Wesleyan's Man of Musics: Richard K. Winslow

Said Melville to Beckett, “You know you have written a contrary show! Whilst I must be quick to espy Moby Dick you just sit there and wait for Godot.”

This erudite bit of limrickal wit took the grand prize in a limerick contest sponsored by the Harvard Square Book Sellers Association back in the early nineties. The prize was $250 worth of free books chosen from the various stores. The winner was Richard K. Winslow, Wesleyan class of 1940, composer, scholar, conductor, teacher, inspiration of generations of Wesleyan students—and now, prize-winning poet.

In November Krishna Winston and I drove up to Antrim, New Hampshire to visit with Dick. He lives in a comfortable old farmhouse with a 1980s addition and gorgeous views of meadow and woodland. He had just returned from his ophthalmologist and was wearing an eye patch. But the other eye reflected the usual sparkle and whimsy. We talked, ate a tasty lunch served by his three-times-a-week housekeeper, and talked some more. Dick recalled his early days at Wesleyan, then his role in the Music Department and the dramatic changes it has undergone— for many of which he was the catalyst.

Dick matriculated at Wesleyan in 1936. Though he could not know it then, he was to have an enduring relationship with his alma mater in a career spanning some 35 years. Moreover, he was to be instrumental in transforming the curriculum, mission, and ethos of his department and of Wesleyan.

He was graduated in 1940 with a B.A. in English. (There was no music major at the time.) His guiding spirit during his undergraduate years and later was Joe Daltry, then husband of Marjorie Rice Daltry Rosenbaum. He was the lone faculty member teaching music courses. Dick says of Joe: “. . . he taught me everything I know. I learned a lot of things from him but the musical basis didn’t change.” He held onto that basis, though another was added after his interaction with John Cage. But that was later.
After graduation he went to work for a concert management firm in New York City where, he says, “he sold bodies of musicians” for a year and a half. Then, after Pearl Harbor, he joined the Navy and served with a mine disposal unit in Panama. Sometime during the war years, he says, “it just came over me like a wave that I wanted to be a musician.” Joe Daltry had kept in touch with him during the war and when it ended he suggested graduate school at Julliard, making sure Dick was admitted, registered, and enrolled in the right courses.

At Julliard he studied composition, earning a B.S. and M.S. Along the way he sang with the Robert Shaw Chorale, probably the most solid musical experience for someone who was to be involved with choral singing all his life. He later conducted the Wesleyan Glee Club and Concert Choir as well as operas, oratorios, and smaller ensembles.

After Juilliard Dick had no firm plans for his future. But one morning his phone rang. It was Wesleyan President Vic Butterfield asking him to “to come back.” At first he wondered: come back where? But Vic was offering him a job at Wesleyan and, without knowing what this entailed and with little if any teaching experience, he accepted the offer and began teaching in the fall of 1949. He suspected that Joe Daltry might have been behind Vic’s call.

By this time there were two faculty members teaching music, Joe Daltry and George McManus. They offered seven courses, all in Western art music. By 1955 four faculty members taught fourteen courses. Contrast that with this year (2011-12) in which sixteen faculty members teach eighty-four courses, fifty-four of them in non-European or experimental music and thirty in the Western art or “classical” tradition. Things have changed.

How did Wesleyan in a half century engineer such a radical transformation from a traditional department specializing in what was then often termed “music appreciation” to one of the nation’s two or three leading institutions in the growing field of Ethnomusicology as well as developing a strong program of experimental music? Part of the reason lies in Dick Winslow himself, whose keen mind and disarming persuasion were able to convince the president, the trustees, and the faculty to change the course of what constituted the music department at Wesleyan.

Dick was lucky to be at Wesleyan at a time when a faculty of high quality found itself in a time of change, experimentation,
and openness to new ideas. There was a new diversity in the air and times they were a-changing.

Dick relates this story: at some time in his early career on the Wesleyan faculty, he fell to thinking about great composers, posing to himself the perennial question: who was the greatest composer in history? He thought of Bach, but then pondered something that had lodged itself more deeply in his mind than the question itself. He had been basing his query solely on Western art music. What about all those singers, instrumentalists, and composers from China and India, from Asia and Africa? How do we rate the achievements in all these musics from cultures we know nothing about? Food for thought.

Dick was blessed with stimulating and intellectually challenging colleagues. Joe Daltry continued to guide the department and strengthen his basis in music; there was Ray Rendall, too, and George McManus, a pianist who had toured with Pablo Casals. Dick characterized George as “irascible, opinionated, and endearing.”

