A CAMPUS GROWS

Revelli
The Long Note

William D. Revelli did more than transform the Michigan Marching Band. His unyielding drive for perfection changed conducting, performing and music education across the country.
He is an old man, with creases at his eyes and white, thinning hair. He appears particularly small, even for someone who never stood more than 5’7”.

He is in the autumn of his years in 1992. All eyes are on him as he crosses the Hill Auditorium stage in a slow but determined walk. Steps on the podium. Lifts his arms. Readies the baton.

The world is suddenly young again.

The unmistakable, joyful noise of a Sousa march is splendid and bursting with life. Flutes and clarinets dance above their brassy counterparts. The snare drum is crisp and efficient. The music races and slows, soars and dips like a roller coaster ride.

The guest conductor is William Revelli, legendary leader of the University of Michigan Bands, a pioneer in American music education, and a John Philip Sousa acolyte.

He is directing “The George Washington Bicentennial March,” the last work of the March King. It is a personal favorite—difficult to play, but so worth the effort.

In conducting his hero’s final composition, Revelli is making his last appearance at Hill, a place where he first set foot 56 years ago as a junior professor just handed an anemic college band.

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Revelli.

His love of teaching, his belief that music is as sustaining as water and oxygen, and his unrelenting drive for perfection resonate long after his final note.

Michigan’s bands grew from one to seven during his tenure. His methods shaped band pedagogy from middle school through college. He built the Wind Instrument Department into one of the strongest in the country. His faith in students carried them across the country and around the globe, exposing them to different cultures and showcasing the University of Michigan to the world.

Michigan traditions—a high-stepping marching band, pep bands, colorful halftime shows, Band-O-Rama, symphony tours—all have their roots in Revelli.

His demands (“Stop conducting me!”), his exasperation (“Why don’t you get a hammer and be done with it?”), and his encouragement (“Be dedicated in whatever you do—even if it’s kissing your girl goodnight”) ring in alumni ears generations after graduating.

At the core of it all was his credo: “We do not teach music. Rather, we teach people through music.”
It’s a pitch-black Sunday morning in 1909 and 7-year-old Willie Revelli is standing along the railroad tracks in the tiny Illinois coal town of Panama. In the distance, a train’s whistle sings. Willie snaps on his flashlight, raises his arm, and flags down the massive locomotive.

In his other hand is his precious violin. It is the only instrument he ever wanted, and he wasn’t yet 5 when he began begging his parents for one.

“My dad put it right beside my bed on a stand and when I woke up Christmas morning, there was my violin! The first thing I wanted to do was play; of course all I could do was scratch around. I didn’t know how to hold the bow or anything.”

This is why he waits at the train station in the dark. Wake up every Sunday morning at 4:30, catch the eye of the engineer, hop aboard The Limited, and ride four hours to the big city of St. Louis. There, he meets with the concertmaster of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra for a 45-minute violin lesson, followed by free time and the return trip to Panama. He arrives home after 9 p.m.

He does this every Sunday, every month, for 10 years.

Giovanni Revelli wanted his son to have the best and be the best; he was “a person who liked things done well.” He loved the music of his native Italy, the arias and libretto of opera. His wife, Rose, sang the Italian folk songs she heard growing up. Together, they gave six children their first lessons in music.

As a boy not yet 10, Willie Revelli saw John Philip Sousa and his band at the Illinois State Fair. He could not believe the sheer majesty of what he was hearing.

“Sousa’s band hadn’t played two minutes and I knew that’s what I wanted to do,” he once told an interviewer. “I said, ‘Dad, I want to be a conductor like Mr. Sousa.’”

He stood apart from his classmates (“I was kind of a funny kid”). As if the weekly train treks to St. Louis weren’t exotic enough, he spent summers traveling with a Chautauqua orchestra through Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin and Kansas. During the school year, he played in the pit orchestra of his father’s silent movie theater.

He practiced his violin constantly; he’d rather practice than play outside, unless maybe there was a game of baseball he could join. He played a little high school basketball, until a teacher warned that sprained or broken fingers could cripple his musical aspirations.

