

West, Melvin Kenneth (1930–2019)

DAN SHULTZ

Dan Shultz, emeritus professor of music, Walla Walla University, has researched and written extensively about Seventh-day Adventist music history and musicians. His publications include *A Great Tradition*—a history of music at Walla Walla University, and the *Adventist Musicians Biographical Resource*—an encyclopedia with biographies of over 1100 Adventist musicians. He founded the International Adventist Musicians Association, serving as its president for ten years and editing its publications and website for over thirty years. Shultz and his wife, Carolyn (nee Stevens), live in College Place, Washington.

Melvin West was a noted Seventh-day Adventist organist, church musician, composer, and music educator.

Early Life and Training

He was born on March 2, 1930, in St. Paul, Minnesota, the son of Laurence and Thelma Abel

West. When Mel was still young, his family moved to Lodi, California, where his mother, an accomplished musician, sang in the choir at Lodi Central Seventh-day Adventist church and was its primary supporting force for many years.

As a child Mel was fascinated with music, listening to the Walter Damrosch weekly radio music program from age four and at age six “playing” organ on the front bumper of the family car, pretending its grill was the pipes!¹ He started piano lessons at age 10 with Frances Brown and at age 13 organ lessons with Allan Bacon at the University of the Pacific. Both parents enthusiastically supported their son's interest in and pursuit of music as a career.²

Mel graduated from Lodi Academy as class president in 1948, attended Union College in Nebraska for two years, and then transferred to Emmanuel Missionary College (EMC), now Andrews University, in Berrien Springs,



Melvin West

Courtesy of WWU Archives at Walla Walla University.

Michigan. While most of his organ study was taken at EMC under Verne Kelsey, West spent one semester at Columbia University in New York City, studying with Claire Coci, celebrated organist and teacher.³

Atlantic Union College Years

After graduating with a B.A. in music from EMC in 1952, he married Betty Ann Nilsson, his seventh-grade girlfriend. That fall, they moved to New York City, where they both worked at Faith for Today, a pioneering Seventh-day Adventist television program. Following a year as organist for the program, West was hired to teach at Atlantic Union College (AUC) in South Lancaster, Massachusetts. A son, Laurence, was born in 1953.⁴

While teaching at AUC, West took a one-year leave of absence in 1954-1955 in which he completed a master of music degree at the University of Redlands, where he studied organ under Leslie P. Spelman.⁵ After returning to Massachusetts, West entered a doctoral program at Boston University, studying under organist George Faxon. He became a Fellow in the American Guild of Organists and completed his doctor of musical arts (DMA) degree in 1959.⁶ In addition to teaching at AUC and graduate study, West was an organist with Episcopal, Unitarian, and Congregational churches in the Boston area.⁷

On campus, West's talents in organ performance and improvisation and teaching inspired faculty and students alike. While his classes were rigorous, he was a gifted lecturer, known for his knowledge of music history and ability to clearly explain concepts in music theory. He inspired students with his youthful enthusiasm for teaching and music as well as his sense of humor. He was an accomplished pianist, frequently using that ability to spontaneously make a point in class presentations.⁸

Walla Walla College Years

At the age of 29, West accepted appointment as chair of the music department at Walla Walla College (later University) in College Place, Washington. A daughter, Lynelle, was born to the Wests in 1960, near the end of his first year there. West chaired the department at Walla Walla College for 15 of the next 18 years. From the first music faculty meeting on, he became an agent for change. His leadership and initiative brought about a transformation that launched the modern era for music at that school.

During his first eight years, West led the program in achieving accreditation in the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) and gaining departmental membership in the national music honor society, Pi Kappa Lambda, both firsts for Adventist colleges and universities.⁹ He brought about construction of a new building to house the college's music and art programs. Completed in 1966, it was without question the largest and most fully equipped such facility in Adventist higher education to date. He oversaw a comprehensive organ installation on campus that included five pipe organs.¹⁰

West also expanded the size of the music faculty, hiring young and talented musicians who helped create excitement in the program. "It was an exciting place to be and very rewarding personally," recalled Marvin Robertson, a Walla Walla graduate who returned to campus to teach for three years under West. Robertson, who went on to head the music program at what is now Southern Adventist University for 33 years, said that "the decision to leave [Walla Walla] was a difficult one since we were very happy there."¹¹

Bruce Ashton, a pianist and composer who would play a major role in music at what is now Southern Adventist University, also started his career under West during the 1960s. He later observed: "I felt at the time that I was starting at the top of the available music departments in our colleges. Walla Walla College was it, the place to be. It was very upbeat. There was the feeling within the music faculty of lots of horsepower under the hood."¹²

As at AUC, West's work as an organist for church services and recitals brought inspiration. He and fellow faculty member Loren Dickinson started an evensong program, a meditative program combining organ music and the spoken word in the 1962-1963 school year that continues as a meaningful way to end the Sabbath.¹³

During his years at WWC, West also participated extensively in community and regional music activities, serving as a member of the local symphony board, and president of the Community Concert Association of Walla Walla. He started a local chapter in the American Guild of Organists (AGO), and eventually served as chairman of the Northwest region of that organization while adjudicating in numerous festivals. He was also featured as an organ soloist with the Walla Walla Symphony.¹⁴

West later reflected on the vision that drove his transformative work at WWC:

As I came to Walla Walla College, my idea was to develop a quality music program so that students could study music at an Adventist college and not feel they were being cheated in their education. To do so required that we provide the best in teaching, facilities, and degree programs. I wanted the students to leave as informed and capable performers, able to make music as well as teach it. My coming to Walla Walla and what happened there was not just the result of a professional pursuit, but more a sense of mission, growing out of strongly held convictions that deepened as the years went by.

