

Don Gillis Interviews Arthur Brandenburg, March 2-7, 1965

American Bandmasters' Association Research Center, Special Collections in Performing Arts,
University of Maryland, College Park

Transcription by Christina Taylor Gibson

Don Gillis: You want to check his modulatory effectiveness?

Arthur Brandenburg: I think it must be about right!

D.G.: I think you want to get a little closer.

A.B.: My voice is a little bit stronger though.

D.G.: Well we're talking in the finale of this Chicago, man!, start over, I mean Washington interviews with Arthur Vandenburg

A.B.: **Brandenburg**

D.G.: Oh, gosh! I'm sorry

A.B.: That's alright, that's alright! No, no apologies necessary . . .

D.G.: Is there a hole in that mike that I can crawl in?

A.B.: No! Don't feel that way about it!

D.G.: Well, I had a . . . I called "Carl" I mean "Frank Simon," "Carl" today . . . we're talking with Mr. Arthur Brandenburg, member of the American Bandmasters' Association, who served faithfully the field of bands throughout many, many years. Arthur, I'm welcoming you to your own microphone because it is through the generosity of you and the company you have been serving here that we have these interviews available for the public. When did you become, when did you become interested in the band field?

A.B.: I had, uh, I had a fellowship to Columbia University in 1922 and 1923 and I was working on a Masters' Degree, and the curious thing at that time was that there was just one tiny, small book, called, uh, "School Orchestras and Bands" by Glenn Woods in California

D.G.: Yes

A.B.: That is the only book that appeared in a library. I started my first high school band in Elizabeth, New Jersey with nine players in 1924. That grew, so that by 1927, we started our first junior high school band in, uh, Alexander Hamilton Jr. High School. This was successful. Three junior high school bands followed, and that then became the nucleus for a senior high band. This, uh, particular city, saw fit to have an all-boys high school, which opened in 1929. The city had an academic high school formerly co-ed in which there were just six girls, but on the opening of the new school, the principal of the girls' school said, "we *must* have a girls band." I shuddered

at the thought because there'd been no experience of this type *at all*. However, with the fine cooperation of the principal, and I'm sure, some financial aid from his own pocket, he saw fit to have a seventy-five piece girls' band organized, fully uniformed, sent to a state contest, to win first place in the first year, uh, uh, competition for bands.

D.G.: This must've been the first girls' band ever?!

A.B.: I'm not sure.

D.G.: Well, you preceded Phil's ___ his all-girls band.

A.B.: Ha! Well, uh, throughout the years, then from 1929 to 1942, I was the fortunate person to conduct both the girls' band, or, 'scuze me, or, the girls' band, the boys band, the girls' orchestra, the boys' orchestra, simultaneously. I had four hours of conducting a day.

D.G.: Did you ever get them together?

A.B.: Yes, later, this came as a result, you can well imagine that parents were anxious to have some sort of coeducation in this educational set-up and, uh, quite by accident, it was necessary then to call the finest boy players and the finest girl players, and we made a sort of composite city group. This continued until 19, uh, 1942. May I go back just a little bit please and say that in 1939, 40, and 41, the boys' high school went to the national regional contests and won three consecutive first divisions. The girls came along very close behind—they were better in their orchestral fields somewhat—but they were just one step, possibly, as far as divisional ratings was concerned. In 1944, when the second World War broke out, uh, naturally, the boys high school, felt the extreme effects of, uh, alumni and so on, going off to service. But, uh, the recreational commissioner, who was then, uh, on, uh, a sort of part-time basis approached me one day, and said, um, "Mr. Brandenburg, we're doing a lot for our athletes in recreation, but are we doing the same for our people in music?" Well, the answer was no. "Are we going to do anything about it?" "Well, what shall we do?" "Well, uh, why not see, if we could, uh, if we can't have a rehearsal of some sort in a recreational facility?" So we cleared it with the school authorities, merely put an announcement in the paper and, uh, we had forty-five people report with instruments at the first rehearsal. Quite complete as far as instrumentation was concerned, except for the instruments that we borrowed from the school rehearsal, uh, facilities. At the second rehearsal, uh, fifty-five, uh, people reported, largely young ladies because the men were in service.

D.G.: Yes,

A.B.: So the first summer, we played three concerts in recreational parks. And, uh, the young men who heard about this uh, successful venture said, "please keep this going 'til we get back!" So, when they came back, now, uh, uh, the band, evened off again, and, uh, out of a band of seventy-five, half were women and half were men. And, uh, I must honestly say that I b'lieve it was the impetus of these fine contests, over the years, that had, uh, molded a feeling of, of, uh, wanting to continue this educational program in music. So we, and, uh, the interest was so great that this band stayed together all year! Through the sponsorship of the Elizabeth Recreation Commission. This band was together for seventeen years. It, uh, was used, for raising money for

charity to the amount of somewhere between 20 and 25 thousand dollars. It became semi-professional in that the local union cooperated and, uh, saw fit to aid in every phase possible, furnishing players where there might be vacancies, and helping in every respect. This was a great joy. We were close to New York, yes, I will repeat that, we were close to New York, and we utilized soloists from the Goldman band: Jimmy Burke, we had, uh, Percy Granger, twice, we had, uh, uh, Mr. Hoffman in the clarinet section, we had Frances Blazedoh, we had Frederick Wilkins, we had, uh, Sigmund Rasher, and a host, uh, Eric Leitsohn, and

D.G.: Some highlights,

A.B.: And I'm very proud of the fact that Dr. Goldman came out three times to honor this particular band. So this, to, uh, a band man, who has worked largely in the school field, this was a great joy.