“My upbringing was one of seriousness of purpose. I wasn’t fooling around just to have music as an avocation but rather to look at it as an experience that would be lifelong.”

Panama was a mining town, and he had no intention of spending a lifetime underground, in the dark and danger of the earth. After high school, he moved north and enrolled at the Chicago Musical College (today the Chicago College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University).

His instructor was Leon Sametini, an exceptional violinist known for being difficult and demanding. When he wasn’t working to meet Sametini’s standards, Revelli was playing violin in dance orchestras in Chicago, Joliet and St. Louis. In particular he performed with Isham Jones, a popular dance bandleader in the Loop who, like Sametini, was a real stickler.

Giovanni Revelli. Leon Sametini. Isham Jones. All perfectionists. All teachers.

Bachelor’s degree in hand, William Revelli was about to embark on his career and cultivate his own reputation as both bandleader and taskmaster.
The new music teacher is Mr. Revelli and he barely looks old enough to be out of high school himself.

But here is he, 23 years old in 1925, huddled in the chemistry lab of Indiana’s tiny Hobart High School, with a handful of anxious students who say they want to be in a band.

None of them has ever touched a musical instrument.

He himself has never played in a band; concert bands don’t use violinists.

The school superintendent made it clear to his new hire: There is no budget, no rehearsal space, no equipment. And there certainly isn’t time during the school day for band class.

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Concert and marching bands—staples of today’s K-12 system and colleges—were an American phenomenon of the 1920s. In the wake of the Great War, the public embraced patriotism and pomp, along with music performed live at silent movies and spread by the phonograph. A growing middle class preferred band music rather than fussier orchestras. The advent of talking pictures brought unemployment to orchestra pits, driving professional musicians to Hollywood, radio—and teaching.

The school band movement was under way.

At Hobart High School, Revelli’s official duties called for him to teach vocal music—all grades, kindergarten through 12th grade—as well as conduct several school choirs and a glee club. Within his first month on the job, he received permission to develop a band program.

The students honked and squeaked and generally crashed through the music. There were not enough players to form a full concert band; they performed minus flutes, oboes, timpani and several other standard instruments. He called it “mess production.”

Still, Hobart parents were keen to hear their young prodigies.

“I had mothers calling and asking me when their child was going to bring his or her instrument home. I used to say, ‘You know, Mrs. Maybaum, you don’t know how lucky you are. I have to listen to him, you don’t. You should be thankful.’”

He was an advocate of solfeggio—the practice of singing the printed notes (“do,” “re,” “mi”). Hobart students would hear the same refrain issued over and over to Michigan students 10, 20 and 30 years later: “If you can’t sing it, you can’t play it.”

He also realized his own need to evolve musically, and learned to play trombone, flute, bassoon, trumpet, and more from members of the Chicago Symphony. He took a similar tack with students, teaching them several instruments so they could appreciate an entire body of work. He also arranged for private lessons between his students and professionals, just as his father did when he was 7 years old.

He demanded, and expected, excellence. During one frustrating band practice, he threw down his baton and told the students to get out, just go home. He wouldn’t conduct them if they were the last band on earth. He stormed out of the room.

Stunned, the students did not move. No one said a word. Ten minutes passed before Revelli returned, picked up his baton, and resumed the rehearsal.

He could not deny how much they energized him. He loved watching them express themselves through music.

“They made my day. Anytime I was down, all I had to do was give a lesson, and those kids pulled me right out of it.”

In return, they played their hearts out, for their teacher and their town. The growing school band movement led to state and national competitions, and Hobart High School matured into the best, period.

Said one judge: “The conductor evidently seeks clarity, thoroughness, and musical performance of every tone more than general impressionistic effect. Either as a conscious technique or because of full participation in the mood, these players bring a wider range of color out of their respective instruments than is ordinarily heard.”

When Hobart won its first national championship, in 1930, one of the judges was the great man himself, John Philip Sousa. Revelli all but ran to accept the award.

For five straight years, the Hobart band reigned as finest in the country.

