

A Brief History of Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia

“We stand today silently grateful to the men of generous heart and courageous vision. And in our gratitude we stretch out our hands to grasp a little of their faith... that we may keep our feet firmly on the road they chartered for us”

- Norval Church; National President, 1938-1942.

Sinfonia’s genesis was, in the words of sixth Supreme President, Percy Jewett Burrell, “not really a beginning after all, but indeed the product of a personality—Father Mills.” Ossian Everett Mills, then bursar of the New England Conservatory in Boston, was profoundly interested in the physical, mental, moral, and spiritual development of the Conservatory students and recognized that a large proportion of them intended to put their musical knowledge into the church either as organists or singers. Mills felt that this class of people, as much as any, needed to be men of high ideals and, beginning in 1885, invited a group of male students to meet with him once a week. Thirteen years later, Mills was still leading these weekly meetings, and he encouraged the “Old Boys” of the Conservatory to invite the “New Boys” to a “get-acquainted” reception on September 22, 1898. Henry T. Wade, a member of the original committee of “Old Boys” wrote:

The fact that Bro. Mills made the initial move to have the men students get together and counseled us in keeping the group interested, in having an efficient organization for getting better acquainted and for fellowship, and also saw to it that we had our first club room, gives to him, in my opinion, a just claim to be honored with the title of Founder...

A discussion about forming a men’s music club took place among some of the men who attended the reception, and there being considerable interest in the idea, a meeting was planned for the evening of October 6 to further explore the possibilities. It is safe to suppose that some of the men who were attending the weekly meetings held by Mills were present at the gathering on October 6 and that, through them, Mills influenced the adoption of high ideals of manhood by Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia even before its official beginnings.

The minutes of the first meeting on October 6, 1898 stated:

Mr. Wade was appointed chairman. Report of comm. on suggestions as to what the club should do with itself, was accepted.
Noted that a club be organized, to which shall be eligible, any male student of the N. E. C.
Noted that the primary object of the club be sociability.
The election of officers was proceeded with...

The minutes of that first meeting also describe the appointment of a “committee on rules and regulations,” which was to prepare a set of bylaws for the new organization. On October 25, the club’s thirteen active and one honorary member, Ossian Mills, accepted from a committee a governing document that has remained the Fraternity’s philosophy of existence to the present day. In part it read:

The object of this Fraternity shall be for the development of the best and truest fraternal spirit; the mutual welfare and brotherhood of musical students; the advancement of music in America and a loyalty to the *Alma Mater*...

The club also accepted the suggestion of the newly-elected director of the Conservatory (and the Sinfonia's second honorary member), George W. Chadwick, that the group adopt the name of an organization to which he belonged during his student days in Leipzig. SINFONIA was born.

The fledgling society was a success from its very beginning. The first recorded initiation of new members took place on November 28, 1898, less than two months after Sinfonia's founding. Under the leadership of its first president, Frank Leslie Stone, the Fraternity carried on a busy schedule of social events, recitals, concerts, and shows, sponsored a men's glee club, entertained visiting artists, renovated the chapter rooms set aside for their use by the Conservatory, and held regular fortnightly meetings, one of the main features of which was the initiation of new members.

By October 1899 the club numbered about fifty men and continued to add members at frequent intervals. Sinfonia's outstanding success gave rise to thoughts of expansion in the minds of Founder Mills, President Percy Jewett Burrell, and Treasurer Ralph Howard Pendleton. To them it seemed that if their club was fulfilling a need among men at the New England Conservatory, then surely men in other conservatories in the country could find benefit and pleasure in similar organizations in their schools. Large Greek-letter fraternities flourished on college campuses, but there was no Brotherhood for men in music. Why not establish a national Sinfonia for men studying music in conservatories and music schools coast to coast? The men of Boston's Sinfonia, however, were by no means of one mind on the question of expansion; at a meeting on October 1, 1900 to discuss the issue, arguments pro and con were vigorous and tempers grew hot. But, in the end, a majority agreed to spend \$25.00 from the club's treasury (which then totaled \$34.00) to send men to New York, Philadelphia, and Washington in order to present the idea of Sinfonia firsthand to male students of the leading conservatories. The expedition attracted notice far outside the student world and mention appeared in leading newspapers and magazines.

