Don Gillis Interviews William D. Revelli, March 2-7, 1965

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Transcription by Christina Taylor Gibson

Unknown: Just say something informally and then we'll go

Don Gillis: I think the feature with Bill had a little more . . .

William D. Revelli: Are you hearing me all right in there now?

Unknown: And how [mumbling off microphone]

W.R.: Is that too much

Unknown: No, no it's fine, it's normal, just normal.

W.R.: Good. That's all you need, isn't it?

D.G.: I'm talking with William E. Revelli, that is Bill E., William D.? I'll start over. That's one of my great blessings, being a good tape editor. I know I can always cut this out. I'm talking to William D. Revelli of the University of Michigan Bands, whose 25th anniversary I had the good fortune to attend. How many years back was this Bill?

W.R.: Well, this is … I'm in my thirtieth year now Don.

D.G.: Oh, so this was five years ago.

W.R.: Yes.

D.G.: At the marvelous banquet where we all sat around and tried in some small way to pay tribute to you for what you had done for the band field, not only at the University of Michigan, but it went way back to a town in Indiana named—

W.R.: Hobart.

D.G.: Hobart, Indiana. Bill, if you don't mind, on this afternoon to go back about thirty years, why don't you tell us about what young William Revelli was doing in Hobart, Indiana as a band director in a town that, which started out as an unknown factor and then became known as THE high school band center of the United States after a little while.

W.R.: This will be easy to do, Don, because was just returned to Hobart about three weeks ago with the Michigan band, the first time in thirty years, where I met a great many of my former students who are now married and have children and I met their children, so it'll be easy to reminisce. Well, it was in 1925 that I went to Hobart. There had not been a single student in the public schools of Hobart that played a wind instrument up to the time that I came there, so it was really pioneering,

D.G.: You began from absolute scratch!

W.R.: Oh yes, oh yes, there wasn't a single instrumentalist in the school system. We began right from the very beginning. The band met at 7 o'clock in the morning in the school gymnasium, and not a ce . . . We didn't have a budget of any kind. So we gathered up all the instruments that we could find from the attics and second-hand stores and so on and we met for one-hour each morning. I recall vividly that we did not have a bass drum and I would go down each morning to the home of Mr. Argo, who incidentally had two sons in the band, and I would get this bass drum. He was a jazz drummer in town. His dance band, a jazz band. And I would get this bass drum and put it in my old Ford and take it down to the gymnasium where we would rehearse for an hour. Then of course I had to return it to Mr. Argo because he would be playing with his dance band that he… Many times, well after a few days he said one morning when he came in rather sleepy eyed when I knocked on his door about 6:30 to get this drum he said, "Bill, I'll just leave it on the porch and you take it." Many times I had to knock the snow off this drum to take it. This is the way we began!

D.G.: You were a drum major too!

W.R.: That's right! Yes, indeed! And, uh, we had the first band mothers' club in the United States in Hobart. These women were marvelous.

D.G.: Women of influence.

W.R.: Oh, they were marvelous. In fact, thirty years later, this was one of the joys of returning to Hobart the other night, these mothers are just as active today. In fact, it's their children who are now the band mothers. And they raised sufficient funds to buy our instruments, our uniforms, our library. They paid for all of the trips to visit the district, the state, and the national contests, and it was a marvelous experience. I, uh, owe so much to the parents, uh, the band parents of Hobart. Well, that was the beginning. Later, the band met at noon in the assembly hall and became, as you know, national champions in their class for five consecutive years, and it was through the efforts of the students and the band parents and the community that this was possible. Incidentally, one of the young men who conducted on the concert last night, William Rhoades, was the director of bands of the University of New Mexico, played in the Hobart band. I started him in the fifth grade. In fact, this was during the Depression and Bill played my own clarinet because of the . . . And, uh, there's been several of those boys that have gone into the college band field. Later, this band met on school time, fully accredited and, uh, um, it became a vital and imperative part of the . . .

D.G.: You were a leader in accreditation, weren't you Bill?

W.R.: Yes, I did do a lot to, to instill interest among administrators in the development of recognition of credit for school bands. And, in fact, through Indiana in particularly and later nationally. Now there was another band, about the same time, was an ideal of mine, was the Joliet High School band under the direction of A.R. McAllister, who was really a pioneer. The first and only president of the National School Band Association. I lived in Joliet so I had a direct contact with Mr. McAllister, and more or less that was my, I would say my ideal of what I

was, what I wanted to accomplish in the school band field. And, uh, together, I think between he and Mr. Harding of Illinois, I learned a great deal about the school band movement.

D.G.: May I interrupt you just a moment? A moment ago you said Hobart was first in its class in band contests.

W.R.: Right.

D.G.: Well, it seems to me in my mind that I relate Mr. McAllister, and perhaps Mr. Harding as being among those who organized contests of a sort in order to build the band movement.

