



Music In Keene

by Gardner Barrett

On March 7, 1780, the town voted “that the singing in public worship be performed without reading line by line as they sing.” The music of churches was of prime consideration in early years and singing by the congregation was considered an important part of public worship. To better the quality, Keene, in 1803-04, appropriated \$60 to teach the people to sing. The town was not always so generous in this regard and many times flatly refused such an appropriation, though in 1820 it did vote \$50 to give such instruction to both the Congregational and Baptist Societies.

In the 1820's Keene had a choral body known variously as the Keene Sacred Music Society, Keene Musical Society, and the Keene Harmonic Society. Under whatever name, it gave concerts well patronized by the public. The object of the society was to perform classical music in the best style, using the newly published collection of music by the Handel and Haydn Society in Boston. Handel's works usually took foremost consideration. The first performance of his “Messiah” in Keene was given on February 21, 1821, at the Meetinghouse, admission 25¢.

Keene had its first glimpse and hearing of a prima donna on August 16, 1827, when the noted cantatrice Signora Eliza Ostinelli Biscaccianti appeared in concert, with a vast European reputation and a real furore. A critic wrote of her performance: “Tho her cadences

are not always so mellifluous or finished as could be wished, nevertheless, her execution defies criticism."

By 1854 the Cheshire County Musical Institution was well organized and brought many noted musical figures of the era to the stage of Keene's old town hall. Local citizens were properly appreciative of performances, both in solo work and in conjunction with local artists. For a number of years the great Carl Zerrahn of Boston was conductor of this society and brought his highly polished artistic standards to its performances. At times the chorus numbered over 500. Later it was stated in the *New England Magazine*, "The Keene festivals of the 1870's were probably the most famous in all New England, being relatively what the Worcester festival has since become."

But in time the Institution faced prohibitive costs. Financial losses, plus a waning of interest, caused the organization to disband.

In time a group of musically inclined individuals formed the select and social Keene Music Club at which members played, sang, and read papers on all phases of music. An invitation to attend was equivalent to a royal command and was so acknowledged.

Keene's heyday in music was the period of the Keene Chorus Club from 1902-1931, and the Club did much to advertise Keene throughout the country. In 1902 Mrs. Herbert E. Fay had become prime mover in the organization of the Club, engendering a spirited enthusiasm among the citizens. A conductor was obtained who was destined to become one of the great choral conductors of his time, Nelson Perley Coffin of Newport, N. H. He was the guiding light of the Club from 1902 to the time of his sudden death in 1923.

The first concert was given February 20, 1902, with Mrs. Berdia C. Huntress as accompanist, a position she occupied until her death in 1922. The chorus numbered 150 voices. Their first festival, a gala occasion, was held the same year. There was scarcely a major choral work of any real distinction not sung at these festivals: "Messiah," "Elijah," "St. Paul," and the Verdi "Requiem," with three performances to its credit. "Aida" and "Faust" were given in concert form with such artists as Edward Johnson, Anita Rio, Janet Spencer, and Emilie DeGogorza in the leading roles.

Keene owes much to the memory of Edward F. Holbrook, Berdia C. Huntress, and Henry W. Brown. These citizens gave generously from their means that others might enjoy the musical talents of great artists.

After the death of Nelson P. Coffin, the Keene Chorus Club carried on under the baton of George Sawyer Dunham of Boston from

1924 to 1931. The first choral performance in New England of Ponchielli's "La Gioconda" was sung in Keene with a cast headed by the well-known soprano Claire Maentz. Three Keene sopranos who lent lustre to the festivals by their artistry were Mildred H. Whitcomb, Teresa Daly, and Edith A. McCullough.

The festivals were expensive affairs. With the depression of 1929 the spark of other days was dimming, and the Keene Chorus Club ended, no longer a financial possibility.

The MacDowell Male Chorus was founded by Henry Southwell, Hugh R. Park, Eric Waling, and Gardner Barrett. Numbering some 40 voices and conducted by Arthur T. Coogan, this group gave programs for several years, with guest soloists Rose Bampton, Marie Healy, Mildred Strout, Jeanette Vreeland, and others sharing the platform. Hope Mason Guild and Edda Bennett Beal were the official piano accompanists and on occasion teamed with Lily Lofgren Lane and Catherine Cogswell Ames.

Keene was fortunate in other choral conductors: Harry W. Davis with his Keene Teachers College (as it was known then) Chorus and the directors of the Keene High School A Cappella Choir. This latter group has given concerts in such cities as New York, Boston, Montreal, and Ottawa.

