

IT WAS THE VIOLAS! An article By Vinnie Burns, CCHS '64

It was December, 1962. I know I must have studied for tests and done homework back then, but now, years later, no memory of it survives. What lingers in my memory from those days is the feverish intensity orchestra rehearsals took on as December opened. The big holiday concert was scheduled for some evening just prior to school getting out for the long Christmas vacation. All the loved ones of all the players would be sitting in the darkened auditorium, listening. It was an important event, every bit as important as the spring concert. What had complicated matters and thus contributed to the rising tensions was that a good portion of rehearsal time in November had been taken up with the senior class play, a musical. There had been two performances in late November. The senior class production was tradition at Clarkstown High School and if it had to be a musical, the school's orchestra would sit in the pit and play.

I loved it all, rehearsal, performance, or anything associated with them. I played in every musical ensemble the school offered, be it the football band or the pep band at basketball games. But orchestra and the dance band, The Sophisticated Swingsters, were my favorites. What we were given to play mattered not at all to me. It was the playing that mattered.

The whole program - everything with a note of music associated with it - was under the direction of Doctor Edward Carney. Even today, Doc, as everyone called him, remains a formidable figure to me. Without doubt he was a major influence on me. That December I was three months removed from my first encounter with Doc. The passage of time hadn't lessened the awe. Somewhere inside I must have known I'd never before

come across a person like him. What I didn't know was that I would carry away from my two-year association with him something considerably more than a deep appreciation of music. I didn't realize that someplace inside me, some indefinable something had been planted. It was awareness, I think, and something like a sense of taste, secretly hidden in my brain and timed to go off at a later date. In my case, the full appreciation of my association with Doc Carney came some years later when I encountered another teacher in a vastly different field who had a lot of Doc about him. How lucky I considered myself when I finally realized what had happened, two of them in one lifetime!



As a youth, and with the devotion I had to the music program, I could have put in three times the number of hours. At a minimum I played in one ensemble or another two hours a day. Sometimes more when something was going on, a school dance or a game. But now I wonder at how Doc did it. He was always there before I got to school. He was there after I went home. He was there every night there was something needing music. I know for a fact that he never missed a day in the two years I was part of the program. He seemed to teach nonstop from whenever he opened the door to the music room until he closed it at the end of his day.

For Doc, there was always the charcoal gray suit, always with the jacket buttoned. He never took it off no matter how hot and humid the weather. The shirt beneath the jacket was often faded white, sometimes pale blue. The tie was always a solid, unobtrusive

selection. Above the horn-rimmed glasses was his most distinguishing feature, a full head of white hair. It made him appear older, but in truth he was only forty-three years old.

Today, despite the fact he looms large among my personal pantheon of heroes, it seems odd to me that I know so little about him. I wish I knew more, his life and loves outside of Clarkstown. There is nothing but bits and pieces, things he mentioned and I heard. He was in the army in World War Two, in a band. I think he said he was in South America at some point while in the army. He played in studio bands on the radio in the late 1940's. In those days, the trumpet was his primary instrument. If he had to audition for a job, he said he'd always play a Sousa march to show off his technique. When I knew Doc, however, he seemed to play cello more than any other instrument. He liked baseball and devoured books with the appetite of a starving man. He was forever dropping titles and authors, relating why the book was important. Like all of us, he was a man of his times. One day I entered the music room and on the blackboard – it was actually green in color – was written a number. I remember it being something like 2046, but I'm probably wrong. There was nothing else written explaining the figure's meaning. At some point I worked up the courage to ask, "What's that number?" Doc told me in a matter-of-fact manner that the number was the year in the twenty-first century when the black population in the United States would equal the white. I thought nothing more of it, another fact to be retained in memory. Now, for me, it speaks volumes about the man and the times.

In early December of 1962, however, I sensed something in the musical atmosphere I moved through. It was a daily increase in tension that eventually became an indigestible

mass carried in the stomach as the Christmas concert countdown went forward. As I walked down the long corridor towards the music room and another encounter with Doc Carney, I knew the days were ticking by and there was so much music to rehearse. Doc was pushing everyone. We simply had to get it all down and right. I knew I had to do my part, however small, to the best of my limited ability.

As possibly the most gifted segment of the school's population, Clarkstown music students were not a passive lot, meekly taking Doc's direction from above. Even then, as kids of that time, we held opinions, even beliefs. What we didn't understand as yet was that we had already been taught not to accept gospel as gospel. Given this, I have no doubt that some among us in 1962 eventually arrived at an intellectual level equal to or greater than that reached by Doc Carney at the time. However, as of that December, the anointed among us had yet to announce their presence. Another thing we didn't know was that we were on the receiving end of what, for its day, was the best public education taxes could purchase. What we got from Doc Carney was a potion of intellectual torture and intimidation mixed with annoyance and cajoling, and an urging for us to always act as professionals. All of this gave us a something that put us somewhat ahead of, I think, the others at Clarkstown. And there was also a degree of curiosity and tenacity that somehow, seeped into us from Doc. Later, it all helped, it all made sense. At the time the idea of acting like a professional, at least while engaged in music, appealed to me. Years later, when I *was* a professional in a far-removed arena, I often remembered Doc's urgings. And I followed them.