With each national title, Revelli’s reputation grew; professional symphonies, colleges and bigger high schools pursued him. Michigan State was calling, but he felt the school was too small. Wisconsin had him all but moved to Madison, but he changed his mind. “I wanted to make one move and I wanted it to be the right one.”

That right one was Michigan.

In his final Hobart concert, Revelli led students he had groomed since fourth grade. They were his instrument. Closing with “Auld Lang Syne,” tears fell down their faces. One after another, kids couldn’t play through their crying. Mr. Revelli himself blinked back tears.
It is the fall of 1935, and Bill Revelli is settling into his junior faculty position. As he does every Tuesday night as the new chair of Michigan’s Wind Instrument Department, he is holding the weekly faculty meeting.

Morris Hall is a 19th century house at the corner of South State and Jefferson. What once was the second-floor master bedroom now houses the Wind Department and its meeting. Afterward, Revelli writes up notes for the dean.

“Professor Revelli, chairman of the wind instrument department, called a meeting. All were present. After considerable discussion, it was unanimously agreed that we had to do some things …”

The dean finds the minutes particularly amusing, and forwards them to other faculty. Chairman Revelli, after all, is a department of one.

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Revelli took a significant pay cut to come to Michigan from Hobart. The band program he inherited was even poorer.


His predecessor had resigned two years earlier, leaving a graduate student to hold the band together. Students arrived late for rehearsal. They smoked before, during and after practice. They were cocky but had no reason to be. It made Revelli crazy.

“That’s the worst thing you can have: when you’re not good and you think you are—there’s nothing worse. Your receptivity to criticism is nil.”

But just like at Hobart, he believed in the students. The program was a sleeping giant, and he was about to give it a good, hard kick.

“I’m totally dedicated to perfection and when it’s just about right, I’m unhappy. To me, that’s like a pilot who misses the runway by 8 feet. You’re dead; he’s almost right.”

His tone would define Michigan Bands.
He is in full band regalia. White gloves, jacket, epaulets and a navy blue cap with the distinctive block “M.”

Before him sit dozens of freshmen, sheer brawn and muscle, the newest members of the Michigan football team. Coach Bo Schembechler is in his debut season, and the veteran band director has offered to help the team in any way he can.

Teach my players the fight song, Schembechler asked.

The director steps up and stares hard at the athletes.

“JOHN PHILIP SOUSA CALLED THIS THE GREATEST FIGHT SONG EVER WRITTEN. AND YOU WILL SING IT WITH RESPECT.”

Sing they do. Out of their chairs, standing and booming, “Hail! To the victors valiant. Hail! To the conqu’ring heroes. Hail! Hail!”

After his 1969 visit, Revelli is invited back every season.

“God,” Schembechler will say years later, “he was beautiful.”

In a way, William Revelli steps onto the field every time today’s Michigan Marching Band pours out of the Michigan Stadium tunnel.

In his 36 years, Revelli revolutionized not only the Michigan style, but marching bands across the nation. The University of Illinois had been the first and best in the land, but Michigan soon stormed past under Revelli’s baton.

He took over a band with roots in the ROTC and rote performance. He dropped the name “Michigan Fighting One Hundred” (“It didn’t have any class to it”) and launched the “Michigan Marching Band.”

And he ranted.

“I don’t want it just about right! To me, just about right is terrible!”

“Mister, if you can’t play that, what CAN you play?”

“It’s all the fault of your high school band director.”

“It goes from a college band to a high school band to a junior high band in four bars.”

He quickened the stride of players, who now took more steps to cover the same amount of yardage. Where the U.S. Army band took 120 steps a minute, the Michigan Marching Band packed in 176.

He and his assistants introduced thematic halftime shows, abandoning performances that mimicked stiff military drills. The band took the shape of a turkey at Thanksgiving, or a car with spinning wheels, or stick figures traversing the field. (“I know it’s hard—that’s what makes it difficult!”)

