



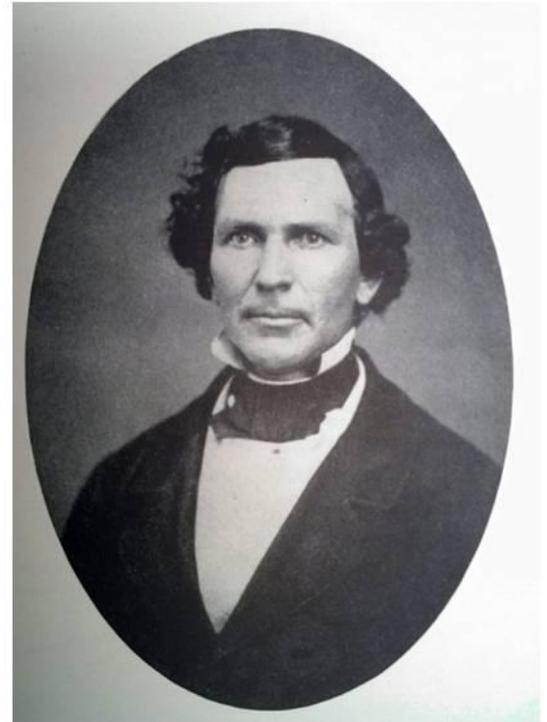
# *The Musical History of Oberlin*

Oberlin has long been a significant town in United States history, standing distinctly as a hotbed for abolition, women's rights, and racial equality in education. Alongside this progressive past, Oberlin's name is also largely associated with music and music making, as it is the home of one of the world's foremost musical institutions. Established in 1865, the Oberlin Conservatory of Music is the oldest continuously operating conservatory of music in the United States, and represented the United States' rise as a cultural force on the world stage. The conservatory set itself apart from the rest of the world because it too, like the college, accepted women and students of color on a regular basis. The development of a conservatory of music out of such a religious school however was by no means an easy progression as the institution's establishment would evidence. Music first found its way to Oberlin through the church tradition. As a result of the New England heritage of Oberlin's founders, liturgical music held great significance in the church as a centric part of worship. The town, having begun in 1833 as an attempt at forming a perfect Christian utopia, required that all of its residents agree to live by the standards delineated in the Oberlin Compact. Oberlin's very first choir was organized by the church Deacon T.P. Turner, one of Oberlin's first settlers, during the same year. One of this compact's statutes made weekly church attendance compulsory for all of the town's residents. As a result, everyone in the town took part in congregational singing, which in turn influenced the town culture almost as much as the sermons did.

*"From the earliest days, music was...for everybody-townsman, theologian, college student, and prep. The typical Oberlin student was a happy amateur. Music was a natural social activity. Like conversation or games."*

-Ernest B. Chamberlain, *The Music of Oberlin*

As a part of early Oberlin's mission to educate Christian preachers and missionaries, the training of singers and choir directors was also seen as vital to the development of well-equipped church leaders. The Oberlin Preparatory Academy, though not centrally musical, greatly urged musical training, particularly in singing. Oberlin is unique in the music world because it hired the first professor of music at an American institution of higher education. Yale graduate Reverend Elihu Parsons Ingersoll taught sight-singing and choir during the 1835-1836 school year.



George N. Allen, founder of  
Oberlin College's Department of Music

## Instrumental Music in the Church:

Contrary to what one might naturally assume, instrumental music was not always a part of liturgical music in Oberlin and was in fact frowned upon by many early leaders and residents in Oberlin. They felt that instrumental music was of a “worldly character” and hence too extravagant for the simplistic and humble existence that Oberlin’s first residents sought out. Met with strong sentiments favoring austerity for the sake of piety, church worship was mostly unaccompanied or a *capella*, literally meaning “from the head” in Italian. Instruments were only used occasionally to accompany vocal groups in small numbers; much more instrumentation than two or three would be considered a violation of Oberlin’s central values. The gradual introduction of more instruments in the church setting by those in favor of them proved divisive, causing one of Oberlin’s board members to resign in 1846 because “a vast amount of time had been expended for fashionable amusements and accomplishments, such as *Piano Music*.”<sup>1</sup> Conversely, more exposure to instruments in church gradually caused increased interest and participation in instrumental music to grow in Oberlin. Despite early controversies regarding the matter, Oberlin began offering instruction in instrumental music during the 1853-54 school year, specifically designated apart from the institution’s courses. In the following year of 1855, Oberlin’s first organ was built in what is known today as First Church, and received to great acclaim. The *Oberlin Evangelist* declared:



Cover of church hymnal *The Dulcimer* used by the Oberlin Choir in the earliest years- courtesy of Mary Louise Van Dyke

**ABSALOM.—An Oratorio.** 301

MUSIC SELECTED AND ARRANGED FROM THE BEST SOURCES, BY I. B. WOODBURY.

