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The Adoption of the Music Major at Sweet Briar College

From its official opening in the year 1906, Sweet Briar College has always endeavored to provide its students with a well-rounded liberal arts education. From the start, the college offered Bachelor of Arts degrees in English, modern languages, ancient languages, history and economics, mathematics and physics, or science¹. However, even within these different focuses of study, referred to as “courses,” the general curriculum itself encompassed many subjects, and all Sweet Briar students were required to study English, history, modern language, philosophy, science, mathematics, hygiene and some form of elective course study². Typically, students could fulfill these elective course requirements through courses in physical education, riding lessons, studio arts, theatre arts, or music. The study of music at Sweet Briar, whether it was through theoretical, practical, and historical application, had always been offered as a part of the college curriculum, and offered as an option for elective study, but the study of music itself was never explicitly required for the completion of a Sweet Briar degree. However, according to Emilie Watts McVea, who was president of the college from 1917-1925³, the college was actually considered to be the “first college in the South to recognize the cultural value of practical music by standardizing these courses and giving to them college

¹ “The First Year Book of Sweet Briar Institute.” 1906. Sweet Briar College. p. 30

² Ibid. p. 32-33

³ Stohlman, Martha Lou Lemon. *The Story of Sweet Briar College*. 1956

credit.”⁴ The college continued to support the music department into the 1930s, and within thirty years of the college’s first year of full operation, the institution was able to implement a formal major in music by 1935⁵. However, a great deal of preparation had to happen before this new major could become a possibility.

The decade of 1925-1935 was a time period that was fundamental to the expansion of the Sweet Briar music department. However, this was coming at a time when the college—and the country—was undergoing a great deal of other changes as well. In accordance with the economic and cultural boom of the “Roaring Twenties,” there was a stimulation of growth and development within the field of higher education, especially for women. To begin with, economic prosperity made education more accessible to middle-class families, and the number of women attending college was rapidly increasing. This also came after the cultural shift that came about as a result of the First World War, in which women who had experienced career positions beyond domestic work were now becoming “interested in courses [that would] prepare them for something other than traditionally feminine roles.”⁶ As a result, enrollment at women’s colleges like Sweet Briar was growing rapidly, despite the fact that admissions standards were becoming more elite. The 1920s were a vital period of growth for Sweet Briar, and this growth, coupled with the college’s increasing national reputation were what ultimately helped the college to thrive during the Great Depression and into the 1930s.⁷ In order to adjust to this expansion and the growth of the student body, the college would have to make the necessary accommodations.

⁴ McVea, “Sweet Briar College – An Interpretation.” 1925. Sweet Briar College. p. 8

⁵ “Sweet Briar College Bulletin: Catalogue Number.” 1935. Sweet Briar College.

⁶ “Making the Cut,” *The Honors Journal*, Volume IV. Joanna Kucinski. 1995-96

⁷ Ibid.

One result of these changes on the Sweet Briar campus was the planning and construction of the Mary Helen Cochran library, which began construction in the June of 1929 and opened to students that fall⁸. This was in order to accommodate not only the increase in the student body, but also the overflow of volumes that could no longer fit in the old library due to limited space. However, the move to the new library as a result of the college's expansion would ultimately provide a new opportunity for the expansion of the music department. After the new Cochran Library finally opened, the small building that had formerly served as the library was physically moved down Elijah Road and situated across from the Patteson house, and was designated to serve as the new music building. By the following academic year (1930-1931), this building had been fully converted into a new academic facility specifically for musical study. It provided new rehearsal spaces and served as a casual performance venue for Sweet Briar musicians⁹. This building, which is now referred to as the "Music Box," offered more room for the music department to expand and accommodate more music students in the future as the school continued to grow.