So it was that Pendleton and Henry Hall found themselves in Philadelphia and in conference with men of the Broad Street Conservatory on October 6, 1900, two years to the day after Sinfonia's birth in Boston. The Philadelphia students requested and received admission to Sinfonia as its Beta Chapter, confirmed by the following telegram to the waiting brothers at the New England Conservatory:

October 6, 1900
Broad Street Conservatory applies for admission.
The Sinfonia now National.
Pendleton and Hall...

On November 26, 1900, a group of twelve at the American Institute of Applied Art in New York City became Gamma Chapter; Delta, at Ithaca Conservatory, followed in the last weeks of January 1901. To govern the affairs of the now national Fraternity, a convention of its four chapters was called in Boston on April 16-20, 1901. The assembly saw the sights and attended concerts in Boston, elected Ossian Mills Supreme President, and set about the business of fraternity government that has continued ever since.

By 1902, Beta had progressed sufficiently to host the second National Convention. The Philadelphia Press on April 20, 1902, gave the assembly a particularly noteworthy account:

Nearly forty musical geniuses from different parts of the country will assemble in this city tomorrow to discuss in a calm, harmonious way, topics pertaining to their art.

This will be the second convention of the Sinfonia Fraternity of America, the first organization which has ever tried to promote and foster a general feeling of fellowship among makers of melody since the practicability of producing musical sounds was discovered in the dead past.

For three days these musical geniuses, who hail from Boston, Chicago, Ithaca, and New York and other parts of the Union are to enjoy one another's society. In that time they will talk of various phases of modern music, discuss the compositions of the old masters, transact business of the fraternity, hold a banquet and visit the various points of interest in Philadelphia, and they propose doing it in a manner which musicians of old times would have believed impossible. In the musical discussions particularly, it is said, the spirit of antagonism proverbially rampant among artists of the profession will be absent. Tradition, in this respect, has been overcome by the Sinfonia.

A committee on national ritual and initiation forms was appointed at the first convention, but it wasn't until after the death of Ossian Mills in 1920 that the ritual attained its current form. By 1926, a committee made up of Peter W. Dykema (Supreme President), Charles E. Lutton (Supreme Secretary), Rollin Pease (Supreme Historian), and Turpin Bannister revised the Ritual as a tribute to the founder and, primarily through the work of Rollin Pease, infused the ceremony with a poetic beauty and deep esoteric symbolism that it retains today. This committee revised the Ritual again in 1938, and in 1947 another revision was adopted with only minor changes to their work. Subsequent revisions in 1960, 1970 and 1982 drastically altered the Ritual, but the 1988 National Assembly voted to recapture the original beauty and meaning of the ceremony by adopting a slightly revised 1938 version as the official form of the Ritual. The Sinfonia's Ritual is acknowledged as being one of the most beautiful and meaningful in Greek tradition.

The club that resulted from the efforts of those young men under the leadership of Brother Mills grew into the largest music fraternity in the United States. The national Brotherhood that formed around four chapters in April of 1901 grew to over three hundred strong in the early sixties and today boasts of approximately two hundred active chapters.

What has really happened since 1898? How did the Fraternity grow to its present size? What were the motives of the founders, and how have they served as the foundation of the organization as it has evolved into what we now know as Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia Fraternity? A history of the organization that appeared in Musical America in 1917 stated:

The Sinfonia's purpose, interpreted into every day life, means service to one's fellow-man. The fraternity covets for the man who is a non-Sinfonian in the realm of music in America to-day a full realization that service to music is not enough, but that service to mankind should be the essential thing of his life.

The writings of the founders and earliest members indicate that they recognized music as more than

a means of artistic expression or entertainment. While the academic institution would teach the musician to perfect his skill, Sinfonia would complete his education by teaching him to regard music as a powerful tool for the uplift of mankind. This idea of service to others through music was personified by Father Mills who, beginning in the 1880s, took groups of musicians into the hospitals of Boston to touch the lives of those who were sick and often forgotten. Sinfonia chapters carry on this tradition today through the Ossian Everett Mills Music Mission.

The founders also sought to develop the “manly musician” by providing a social atmosphere in which individuals could develop the ideals of manhood in themselves and their fellow-man ? ideals that, through their interactions with others, would pervade society. The delegates who were gathered at the first convention in Boston in 1901 stood on the threshold of the twentieth century—a time that was to see the most rapid and dramatic changes in the history of the world. Those men attempted to project into this century an idea that would revolutionize American music—an idea that emphasized the harmony and welfare of music students over the dominant condition of competitiveness that characterized interactions among musicians. They envisioned a brotherhood that they hoped would go forth from the conservatories to bring about the final harmony of all mankind. Thus, the advancement of music in America was initially regarded as the inevitable result of advancing Sinfonia’s ideals in musicians in America.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the Fraternity’s members began to realize the organization’s potential to raise American music and American musicians to a point of equality with their European counterparts. America was beginning to assert itself in the arena of world affairs, trying furiously to cast off the role of the culturally “backward” colonies and be counted among the ranking nations of the globe. That American musicians should want to be part of this movement as well stands to reason.

