

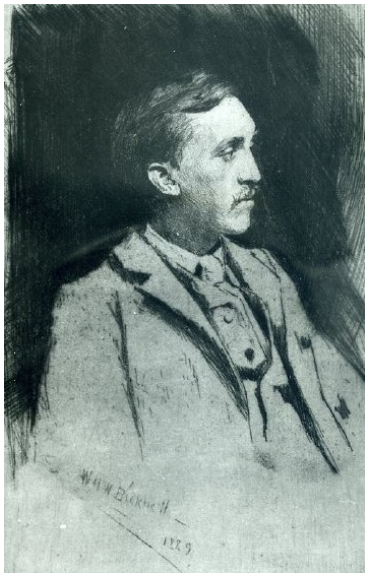
ORCHESTRAS

By Ellen Knight¹

In the newspapers and various other writings from the 19th century, miscellaneous references to resident orchestras appear. Most were undoubtedly small ensembles, such as the "Social Orchestra, composed of seven performers of instrumental music, which performed at a temperance meeting in February 1860. They were probably short-lived. Several groups bore the name of the town, such as The Winchester Orchestral Club which performed at an Arbor Day, 1886, meeting of the Village Improvement Association in Lyceum Hall. Another, the Winchester Stringed Orchestra, performed in January 1888 in North Woburn and was reported as having "many engagements to perform in the surrounding towns" and "becoming very popular."² One called simply The Winchester Orchestra performed for the Village Improvement Association in January 1889 and at the Congregational Church in April 1890. In no case is information about personnel or leaders available.

THE WINCHESTER ORCHESTRAL SOCIETY

For eight seasons during the early twentieth century, Winchester had a resident amateur orchestra whose history can be documented, the Winchester Orchestral Society. The Society gave concerts in Town Hall beginning in December 1909 and ending in 1917.



Bicknell self-portrait

The founder of this orchestra was William Harry Warren Bicknell, a prominent local artist, himself a cellist. As reported in *The Winchester Star*, "A complete orchestra—an orchestra that will rehearse with regularity—an orchestra composed as nearly as possible of residents of Winchester, playing high class, symphonic music—has long been a cherished idea of Mr. W. H. W. Bicknell and will now probably be put into practical operation."³

The dream became reality when Bicknell and other like-minded men of Winchester decided to form an association to handle the business of running an orchestra. The Executive Committee was formed of James Dwinell, president, Sylvester Taylor, secretary, William Newell, treasurer, William Richards, and Preston Pond. The Musical Committee was formed of Bicknell, Joshua Phippen, and the conductor.

The orchestra itself was composed of about 60 amateur volunteers, male and female, from Winchester, Boston, and neighboring communities. They rehearsed every Tuesday night in the high school gymnasium to present three concerts annually (to which was added in 1914 a Special Gala Concert). All concerts were held at Town Hall from 8:00 to 10:00pm. Arrangements were made to hold the regular trolley car passing Town Hall

(bound for Arlington) at 10:10 until 10:15 and add an extra car immediately after.

The concerts were gala occasions. The *Star* reported in December 1901, for example, that "many beautiful gowns were noted in the audience, giving a brilliancy to the affair that was well merited."

From the beginning, the concerts were an artistic success. "Excellent," "splendid," "remarkable," "surprising" were expressions reportedly heard on all sides (by the *Star* reporter) when the Winchester Orchestral Society debuted in 1909. At the first concert every number was "heartily applauded" (declared the same reporter). At the end of the first season, conductor John Little remarked: "The success is not due to me as to the orchestra. The public does not realize how good this orchestra is; with the exception of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Festival Orchestra it has not its equal in all New England."

If Little was perhaps a bit excessive in his praise of the orchestra in its first season—for it was reported that with the advent of each succeeding conductor the orchestra improved significantly—it doubtless was a good orchestra.



After two seasons as conductor, Little was succeeded by S. Henry Hadley. Hadley (not to be confused with his son Henry Hadley who conducted the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra at this time) directed for two seasons and was followed by Henry Eichheim, the most prestigious of Winchester's conductors. Formerly a violinist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra (1890-1912), Eichheim remained with the Winchester orchestra for four years. After leaving, he devoted most of his time to composition, conducting many of his own works with major orchestras.

The composers represented in the orchestra's repertoire were numerous and varied. Generally at each concert the major work was a symphony by one of the masters—Beethoven, Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, Mendelssohn. Many other composers were performed, including such men as Debussy, Wagner, and Strauss, as well as other lesser known names, for example, Moritz Moszkowski, a great favorite whose work is hardly ever performed today.

Compositions by two local composers, Mary Bicknell and Joshua Phippen, were also performed. Phippen, a member of the orchestra's musical committee, also appeared as a piano soloist with the orchestra (and also once, when Hadley was ill, as conductor, reportedly with great success).