W.R.: This is true, uh, actually Mr. McAllister's band participated in the second national band contest, as I recall. The first one was held in Fostoria, and perhaps the Joliet band was there, but I recall very vividly it being held in Joliet in, uh, 1927 and, uh, Mr. McAllister was, of course, a pioneer in this field. I think that the, uh, line, tracing it in the way it developed, Mr., Mr. Harding of Illinois held the first band clinic in the United States and, uh, Mr. McAllister more or less copied his program from the Illinois program. So you see there was and evolution here. And then later on, there was a contest movement developed all over the United States. In fact, the prize winners of each state assembled to the national band site. Uh, my first experience in the national band contest was in Denver, Colorado, 1929, where, uh, we participated, and then, uh, each year it grew, it grew larger and bands would be in this locale, in this site of the contest for five days, you do a preliminary performance and then they would select the five best bands to play it off as they do in the finals of a sports event and this would be held on the final evening in the, in the, uh, session, and believe me it was a real inspiring, marvelous experience for these children.

D.G.: I've heard stories about crowd reactions in those days.

W.R.: Oh, tremendous

D.G.: They were rooting just like they would be at big

W.R.: Oh just like they would at national

D.G.: Big Ten Championship

W.R.: Yes. Tremendous pressure. I think that part. So then of course much later it was broken down to ten divisions. So there were only ratings, not rankings, so now there is a first, second, and third division. And of course, I went to Michigan in 1935.

D.G.: Yes, it seems to me, Dr. Revelli, that you told me once something about how the instrumentation of the band during that period. One time, you know, if you had 18 flutes and a bass drum you could call yourself a band, but it, it sort of

W.R.: Yes, the National Bureau for the Advancement of Music under Mr. Tremain and Mr. Maddy was a member of that committee, designed an instrument required list of which you had to have a certain number of instruments of each, flutes, oboes, clarinets, etc. And for each of those instruments, you did not have you were penalized a half point. I remember that when we played in Denver, our playing grade before we played a note was 86 because we'd been

penalized from by the instrumentation committee for not having certain instruments. This was very important, uh, rule, for the development of instrumentation of our high school bands.

D.G.: I should think it would also be very helpful to composers too.

W.R.: Yes, it did. You would ask a question, "what is a band?"

D.G.: Yes.

W.R.: Well, I think we still have that question to answer today because no two bands have yet arrived at the exact instrumentation.

D.G.: I remember talking with you after you returned to Europe on your sabbatical leave in which you'd been examining instrumentation of European bands. Would you sort of like to give the difference say, between the Guard National of, uh, uh, uh,

W.R.: Paris

D.G.: Paris and your own band.

W.R.: Well, of course, the European bands have a difference between what they call "mellow" and "brilliant" brass, "bright" brass. In which they use trumpets and cornets in different ways than we do. They use them as separate choirs. We use them within a choir. They also have tenor horns. They have valve and slide trombones. They have flugelhorns, the whole flugelhorn family. They'll use a sousaphone where we won't. But in general, I would say that the American instrumentation as we have it today, which includes our E-flat soprano clarinet, alto and bass clarinets, contralto clarinet, contrabass clarinet, and all of the brass. When we need a flugelhorn, we have it—we don't use it all the time, we use it as a color instrument. I really believe, Don, that the instrumentation as we finally are adopting it, and which still needs some, uh, research and, uh, study. But as a whole, the instrumentation of our American bands in the public schools and in colleges, although they do not agree completely with each other, are, have developed to such a point that you as a composer need not be concerned as to whether the average high school band or college band has an oboe. There are more oboes and oboist in high school in one state playing oboe today than there was in the entire United States when I started to teach. And this has developed in bassoon. And these people, these youngsters play beautifully on these, on these difficult instruments. They study privately with great, with great artists in the symphony orchestra. So, the development of instrumentation has been really wonderful. The development of repertoire has been tremendous. Our current, uh, uh, current interest among the great composers in the band is continuing to increase and I would predict that now in the not too distant future, that you will hear a great many of our concert and symphony bands play music by the greatest of composers and music which is not, uh, geared actually to the entertainment, but to the aesthetic and cultural development of our people. Uh. The band, as you know, for many years was looked upon as an entertaining medium. I think today, it has arrived upon, uh, where it is looked upon as a cultural, uh, medium of expression in music. And this has happened even though we've had a great fight, in a way, for support of the band because, as you know, there's, many people look down at the band because of its entertainment value.

D.G.: Yes, this is true. Now, one of the great factors, however, about the University of Michigan Band is that it has achieved this cultural aesthetic, um, contributory function that has. And yet at the same time, I've really heard this band and watched this band on television entertain crowds so that, you know, what could you want besides something that's … so how do you explain this flexibility Bill? Well, the Dallas Symphony couldn't do this, Philharmonic couldn't do this.

W.R.: Well, I think the Marching Band, and our stadia is an example of what can happen when you play, uh, uh, serious music. For instance, in the last couple of years, we have done, at every game, and many of the college bands are doing this now, and, uh, in fact, Mr. Harding did it many years ago, not the same way that we're doing it. We're playing serious, uh, music at a football game and receiving standing ovations doing it! In fact,

D.G.: I saw that, just last fall, Bill on television.