In those days, even American audiences and conservatories would recognize a musician only if he had a background of European instruction. The foremost masters were Europeans. No matter what a man’s ability, he could realistically expect no advancement without the proper European pedigree. One can easily imagine the effect this type of atmosphere could have on a young musician eager to make his start in the world. This served to intensify the competition among talented American musicians for the few positions available to them and to foster in them a deep insecurity and an unavoidable sense of inferiority to the Europeans, regardless of their own abilities. The unfairness of the situation gnawed at them. To be disregarded by the Europeans was one thing, but to be disregarded by their countrymen for the same reasons was almost unbearable. If America was willing to assert itself on a level of equality with the rest of the world, could not American musicians do the same? This became one of the driving forces behind the expansion of a national Sinfonia.

Thus, the structure created for musical students to develop devotion to Sinfonia’s ideals within themselves and their Fraternity brothers became a mutually supportive atmosphere for American musicians and a means to end the destructive competition which only served to hold them back. They foresaw a time when American musicians would compete, not against one another, but against the European stigma that kept them from a place of equality. Only then could American music take its rightful place alongside the European tradition. The early members of the Fraternity took great pride in being a primary force in that movement.

The rapid rate of expansion that followed grew out of this atmosphere, as the young musicians of the country’s conservatories eagerly sought to overcome their perceived inferiority. By its twenty-

fifth year, the Fraternity had grown to twenty-five chapters. It doubled in the five years that followed. It was in this period that Sinfonia experienced its "Golden Age," when labors of influential and selfless leaders such as Ossian Mills, Percy Jewett Burrell, Peter Dykema and Thomas E. Dewey brought forth a National Sinfonia that earned the great respect of students and educators alike and truly became a force in American music. The Object upon which the Fraternity was founded was reordered in December 1927, placing the advancement of music in a position of prominence. The new statement read:

It shall be the object and purpose of this Fraternity to advance the cause of music in America, to foster the mutual welfare and brotherhood of students of music, to develop the truest fraternal spirit among its members, and to encourage loyalty to the Alma Mater.

Sinfonia grew and flourished in the early teens under the leadership of Burrell, a man imbued with the spirit of Ossian Mills and determined to nurture the seeds that Mills had carefully planted in Sinfonia. Supreme President from 1907-1914, Brother Burrell gave selflessly of his time and effort to build Sinfonia into a proud and strong Fraternity with an earnest commitment to the values embodied in the Object of Sinfonia and a demand for quality that gained Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia the respect of its peers.

Sinfonia continued to flourish in the 1920s under the dynamic leadership of Wisconsin's Peter W. Dykema, later of Columbia University, a man of great energies and foresight whose effect on American music education is felt to this day. The Fraternity stressed quality in its programs, a quality that was reflected in a series of exemplary publications written by a young first year law student at the University of Michigan, Thomas E. Dewey, who at the time was equally well known for a "fine baritone voice." Dewey insisted on quality as National Historian, often returning articles to their authors with instructions to improve them. His efforts resulted in a feeling of pride throughout the Fraternity that helped to power Sinfonia's rapid growth. Dewey later transformed those same standards and values into an outstanding political career that carried him to the Governorship of New York and just short of the Presidency of the United States in 1948.

After America's victory in World War II, the idea that American music was inferior became a thing of the past. The insecurity that had given Sinfonia its urgency before the wars vanished. The draft in wartime had made it virtually impossible to maintain anything other than a shell of the organization, since many schools could claim fewer than ten male students enrolled. With the introduction of the GI bill came a massive influx of men into the nation's music programs after the war. The size problems suddenly vanished, and now chapters boomed almost faster than anyone could keep track. Due to this rapid growth, maintaining the same type of quality and continuity in the Fraternity's programs became very difficult. Rather than a natural, orderly expansion, the Fraternity was now faced with a membership boom for which it was not well prepared.

