

British Grenadiers
Buffalo Fight Song
Cabadaster
Cadence
Christmas Presents
Complaint Fanfare
Country Tune
Do Sol Do
Dosi Dos
Fiddle Iddle Up
For A Song
Fourth, The
G Minor Is My Favorite Key
Gay Friends Are Essential
Gentle and Sentimental
Gentleman Tramp Cues
Goodnight, My Darling
Haffner
Heart Fund Valentine Cues
Here Comes the Queen
Horse Sense
I Know Why
I May Never Fall In Love With You
It Is G It Is Minor It Is Mozart
Josephine
Just Like A Song
Just Like A Woman
Melody Man, The
Mule, The
Now We Sing
Number Four
Oh, Where Can There Be
Oh, Where Oh, Where
Polonaise Militaire
Rakoczy March
Remington Rollamatic March
Riverside Drive
Robert Schumann
Scherzo, The
Sequence
Sing Fiddle Sing
Summer Breeze Song
This Concerto Has It
This Is the Song
Toodelso
Up Where People Are

Up Where The Joke's Going On
Very Giacoso
What A Wonderful Song
Where's The Third One?
Yuma and Fun

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Valerie A. Austin was born in Massachusetts on the 27th of January, delaying her birth by nearly five weeks possibly so as to share a birthdate with Mozart. Her mother was not amused. Her parents separated when she was young, and at the age of six she moved with her mother and sister to Charleston, West Virginia. The remainder of her childhood was spent there, and the indigenous music and culture of that State strongly influenced Austin's subsequent interest in Appalachian customs. While in high school Austin was honored as a "Young Columbus Ambassador" by Parade magazine. As a result of this award she travelled to Ireland where she met and made presentations to the Irish president, the American ambassador to Ireland, and the Lord Mayor of Dublin. It was during this trip the Austin first heard traditional Irish music and was struck by its relationship to Appalachian music.

Soon thereafter Austin accepted a performance scholarship and matriculated into West Virginia University. During her years at this university she was awarded numerous scholarships and honors, mostly for performance on trumpet, her major instrument. During her junior year Ms. Austin won a seat in the faculty brass quintet and subsequently enjoyed much travel and performance with this group. After her 1985 graduation with a bachelor's degree in music education, Austin took a position with the Kanawha county board of education. In 1987 she began her successful tenure as band and chorus director for Dunbar High School, where she remained until the school's closure in 1990. At this time Austin entered the University of Florida to pursue a master's degree in music history and literature. During her time at this institution Austin was active in the Renaissance Ensemble, eventually rising to the position of assistant director. During the summers of 1991 and 1992 she held internships at the ITMA in Dublin.

During the 1993-94 academic year she was awarded a Rotary International Graduate Ambassadorial Scholarship to study at Trinity College, University of Dublin, in Ireland.

Upon her return to Florida, Austin accepted a position as music instructor at the P.K. Yonge Developmental Research school of the University of Florida. During her seven years there she gained tenure and served on the committee which designed the P.K. Yonge Performing Arts Center. She began her doctoral work, concurrently becoming one of the first National Board Certified teachers in music and earning all three Orff methodology levels. Austin took a leave of absence from P.K. Yonge after completing her doctoral exams. While writing her dissertation she has held several one-year positions, at the University of Vermont, Tennessee Tech University, and Stephen F. Austin University. Her hobbies include reading and travel.