There was the time the first trombonist messed up and began marching in the opposite direction. Absolute wrong direction in front of thousands of fans. While he wandered off, the rest of the band marched away in formation. Eventually, everyone reunited, but not before the trombonist took advantage of his single status and hammed it up for the crowd.

What in the world were you thinking? Revelli demanded to know afterward.

“He said, ‘I don’t know, my mind just went blank.’ I slapped him on the back and said, ‘Some day you’re going to be dean of a music school.’”

Perhaps his most significant contribution was the sound and song of the band itself. He wanted his marching band to sound like a symphonic band that just happened to be on a football field.

“Don’t come up and tell me the Michigan band looked good; I don’t like that kind of compliment. But it you say they looked great and they sounded terrific, I’ll accept that compliment.”

That meant exceptional tone. “Even if it was November and snow was coming down, I stopped that band if there was a bad sound. I did it a million times. I didn’t care if the game was the next day. What I did care about was their sound—right now! I want a good tone!”

He mixed popular music with classical works—Bach, Shostakovich, Tchaikovsky—before thousands of football devotees. He introduced Bach’s “Toccata and Fugue in D minor,” a famous composition typically associated with organ. “The audience stood up, cheered us, and actually booed the team back into the tunnel.”

And in a Michigan first, he had a stadium announcer introduce the band’s various moves.

The high-stepping band made its national television debut at the 1948 Rose Bowl, where a reporter called Michigan “the Radio City Rockettes of football.” Somebody else declared the game
over before it began, based solely on the pre-game execution of
the band.

In 1950, an eight-page spread in Life magazine (circulation: 8.5
million) sealed the band’s national prestige. Alfred Eisenstaedt’s
iconic image of Ann Arbor children gleefully strutting behind
drum major Dick Smith set the tone for an effusive photo essay
about the pageantry of Michigan.

“This art form has reached a spectacular peak at the University
of Michigan whose band, directed by ace Bandmaster William
D. Revelli, is considered by many to be the most musicianly in
the U.S.”

He knew he was at the right university.

“Look at the stadium. Look at those crowds. Look at our team.
Look at the program. Look at the number of people who want to
play in the band. Look at everything else. Look at the facilities.

“You’re not going to go anywhere and beat this.”
It is the opening concert of an international tour that will span 30,000 miles, 110 performances and 21 cities. Tonight they play for Moscow, a city that in 1961 has rare contact with Americans, their universities or their young people.

The Michigan students have played—well—for nearly two hours, and are concluding with a Russian classic, Mussorgsky’s majestic “Great Gate of Kiev.” They have put on an exceptional performance, and Revelli braces for the applause he knows will explode after this grand finale.

Instead there is silence.

Frozen, he stares at his students. What have we done wrong? Who have we offended? It seems all oxygen has left the hall.

After a moment that spans forever, a single Russian rises. He claps, once, and the audience of 6,000 mimics him. Then they clap again, slowly, and again, faster and faster again, now they are stamping their feet, and clapping and stamping, thousands of hands and feet pounding away.

“That then stood up and cheered and then I knew we had arrived.”

The Symphony Band plays five encores.

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If you wanted to get under Bill Revelli’s skin, you called him the director of the Michigan Marching Band.

“I want to scream. Not because I am not proud to be director of the marching band; of course I am. But wouldn’t you believe that after a half a century they would know that I am director of all University bands?”

The Symphony Band was the finest of the bands he came to create and conduct. There was the Varsity Band, the Marching Band, Wolverine Band and more. The Symphony Band, though, was the cream, rich with music majors and aspiring professionals.

Not so at the start. Other than venues and uniforms, there was no distinction between Michigan’s bands—the band was the band. And its reputation preceded it.

On a Sunday afternoon in the winter of 1936—Revelli’s first in Ann Arbor—he and his charges were set to perform at the 4,300-seat Hill Auditorium.

“I came on the stage and looked in the crowd. It looked like a baroque trio; All those empty seats.

“They would practice, practice and practice some more. Start a piece. Stop. Start over. Stop. Start again. Stop. Over and over, until it was right. Revelli put in so much time with students that his faculty colleagues griped he was making them look bad.