W.R.: So, it is inspiring. There is one point, that I'm gravely concerned about and that is the emphasis in recent years that has been given in areas of academic, academic areas of studies, that are not in conflict, but do take away time from our uh, our uh band program.

D.G.: You're talking about the new philosophy since Sputnik went up.

W.R.: Right.

D.G.: So now everything is a frill that isn't the square root of something-or-other.

W.R.: Right, right. And I believe that in time, that we will come back to the realization that although man MAY find his way to the moon, that once he gets there, that there is something else that is even more important than getting there and that's what he's going to do with himself when he gets there.

D.G.: Or while he's going there. [laughs]

W.R.: There is one point that I'd just like to say this, that I, I know this. We don't know what country will be the first to place a man on the moon, but I can assure you that if it's an Italian that gets there first and we come in second that we'll be met by an opera singer.

[laughter]

W.R.: And if a Russian gets there first and we come in second, we'll be met by a ballet dancer.

D.G.: Yes.

W.R.: And, I believe, that if an Englishman got there first—I used to think so at least—less in more recent times, that we'll be met by a poet or a playwright. And I believe that if American gets there first, we should be very careful that the others, whoever's there, isn't met by guitar players.

D.G.: I hope he's met by a band playing the Stars and Stripes.

W.R.: So do I, so do I. I think that would be great.

[laughs]

D.G.: Well you know, there are so many questions that one might like to ask you that one can't get in covering a whole thirty-five year career here, but, uh, one thing Bill, uh, you've been known as a champion of new music, you've played so many premieres, so many new scores, so many old scores too. What do you think the future of the American composer with relationship to the band is? How do you feel as a conductor of a major symphonic organization?

W.R.: Well, I think it's gratifying that we have been able to interest and achieve the, uh, the, uh, secure the compositions and the interest of the great composers of America writing directly for the band. I would like to say this, that not all of the contemporary things that are being written for band are going to be good any more than all of the old things that were written for orchestra were good.

D.G.: Right, right.

W.R.: But I do think that the, the future of the band will be determined by two things: the quality of its music, the repertoire, which is, whether it is old or new, but it must be grateful for band; then the next, I think is, is very important, the universities and colleges of this country continue the magnificent program that they have adopted now and are developing in the future of conductors and teachers of wind instruments. There's no nation on the face of the earth that has the intensive program in the universities and colleges that we have in the future development of musicians, teachers, and conductors, and composers. At long last, even they are beginning to recognize in the composition departments of our universities the importance of the band idiom and they are now giving the student an opportunity to, uh, write for the band. As you know, in the past, if a student of composition went to a major university to study composition, he was immediately put into the string quartet or the orchestral field, which is fine! But they poo-pooed the band to a certain extent. That is no longer so. Today some of the greatest compositions, the finest compositions are coming from the pens of these talented young Americans. I do hope that we will be able to bring a realization of the importance of the band as an instrument of serious expression, rather than just entertainment, although you know my feeling about the importance of that also.

D.G.: Right, I do. And as you entertain along with your cultural expressions. One personal note, I hear you're in a new music building at the University of, uh, uh, Michigan.

W.R.: Well this is an example, in this day of Sputnik, and all of the emphasis being given to science and all, the legislature saw fit to, to, uh, budget, in their, in their state budget appropriations of over 5 million dollars for a School of Music, so I don't think there's anything to be discouraged about!

D.G.: There are thousands of grads who graduated from University before you got that new building though. I remember a certain other hall which was situated at the center of campus, which was called, uh,

W.G.: Harris Hall

D.G.: Harris Hall or most of us used to call it Revelli Hall (laughs) I think. Bill, one other thing and then we'll close: I was very proud of you as I read news reports of a tour you made into Russia. Can you just summarize, for just a moment, how it must have felt to do a "Stars and Stripes" in Moscow?

W.G.: It was marvelous. I, I, you know the one point of all of this, you know Don, and we were in ten countries in the Near East and in Russia, course for 8 weeks in the Soviet Union, but I learned from this experience that people are the same the world over. And that, wherever you play, the voice of music is heard. The people forget everything else, and there is no medium of expression in the entire world that can bring people together more strongly, where they feel like they are one, than music. When I looked at the faces of those Russian men and women, and children as we played, I realized that the voice of music was so powerful and it's bringing people together. And you could sense this enthusiasm for what we were doing. And, by the way, the Stars and Stripes was one of the most popular pieces on our repertoire. When the Eastman orchestra went over a year later, they played the Stars and Stripes too because of the demand from the Russian people for the Stars and Stripes. So you can see the, the influence of a wonderful march. This was another point, we would play symphonic music—tone poems, overtures—and the marches were the ones that were really the most approved and enthusiastically received in the final analysis, which proves that the voice of the band can be very effective in this area.

D.G.: A great element for understanding?

W.G.: Right, completely so.

D.G. For peace.

W.G.: Yes, right, for peace and understanding. There is no difference between people. The Russian person, the individual Russian peasant or person is no different than the American common man or woman when it comes to listening and appreciation of music and what it means to the soul and to the hearts and minds of people.

D.G.: Thank you Bill!

D.G.: I notice that they're much more relaxed when they don't have to talk up.