

Composers of Great Band Works

by Brian Harris, Bandroom.com Publications

Robert Russell Bennett (1894 - 1981)

Lifeline

- born in Kansas City, Missouri (June 15).
- at age 4, suffered a bout with polio and consequently was educated at home by his mother until age 12; later graduated from public high school as valedictorian.
- as a child, was taught piano and violin by his parents.
- when 9, his father helped him notate his first original piano piece.
- at 22, moved to New York City to pursue a career as a musician/composer/conductor.
- at 25 he married Louise Merrill; a daughter (Jean) was born a year later.
- at age 32, moved to Paris to study composition with Nadia Boulanger, completing his first Symphony under her tutelage.
- at 33, returned to the U.S. and resumed scoring for Broadway shows; also received a Guggenheim fellowship to make possible a year devoted to composing in Europe; he hoped to secure a conducting position at a German opera house.
- at age 34, returned again to New York having decided to continue a career in composing rather than conducting.
- at 39, became music director for Rudy Vallee's "Royal Gelatin Hour" weekly radio show; his first opera premiered at the Juilliard School, generating favorable reviews.
- in his early 40's, moved to Los Angeles to work on films; the remainder of his career would be divided between Hollywood and Broadway; was given his own weekly half-hour radio music show entitled "Russell Bennett's Notebook."
- began work on *Suite of Old American Dances* at age 53; he conducted the Goldman Band in the 1949 premiere.
- at 57 began work on music for the *Victory at Sea* television series; completed twenty-six half-hour episodes.
- at 63, his commissioned work *Symphonic Songs for Band* was premiered by the National Intercollegiate Band.
- through his 60's and 70's, he continued to work on his own compositions, a few select theater productions, his NBC television show "Project 20," and an occasional guest-conducting assignment.
- died at age 87 (August 19).



Anecdotes and Trivia

- his father (George) was professional trumpet and violin player.
- his mother (May) was an accomplished pianist and music teacher.
- had one sister (Beatrice), two years his junior; a third sibling did not survive infancy.
- did his counterpoint exercises in ink on the first draft during breaks between playing piano for silent films.
- at one time was a roommate with George and Ira Gershwin.
- was known as "Russell" to acquaintances.
- was an avid tennis player; for a brief time played semi-professional baseball in Kansas City.
- volunteered for service during WWI and was made bandmaster of the 70th Infantry Band. Later said that the band consisted of "fifty-one men, one of whom could play."
- was commissioned to write band music to be synchronized to a fireworks and water fountains display for the 1939 World's Fair in New York City.
- *Suite of Old American Dances* was originally titled *Electric Park* (a park in Kansas City he was fond of visiting).
- between 1920 –1970 he collaborated with all of the best-known Broadway writers of musical stage productions: Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Richard Rodgers, Frederick Lowe.
- claimed to have worked on almost 300 musicals. Examples of the more popular ones are: *Show Boat* (1927), *Oklahoma!* (1943), *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946), *Kiss Me Kate* (1948), *South Pacific* (1949), *The King and I* (1951), *My Fair Lady* (1956), *The Sound of Music* (1959), *Camelot* (1960).
- created orchestrations of musicals at an amazing speed, often working for more than 24 hours without rest.
- worked almost exclusively in ink and "straight down the page" – writing all parts simultaneously rather than filling in melody and bass lines then working in the inner voicings.
- preferred an evening of opera or symphonic music to an opening night on Broadway.
- composed seven symphonies, three operas, numerous concerto and sonata works, choral works, keyboard pieces, film music, and more than 20 original compositions for concert band/wind ensemble.



Sources

The Life and Work of Robert Russell Bennett by Roy Benton Hawkins (1989, UMI Dissertation Services); *Robert Russell Bennett: A Bio-Bibliography* by George J. Ferencz (1990, Greenwood Press); *The Broadway sound: the autobiography and selected essays of Robert Russell Bennett* by George J. Ferencz (1999, University of Rochester Press)