Kids from Hobart applied to Michigan so they could again play with their mentor. More and more music majors joined, raising the quality and the sound.

The campus radio station began to broadcast concerts, and then a Detroit station, followed by a national radio syndicate.

He justly changed the name from concert band to symphony band. Where concert bands were traditionally identified as brassy and harsh, Revelli’s band had a silky elegance to it. His clarinets could sound like violins, the euphoniums like cellos. He changed the seating of the ensemble, giving certain instruments the space he felt they needed to truly be heard.

“I can listen to recordings of other bands and then my own Michigan Band and I hear a different timbre. It’s a different color.”

He worked particularly hard to convince composers to write for symphony bands and, given the quality of Michigan’s, they did. The result: a depth of interesting, challenging symphony band literature that continues today.

He began taking the Symphony Band on the road—a first for a major university—and they performed in America’s great venues. They amazed audiences in Boston Symphony Hall, the Philadelphia Academy of Music, New York’s Lincoln Center, Philharmonic Hall in Los Angeles, and the ultimate destination, New York’s Carnegie Hall.

It was hard to believe they were college musicians. New York Times music critic Harold Schonberg—considered the best of his era—raved about Revelli and Michigan students after a 1955 concert. “He got out of his kids what not many bandmasters ever achieve—a brilliant, yet luminous texture of tone, a smart-sounding ensemble, well-balanced choirs and even instrumental virtuosity.”

The pinnacle was the 1961 tour, a goodwill gesture arranged by the U.S. State Department at the height of the Cold War. University bands and orchestras throughout the country were invited to submit tapes of their best work; the finest conservatories, Juilliard and Eastman, were in the running.
By now, though, Michigan’s rock-solid reputation made them the overwhelming choice. The tour was going to take four weeks, then six, then eight and 11. Egypt was added to the itinerary; when diplomats in Jordan heard about the tour, they wanted the Michigan band, too. So did Lebanon and Cyprus.

In the end, the Michigan Symphony Band would tour for 15 weeks—an entire semester away from Ann Arbor—and visit nine countries; two months alone would be spent in the Soviet Union. It remains the most extensive tour ever carried out by a university band.

Wherever they performed, Michigan students were mobbed. Concerts sold out. Encores—six, seven, nine—became standard and extended performances by an hour.

The tour concluded at Carnegie Hall and the praise was lavish.

“The Michigan ensemble, composed of ninety-four students of the university, played with the precision of a well-oiled machine,” wrote Raymond Ericson of the Times. “More than that, it produced some luscious, gleaming organ-like sonorities within performances that were always accurate, texturally clean, and smooth flowing.”

This was Revelli perfection.
It’s halftime and more than 106,000 fans are jammed into Michigan Stadium for 1992’s homecoming and a drubbing of Minnesota.

The marching band is on the field and at attention, as are dozens of alumni players, in jeans and sweatshirts, who have returned for this fall ritual. They eye the 90-year-old conductor, retired for more than 20 years, and wait for his cue.

“God Bless America” soars from their instruments. He commands the field, and then turns to face the stands and the press box. Again he conducts. Together, with the Michigan faithful, they sing in unison.

The applause begins well before the final note.

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He was Mr. Revelli, Dr. Revelli or the Chief. He was charming and he was a tyrant. He worked incredible hours and he never grew tired.

Every rehearsal, every concert, every tour was an opportunity to be the best.

“What truly mattered to him, though, could not be captured in brick, stone or engraved plaques. It was the ability, and obligation, to inspire.

“The conductor has a responsibility to create an attitude of love for music. You are not a conductor of bands, you’re a conductor of people. It’s through music that you reach them, and it’s a beautiful way to reach people.”

– Kim Clarke

Revelli died in 1994. He founded the College Band Directors National Association and was inducted into both the Music Educators Hall of Fame and the Hall of Fame of Distinguished Band Conductors. The marching band facility at Michigan bears his name, as does the town bandshell in Hobart. A national contest for new band compositions is named in his honor. Numerous scholarships and awards honor his legacy.