D.G.: How many students would you say that you had served? Or who served you, or mutually cooperated in making all of this possible during those years? Would you say . . . ten thousand? Twelve? Fourteen?

A.B.: Uh, strangely enough, in the seventeen years, over 600 alumni appeared in this band. Uh, the Elizabeth School System is large enough so that when you have two academic high schools, a vocational school, four junior high schools, uh, the number of instrumental students would be staggering. I mean, in the amount, you would have four or five hundred students easily per year.

D.G.: mmhmm

A.B.: On the average, I would say.

D.G.: Well, you've seen the band grow through this cultural explosion, which started from nothing thirty years ago and is, or almost nothing thirty years ago in the schools and has now grown to gigantic proportions. What . . . was there a single factor or are there several factors, you think, which caused this? Why this interest in bands? Why not the orchestra?

[pause]

A.B.: I b'lieve the first impetus of this came largely from the fact that, uh, uh, both from the standpoint of material, from the standpoint of preparation of teachers, probably the band movement had gotten greater impetus. Uh, the string, uh, the string program, uh, would, I think, normally, had come along, if the same emphasis had been placed there. I think it was another one of these cases where, uh, you do the best with the amount of teaching time that you have available. The bands, of course, were, uh, constantly in the band for, uh, community affairs, and, uh, probably with, uh, the amount of music written for them, and the progress they made, uh, probably developed faster for that reason.

D.G.: You don't think it was, uh, flashy uniforms and, uh, parades, rather than . .

A.B.: No, I don't think so . . . I would throw a lot of emphasis on the competitive field though, and I mean this in the proper light, to the extent that when students, both in solo and ensemble contests, and in the regular, larger groups, when they would go, to contests, competitive festivals,

if you please, and be evaluated by outstanding musicians, I think the band directors then had the support of the professional man who could come in and say the same thing to the students and the student would make remarkable progress. I think one of the great joys of a musical director who has spent this amount of time is in the number of students, of his own students, who have gone out into the field and become directors, some who have joined symphony orchestras, and are holding prominent positions and, I must not forget the ladies, even though the ladies may not have gone into the professional field, they again, have encouraged their own offspring as they came along in succeeding generations and I think this made for a real, fine, wholesome situation.

D.G.: It has sort of been the natural thing to do then, since the band itself is a natural American expression, and one gravitated to the band and then one had children and then remembering the fun they had as band players then sent their children on into the band, would you say?

A.B.: Yes, and this was very evident in such things as PTA groups, actually community groups, uh, we had such things as national music week, sponsored by all the service clubs. Well that was a fine opportunity for our school groups to, uh, pinpoint the work of a particular music department of the year.

D.G.: Arthur, uh, you've had a long, experience now, uh, almost a lifetime, spent in the field of music. Let's pretend, uh, we're going back to that same library where you were in 1923, what kind of books on bands do you think you might find on the shelves now, after all of these years when you could only find one back in 1923, what, do you think there might be more now, has, have there been a great number of new texts written?

A.B.: I think I've been most fortunate in that in my teaching career, I have sought out, actually, every single printed method that has been published in the United States and somewhere in that method, the man who wrote it took the trouble to set down his very best ideas. Certainly, we have finer, uh, methods, of all sorts today, but basically, since we are talking about, uh, having music come to uh, uh, a high point of excellence, there was a surprising amount of material even in the early texts. When I speak of such things as, uh, the Barnhouse Educator. Some of the very early publications of the Vandercook School. The coming along of such methods of the Rubank System. And there were other methods. It seemed like there were two tendencies: there was the tendency to develop a method for a particular instrument, and also a method for a consummate family of instruments. A fine teacher seemed to adapt himself to whatever the situation was, and no two situations were alike in the teaching field.

D.G.: So one kept pace with the other . . .

A.B.: I feel so

D.G.: Man was supplied by the information required. And you spoke, not very much as everyone made of this, you spoke of fine players from major symphony orchestras coming to you to help your, your, uh, students, your individual students, such as Frances Blazedale, uh, excellent flute player, uh, who may have come and uh, also helped your students to find new ways of playing flute better, or Fred Wilkins, or some of the other men from the Philharmonic.

A.B.: Those people came in as soloists with this, uh, community band, they did not have a specific assignment. However, I must be fair to the instrumental music department. We had men that were actually specialists on strings, woodwinds, and brass, so that, uh, these teachers had quite a remarkable talent, in adjusting themselves to the very best methods of the day.

D.G.: Arthur, we've been talking with a few members of the ABA, those of whom have had distinguished careers and sort of playing a little game of space-age gazing ahead as a sort of a final question for these interviews. Suppose we were to jump ahead into the 80s in this, uh, land, the cultural explosion has exploded now, what is the future of the band? What would you might find in 1985 if you went to Elizabeth New Jersey?

A.B.: I feel that at the moment, there should be great attention given to, uh, keeping the arts as part of the entire educational system. If that is done, I foresee that the child of the future will have uh, a fine, well-rounding experience, not deficient in any one or overly educated or narrow-minded along uh, um, a few areas. I feel that, uh, community-wise, we would be much better if we had this overall person of well-skilled in the humanities, cause I think that, after all, is the essential thing that makes that person a good citizen.

D.G.: That's a good way to end that one, thank you Arthur.