PRINCIPAL PERSONAGES.

ABSALOM, . . . . . Tenor.	DAVID, . . . . . Bass.
JOAB ( <i>David's General</i> ), . . . . . Tenor.	MESSENGER, . . . . . Baritone.
TAMAR ( <i>Sister to Absalom</i> ), . . . . . First Soprano.	MERAB ( <i>Attendant of Tamar</i> ), Second Soprano.
People, Warriors, Travellers, Priests, &c., &c.	

(The Orchestra Part, arranged for small Bands, viz., Violins, Bass Violin, Clarinet, and Brass Instruments, can be had, printed, of the Publishers.)

**No. 1. GOD OF MORNING AND OF EVENING.—Prayer.\*** (Supposed to be sung by travellers at the gates of Jerusalem.)

All the voices in unison. Music by A. MINE.

God of even-ing, and of moru-ing! Bound-less Source of

light and love! When the light is sweet-ly dawn-ing, Shine up - on us from a - bove.

Cres. Dim. St. Dip. Ch. Swell.

Pia. Forte or Organ. †

The first page of L.B. Woodbury’s *Absalom*, the first oratorio ever performed in Oberlin (1852).  
Courtesy of Mary Louise Van Dyke

“we are now prepared to say that we regard this organ...as a valuable auxiliary to religious worship.”<sup>1</sup> This organ served as the pioneer for instrumental pursuits in Oberlin for the many years to come. Just two years later, the town was home to about forty pianos.

### **The Legacy of George N. Allen:**

George N. Allen (pictured on page 1) would assume Ingersoll’s position at Oberlin College in 1837. A man of many talents, Allen led choirs, sang, played violin, and piano, and when not teaching music, he taught in the geology, and natural history departments. He also worked as the principal of Oberlin’s Preparatory Academy and as the College’s Secretary and Treasurer. During this time, being a musician or music teacher was not yet considered a full-time job. Allen hence sought out such employment aside from music. Lowell Mason, a notable Bostonian musical pedagogue and George Allen’s teacher, notably made a case early on for teaching and learning music, citing its mentally and emotionally salubrious benefits. He argued that music promoted physical stability and emotional peace while teaching cooperation, ultimately asserting that it was a benefit to society. Influenced by the work of his teacher, Allen dedicated himself to developing Oberlin’s music program. Early on, Allen formed the Oberlin Musical Union in 1837, which is “one of the oldest musical societies in the West.”<sup>2</sup> This group would give benefit concerts to raise funds for the building of Oberlin’s first concert hall in 1842, as well as other improvements in Oberlin. Allen was also responsible for bringing the piano to Oberlin in 1841, overcoming college trustees’ prejudices against piano as an acceptable branch of musical instruction. In 1855, Oberlin established the Department of Instrumental Music under George N. Allen, which would be the precursor to the conservatory of music, which was established in 1865.

### **What is a Conservatory?**



Fenelon B. Rice  
Oberlin Conservatory’s 2<sup>nd</sup> President

The word *conservatory*, though sometimes used to describe a school for drama or oratory, ultimately came to mean “a school for the cultivation of music in all its branches.” When Fenelon B. Rice, the Conservatory’s second president (1871-1901) took over after the joint first presidency of John P. Morgan and George Steele, the conservatory truly began to develop structurally into the musical institute of education that it is today. Rice, along with Morgan and Steele, were all graduates of Oberlin’s Academy of Music and the Leipzig Conservatory and had a distinct vision for greatness for the this American conservatory they sought to develop. This, the first American conservatory of music, was modeled in

structure and educational style after the Leipzig Conservatory, which the famous composer Felix Mendelssohn established in 1843. When the Oberlin Conservatory of Music was established, its core educational goals stated that it was meant for instruction in “cultivation of the voice, musical elocution, elementary principles of notation, harmony, thorough bass, piano, and

organ.”<sup>2</sup> Keeping in line with the founder’s values, the Conservatory initially had two divisions: The School of Church Music, and the School of Secular Music, which would ultimately overshadow the Church Music division. In the earliest years of the conservatory, Oberlin only offered instruction in string instruments, voice, piano, and organ, but in 1928, the wind band program that started under Arthur Miller would create a demand for professors that taught wind instruments and percussion. It was through these structural and ideological changes that the Oberlin Conservatory became the sort of musical institution that it is today.

