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HANSON, HOWARD HAROLD (b. 28 Oct. 1896 in Wahoo, Nebraska; d. 26 Feb. 1981 in Rochester, New York), Pulitzer Prize-winning composer, conductor, and music educator.

The son of Hans and Hilma Christina (Eckstrom) Hanson, who were both born in Skåne, Sweden, Howard Hanson studied piano and cello as a child, and his mother was one of his first teachers. The firstborn child (a son) died before Howard's birth. Hanson attended Luther College in Wahoo; the University of Nebraska (1912-13); the Institute of Musical Art in New York City (forerunner of the Juilliard School), where he studied under James Friskin (piano) and Percy Goetschius (composition), and was encouraged to become a pianist; and Northwestern University, where he received a Bachelor of Music in 1916, after studying composition with Peter Lutkin and Arne Oldberg.

Upon graduation, Hanson became professor of theory and composition at age 19 at the College of the Pacific in San Jose, California, and, remarkably for such a young man, was appointed Dean of its Conservatory of Fine Arts after only three years. In 1921, he won the first Prix de Rome in Music awarded by the American Academy, for his incidental music to the ballet, *California Forest Play of 1920* and his symphonic poem, *Before the Dawn*. Taking up fellowship residence in Rome for three years, Hanson studied orchestration under Ottorino Respighi and devoted himself to composition, writing his Symphony No. 1 ("Nordic," 1922) and two symphonic poems, and began work on his major choral work, *The Lament for*

Beowulf, which was completed in the United States in 1925.

While conducting the American premiere of his Nordic Symphony with the Rochester Symphony in 1923, Hanson met multimillionaire George Eastman, the founder of Eastman Kodak Company, who had recently endowed a School of Music at the University of Rochester, and University President Rush Rhees. From Rome, Hanson accepted their offer of the school's directorship, and remained Director for forty years (1924-64), making the Eastman School one of America's finest musical institutions. Upon his retirement, he became Director of its Institute of American Music, which was renamed in Hanson's honor in 1996.

An extremely energetic man and dynamic teacher, Hanson simultaneously balanced his administrative, educational, and musical responsibilities, and was deeply involved in the Eastman curriculum. Among Hanson's many students were the composers Jack Beeson, William Bergsma, and Peter Mennin. Many of his students, who marveled at his ability to instantaneously sight-read an orchestral score at the piano, went on to establish and run music departments in other colleges and universities, which would eventually rival the Eastman School.

Hanson made his conducting debut in 1919 with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, performing his *Symphonic Rhapsody*, and guest conducted all the major orchestras, usually in contemporary American works. His only opera, *Merry Mount*, had its premiere at New York's Metropolitan Opera in 1934, and reflected the Lutheran side of the composer's personality. Despite a very

favorable public response (fifty curtain calls), however, it was dropped from the repertoire. Among his major compositions are seven symphonies, six pieces for chamber ensemble, a piano concerto, several songs set to the words of Walt Whitman, and sixteen choral works. Although his Symphony No. 4 (“Requiem”), which was dedicated to his father, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1944, his second symphony (“Romantic”) has proven to be his most popular work.

Hanson was active in many professional organizations, serving as President of both the National Association of Schools of Music and the Music Teachers National Association. While President of the National Music Council, he helped establish a composer-in-residence program in the public school system. He received honorary degrees from thirty institutions, and also won the first Ditson Conductor’s Award (1945); the George Foster Peabody Award (1946); the Laurel Leaf of the American Composers Alliance (1957); and Huntington Hartford Foundation Award (1959); and was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1935) and to Sweden’s Royal Academy of Music (1938). He was also editor-in-chief of the eleven-volume *New Scribner Music Library* (1972-73).

Hanson married Margaret (“Peggy”) Elizabeth Nelson on 24 July 1946, whom he had first met while conducting in Chautauqua, New York, and who was twenty years his junior. Peggy was an accomplished singer and played both the piano and cello, although she did not pursue music professionally. The Hansons had no children, and enjoyed spending vacations on Bold Island (off the Maine

coast), which they owned. A tall, large man, Hanson grew his trademark goatee when he conducted the Rome Symphony Orchestra at age 24, to look older. Hanson suffered from diabetes in later life, and died at the age of 84 after a short illness. He was buried on Bold Island.

Often referred to as the “American Sibelius” since his compositions are known for their somber harmonies (even bleakness) and soaring romantic melodies, Hanson also cited Bach and Grieg as major influences on his music, was an admirer of Beethoven and Dvořák, and absorbed Gregorian Chant during his stay in Rome. Hanson was a vocal critic of dissonant and atonal music, which he called “anti-musica,” and of music that was too cerebral, advocating instead a conservative, tonally centered approach to composition. He once observed that, “Though I have a profound interest in theoretical problems, my own music comes from the heart and is a direct expression of my own emotional reactions.” Hanson’s theories are outlined in his 1960 book, *Harmonic Materials of Modern Music*. Even though they did not appeal to him personally, however, Hanson still included dissonant and atonal music in the programs at the American Music Festivals, which he instituted at the Eastman School beginning in 1925.

A tireless proponent of American music, Hanson’s greatest impact was undoubtedly through the Eastman School and the Festivals of American Music, which enabled young composers to exhibit their work, including Aaron Copland and Samuel Barber. In Rochester, Hanson presented over 1,500 works by 700

composers, including the *Afro-American Symphony* by William Grant Still, the first symphony by an African-American to be performed by a major orchestra. Hanson repeatedly used his prestige to proselytize for American music, and, with the Eastman-Rochester Orchestra, recorded one of the most extensive series of American music ever undertaken (primarily for Mercury Living Presence), including the works of contemporaries like Ives, Grofé, and Schuman; predecessors, such as Chadwick and MacDowell; and even works by his former students.

Although the popularity of his music has at times waxed *and* waned, Hanson was a true giant in the field. As conductor Gerard Schwartz has observed, Hanson “was Mr. American Music.”

[The standard reference source for information on Hanson is *Howard Hanson: A Bio-Bibliography*, by James E. Perone (1993), which provides citations for materials both by and about Hanson, significant performances of his music, and a discography. Hanson’s influence on music education is covered in “Howard Hanson: American Music Educator,” by Robert C. Monroe (Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1970). Many other dissertations have been written on aspects of Hanson’s music, including “An Analytical Study of the Band Compositions of Howard Hanson,” by Barry Wayne Johnson (University of Houston, 1986), and “The Late Choral Music of Howard Hanson and Samuel

Barber,” by William M. Skoog (University of Northern Colorado, 1992). An earlier profile and interpretation of the composer is offered by Burnet C. Tuthill in *The Musical Quarterly*, volume 22 (April 1936), pages 140-153.

Fascinating insights into Hanson’s style and blunt-talking personality are offered in *Conversations With Howard Hanson*, by David Russell Williams (1988), based on a series of interviews with him in 1978. There are articles on Hanson in *Current Biography Yearbook* for 1966; *Baker’s Biographical Dictionary of Musicians* (7th edition, 1984); *Annual Obituary* for 1981; *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music* (1986); and *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* (1992).

The most complete obituary appeared in the [Rochester] *Democrat and Chronicle*, 27 Feb. 1981, pp. 1A and 3A. Others appeared in many newspapers on 28 February 1981, including the *Washington Post* (page C6) and the *New York Times* (page 19).]

John A. Drobnicki