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Merle Isaac Collection at VanderCook College of Music, Chicago, Illinois

By Rob DeLand, VanderCook College of Music

Merle Isaac was a Chicago musician and music teacher who published more than 800 arrangements for school orchestras, bands, and more over a career of 60 years, from his first published work in 1936 to his last published five months after his death in 1996. When he began his career, few resources existed for music teachers. He worked to give “each player an interesting . . . part to play” that was challenging but within his or her capability. The popularity of Isaac’s arrangements over the years and the fact that over a hundred are still in print today attest to his success in string music education.

Isaac was born in 1898 in Iowa, and his family had moved to Chicago by 1900. His musical experience began in the fourth grade with piano and organ lessons soon after. In high school, he played the flute and sang in the glee club.

[He] visited movie theaters and became acquainted with the organists. [He] learned about the various kinds of music that were used to accompany the silent pictures [and] registered with one of the organ companies as a theater organist seeking employment. On the day after Christmas in 1919, [he] received a call to report to a theater for work. (Their organist didn’t show up on Christmas day!)

Early feature films ran for two hours or more, requiring the right music to accompany each scene. The collection contains a sample tune list he used for one particular evening’s newsreel, comedy short, and feature film. The collection also includes a number of theater programs from 1921 to 1924 that show his name as organist and about 150 pieces of published music with rubber-stamped dates—these comprise some, but certainly not all, of his professional library.

As talkies began to replace silent films, Isaac began searching for another career. At the encouragement of one of his previous music teachers, he became a certified teacher of instrumental music and in 1929 started work at Marshall High School. To better his professional capacity as a teacher, Isaac attended classes at VanderCook College of Music and took private lessons to learn to play all the instruments he taught in his classes.

He also soon discovered that the music available in the Marshall library was not appropriate for high school use. He started to write orchestra parts that would be inclusive and engage the students. As Isaac said, “Every part should be difficult enough to be challenging, but not difficult enough to be discouraging. Each player in the orchestra...
needs to feel that he is a member of the team and that he is making an essential contribution.”

Isaac earned a bachelor of music from VanderCook College, Chicago, Illinois, in 1932, a bachelor of science from IIT’s Lewis Institute of Arts and Sciences in 1936, and a master of arts from Northwestern in 1937. After 14 years of leading the Marshall High School Department of Instrumental Music, Isaac accepted a position as a Chicago Public School elementary school principal in 1943—however, he continued arranging music for students for the rest of his life. Several of his arrangements are held in particularly high regard, including an abridgement of the Brandenburg Concerto no. 3, his own Apollo Suite, and Tchaikovsky’s Russian Chorale and Overture.

The Collection

The archives received a hundred U-Haul boxes of papers and music scores in 2008. We created an inventory of each box that included the fields title, composer, publisher, date, and instrumentation, prioritizing each item as follows:

**Priority 1:** a manuscript, letter, or other unique item relating to Merle Isaac’s music arranging career that could not be obtained anywhere else;

**Priority 2:** Merle Isaac publications that theoretically could be purchased or replaced if necessary;

**Priority 3:** items with some interest, but not as important as the first two priorities;

**Priority 4:** Isaac’s copy of something that was (or had been) readily available and as such was out of the scope of the collection.

By separating the fourth priority, we reduced the collection from 100 to about 40 boxes. We sorted remaining items by composer and title.

The Merle Isaac Collection consists of over eight hundred scores, mostly orchestra, string orchestra, and band arrangements. Instrumental solos, chamber pieces, and methods books are also included. An analysis found that 384 items (roughly 44% of the collection) are in manuscript form only; 363 items (42%) are in published form only; and 128 items (14%) exist in both manuscript and published form. By charting the types of music and the years published, we were able to see the trends in what publishers were looking for, or what Isaac felt was most needed. Besides the completed (or mostly completed) scores, we found hundreds of musical manuscript fragments, most of which have no identification at all, as well as the aforementioned silent movie theater programs, tune lists, and scores with date stamps. Correspondence and other personal records document his education; Chicago Public School appointments; copyright registrations; American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers membership; and so forth, and detail his interaction with publishers, conductors, and other peers.

The Merle Isaac Collection also includes open reel and audio cassette tapes and Eva-tone flexible sound sheets of

A page of Merle Isaac's original music arrangements

He was active in numerous music education professional organizations, including serving on the board of directors of VanderCook College of Music. Many of these organizations also recognized his work with honors such as honorary doctor of music from VanderCook in 1990.
recorded excerpts (included with some published scores). Most of the recorded audio tapes are of rather low fidelity, and we believe them to be rehearsal run-throughs of preliminary manuscripts with local school bands, which would have been used to make corrections. Labeling on all of these was very poor and provided almost no useful information. We acquired a Sansui open reel deck to ascertain what might be on the reel-to-reel tapes, and a one-quarter-inch splicing block, which is invaluable to reattach the leaders and fix other splices that have come undone, is included with the collection. While the flexible sound sheets are all out of print now, they are still in copyright. We decided not to digitize any of these items at this time.

The usual concerns for acidic paper applied, especially for the early theater handbills printed on inexpensive paper—information included would be difficult to find elsewhere. These and all musical manuscripts are now carefully stored in acid-free folders. A few of the silent movies, such as Queen of Sheba (1921) and Blood and Sand (1922), are available on YouTube and can be an engaging supplement to the promotional materials held within the collection when on exhibit.

Processing a collection of this size required a great deal of organization and solid work by student workers. It posed many challenges and required some difficult decisions. We have scanned title pages and/or first pages of scores for what we hope will be an online catalog of Merle Isaac’s life’s work.

References

The silent movie playbill noting Isaac “at the organ” in 1922

A screen grab of the Queen of Sheba available via YouTube