### **Moving Toward the Present**

The musical culture of Oberlin seen today came about as a fusion of Sacred and Classical music’s influences. Musicians who came to teach from the Leipzig Conservatory fueled classical growth, while the New England protestant influences that Oberlin’s founders brought provided a firm foundation upon which the musical culture in the town thrived and ultimately gave way to the Conservatory’s establishment. In 1970, Robertson and Bibbins halls were built by Minoru Yamasaki, designer of the World Trade Center, to house the Conservatory, creating the distinctive appearance by which the school is known today. Since its establishment, the conservatory has produced hundreds of the world’s finest musicians and singers who can be found in many professional orchestras, opera companies, and other ensembles. To this very day, the Oberlin community remains true to its musical roots as a thriving musical environment in which both amateurs and professionals make all forms of music and put on countless concerts in every imaginable venue each year. These concerts span the musical spectrum from *a capella* groups and Indonesian Gamelan music, to orchestra concerts and operas. In the present, Oberlin Conservatory retains a strong link with the town through the Community Music School by which residents can study with conservatory students and local teachers. Townspeople and students alike can also participate in the Oberlin Musical Union. Much like in early Oberlin, music is very much alive in the community and still practiced and enjoyed by townspeople and student alike.

*Written in November 2013 by OHC student intern César Palacio,  
Oberlin College and Conservatory Class of 2016.*

**Oberlin Heritage Center, 73 ½ S. Professor Street, Oberlin, OH 44074  
440-774-1700, [www.oberlinheritagecenter.org](http://www.oberlinheritagecenter.org)**

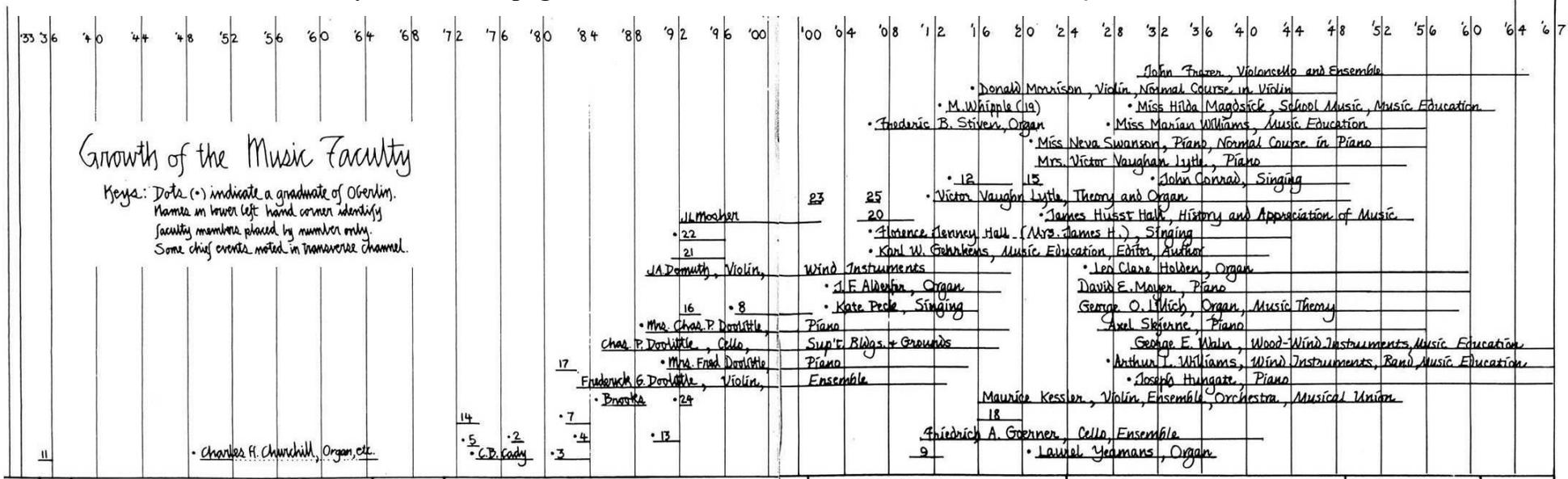
#### Sources Cited:

