



Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017

Volume 20
Issue 1 *Spring 2011*

Article 8

Spring 2011

A Life of Music

IWU Magazine
Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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Recommended Citation

Magazine, IWU (2011) "A Life of Music," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol20/iss1/8>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

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A Life of Music

One of IWU's longest-serving professors,
R. Dwight Drexler dies at 98.

This winter, the University lost a great musical presence when R. Dwight Drexler, one of Wesleyan's longest-serving professors, died on Dec. 22, 2010, at the age of 98. A 1934 graduate of IWU who went on to become a music professor, Dwight spent more than 50 years on Illinois Wesleyan's campus.

His love of music began in elementary school, when Drexler took his first piano lessons through the University's preparatory department. In 1929, he enrolled as a freshman at Wesleyan. As a student during the Great Depression, he worked out a deal with the School of Music's dean, Arthur Westbrook, to earn a scholarship for singing bass in the college choir and to have a summer job scrubbing floors at 25 cents an hour.

When he graduated in 1934, the music school was ready to hire Drexler, who joined the faculty and taught until 1942, when he joined the U.S. Army Air Force during World War II, serving 20 months in India as a weather forecaster. He returned home in 1945 and resumed teaching piano as well as "Form and Analysis" to juniors and seniors in the music school.



A photo of Drexler taken when he was an IWU student.

During those early postwar years, he met Maxine Lebkuecher, a soprano and voice student in the class of 1946. She and Drexler married in July 1947. Their children Richard '77 and Darcy also went on to have careers in music.

Students recalled Drexler's inspiration in their own lives. "He set very high standards, but I knew from the beginning that he believed in my ability to achieve those standards," wrote Kathy Murray '79, a former student of Drexler's who is now provost and dean of faculty at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn. "By the end of my four undergraduate years, I knew I had had a very special experience, and I have become increasingly aware of the significance of that experience in the years since. I hope I carry with me some little piece of the wisdom Dr. Drexler shared with his students every day."

Another alumna recalled Drexler's sense of humor through the advice he had given her just before her senior recital: "Get the first note right. Get the last note right. And don't fall off the bench in between."

During his time at IWU, Drexler served as director of the School of Music three times, accompanied visiting concert artists and served in the Bloomington-Normal Symphony. He also served for 49 years as organist at Bloomington's First Christian Church.

In addition to his IWU education, Drexler held a master of music degree from the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago and completed additional graduate work at Columbia University. In 1962, he was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of the Pacific (California). That same year, he received Illinois Wesleyan's Century Club award for distinguished teaching.

Drexler served Wesleyan in a variety of ways, including as faculty representative to the Board of Trustees, president of the local chapter of Phi Kappa Phi and chair of the 1975-76 Alumni Fund. In 1972, he was honored by the student body as grand marshal of the Homecoming parade.

In addition to being an inspiring teacher, Drexler was also a gifted performer, according to Robert C. Bray, the R. Forest Colwell Professor of American Literature at IWU. In a written recollection, Bray described a mid-1970s performance by Drexler in Presser Hall "on the Steinway Grand. He comes onstage in tails, not quite shambling, a large and gentle bear of a man who always appears just too folks to be the rare artists that he is." Drexler performed the first set of Claude Debussy's *Préludes*.

"With the last submerged chord having died away ... he puts his hands on his lap and his prominent jowls seem to slacken as he relaxes from the music that has played him. After a suspended moment, like a wave at its crest, the audience too is released, and the wave breaks in a sigh of melancholy catharsis across the auditorium."

Drexler remained at IWU until 1979, retiring as professor emeritus of music. He continued to perform publicly, here and abroad, in a duo-piano ensemble with fellow music professor Susan Brandon until 1995. The Brandon/Drexler Duo played in Vienna, Austria, and also recorded a CD in 1997 titled *The Battle of Prague and Other Parlor Delights*, which features music from 18th century Czech composers. During the years after his retirement, Drexler kept up an active correspondence with many of his former students and colleagues.

"A conservatory exists to prepare the professional musician; it provides nothing more than that. A school of music, such as ours, includes the liberal arts as a necessary part of the education of a musician," Dwight noted in a 1979 interview before his retirement. "There is a tension between the pull toward professionalism (and performance) and general education. IWU's success is due to its resolution of the balance between the professionalism and the general."

In 2002, the R. Dwight Drexler Music Scholarship for outstanding musicianship was established. The scholarship is awarded annually to a student selected by the School of Music faculty.

Drexler is survived by Maxine, his wife of 63 years; a sister; and his children Richard and Darcy.



Drexler teaching one of his many students.