Lauren B. Sykes (1905-1980)

"Lauren B. Sykes has done as much or more for music in Portland than any individual in the history of this city," wrote Oregon Journal music critic Martin Clark in 1967. Governor Tom McCall described Sykes's significance to Oregon's cultural history this way: "Thousands of Oregonians know personally about your contributions to music in our metropolis and, in fact, to the entire state.…You have been a moving force in the musical world of our state."

Sykes was born in Newberg on December 31, 1905, to Nelson J. and Esther (Horton) Sykes. The family moved to Portland, where Nelson Sykes owned a millinery store and Esther Sykes was a church organist. Young Lauren studied organ with Lucien Becker and with Thomas Roberts of Willamette University. At age twelve, he became organist at Third Baptist Church, and at his graduation from Jefferson High School he played the organ at Portland Civic Auditorium (now Keller Auditorium).

Sykes completed his education by studying music theory and composition with Frank Wright of Brooklyn. He earned the titles Associateship (AAGO) and Choir Master (ChM) from the American Guild of Organists and was president of the Society of Oregon Composers.

An organist-choirmaster for three of Portland's largest churches—Hinson Memorial Baptist (1928-1943), First Christian (1943-1948), and First Methodist (1957-1967)—Sykes maintained choirs for all ages, professional vocal quartets, instrumental ensembles, and even a full orchestra and concert series. Attendance at Easter Sunday services at Hinson, which featured Sykes’s music program, grew so large that they were moved to Portland Civic Auditorium. The Hinson Touring Choir sang at the 1939 San Francisco World's Fair, where Sykes also performed organ recitals.

Sykes brought the most prominent organists from around the world to Portland, including Virgil Fox, Claire Coci, and George Markey (New York), Alexander Schreiner (Salt Lake City), E. Power Biggs (Cambridge), Floor Peters (Ghent), and Fernando Germani (Rome). In 1934, Guenther Ramin, organist at Bach's Thomaskirche in Leipzig, played at Sykes's afternoon wedding to piano teacher Ruth Ryder before playing an evening concert at a packed Civic Auditorium.

Sykes sat on the organ bench with the blind Marcel Dupre at St. Sulpice in Paris and played the organs at Canterbury Cathedral and St. Lawrence Church, where Handel composed and played his masterpieces. He was organist for the Portland and Victoria, B.C., symphony orchestras and performed as soloist with Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops in Portland. Sykes also designed pipe organs for numerous churches in the Northwest and played concerts each year in addition to his teaching duties.

An educator at heart, Sykes had scores of private students. He taught at George Fox College (1934-41), was director of music at Multnomah School of the Bible (1936-51), and chaired the Music Department at Warner Pacific College (1946-71). His touring choirs sang across the United States and abroad. With Robert Zimmerman, he organized the Portland Symphonic Choir and served as the choir’s assistant conductor and organist, accompanying major oratorios on national broadcasts. He received an honorary doctorate from Warner Pacific College in 1971.

Sykes died on July 14, 1980. The free weekly lunch concerts that he initiated on the historic Hook and Hastings pipe organ at Portland’s Old Church, a building he helped rescue from the wrecking ball, continue to this day.

Written by Ulrich H. Hardt

Further Reading:

Phillips, Nan. "Lauren B. Sykes Honored for Fifty Years Contribution to Music." *Choral Journal* (May-June 1968).

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