1. Chamberlain, Ernest B. *The Music of Oberlin and Some Who Made It*. Oberlin, Ohio: Oberlin History and Improvement Organization, 1967. Print.
2. Fletcher, Robert Samuel. “Music in Oberlin.” *A History of Oberlin College; from Its Foundation through the Civil War*. Vol. 2. New York: Arno, 1971. 784-808. Print

"Growth of Music Faculty" chart from pages 40-41 of Ernest B. Chamberlain's *The Music of Oberlin and Some Who Made It*

Growth of the Music Faculty

Keys: Dots (•) indicate a graduate of Oberlin.  
 Names in lower left hand corner identify faculty members placed by number only.  
 Some chief events noted in transverse channel.



Allen, 1836-1864 Musical Union Founded	Steele Morgan II '65-71	Rice, 1871-1901 * Glee Club Founded * Warner Hall Built	Morrison, 1902-1924 * Finney Chapel Built * Rice Hall Built	Shaw, 1924-1949	Robertson 1949-1961	Lloyd Fountain
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>C.A. Bentley, Singing</li> <li>J.R. Severance, Singing</li> <li>S.H. Blakelee, Singing</li> <li>Ida Blakelee, Piano</li> <li>Florence Cagney, Piano</li> <li>Ezra Geer, Piano, Violin</li> <li>J.C. Fillmore, Instr. Music</li> <li>Mrs. Tom Bradley, Singing</li> <li>H.W. Matlack, Organ, Theory</li> <li>Francis Kohler, Violin</li> <li>John Trumppeter, Organ</li> <li>E.P. Ingersoll, Sacred Music</li> <li>Charlotte Williams, Violin</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helen Hoskins, Piano</li> <li>E.E. Kelany, Piano</li> <li>Mr. &amp; Mrs. Maitland, Singing</li> <li>J.A. Pennington, Organ</li> <li>Edw. B. Perry, Piano</li> <li>J.E. Swisher, Organ, Theory</li> <li>Margaret Whipple, Piano</li> <li>Caroline Williams, Violin</li> <li>Mrs. J.R. Hall, Singing</li> <li>J.R. Hall, Piano</li> <li>Thos. W. Henderson, Singing</li> <li>G.D. Siddall, Singing</li> <li>Eileen O'More, Violin</li> </ol>	<p>Mrs. Fenslon B. Rice, Singing</p> <p>Mrs. L. Celestina Wattle, Piano, Secretary of Faculty</p> <p>Chamberlain, V.B., Singing, Glee Club</p> <p>Charles W. Morrison, Piano, Director</p> <p>Howard Hamdel Carter, Piano</p> <p>George W. Anderson, Organ</p> <p>Arthur S. Mumhall, Singing</p> <p>Edgar G. Sweet, Piano, Singing</p> <p>Mrs. Sweet, Piano</p> <p>Mrs. Morrison, Singing</p> <p>William K.</p> <p>Charles K. Barry</p> <p>Edward</p> <p>Arthur E.</p> <p>Wm. T.</p> <p>Chas. H.</p> <p>Wm</p>	<p>of Conservatory, 1902-1924</p> <p>Composition, Musical Union, Orchestra</p> <p>Glee Club, Second Church Choir</p> <p>First Church Choir</p> <p>Breckinridge, Piano, Organ, Accompanist, Harp</p> <p>Piano, German</p> <p>Dickinson, Music History + Appreciation, Author</p> <p>Healey, Harmony and Counterpoint</p> <p>Upton, Piano, Accompanist, Author, Critic</p> <p>Abams, Singing</p> <p>J. ("Jackie") Horner, Music Education, Singing</p> <p>George C. Hastings, Piano, Organ</p> <p>Mrs. Hastings, Piano</p> <p>Orville A. Ingquist, Piano</p> <p>Mrs. Charles + H. Abams, Singing</p> <p>Friedrich E. Lehmann, Theory (and GOLF!)</p> <p>Herbert Harboun, Singing</p> <p>Bruce H. Davis, Piano, Organ, Accompanist</p>			