The Keene Brass Band and Keene Military Band had been organized in the 1870's. Beedle's Military Band started in 1899. Others followed, but the one that has remained more or less constant over the years to the present time is the Keene City Band. The Gordon-Bissell Post #4 American Legion Band has made a name for itself throughout the New England area.

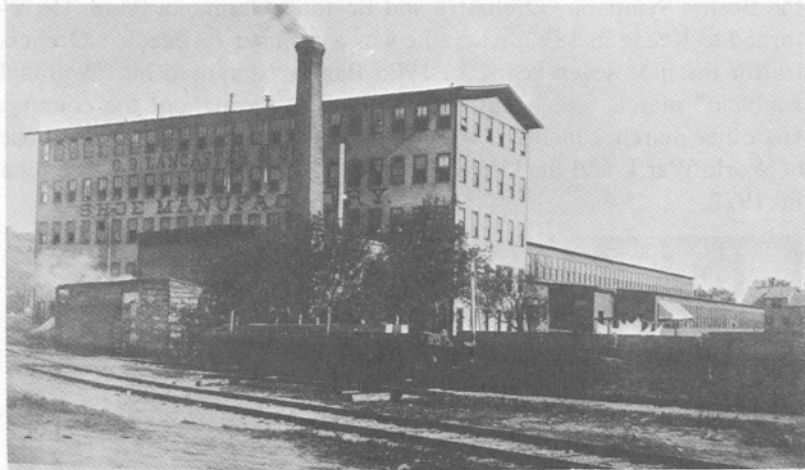
The first dance orchestra in Keene to gain widespread recognition was undoubtedly the "Keene Quadrille Band" which played regularly (under different names) for all of the better balls, assemblies, and levees in town. A correspondent of the *Bellows Falls Times* says of the Grand Masonic ball at Chester, Vt., on January 29, 1874, "There is no better ball music within one hundred miles of here than that of the Keene Quadrille Band. The calling, or rather, prompting, was clear and distinct, the selections unusually fine."

The band carried on under various leaders. Later the organization was known as the Second Regiment Band, Maynard and Merrill's Orchestra, Maynard and Holton's Quadrille Band, and Maynard and Wheeler's Orchestra. This last combination played for various city functions until well into the mid-1880's.

Every town in the country large enough to maintain a fire de-

partment had an annual Fireman's Ball. Keene was no exception. Local orchestras usually were engaged to play at these affairs, with an occasional "outside" band imported. The Deluge Hose Company and the Phoenix Hose Company held a series of dance assemblies every winter. The Keene Light Guard was another civic organization holding monthly dances. From descriptions available their military balls must have been "the" social event of the season. The Universalist Society, as well as the Unitarian Society, held annual fairs and festivals, culminating in several hours of dancing. An organization known as the "Monadnock Colony of Pilgrim Fathers" was another society sponsoring a series of dances during the winter months.

At that time it was customary to hold a "Dedication Ball" to open a new civic building officially. It was somethin^g else again to



C. B. Lancaster Shoe Co. in the 1890's

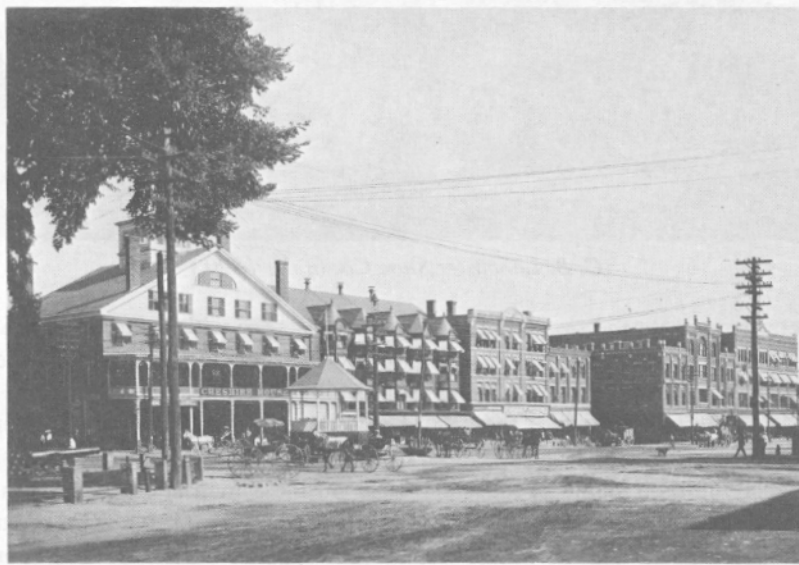
commemorate the opening of a new shoe factory with a public dance. Yet this happened on February 16, 1892, when the Lancaster Shoe Company formally dedicated its huge building with a Grand Ball.