The increased numbers brought about the appearance of health, but along with that perception came complacency toward the values of the Fraternity that had seemed so urgent before the wars. The values that had been intently championed by the idealists of the early years seemed somewhat hollow and perhaps a little naive to the men who were fresh from the experiences of war. They wanted to enjoy life, to make up for lost time. The Fraternity became larger through a desire for fellowship and renewing old acquaintances, but the intense commitment to developing the ideals of manhood that had been prevalent in the early days subsided in favor of more social and professional

interests.

Extremely rapid expansion coupled with the difficulties and expenses of communicating with the entire membership and keeping records updated posed some rather large problems. To save money, publications were streamlined. It was impossible to put out the type of yearbook that had been the standard of the pre-war era. The heritage of excellence that was common knowledge to the early brothers was lost in the rush of expansion, and hence any knowledge of Sinfonia's early years was limited and somewhat vague. The writings and commentaries that made up the bulk of the Fraternity's history were no longer published on a regular basis, and as a result their message became less and less familiar to its members. Along with that loss and the intense commitment the writings had helped to foster went the national prestige that the Fraternity had enjoyed in the 1920s and 1930s. This was not a drastic process, but rather a decline that progressed slowly over the ensuing years. When the scorn of established institutions that characterized the 1960s hit Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia, the Fraternity was hard pressed to preserve the vestiges of national prominence that remained. The question of quality had been replaced by the more vital question of survival itself.

In an attempt to distinguish itself from other fraternities and attract membership, Sinfonia's leaders marketed the organization as "The Professional Fraternity for Men in Music," a designation that, despite its departure from the original intent of a club formed for sociability, became a source of pride for generations of Sinfonians. In 1970, the Fraternity's statement of purpose was rewritten to "place increased emphasis upon professionalism."

The primary purpose of this Fraternity shall be to encourage and actively promote the highest standards of creativity, performance, education, and research in music in America. Further purposes shall be to develop and encourage loyalty to the Alma Mater, to foster the mutual welfare and brotherhood of students of music, to develop the truest fraternal spirit among its members, and to instill in all people an awareness of music's important role in the enrichment of the human spirit.

At the height of the characterization of Sinfonia as a "professional fraternity," Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 was passed, dictating that professional fraternities cannot legally restrict membership to a single sex. After permitting the initiation of approximately 250 females since 1976, in accordance with the new regulation, Sinfonia was granted exemption from Title IX and therefore designated as a "social, rather than professional, fraternal organization." Following receipt of an exemption from Title IX in 1983, the 1985 National Assembly voted to limit all membership and initiation programs in chapters to men only and to delete "Phi Mu Alpha is a fraternity representing the music profession" from the National Constitution as not being an accurate description of the organization. However, until 1998, the National Examination continued to teach probationary members that the Fraternity was a professional society "in terms of its goals and purposes." As efforts increased to educate members that Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia is both legally and philosophically a social fraternity, members began to question the apparent contradiction of this classification with the 1970 statement of purpose. Concurrently, members who took a greater interest in the Fraternity's history and the Ritual came to realize that the 1901 Object is the basis of the Fraternity's Ritual and symbols. This increased awareness led to the decision of the 2003 National Assembly to restore the 1901 Object, in recognition of the fact that placing "the development of the best and truest fraternal spirit" in the position of chief importance expresses an idea that is the very essence of Sinfonia.

With retrospective self-examination, Sinfonia has entered its second century with a renewed commitment to the vision of its Founders and a zeal for the timeless values that, as history has demonstrated, provide such a strong foundation for the health of the organization. The values that made Sinfonia great in its early days are abiding and can be just as useful now as they were one hundred years ago. What made Sinfonia so prominent in its “Golden Age?” There were three overriding forces: intense commitment to the values of the Fraternity; a belief in the need for a vital and well-organized national organization in addition to strong individual chapters; and a sincere attempt to live the vows taken at initiation. As our early brothers expressed so well in 1928, at the memorial service for Ossian Mills:

To all of us humans the future is a closed book, except that we know it as a continuation of the present, just as the present flows out of the past. We, therefore, can speak of the Sinfonia of the future only in terms of what has been.

The future course of Sinfonia rests on the actions taken in the present. The success that Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia will enjoy tomorrow depends upon fidelity and vigilance to the vision of the founders today. Why should Sinfonia not fulfill its promise to advance music in America and bring about the final harmony of mankind by developing *musicians* — physically, mentally, morally, and spiritually? The only limitation to Sinfonia’s attainment of this mission is each brother’s personal commitment and effort.