Once the Cochran library was opened, the college now turned to the expansion of its collection. Meta Glass, who was the president of the college at the time, frequently engaged with the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and often attended meetings for its advisory group on College Libraries. Her association with Carnegie would prove to be very beneficial for Sweet Briar, for beginning in 1929, the college received yearly grants of \$7,000 (worth approximately \$97,360 today when indexed to inflation) for the purpose of expanding the new library. These gifts came in yearly installments over the course of a

⁸ "The Mary Helen Cochran Library." 1944. Sweet Briar College p. 3-4

⁹ "Sweet Briar College Bulletin: Alumnae News." 1930. Sweet Briar College p.17

four-year period, and were supposed to cease after the fourth year. However, the college received “a further subvention from the Carnegie Corporation of New York of \$16,000”¹⁰ (nearly \$277,770 today when indexed to inflation) during the 1932-1933 academic year. In addition to the grants given for the library, the Carnegie Corporation also gave another \$7,000 “to be used in 1932-1933 in support of the college’s program in the arts.”¹¹ This gift benefitted the artistic fields of the Sweet Briar curriculum such as theatre and the studio arts, and allowed for the enriched study of the arts as well as the addition of archaeology to the art department curriculum.¹² Within this period of monetary assistance from the Carnegie Corporation, the college was expanding academically, and was truly beginning to offer the well-rounded and diverse curriculum of a true liberal arts college. These generous contributions were just the support the college needed, for the college’s growth had generated a slight need for material expansion. These grants helped to support this progress and expansion, but it didn’t stop there. Also, Sweet Briar was one of only twenty-two colleges to which the Carnegie Corporation contributed a collection of equipment of musical study valued at nearly \$2,500 (approximately \$45,740 today when indexed to inflation), and included equipment such as a “Capehart phonograph [...], 824 records [...], 251 scores [...], 129 volumes, historical biographical and technical; a cabinet for records and scores, and a printed descriptive catalogue”¹³. Without the consistently generous giving of the corporation, it is rather unlikely that the department would have been able to acquire the necessary resources it needed to continue its expansion.

¹⁰ *Alumnae News*. June 1933. Sweet Briar College. p.13

¹¹ *Alumnae News*. June 1932. Sweet Briar College. p. 12

¹² *Ibid*. p. 14

¹³ *Alumnae News*. December 1933. Sweet Briar College. p.7

Following the major advancements of the music program between 1929 and 1933 with the new music building, new equipment, and new faculty, the department finally seemed to be coming closer to achieving an end goal by the end of the 1932-1933 academic year. In the spring of 1933, a copy of the Sweet Briar College Bulletin entitled “Phases in Progress” was published, and in a few brief sentences it distinctly described the goals of the music departments, acknowledging its recent progress and “look[ing] forward to the establishment of a major in Music as soon as practicable.”¹⁴ This was a major step in the development of the music program, for although consistent advancements had been occurring over the course of the previous five or so years, the college was now explicitly asserting its objective, and was making the music department a priority. After this assertion, another year passed before one last addition was made to the department during the 1934-1935 academic year. Louise Rood, a classically trained violinist, was hired as a new music professor at Sweet Briar in the fall of 1934, where she would teach violin and lead the orchestra. Although the hiring of faculty seems commonplace, the hiring of Louise Rood as a music instructor was rather noteworthy, for she was sent to Sweet Briar from the acclaimed Julliard School of Music in New York as a teaching fellow. She came bearing high praise, and the continuation of her fellowship came “in recognition of her promising work.”¹⁵ Although to some she might seem to be no more than a typical member of the Sweet Briar faculty, she was significant in that she was the final jewel in the crown of the Sweet Briar music department, and after all of the department’s progress in recent years, it was finally entering the home stretch.

¹⁴ “Sweet Briar College Bulletin: Phases in Progress.” 1933. Sweet Briar College. p.4

¹⁵ “Sweet Briar College Bulletin: Fall Announcements.” 1934-1935. Sweet Briar College. p.1

In the fall semester of the 1935-1936 academic year, the music department had finally grown enough to where the college could finally implement the formal major in music.¹⁶ Although music had always been an available field of study at Sweet Briar College, the progress made between the years 1929 and 1935 was quite dramatic, and the department was only becoming more advanced. Ultimately, the traceable factors that allowed for this period of expansion within the music curriculum all stem from the college's growth during the 1920s. Increased population led to the need for the new library, the new library created the opportunity for a new music building, and then the generosity of the Carnegie foundation (also provoked by the library) helped to flesh out the program by providing new materials. With a few new faculty members such as Louise Rood rounding out the department, the domino effect of progress finally reached its end, and the music major became an official part of the Sweet Briar College curriculum.

¹⁶ "Sweet Briar College Bulletin: Catalogue Number." 1935. Sweet Briar College.

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