

LEGACY

Illuminating the Past, Informing the Present, Inspiring the Future



ROGER TENNEY

Editor's Note: This Legacy profile was submitted by Julie Aune, a former student of Roger Tenney and longtime ACDA-MN member.

Roger Tenney's formal training began at St. Olaf College where he sang in the choir and majored in music. After graduation in 1952, he spent two years in the army, then began teaching music/drama in Mountain Lake. In 1960, he was hired to teach a mixed high school choir, women's glee club and music theory in Owatonna. He taught at Owatonna for 32 years, directing three high school choirs, as well as the Roger Tenney Chorale and the Trinity Lutheran High School Church Choir. His graduate work included acquiring a Master's Degree at the University of Colorado and doctoral work at the University of Illinois. In recent years

he taught choral methods classes at St. Olaf, and worked with musical productions on the Princess, Holland, and Cruise lines from 1992-1998.

Mr. Tenney's career included the great honor of being named National Teacher of the Year in 1967. His choirs sang at state and regional ACDA conventions, as well as state and national MENC conferences. His leadership in and commitment to ACDA includes several years serving as president, SE District Chair, and chairing the committee for the FMC endowment fund.

When Mr. Tenney was selected as Owatonna Teacher of the Year, he submitted this philosophy of teaching essay that included the following belief statements: *"The purpose of my professional life is to give the students' lives direction and merit. The role of the teacher is to shine by reflected light, to bring learners to the fulfillment of their native potential, to facilitate their success so they will want to strive for even greater successes in each learning they attempt, to give them the love, care, and concern that will model for them the roles they will play as caring individuals, as parents, as life-long learners, as PEOPLE!"*

Roger's commitment to developing talent in all of his singers, and teaching life lessons is evident in a recent letter received from a former student on a significant birthday: *"Since I left high school 30+ years ago, I can't count the number of times when I have thought of you, your impact on my life, or how what you taught me has had an effect on my life and so many others. You taught me to take a small talent and be confident with that talent and use it in many ways. It not only has touched my personal life but my professional life as well."*



Teenage Roger's first choir at Zion Lutheran Church in Litchfield.

Look Magazine featured an article on Tenney when he was recognized as National Teacher of the Year winner. The article included his comment: “You can’t be aloof in my class... Use your mind. Use your heart.” An interviewed sophomore singer commented, “This man could take ten frogs and make them sing in harmony.” I can personally attest to Roger’s enthusiasm and passion, as I gave up precious summer days to take a summer school class so that I could add choir to an already full schedule for my senior year at Owatonna High School. It was a life-changing experience for me. We sang from our hearts. We sang a variety of quality, challenging, and beautiful choral pieces. We believed in the music, in our director, and ourselves. I recently interviewed my high school director and am pleased and honored to share portions of that interview with you.

Julie Aune: How did you decide to become a choral director?

Roger Tenney: I was raised in a very musical family. My mother organized us and we would often sing in different churches. My sophomore year in high school, the minister’s wife asked if I would like to direct the junior high choir. I said, “No, I don’t want to, I don’t know a thing about directing.” My mother said, “You begin Wednesday night at 7:00. Either that, or no dinner!” I enjoyed it and went on to direct the adult choir my senior year. I had thought of becoming a minister, but the church choir experience caused me to think about studying music. To think this started when I directed a children’s choir at Zion Lutheran Church as a high school sophomore in Litchfield! Another defining moment was when I sat in the front row listening to my sister sing in the St. Olaf Choir. I thought, “What utopia! That is what I’d like to do!”

JA: Could you share some of your experiences from your early years of teaching?

RT: When I returned from the army in the fall of ’52, it was difficult to find a teaching position with the school year already underway. In November, I was hired to teach K-12 music, speech and drama at Mountain Lake. When I asked about my duties, I was told that I was responsible for selecting, casting, rehearsing the junior class play to be presented in two weeks! So, I did it.

Mountain Lake had a strong choral tradition, so most students were involved in music. However, on day one at Owatonna High School, I found that I had 35 women and 13 men in my high school choir. On day two, I told the choir: “I need 18 more men to balance the choir. You get the men for me. I don’t care if they can sing or don’t want to be in the choir. Just bring them to me and we’ll see if I can convince them to be in the choir. I’ll

give you two weeks. If I don’t get 18 men I’m going to drop half the ladies.”

The next two weeks, I could hear screaming coming from the hallway. I’d say, “Do you want to be in choir?” “No way!” “Try it for two weeks and if you like it, fine, if you don’t you can drop out.” We picked up 20 men.

In the early years, we sang at the state fair. We won and were presented with a trophy at the fall concert. That helped to build the program. The choir sang at the World’s Fair in Seattle in 1962 and parent and singers raised funds to travel by train. The visibility helped the program grow. Additional choirs, Music History, and year round voice lessons were added. A new choir room designed by Fred Christiansen (Olaf’s son) was built.

JA: Who were the choirs and conductors who inspired you over the years?

