

Willimantic Orchestras Old and New: A Not-So-Brief History

To follow is the history of two Willimantic orchestras, one founded in the early years of the last century and performing locally until outside forces submerged it into the larger eastern Connecticut musical scene, and the other having begun subsequently in the 1970s and continuing to thrive in essentially its original form now in the present 21st century.

Willimantic Orchestra One

The first "Willimantic Orchestra" was founded by Mary R. (later "Marie") Blanchette, the daughter of a local baker and a recipient of formal musical training in Europe before returning to Willimantic to establish her own music school. She also founded her own orchestra and named it in fine classic style after Euterpe, the Greek muse of lyric poetry and music. On 18 May 1921, the Euterpean Orchestra presented its first concert at Windham High School (later to become the Kramer Middle School) in Willimantic.

In 1931 the Euterpean Orchestra was renamed the Willimantic Community Orchestra and as such, continued to provide Willimantic audiences with one concert each year. But by 1948 Marie Blanchette's musical energies apparently were on the wane, and so she "appointed" Victor Norman as the new conductor of her orchestra. At the time, Norman was already conducting the recently formed New London Civic Orchestra. His acceptance of the assignment in Willimantic effectively merged the two orchestras, even though like aggregations of players continued to perform under the two different names in their respective cities. In 1952, the board of directors voted to change the name to the Eastern Connecticut Symphony. This organization, created out of the demise of the first Willimantic Orchestra and its sister New London aggregation, continues to offer a full season of concerts to this day.

Willimantic Orchestra Two

The present Willimantic Orchestra had its beginnings thanks to another strong-willed woman who was a musician living in Willimantic. Some time in the late 1970's, Desmonde Ward Fiondella (known to all as "Desi") established the Chamber Music Society at Eastern Connecticut State College (now University). The group consisted of both adults from the local community and

college students enrolled at ECSC. Of course, by this time, as has been indicated, Willimantic's only other symphonic musical organization had long since disappeared from the local music scene.

Appearing today in the printed programs of the Willimantic Orchestra is a statement that the "ECSC Chamber Music Society, founded in 1977 by Eastern Connecticut State College music professor Desmonde Warde (sic) Fiondella" was the forerunner of the present Willimantic Orchestra. Evidence that Desi's group evolved to become the second Willimantic Orchestra is a "Premiere Concert" presented on 14 November 1980 by the "Willimantic Community Orchestra" and "(sponsored by) the Eastern Connecticut State College." Printed in the concert program was a statement by ECSC music faculty member Robert Lemmons (sic) that "Desmonde Ward Fiondella, . . . , established the ECSC Chamber Music Society in 1977." This statement perhaps serves as the basis for the view shared today that 1977 was the year of the Willimantic Orchestra's founding.

In fact, Desi's ECSC troupe of local performers was already presenting fully orchestral programs several years before the occurrence of the so-called "Premiere Concert." An especially interesting one is Desi's last concert with the "Chamber Music Orchestra at ECSC," presented in Shafer Auditorium on 15 May 1980. Herbert Ward of the Honolulu Symphony Orchestra, Desi's brother, was a guest artist. With Herbert on contrabass and Nancy Crane on viola as soloists, and with Desi conducting, the group performed von Dittersdorf's *Sinfonia Concertante*. Then for the second half of the program, brother and sister reversed roles, with Herbert conducting the orchestra and Desi as piano soloist in a performance of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. Shortly after this spring 1980 concert, Desi retired from the ECSC music faculty and subsequently relocated to California, but not until Willimantic listeners once again were treated to concert performed by their second very own "orchestra."

Subsequently, the conductors of the Willimantic Community Orchestra included, in addition to Bruce Bellingham, Jane Carlberg, Nancy Crane, Edward Gerry and Toby Tolokan. Frequently, more than one of these conductors shared the baton on a given program. At the end of the 1985-1986 season, the Willimantic Community Orchestra decided to hold competitive auditions for a new conductor with the result that Marshall Brown became conductor for the 1986-1987 season. In 1987 the Willimantic Orchestra was

incorporated, with Scott Lehmann, Gus Mazzocca and myself as the incorporators. The 1987-1988 season was another year of auditions with Francis Leger this time winning the competition. Francis stayed for two seasons and then another round of conductor auditions ensued in 1990-1991. David Vaughan won that audition and, except for a sabbatical leave in 2001-2002, has conducted the Willimantic Orchestra every year since.

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