FALL FEATURE: LIVING LEGENDS

“The wonderful look students have on their faces when something is good makes it all worthwhile.”

- Dr. Donald E. McGinnis
From humble beginnings, “with no scholarship and no background,” Donald E. McGinnis rose to the pinnacle of the university band director world and the flute and clarinet performance world through his career of over sixty years. He was told that “he would not succeed in music” when he entered the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. His professors Arthur Williams and George Waln “hesitated to let him be a five year clarinet music education/performance major.”

“Both parents were musical. My father played the piano. We gathered around the piano to sing. I fell in love with music from a very early age...being lucky enough to have great teachers who inspired me, that I had the talent, if I worked at it...I had tremendous drive and focus...You don't take ‘no’ for an answer...One must have a desire to be outstanding...You have to be passionate about music to do it.” Dr. Donald E. McGinnis, throughout every aspect of his career, has had the desire “to be the most outstanding he can be.”

Thousands of musicians have been inspired by Dr. McGinnis in rehearsals, clinics, live concerts where he played and conducted, recordings, private lessons and conducting lessons. His students both cherish and revere him, staying in touch through the decades. Why? Because he challenged them to be better than they thought they could be. A man of high standards, integrity and moral fortitude and a work ethic second to none, he demanded the best his students could give. Why did they do it? Because he demanded the very same of himself. A man of high standards, integrity and moral fortitude and a work ethic second to none, he demanded the best his students could give. Why did they do it? Because he demanded the very same of himself.

It has been my privilege to know and study with Dr. McGinnis since 1970 when I came to Ohio State as a graduate student in flute, studying with him privately as well as performing with the Concert Band, including at Carnegie Hall. Dr. McGinnis has been my mentor, friend, and inspiration ever since. I have had the pleasure of interviewing Dr. McGinnis over the course of many months. What follows are some of his many ideas that may prove helpful to all of us in the music field. I have used the DMA document, The Professional Life of Dr. Donald E. McGinnis by Dr. Jaime Rowe Titus, as a guide. Her document, available on OhioLink, contains much information that cannot be provided here.
played the J.S. Bach Toccato and Fugue in D minor. I was overwhelmed with the beauty of that sound, it was life changing. I knew I would not have the audacity, patience, or control of players to get that sound. So I decided to go for a different sound. ‘The clarity of my sound was a goal. The cleanliness.’

“I tried not to mention other bands in rehearsals, but would talk about the Berlin Orchestra under von Karajan or the Concertgebouw orchestra. I was always salivating to get that sound. I took recordings out of the library to continually learn.”

“I wanted to know what was going on. I recorded most of my rehearsals and studied them, even if just on my cassette player in my car. I wanted to know where we were with a piece of music. This listening helped me to analyze what I needed to do next. I was constantly thinking about what to do with a piece of music.”

“As a conductor, don’t always look in the same place, in the same way. Use all kinds of expressions.”

“Another factor is the fact that you don’t hear back in recordings what a great hall gives you, like a Carnegie Hall or Philharmonic hall.”

“I was listening to an opera with Levine, and it was just like Szell. So clear, everything was exactly there. I never saw him conduct, but I’ll bet his stick technique is marvelous.”

“I spent a great deal of time and emphasis building my ability to conduct. Good players get bored with hearing conductors talk. If you watch what I am saying with the stick, facial expressions, and left hand, you won’t have to hear me talk. That was how I was able to get a lot done with the conducting. I also made it obvious how much I cared about the music.”

“I am told by Richard Blatti, Bob Reynolds, and Craig Kirchhoff, three of the truly great wind conductors of our time, that they had an encounter with a composer who said he was so motivated by playing in a regional band that I conducted, by how much I cared about the music, that the experience made him become a composer.”

“It is a good fortune for a conductor to be an excellent, superb performer. I labored hard and long hours to become a superior technician on the clarinet. So I was constantly thinking about how to do it easier without going through everything. You must perform and observe outstanding conductors.”

“I studied, observed rehearsals of others, asked questions and, used Max Rudolf’s Grammar of Conducting and Elizabeth Green’s The Modern Conductor. Elizabeth Green taught a looping technique. Horizontal movements. I spent every hour learning what I could so that if you watch what I am conducting you can play it!”

“A lot of it was from reading, attending concerts, believing that conducting technique is the best rehearsal technique.”

“And I kept my own performance career going, performing in the Columbus Symphony and playing chamber music with piano, woodwind quintets and string quartets. Inspiration comes from great music and great performers…If you don’t have the good fortune to play with great musicians, you must listen to great recordings. Play in as many fine groups as you can to enrich. I was constantly reaching out for something else that is better. Learning is for a lifetime.”

“The conductor’s musicianship, knowledge of the harmonic series and intonation tendencies, knowledge of pitfalls, sounds of the instruments, the temperature of the room, all of these things matter. School conductors must know how the instruments work. Biggest problem is a lack of breath.”

“Use catch-phrases from great teachers…I was fortunate to have great faculty teaching applied music at Ohio State.”

“One of the huge problems that outstanding band directors of middle and high school bands face is clarinet reeds. Despite all the research, there is no huge solution to it, although it seems that plastic reeds may be a solution. David Thomas of the Columbus Symphony uses them. Helping the reed players is essential.”

“Rhythm and intonation are the two essential items to be a principal player. Good breath support is a given.”
One of the things that is important to me—and I don’t know where I got it—is grouping. Grouping is one of the most important things in phrasing. Claude Monteux, the great conductor and flutist, said that Papa, his father, Pierre, talked about taking a Long Island phone book and tearing it. This demonstrates the tension of the musical line. Musical line is one of the hardest things to teach. “How did I get good intonation? I constantly analyzed in composition study, and at the piano. Determine what key you are in, what is the tonic, where are the seventh chords and where do they resolve? One of the hardest chords to tune is the dominant seventh. Teach students to use their ear. Don’t go down the line tuning each student to a tuner. That could be a waste of time. Listen!”

Apparently someone came up to Brahms after a performance of one of his symphonies and said, ‘You can tell people loved hearing your symphony.’ Brahms said, ‘That is fine. I had hoped it would change their lives.’ When you step on the podium, like my family doctor said, the moment you start thinking about the money you make, you lose your artistry. The wonderful look students have on their faces when something is good makes it all worthwhile.

When I hear back performances, I think you get certain things that you go for and then it is difficult on the other side of the coin. Attack, staccato, integration of sound. Clarity.

“When you listen to my recordings, you will hear great direction of line, my pushing for support of the tone. The sound was direct, always air pushing.”

“My rehearsal style was greatly influenced by great orchestra conductors. Early on I fell in love with Toscanini. I couldn’t imagine how anything could be any better. I sat in the front row for a rehearsal of Toscanini with the NBC Symphony and was amazed. Later I went to study flute with Maurice Sharp of the Cleveland Orchestra and thus had the opportunity to hear the orchestra. I became such an admirer of their great conductor, George Szell.”