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SPOTLIGHT ARTICLE
04/03/2012

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Dr. Elmer Copley

"A Man of Gigantic Proportion"

LINDSBORG, KANSAS - 04/03/2012--

Lindsborg is host to the longest running performance of Handel's *Messiah* in North America. The longest continual conductor of *Messiah* for the Bethany Oratorio was Dr. Elmer Copley. In a literal sense and a figurative sense, Copley was a large man, standing at 6'6 1/2 feet tall with a colossal wing span which was useful when conducting a grand style oratorio. Beginning in 1960 with the untimely death of Alvin Reimer, who was recently selected as the Bethany Oratorio Society music director. Copley agreed to step in just weeks before rehearsals started. With Copley as an emergency replacement, no one believed a legend would be born.



Dr. Elmer Copley

Elmer Copley was born on August 4, 1925. As he grew up in Davenport Iowa, music was not considered part of the equation. He joined the Army at the end of World War II. After serving in the military, he attended Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois. He did not excel as a business major, but then a change came about; Copley decided to take a risk and become a musician. The rest is artistic and musical history, even though it did take awhile to get there.

Copley studied with Dr. Henry Veld at Augustana. He credited Veld with the influence in making him the musician he became. Copley also met Ruth Anderson on a choir tour. This was the start of a family of musicians. After graduating from Augustana he returned to the Army for thirteen months. During this time, Elmer and Ruth were married on Palm Sunday, March 18, 1951. They packed up after his military discharge and moved to New York City where Copley studied at Juilliard School of Music from 1952-1953 with Bernard Taylor. By then Rebecca, their daughter was born, and Copley was called to teach at Augustana as an assistant to Dr. Veld, his former teacher. He conducted the Augustana Seminary Chorus from 1953-1960.

After the death of Reimer, the President of Bethany College contacted Copley and offered him the challenge bringing together a widely varied group of talent and personalities almost instantaneously. Copley directed the Oratorio in a grand style with over 400 people in the chorus

alone. As time went on, he often held auditions for soloists in New York. To sing as a soloist in the Bethany Oratorio in the Lindsborg Messiah Festival with Copley conducting was the aspiration of singers in the Metropolitan Opera, Carnegie Hall and all over the world. Ruth, a musical artist as well, was a large part of the Bethany Messiah Festival as the pianist for two or more soloists and the Bethany Choir during the week. Also, Elmer thought it important to socialize with the soloists and Ruth provided legendary hospitality.

It was not all work and no play, Copley also was in Kiwanis, a bowler, a bridge player, loved to travel, and in a gourmet club. He worked promoting the Swedish heritage of Lindsborg and the Community Arts Council. Another one of Copley's success stories was Broadway RFD. In 1969, the theatre troupe was in debt. When asked to direct, he chose *Carousel* which put them in the black. He went on to direct six other RFD plays and was the leading man in several. He also loved basketball. His daughter Rebecca said that if Copley needed more male singers in the Bethany Choir, he'd head to the gym and challenge reluctant singers to a game of ball. He would say, "I win, you sing."

He loved people of all walks of life, a true egalitarian. However, he was serious about music and tough in a good way. He knew how to get the best performance out of a singer, even his own daughter Rebecca who studied with her father at Bethany, and became an international concert/opera singer who has sung to great acclaim all over the world, mentions being the Festival soloist with her father as conductor as one of the most marvelous moments in her life.

Dr. Elmer Copley was a big human in all ways. He lived by his words that music is not just notes. And every year, the message of Handel's *Messiah* came alive and new once again.



For event and travel information, call or stop by the Convention and Visitors Bureau located at 104 E. Lincoln, Lindsborg, Kansas 67456. Ph: (785) 227-TOUR (8687) or Toll free: (888) 227-2227. E: cvbdir@lindsborgcity.org. W: www.visitlindsborg.com .

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Dear friends,

I enjoyed the article on Dr. Copley. He was, indeed, a great man, and he helped inspire me to follow the career path I've had. However, there was one factual inaccuracy I feel compelled to correct, since this sort of article is the kind of thing a student might use researching a paper and end up with an error in his/her findings.

Dr. Copley was not the longest conductor/director of the oratorio society. That record is held by the subject of my doctoral dissertation, Hagbard Brase. Brase was organist for something like 11-14 years and then directed for 31 years (not including the time he took over a performance after he retired when his replacement fell ill after starting a performance of *Messiah*).

Copley's tenure got him into the upper 20s, I think, even counting the times he was on sabbatical (at least twice during Copley's tenure there were guest conductors who filled in while he was gone--Pelz once for sure, and I've forgotten the other one or two).

Since Easter is past I doubt you will want to run another piece on the festival until next year. I thought I should point out the error anyway (after I had double-checked--my first reaction when I read your release was: Did Copley stay long enough to overtake Brase?) Maybe next year you can do a piece on Brase and correctly identify him as the conductor of the oratorio society who enjoyed the longest tenure.

I enjoy receiving the PRs and keeping up a little with what will always, in some way, be home.

Sincerely,

Ron

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