Some of the more satisfying moments for me included the completion of the Fine Arts Center . . . and the opportunity to be involved in so many enjoyable performances of great choral works: the Brahms and Durufle *Requiems*, the Creston *Prophecy of Isaiah*, and the Poulenc *Gloria*. Performing this great literature with Harold Lickey was definitely a highpoint of my experience there.¹⁵

West took a sabbatical in 1966 and then taught at Middle East College in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1969-1970. Following this travel abroad, he started the Arts and Ideas class, an integrated experience about art, architecture, music, and philosophy. He also taught the class during summers in European tours with WWC students and others.¹⁶

Minister of Music

After another seven years at Walla Walla, West left in 1977 to become minister of music at the Kettering, Ohio, Seventh-day Adventist Church, the first full-time position of its type in the denomination. Four years later he went to Union College, Lincoln, Nebraska, where he taught music, served as director of Development and Alumni Affairs, and was minister of music for the College View Seventh-day Adventist church. In 1982 he became director of music at the Westminster Presbyterian Church in Lincoln, where he served until his retirement in 1988.¹⁷

In addition to his activities as an organist, West was a gifted arranger and composer. In the 1970s, five of his many hymn arrangements and choral responses were published. Other unpublished works from this time period included choral music and an instrumental work, *Dyptique for Trombone and Piano*.¹⁸

In the 1980s, he was on the General Conference committee for creating a new church hymnal, serving as chair of the subcommittee on tunes. He and Wayne Hooper edited and arranged the music, with West composing five new hymn tunes. *The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, released in 1985, includes over 30 arrangements and hymn tunes by West, the largest contribution by any one person in those areas.¹⁹

When the Wests returned to the Northwest in 1988, he continued to perform church music, serving as organist at the Sunnyside Adventist Church in Portland, Oregon. He joined on occasion with former colleague Harold Lickey, also residing in that area, in his choral work.²⁰

Legacy

In 1996 West was honored for his work at WWC and his contribution to Adventist music when the college's music and art facility was named the Melvin K. West Fine Arts Center. He thus became one of a select group of six Adventist musicians who have had music buildings named after them.²¹ He was granted professor emeritus status in that same year.²²

While West's accomplishments in a career that spanned more than 60 years were many and distinguished, in the minds of many he was best known for his gifts in teaching and performing. Through his talents and dedication, he ennobled, enriched, and inspired the lives of countless students and worshipers.

West was living in Portland, Oregon, when he died on December 27, 2019, at age 89. He was interred in Cherokee Memorial Park in Lodi Memorial Park, near his parents and infant son Lon (1961). Memorial services were held at the Portland Sunnyside church and the Walla Walla University church in February 2020.²³

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. Wayne H. Hooper and Edward E. White, *Companion to the Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1988), 666-668.
2. Hooper and White; Lynelle West Hatton, "Life Sketch," Melvin K. West Evensong Memorial Services printed program, February 16, Sunnyside Adventist Church, Portland, Oregon, and February 23, 2020, Walla Walla University Church, College Place, Washington.
3. Hatton, "Life Sketch."
4. Ibid.
5. Melvin West, interviews by author, Dan Shultz, January 4, 1991 and September 25, 2009; Melvin West to Dan Shultz, April 30 and November 27, 1991. The interview and letters became the source for a significant amount of information for this biography.
6. Melvin West's D.M.A Graduate Recital program, November 26, 1957.
7. Melvin West interviews.
8. Author's personal knowledge and experience as a music student attending AUC at that time.
9. Dan Shultz, *A Great Tradition, Music at Walla Walla College 1892-1992* (College Place, Washington: College Press, 1992), 136-137; West interviews and correspondence.
10. Ibid., 135-137.
11. Ibid., 134; Marvin Robertson, interview by author, November 19, 1990; Marvin Robertson to Dan Shultz, June 17, 1990.
12. Shultz, *A Great Tradition*, 142; Bruce Ashton, interview by author, June 13, 1990.

13. Shultz, *A Great Tradition*, 142; West interviews and correspondence.
14. Shultz, *A Great Tradition*, 135.
15. *Ibid.*, 160, 181.
16. Hatton, "Life Sketch."
17. *Ibid.*
18. Shultz, *A Great Tradition*, 171.
19. Hooper and White, *Companion to the Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, 667-668.
20. Hatton, "Life Sketch."
21. Noah Paulin, Pacific Union College, 1932 and 1967; Carl Engel, Union College, 1948; Harold A. Miller, Southern Missionary College, 1954; Paul Hamel, Andrews University, 1995; Mel West, Walla Walla College, 1996; J. Mable Wood, Southern Adventist University, 1981.
22. Dan Shultz to W.G. Nelson, President, WWC, December 19, 1994; Dan Shultz to Melvin West, October 3, 1995; Mel West to Dan Shultz, October 24, 1996; "Printed Program for Naming of the MKW FAC," April 26, 1996; Melvin West to Dan Shultz, April 30, 1996 and August 21, 2007; Dan Shultz, "Walla Walla Honors Melvin West," *International Adventist Musicians Association Notes*, Summer 1996, 1, 3.
23. Hatton, "Life Sketch."

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