But he was perhaps more influenced by colleagues outside of the Music Department. Carl Schorkse was one “he held in intellectual awe.” Another scholarly sparing partner was Nobby Brown (Norman O. Brown), the great classicist author of Life against Death and Love’s Body. And others: anthropologist and later member of the Music Department David MacAllester. Add to the blend Louis Mink in Philosophy, Ralph Pendelton in Theater and librettist of several of Dick’s operas, Bob Rosenbaum in Mathematics, and the psychological theorist David McClelland. As we sat in Dick’s front room overlooking the now bleak New Hampshire landscape, he pointed out a painting given to him and painted by McClelland’s wife Mary, an emblem of the closeness of this small community of scholars. I asked him if he had had any opponents on the faculty. “No,” Dick replied serenely and generously, “I liked all my colleagues.”

His most intellectually and musically influential colleague and his second musical basis was not a regular faculty member. John Cage, who spent three semesters (1960-61 and 1969) at Wesleyan’s Center for Advanced Studies set the stage in many ways for what was to become at Wesleyan both the world music and the experimental music component of the Music Department. Dick sees these as two sides of the same coin.
Cage’s first appearance at Wesleyan was in the late fall of 1955. The story is part of local mythology, but bears repeating. Dick received a letter from Cage offering to perform a piano concert with pianist David Tudor, playing “modern music,” some of it by Cage. An honorarium of $200 was agreed upon. But since the offer came late in the season, the Music Department’s concert budget had only $100 left. Dick suggested that Cage come alone for “half the fee.” As things worked out, both Cage and Tudor decided to come anyway. They had shrewdly calculated that “half the fee” would amount to something around $50 a piece, but they still wanted to go ahead with the concert. And quite a concert it was.

According to Dick, it was nothing less than sensational. The poster for the event, designed by Jack Paton, then director of the office of public information, identified the two as “screwball pianists.” This drew a handful of curious students, thinking they would hear a Spike Jones type of performance. Yet the chapel was packed because, late in the semester, most students had not accumulated their mandatory ten attendance credits for chapel events. A mixed, but a primarily unknowing crowd.

Cage was supposed to give a brief talk before the performance (no extra fee). Dick sat with him up on the stage in the front of the chapel. Cage asked him, “Should I talk to them about electromagnetic tape?” (He had been experimenting with new tape-recording techniques.) Cage may have talked about magnetic tape, but it was in such a whisper that most of the audience had to strain to hear and many were disconcerted at what seemed to be a meandering scientific lecture delivered pianissimo rather than the advertised “screwball” concert. David Tudor played some of the Stockhausen Klavierstücke as the first half of the program—strong stuff for inexperienced ears—but nothing like what was to come after intermission: Cage’s 34’ 46.776” for prepared piano. During the interval Cage had invited the audience (at least those who could hear him) to come up to the stage and watch the piano being prepared. The students, fascinated perhaps by the idea of watching a Steinway being violated, made a rush to get to the stage first. Those on the inside of the pews clambered over each other, breaking hymnal racks on the way, to catch a glimpse of Cage inserting various common objects between the strings: bolts, pennies, forks, spoons, number two pencils, &c. When the piece began, the music had an unheard of sound, especially when punctuated by the pianist pounding on the soundboard. The
crowd went wild. “It was a mob scene,” said Dick. Cage was delighted. He talked about the lilies of the field.

The concert provoked some serious discussion on campus, with letters of praise and protest appearing in the Argus. One writer asked if this was serious or was it funny. Dick’s reply: “Yes!”

Joe Daltry had provided Dick with his first great musical basis. Now John Cage gifted him with another. “The only person who changed the basis for my musical being was John Cage. Cage never taught anybody anything on purpose. You know, you just hung around with John and learned.” Dick's feeling was that Cage complemented Daltry, even though Joe probably considered Cage “a clown, a charlatan, or madman—or all three.”

The history of the World Music Program at Wesleyan is written in many other places, but it would be remiss not to say a bit about Dick's role in its inception and his shepherding it through the first several decades. Or, as he put it in the title of a talk he gave at the Wasch Center two years ago, “How World Music Came to Wesleyan Big Time.”