RT: Olaf Christiansen was an influential teacher that I had while I was at St. Olaf. His understanding of the text was admirable. His interpretation of how the lyrics fit with the music added much feeling and understanding to each phrase line. He would sometimes work on one phrase line for an entire half hour. Sometimes it “arrived,” but often that didn’t happen until weeks later, or sometimes even in a concert. But, when it happened we knew it and it was like the gate to heaven had opened. Many a tear fell when this happened and we felt like we had ascended. When Olaf emoted, his look could be as sharp as a razor, but it was softened by love and determination.

I remember going back to Olaf in need of assurance or help. I told him that I get very nervous in the performances of my choir at Mountain Lake and even with my church choir at Windom. He said, “If you ever do not get nervous, get out of the field.”

JA: Was your style influenced by other directors?

RT: I studied under Norman Luboff, Robert Shaw, Olaf and Paul Christiansen. Each had a unique touch. F. Melius directed within a small square around his mid-section and Olaf would use larger space. Paul would go even larger. Which way is the right way? You develop your own style and sometimes it’s a combination of several, or it’s just your own!

JA: You have mentioned before that Brahms’ *Requiem* is a choral favorite. The *Look Magazine* article mentions your belief in choirs performing literature of all types. Programming music was one of your strengths, evidenced by the fact that Owatonna High School’s extensive choral library was a wonderful resource when you taught the Choral Literature course at St. Olaf. Do you have some choral favorites?



The maestro at work.

RT: When I studied under different directors, I would catch a ray of greatness in their chosen literature and personal compositions and would program it for the next school year and in years to come. My favorite was the Robert Shaw workshop where we presented Brahms' *Requiem* at the end of the week. I also enjoyed Shaw's arrangements, as well as those of the Christiansens, William Dawson, Norman Luboff, Eric Erickson, and Leland Sateren.

One of my top choral picks would be Gretchaninoff. I was fortunate to have low basses in my choir that could sing low C's and B's. Being a low bass myself, I was able to help basses sing low C by a method of relaxation and placement of mouth and throat which was relaxed and open. So, we did Russian music and it was grand.

JA: You played a key role in ACDA-MN development in the early years and served as one of the first state presidents. Could you elaborate on the value of ACDA? Why get involved?

RT: Those early years were exciting! We had such a vivacious group. It was always positive. The sharing of ideas and brainstorming was what led to Dialogue. Twenty-five years ago, several of us met in the back room of McDonald's in Sioux Falls during a break at the convention. We knew we needed something new and different. Alice Larson, Bob Scholz, and Axel Theimer planned the first summer ACDA event and we had 200 attendees!

ACDA provides a chance to converse and rub shoulders with other directors and hear great music and new literature. ACDA-MN added more regional meetings in the 1980s to help directors who needed help or to provide help to neighboring choirs. We tried to do this in each of the regional areas. The purpose was to help all – first year to thirty-five year teachers. Talks included things such as budget, exchanging purchased music, getting robes, choir trips, getting more men for choir, music group scheduling, credit for music on the honor roll, voice lessons, summer school teaching of voice, handling cuts, etc. Directors had a phone number they could call for "HELP, I THINK I AM DROWNING!"

ACDA-MN encourages collaboration, so four of us high school choir directors met at each other's schools and rehearsed their choir and critiqued one another. The critiques would happen over food at the guest director's home. In my area's collaborative group, directors included: Yosh Murakami from Northfield, Dick Larson from Austin, and others. It was fantastic!

JA: You were active in establishing the FMC Endowment Fund. Please elaborate on its development and purpose.

RT: The fund was established in 1997 after a concert honoring the 100th Anniversary of the start of F. Melius Christiansen's years at St. Olaf. Five choirs of Lutheran background sang individually and combined to sing "Beautiful Savior." The concert was given two times to standing room only audiences.

The resulting ticket money surplus became the seed money for the fund. I chaired the Endowment committee made up of Bud Engen, Curt Hansen, Geneva Eschweiler, and Murrae Freng. We established scholarships for students seeking further study in choral conducting.

JA: One of the highlights of your career must certainly have been being chosen as National Teacher of the Year. Can you share some of your memories of that honor?

RT: Highlights of that year included the honor of having my high school choir sing in the Rose Garden with President Johnson and Vice-President Hubert Humphrey presenting the award. We were privileged to give a full concert at the beautiful Washington Cathedral. My wife, Ethel and I flew from Washington, D.C., to New York City to appear on the Ed Sullivan Show. It was a thrill to speak and discuss the importance of education and the role of music in education in twenty-five different states, including Hawaii and Guam. It was a hectic year, but also a rewarding year that my family and I have never forgotten.

JA: Do you have any words of advice for choral directors?

RT: It's vital that you're enthusiastic. Get your singers excited about what the choir is doing! Let your students know that it's important to you to have their opinion. They need to feel that they are part of the process. If they feel part of the process, they will work harder! Don't be afraid to laugh!



Speaking in the Rose Garden flanked by President Johnson, Vice President Humphrey, White House staff and family.



Tenney in his cruise ship hospitality role.

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