The early years of the 1880's saw the most spectacular series of balls ever held in Keene. These were known as the "Big Six" balls, receiving their name because six local business men sponsored them. Aside from the dancing, these evenings became pleasurable as reunion time for former Keene residents, and many came a long distance for this purpose only. The "Big Six" series of dancing assemblies continued well into the 1890's. Their only serious competition came from those originated by Benjamin S. Osgood, which were called the "Ours" series.

Though perhaps not as elegant as the "Big Six" dances, still they found favor with the general public and were well patronized for many years.

The Beedle Orchestra of the "Gay Nineties" and beyond was one of the finest groups of musicians ever gathered together in the city. **I**t was organized shortly after the Beedle family came to Keene in the early 1890's and within one year was musically in demand throughout the county. **I**n 1893 five of the eight musicians in the orchestra were named Beedle, and top men in the field for miles around were anxious to join this celebrated group.

At the age of nine Edwin Eugene Bagley, born in Craftsbury, Vt., in 1857, came under the care of his cousin, Mrs. Charles C. Beedle, a member of the company of Leavitt's Bellringers. The boy joined this group as a singer and comedian. Later he became a member of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Boston's Germania Band. He returned to Keene in 1893, where he was a member of Beedle's Orchestra for the next seven years. In 1905 Bagley composed his "National Emblem" march, which has become famous throughout the country. His other marches include "America Victorious," written at the close of World War I, and the "Farm Bureau March." Bagley died in Keene in 1922.



*Bandstand erected 1872 on site of town well;
removed in 1900*

With a bass voice of exceptional range, power, flexibility, and appealing quality, a local singer of opera and oratorio, William "Bill" Nye, delighted audiences for many years.

For several years shortly after World War II a group of local singers formed the Keene Light Opera Company and performed in such popular hits as "H.M.S. Pinafore," "The Mikado," "The Sorcerer," and "Robin Hood."

The first dancing school in Keene was taught during the winter of 1798-99 by a Mr. Burbank of Brookfield. In the 19th century this type of instruction became a flourishing business. Boys and girls were instructed in the latest steps as well as good conduct. Adults were taught the dances at later hours. The dance season began early in October, ran through the winter months, and usually ended in April. The *Sentinel*, during those months, contained numerous references to the local dancing assemblies. Frequently wedding anniversaries were celebrated by a dancing party.

Ralph G. Page, well-known Keene resident and authority on country dances, called his first square dance on December 6, 1930, in the Stoddard Town Hall. He became a full-time professional caller in 1938. Since then he has been teaching at dance camps, schools, and colleges throughout the country and in Canada. The U. S. Government (Department of State, Exchange of Persons Branch) sent Page to Japan in April and May of 1956 to teach New England country dancing. In the fall of 1966 he was invited abroad by the English Country Dance and Song Society. Page spent several weeks traveling around England presenting New England dances.

Members of a group under Page's leadership have recorded a score of traditional contra and square dance tunes for Folk Dance Co. of New York City. Page has written articles about square and contra dances for many publications and is editor of "Northern Junket," a dance and folklore quarterly.

A Keene-born musician is the talented violinist Michael Vitale, who at the age of six began violin lessons with the late Fredyum Hendrickson. After three years of study, an audition at the New England Conservatory of Music brought him a scholarship which enabled him to continue under Alfred Krips, Assistant Concertmaster of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. When Vitale was 12 the Conservatory presented him in recital at Jordan Hall in Boston. The same year the Juilliard School of Music in New York awarded him a scholarship to study with Ivan Galamian, one of the world's greatest violin instructors. He made solo appearances with the Worcester and Cincinnati Sym-

phony Orchestras and, in 1964, the year of his graduation from Juilliard, Vitale became, at the age of 21, the youngest member of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

The Keene Community Concert series, also known under other names, to a large degree continues to fill the void left by the old choral groups. Starting with the first season in 1937-1938, many foremost artists of the present day have appeared on these programs before sold-out houses.