Most programs included a soloist. Usually it was a singer, accompanied not by the orchestra but by a pianist, a practice common to the era. Violin and piano soloists also performed. Several of these soloists are still known by reputation. For example, Ernst Perabo, one of the most popular piano recitalists of his time in Boston, performed at the second concert of the first season, and, according to the *Star*, "through his friendship for Mr. Bicknell and his great interest in the work of the orchestra" returned as soloist during the second season.

By all accounts, the concert-going public very much enjoyed the concerts. In fact, in April 1913, the *Star* reported that "already these concerts have become an institution, and are crowded, and enjoyed." Public support, however, was not strong enough to sustain the life of the orchestra.

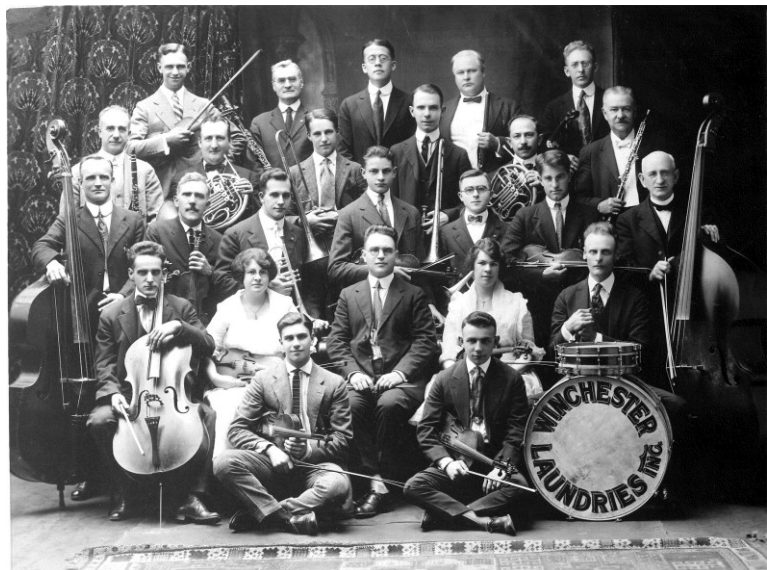
After the eighth season the orchestra was discontinued—not because the orchestra itself was a failure, for it assuredly was not. The committee declared that their goal of giving good concerts had indeed been accomplished. They felt, however, that the efforts of the orchestra were not appreciated by a sufficient number of Winchester citizens to compensate the officers and the players for their hard work and time.

The problem was financial. Each year but the second saw a deficit. As Henry Chapman in his *History of Winchester* remarked upon the demise of the orchestra, "The best music is still a luxury for which few American communities are willing to tax themselves." At no time, the committee complained, had more than two-thirds of the seats been subscribed for. They consistently refused to raise prices, hoping simply to sell more subscriptions. However, each year the deficit was paid, not through increased ticket receipts, but by private gifts. The Committee was, finally, unwilling to burden further these few generous men.

The end of the Winchester Orchestral Society came not without regret. Ralph E. Joslin, for example, wrote to the *Star* to protest. "The orchestra," he declared, "has now reached a proficiency which makes it seem to me little short of a catastrophe to have the concerts discontinued."

WINCHESTER LAUNDRIES ORCHESTRA

The next resident Winchester orchestra was quite different from the former. Founded by the Winchester Laundries, one of the most successful laundry enterprises in state and a major employer in town, the Winchester Laundries Orchestra came to life in 1920 as part of the company's social welfare work. Directed by T. Parker Clark, the 26-piece orchestra gave an annual concert and dance for the Laundries Mutual Benefit Association. In addition, although it did not seek engagements, its services came into demand in



outside cities and towns. For example, it played promenade concerts at New Hampshire resorts, played at the Boston City Club for the Rotary Club (1921), performed for the American Legion

housewarming and carnival, and performed concerts and revues in Winchester. It accompanied a play given by Winchester's Fortnightly Club (1921) and another presented by the Inter-Church Council (1923). At least twice the orchestra performed on the radio.

The conductor, T. P. Clarke, represents a class of musicians of whom Winchester has known many, those who have maintained an active musical life while professionally employed in other fields. Clarke came to Winchester to work for the highway department and, while conductor of the orchestra, was employed as a division manager of the laundries and later held engineering posts. He sang in a male quartet, church choirs, the Winchester Choral Society, and played trombone with the Ives Band of Boston and First Corps Cadet Band, and contributed to the Winchester Music Garden.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Sept. 18, 1992 and of material used in her article, "Music in Winchester, Massachusetts: A Community Portrait, 1830-1925," *American Music*, II:3 (Fall 1994). This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² *The Winchester Star*, Jan. 28, 1888.

³ *The Winchester Star*, October 15, 1909.