It must be said that if Doc Carney hounded you and you stuck to your guns, even though you were completely in the wrong, you moved up a notch in his eyes. Of course,

he would never admit to that, but it was true. The problem for us kids was to know when to stick and when to fold. Personally, I wasn't a confrontational type. I never argued back with Doc.

The chorus rehearsals for the holiday program on Tuesdays and Thursdays seemed to be going well and there were few, if any, verbal explosions from our leader as performance time drew near. This, however, could not be said for the orchestra and its portion of the program given the time lost with the senior musical. Of necessity, therefore, there were three orchestra rehearsals a week during the school day and at least two others after school. Also, for his part, Doc Carney was not one to toss musical softballs at an audience. After all, he was Doctor of Music and his audience was not merely the parents and loved ones of the kids in his charge, they were the taxpayers. They deserved the best.

And there was the music. Music, the little odd symbols and lines, written on paper, is the score; each player has his or her part resting on a stand in front of them. The player looks at the symbols and converts them into sound, music coming from the instrument he holds. Well, it's not that simple. Music is more than that. It's about interpretation. Matters can get complicated at times because of the hands the original music passed through before it is resting on the stand before the player. Copyists are people who take a composer's work and prepare it for printing and publication. As humans, they occasionally make mistakes, errors of omission or commission. They sometimes add things not intended by the composer, a phrasing notation for instance. Or they forget something, such as a dynamic, a symbol telling the player how to play a phrase or passage, soft, loud, louder. To this must be added the fact that most conductors, and Doc

Carney was no exception, like to add their own phrasings and dynamics here and there in a score to enhance, they believe, the intentions of the composer or their conception of the work. In that the composer is rarely in the audience for a high school's performance of his work – most often because he is dead – no one takes exception, if indeed as an audience they are even aware of an addition here or a subtraction there.

It was in this intense rehearsal period, days before the performance, that I recall one of the more interesting confrontations between Doc and a student. That day, I was in the brass section, reading my third trumpet part, playing it, when the explosion hit. The shock was all the more severe in that, I thought, the Brahms' piece we were playing was going along nicely.

“Pianissimo, damn it! Pianissimo!” Doc Carney screamed as the ballpoint pen he always used as a baton flew across the room and left a mark on the wall. The music stopped in an instant. Everyone in the orchestra froze, waiting. I looked at the part in front of me. I knew I had played it as written. It wasn't me who had made Doc erupt.

“Violas! Pianissimo!” he screamed again.

It was the violas that did it. Thank God.

“Doctor Carney,” said the lead viola, a senior girl who I remember having long dark hair. “Doctor Carney, there is no such notation on our score at bar thirty-two, the last phrase played by this section prior to you...your stopping.”

“Balderdash! Incompetence!” Doc screamed.

During this and many other confrontations like it, Doc's face would acquire a purple tint that was exaggerated by his white hair. “Here,” he yelled as he held up the conductor's score that contained all the orchestra's parts. “Here!” He pointed to the

viola line in the score. “Here’s the little “*p*” that means Pianissimo that means play quietly, you twit.”

In deference to Doc, in that era a teacher could call a student a twit without fear of censure or suit.

“I beg to differ, Doctor Carney,” the viola leader said, her head high, not at all intimidated. I realized she was holding her ground and things might very well get worse. The viola was on her lap now as she took her score and held it up for him to see. “As perhaps you cannot see at this distance, given your advanced age and corrected eye sight, there is no little “*p*” anywhere in this passage, you big twit.”

In deference to the viola player, in that era a student could call a teacher a twit without fear of retribution if the word was vocalized in just the proper tone. However, use of a word of such strength was moving toward a vocabulary borderline. Crossing that border in the wrong way could label a student a “delinquent” and bring down the wrath of the administration. Luckily, the viola player had put just the right inflection on the word “twit.”

This exchange brought a sprinkling of nervous laughs from across the orchestra, mostly from seniors who had seen it all before. Newer kids and freshmen remained stiff in their seats, holding their collective breaths. Doc Carney stepped from behind his music stand and leaned forward slightly, peering at the viola part held up by the student. He realized his error immediately and humbled himself. “I apologize,” he said softly, as the tint left his cheeks. “Obviously, an incompetent failed to include the notation. Please take a pencil and make a little “*p*” at the passage beginning at bar thirty-two...**you twit.**”

With that, the orchestra broke up. The tension left the room along with the sound of our resumed rehearsal of the Brahms. From that moment, the word *twit* entered everyone's working vocabulary, and to this day, I still vividly remember its incorporation into mine with extraordinary fondness and incomparable respect for the man we called "Doc".