The Stearns Instruments of Burton Tower

by William Malm, Ph.D.

My first home at the University of Michigan was room 400 in Burton Tower. I shared it with the Americanist, H. Wiley Hitchcock and music librarian, William Weichlein along with shelves heavy with 78 records, blue mimeographed course outlines and text translations. In those days, I seldom lectured on Beethoven’s ninth because the records weighed so much when one carried them up the stairs of the Tower or through the snow to Angell Hall. I also could be seen lugging such exotica as an Indian sitar or African drum as both European art and world music were part of my teaching assignments. The use of Stearns instruments was relatively easy as they were either hanging in the second floor lobby of Hill auditorium, baking in steel cabinets on its third floor, or stuffed in unheated cloak rooms down the fire escape stairs. Through the efforts of Prof. Robert Warner, the exhibits improved and an eighth floor room in Burton Tower was acquired for restoration and research on Stearns instruments. New acquisitions and some of the original collection were used in

A rehearsal at Burton Tower

European historical ensembles. In 1961, a Japanese Music Study ensemble was begun there with the help of the Center for Japanese Studies that funded the purchase of new instruments to enhance my own collection. Michigan students then could have their first hands on experiences in non-Western music. First mission accomplished. The debut in 1962 was done in a Western manner (see photo), but soon became Japanese in style and remained so to its closing concert in April 1993.

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The Japanese Ensemble debut at Angell Hall ~ 1962 (top photo) performed Western style.

A very different Burton Tower challenge came in a 1964 letter informing me that, with the closing of the New York World’s Fair, a complete Javanese gamelan was up for sale at $8,000. With the enlightened help of Dean James Wallace and Vice President Roger Heyns, a down payment was made in May and I began to think about a location for this set of some forty gongs and metallophones. The Stearns research and collegium facility had just moved to the new School of Music so the eighth floor room was available. That summer an article in the New York Times was brought to my attention about the acquisition of a World’s Fair gamelan by Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut! My Indonesian contact person had returned to Java, our $5,000 deposit was “somewhere”, and my non-tenured position felt very rocky.

By fall, my first white hair appeared, but eventually the deposit was returned. At that point there was only one word I never wanted to hear again: ‘gamelan.’ A year later I returned from research work in Japan to begin a new set of opportunities that only a large university like Michigan can provide. There also were other challenges to be met in messages found in the pile of summer letters yet to be opened. One informed me that the gamelan requested by the University of Michigan had arrived in New York: please remit $10,000! Though by then Vice President Heyns had left Michigan for a position in California, the University came through a second time with support for world music in Burton Tower.

One winter day in 1966, a truck driver arrived at my office door and requested my signature on a delivery receipt. He then dumped before the Tower, a set of giant boxes made with rough teak and sheathed in tin. A quick trip home for a hammer and a crowbar plus a search for my only graduate assistant (Mark Slobin), resulted in an eighth floor room filled with gongs, wooden frames, and metal keys, minus an instruction book on how to assemble this forty piece gamelan. During one of the many elevator trips up, the university fire marshall joined us to inform me that the packing rice straw and boxes that were in front of the Tower were a fire hazard that must be removed immediately. Two boxes became storage sheds in my backyard and the rest went up in safer flames.

The gamelan debuted in April 1967, playing the only two pieces I knew. My brilliant graduate student, Judith Becker, was a Southeast Asianist and, with the help of an Indonesian musician (Hardjo Susilo), expanded the potentials of this ensemble. A fourth floor Burton Tower room was enlarged for its use. Mrs., now Professor and Department Chair, Becker created and maintains the beautiful Javanese music and dance tradition that has been such an important part of our world music tradition since that time.

Over the decades other exotic ensembles have appeared in Burton Tower, such as a Chinese opera orchestra and a classical music group of students from Thailand. Often instruments from the Stearns collection were used. The sounds of the handsome Philippine kulintang gong set, now on display in the lower Stearns gallery at the School of Music, and Philippine guitars of a bandura have been heard drifting from the windows of Burton Tower. Indeed, on certain days one can take an international music trip by simply riding the Tower elevator. Gamelan music may emanate from the fourth floor, Beethoven from the fifth, American music from the sixth, contemporary compositions from the seventh, Japanese music from the eighth, and hand bell choirs of Margaret Halsted playing Bach from the ninth. Over all this there are the sonorous sounds of the carillon.

I recall once hearing a bagpipe added to the international din.

The Stearns does not own Beethoven nor the giant bells, but its contributions to the beauty and variety of musics at Burton Tower remains as active as its exhibitions at the School of Music and its lecture series. All are made possible by private funds. Join in our support to ensure the continuity of handsome musical sounds and sights in Burton Tower and throughout the campus.
Sacred Sounds from the Virginia Patton Moss Case

In the Vol. 6, No. 3 issue of the Stearns Newsletter you read about our acquisition of 8 sacred flutes from Papua, New Guinea. Six of them can now be seen and heard in the Virginia Patton Moss case in the lower lobby of the Stearns Collection. The rare sounds were made possible by further gifts of a video tape from Helmut Sterns and audio tape from Vida Chenoweth.

BECOME A FRIEND OF THE STEARNS

With your help, additional instruments may be restored, played, displayed, and appreciated by the musical public. Friends receive The Stearns Newsletter, invitations to the Virginia Martin Howard Lectures and announcements of upcoming exhibits and performances. Your tax deductible contribution will help support all activities of The Stearns Collection.

Membership in the Friends of the Stearns is available in the following categories:

- Benefactor $1,000
- Patron $500
- Sustaining $100
- Friend $30
- Student / Senior Citizen / Beyond 200 miles $15

I (We) want to support The Stearns Collection of Musical Instruments.

I (We) enclose a/my/our check for $___________ made payable to: The University of Michigan Stearns Collection.

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Please circle title(s) and print your name above as you would like it to appear on donor lists

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Phone number

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Please mail this form with your check to: Friends of the Stearns, The University of Michigan School of Music, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109.
A Docent Program Begins

Denise Crenshaw of the Stearns advisory board has begun an exciting program. On May 1st there will be an opening meeting of the staff along with volunteers who wish to be trained in the special art of giving tours of the Stearns Collection and exhibitions. The docent will be given special course work in the fall so that by 1994 they will be able to expand not only our gallery tours but also begin an outreach program in schools and other facilities. If you wish to join this exciting opportunity, call the Stearns office at (313) 763-4389 for an application form.

What’s New?

More of Michigan’s musical history has been acquired through the gift of a 1912 Gibson guitar made in Kalamazoo, Michigan. The gift comes from Woodward Warrick. Look at the other Michigan instruments in the music school’s main lobby exhibit. The exhibit will soon be changing to the topic of harps. The Stearns continues to offer you new information through lectures, exhibits and the newsletter. Keep in touch. Be a Friend!

Whose In Charge?

Professor William Malm retains part of his teaching load in the service of the Stearns Collection while Professor James Borders is on sabbatical until the fall.

Two teaching assistants, Jennifer Delap and Ros Finney, maintain the office and warehouse and all of their services.

Work study student, Denise Pilmer, sees that the galleries are open and closed and also helps with the increasing number of tours requested of the collection.

Of very special importance to the collection is its voluntary advisory board. Here are those people who contribute so much to the Stearns research and development:

Sue E. Barber, President
Dean Emeritus Allen P. Britton
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Jeanine DeLay
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Special Advisor:
James A. Walgreen

These dedicated people deserve our thanks and our help as we move on to a meaningful endowment for the Stearns Collection.