Dick relates how in the late 1950s David McAllester, the world’s foremost authority on Navaho music and founder of the Wesleyan Anthropology Department, began a covert campaign to “brain-wash” him into a psychological frame of mind to initiate and support a new program in Ethnomusicology. Together with Charles Seeger (father of Pete) David was one of the founders of the Society for Ethnomusicology. He took Dick to a number of national conferences, getting him think seriously about a new kind of music program he thought would work at Wesleyan. At the time the only degree-granting program in Ethnomusicology in the country was at UCLA. One of these conferences at Berkeley concluded with a banquet, where Dick found himself seated next to Bob Brown, a brilliant young musicologist who was studying to be one of the first ethnomusicology Ph.D.s at UCLA. On Brown’s other side was David. Both were deeply impressed, and on the plane ride back to the east Dick casually remarked, “You know, we ought to hire this guy.” David was elated. His brainwashing was starting to pay off. Dick was excited. His persuasive proselyting and carefully choreographed diplomacy enabled him to enlist enough support for the new study of Ethnomusicology. He and others convinced President Vic Butterfield the value of a new and distinctly different academic program. Dick credits Vic with the foresight to understand the value of the proposed
program and the confidence faith in Dick and David would find the right person to start things moving. So Bob Brown was hired on.

The beginnings were modest but enthusiasm quickly accelerated. Bob organized an Ethnomusicology seminar with a handful of students and faculty members. Then came the Curry Concerts of South Indian music and appropriate food in the kitchen of Bob Brown’s rural Middletown farmhouse. Eventually the concerts moved into the barn—but still with the Indian food Bob and his Indian colleagues and students prepared in his kitchen. It was in these years—the early to mid-sixties—that Bob Brown coined the term “World Music;” it soon became synonymous with “Ethnomusicology.”

The foundation was now in place. The founding fathers, Dave McAllester the inspiration, Bob Brown the programmer, and Dick Winslow the facilitator managed to convince President Vic Butterfield to promote and to seek financing for a world music program, a much different field of study than anyone would have imagined even a few years before. “Somehow Vic was wise enough to see the importance and far-reaching values of the program,” says Dick modestly. But he himself was the persuasive force behind these innovations. His administrative and negotiating skills guided the planning through the pitfalls of bureaucratic dithering and trustee intractability. Music, especially the kind of music Dick was promoting, was not an easy sell. And Dick was neither by practice nor by training an ethnomusicologist. But his flair for shuttle diplomacy (between the Music Department and South College) and his ease in working out advantages and compromises together with his deep belief in and devotion to the incipient program convinced others of an idea some considered weird and cockeyed. And eventually a program was planned, new faculty and visiting artists were hired, instruments were purchased. The story is too long for inclusion here, but Mark Slobin, in his book, *Music at Wesleyan* (Wesleyan University Press, 2010), delivers an engaging and detailed account.

Of course Wesleyan was in one respect very lucky. The lobbying for a new and untested program in World Music coincided with the sale of the American Education Press to Xerox, making Wesleyan one of the richest colleges on a per student basis in the U.S. By 1966 the institution was able to mount an ambitious World Music Program while at the same time establishing Ph.D. programs in the sciences and underwriting the Center for Advanced Study.
But Dick was by inclination and vocation a composer. Through all these years he was composing and performing. Beside various smaller ensembles, he had at hand the forces of the Wesleyan University Orchestra and the Glee Club, a venerable institution dating back to the 1860s. Many, perhaps most of his compositions were performed at Wesleyan: operas, oratorios, songs, fantasies for the Glee Club, works for the Concert Choir, arrangements of songs, occasional music, commencement music, and even pieces for the Wesleyan carillon. It may be time for a retrospective.

Much of Dick’s music, especially his operas, provided occasions for combined community efforts. He recruited faculty members, their spouses, their children, and, of course, students to perform his works. Here are some remarks about a few of these, three operas and an oratorio.

_Sweeney Agonistes_, an opera based on the play by T.S. Eliot was given numerous performances in 1952, 1953, and 1954 with mostly Wesleyan musical forces. Marjorie Rice Daltry Rosenbaum sang the role of Dusty, with that of the child by Kitsy McClelland, the actual child of David and Mary McClelland. The conductor was Dick Winslow, who later wrote in an undated note: “This short opera has been performed about twenty times. Single or multiple performances have been given at Wesleyan, Columbia, Brandeis, Northwestern, Juilliard, Pittsburg, and Hartford. Marjorie describes it as XXX.

_Adelaide_ was produced in 1958, again with an almost all-Wesleyan cast that included Marjorie in the title role, Carl Schorske (History), Jose Gomez-Ibañez (Chemistry) Ray Rendall and Richard Donahue, both of the Music Department. Ralph Pendelton provided an original libretto and directed, while Dick was once more in the pit. According to the Argus, it played many performances, here and at other colleges including Juilliard. The Hartford Courant called it “a masterpiece, a spellbinding experience.”

_Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights_, is the only of Dick’s operas I have seen. The libretto was a play by Gertrude Stein. It was produced twice at Wesleyan, each time with multiple performances, in 1967 and again in 1971, and with a cast of mostly Wesleyan faculty and students. Ann Farr (who had no direct Wesleyan affiliation) was Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel (that’s her name), Doctor Faustus was sung by Dick Donahue of the Music Department. Steve Crites of Religion (later Philosophy) sang Mephisto, Marjorie
Rosenbaum was the Country Woman who, at the end mutated into Gertrude Stein herself. Ralph Pendleton of Theater directed. An almost all Wesleyan faculty cast and another glimpse into the way Dick simultaneously created his music and through it engaged the community.

One more observation on Dick’s music and the power it projected. When I was talking with him in Antrim, he gave me a CD of his oratorio Job, which I had not heard before. This was a recording of its premiere in 1964. The conductor was Jon Higgins, then a graduate student, but later the Director of the Center for the Arts and celebrated Karnatak singer. Steve Crites sang the title role. A startling—and to my mind a brilliant—composition. The text is largely from the Book of Job, the Eighth Psalm (“O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth”) and the Gospel of John (“In the beginning was the word . . . “) forming a second, shorter part.

It is scored for baritone, a reader (speaking part), male chorus, organ, and small instrument ensemble. The speaker intones the text as the baritone sings the role of Job, mostly over an organ drone with flashes of orchestral color. As Dick writes, “randomizing processes affected choice of words, pitches, and rhythms in the first half of the work.” The effect of the organ drone below the counterpoint of the chorus, the speaking voice, the singing voice and the chorus is uncanny but at the same time solemn, disturbing, exhilarating. Steve Crites sings the role of Job. For this performance the Chapel Singers were arrayed on a horseshoe balcony, spaced about 6 feet apart, each singer was given one word chosen at random from Biblical account of Job, and at certain points mouthed quietly over and over. Words emerge, float, submerge and then merge into the whole of the music. You hear, or think you hear, fragments of words: righteousness, corruption, fornication. Was that “taxation?” No, maybe “vexation.” The piece is driven by random elements, figments of uncanny force. About two-thirds through comes a natural pause, as the reader intones the beginning of John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the word . . . “ He moves eventually into the Eighth Psalm, joined by the chorus, but now tonally. The reader concludes with excerpts from the story of the wedding feast at Cana, fading out with the steward’s words “but you have kept the good wine till now.”
Listening to this piece several times, I began to realize the gravity of the randomizing. It pervades the unique sound of any performance in the same way Job is afflicted with what seem to be random miseries. The uncertainty of the choral and instrumental sounds suggests Cage’s aleatoric music; the persistence of drone suggests the sound of South Indian music—or the music of any other culture that uses drones. Two sides of the same coin.

The piece is kind of amalgam of World Music and experimental music, at the same time remaining solidly in the Western tradition. It is powerful and moving, but here, as in all music, the vocabulary we have to describe it is inadequate and words fail. Dick Winslow’s own remark is succinct and suggestive: “It is like unto a creature with infinite speech and a backbone of steel.”

There are other stories too long to be told here. One important one is Dick’s midwifing experimental music into the faculty and curriculum with his hiring of Alvin Lucier in 1970 (a student of John Cage) and later Ron Kuivila (a student of Alvin Lucier). Another is Dick’s conducting. Neely Bruce says he is the only one he knows who conducts with a pencil rather than a baton, but I don’t remember that. I do remember a spectacular performance of Henry Brant’s Meteor Farm in 1982 in which Dick and Neely conducted different parts of the orchestral (if that is the word) forces simultaneously. These forces seemed to consist of every musician and ensemble at Wesleyan. Another one of those indelible memories I have of music at Wesleyan.

But Dick did not neglect the European classical music tradition that, years before, he had, been hired to teach. In the last three years of his tenure at Wesleyan, 1981, 1982, and 1983, he conducted three blockbusters: Parts II and III of Messiah, the B-Minor Mass, and the St. John Passion. Obviously Bach, not to speak of Händel too, still shared a lodging in his Pantheon of great composers.

Back to Antrim, New Hampshire. We ended our conversation when we looked out through the front window and realized the illusion of falling snow was no illusion. Large flakes were obscuring the fields and woodland and we thought it prudent to start for home. After a grateful valediction, we drove back through the village of Antrim and
found clearing skies. Fair weather took us home. Thinking of Joe Daltry, John Cage, and Dick Winslow.

Dick has been writing poems for a number of years. Here is one. You can find another in the Poets' Corner of this issue.

**Music 101**

And so the antiphons outweighed
all cantus firmus trysts
in dodecaphonia.

Come to me my beamish boy
who slew chromatic song!
Sing your holy wild melismas!
Sing one joyous Alleluia!
Sing in grand solfeggio
so time itself may join
our all-embracing plagal A-men!

--Richard K. Winslow

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