

Notre Dame Magazine

Notes on a life in music

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Loving voices of old companions

Stealing out of the past once more.

And the sound of the dear old music,

Soft and sweet — as in days of yore.

— From “The Kerry Dance,” words and music by J.L. Molloy

When he arrived in 1973 as the successor to Daniel H. Pedtke, the Notre Dame Glee Club’s director since the 1930s, the hip new professor, with his long sideburns, unruly hair and bell bottoms, signaled a break with the old music department.

David Isele, the new director of choral programs at the newly coed university, brought impressive music credentials, too, including two master’s degrees in organ from Southern Methodist University and a doctorate from the Eastman School of Music. At age 27, he also easily charmed audiences with his musical mastery and access to the perfect *bon mot* for every occasion.

He knew nothing of football, and little of college students’ current interests, but Isele’s musical erudition distinguished him. Gifted and iconoclastic, he was given to flights of compositional caprice, using discordant tone clusters, twists and inversions that, stylistically, made him a veritable e.e. cummings of music. Some wag in the Glee Club thought the erudite Isele should be given the unlikeliest of monikers — so, from week one, he was simply “Coach,” a name he reportedly delighted in.

He also delighted in a bit of play. He collaborated on an operetta called “Red Hot Riding Hood” — starring a lascivious wolf and a femme fatale — that he took on a Glee Club tour. He programmed Peter Schickele’s off-color roundelays, intemperate Latin drinking songs and other pieces that the occasional audience member — and, once, a University trustee — deemed too risqué.

But Isele was serious as well. He drilled the Glee Club into perfecting sophisticated, demanding and diverse four- and eight-part harmony, featuring choral works that spanned the centuries. In rehearsals, he was exacting in shaping the tone and dynamics he wanted — expecting professional-level performance from rowdy young amateurs. Eschewing a baton to direct, he used head nods, eye signals and fingers instead, rarely spreading his arms. Choristers were required to memorize the entire concert program.

Isele’s humor, a scalding, arid wit, could skewer. Boyish outbursts in rehearsal earned his signature “unvoiced yawn”: raising his eyebrows, lowering his eyelids and slowly tapping his mouth, only slightly parted, he mimed an affectation of ennui.

In 2015, at the Glee Club’s Centennial Concert at South Bend’s Morris Performing Arts Center, after leading his alumni through numerous old repertory numbers, he reminisced that it was the Glee Club that provided many of his fondest professional memories. One favorite involved the concert sponsor who had asked him to fully orchestrate three Glee Club works for a concert honoring the nation’s bicentennial, The following year the sponsor flew Isele and 12 Glee Club seniors to a white-tie fundraiser in South Carolina, where he shared equal billing with composer Gian Carlo Menotti, who lauded the singers and their “Coach.”

Isele spent only six years at the University, due to what he labeled an occupational hazard in academia: turf struggles and personality clashes. Yet at a time when President Theodore M. Hesburgh, CSC, sought to raise the profile of women at Notre Dame, Isele succeeded in developing a mixed chorus of national stature equal to the Glee Club, while teaching organ and composition, composing three full Masses and dozens of other songs, and setting hundreds of choral arrangements. Coach took the Glee Club to 35 states and twice on European tours. When he left Notre Dame in 1979, he embarked on a distinguished tenure as director of choral and vocal activities and professor of music at the University of Tampa.

Isele died in June at age 70. His son, Curtis, planned a memorial service according to his father’s strict instructions: no organ works except by Bach — or Isele. His family asked if at least a quartet of Notre Dame alums might lend their voices to the service. Word spread. As a result, 32 gray-haired Glee Club alumni, plus five from the Notre Dame Chorale, turned out in Tampa to form a memorial chorus.

There they sang the songs Coach had written, their now-mature voices echoing “the sound of the dear old music, soft and sweet — as in days of yore.”

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