

History of the Austin Civic Wind Ensemble

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“Resilience, stubbornness, total resistance to face reality.”

-Janet Rice (ACWE member since 1978)

The Austin Civic Wind Ensemble was founded in 1975 by a high school band geek who didn't want to give up being a band geek. Through the band's five-decade history, most of its members have had a similar story. Many had played in high school, maybe some in college, but then put away their instruments for a few years before realizing how much they missed playing. Some have even put away their instruments for decades. As a result, the group has usually played with enthusiasm, if not always to the highest musical standards. Despite multiple setbacks and adversity, this improbable group has managed for 50 years to survive, grow, make music—and have a bunch of fun. It has also multiplied, as friendships and networks fostered within ACWE have led to the development of countless other music groups in the Austin area.

From the beginning, ACWE has been open and welcoming to everyone. Membership has always been about the enjoyment of music through active participation. The group has never required formal auditions. And with few very rare exceptions, concerts have always been free. The band has always been run by a volunteer board of directors made up of band members. People giving freely of their time and abilities has been a guiding principle of the band since its inception.

The first 50 years of the Austin Civic Wind Ensemble have been bookended by two of its two most significant music directors. Bill Whitworth, the founding conductor, led the group for nearly a decade. ACWE's current director, Robert Laguna has held the role longer than anyone else and has presided over the greatest growth of the group.

A Community Band is Born

Bill Whitworth loved music. This is not surprising, given that he grew up in a family of musicians. While the rest of the family was involved in vocal music, Bill's interests lay primarily in instrumental. As a young boy, he would practice conducting along to orchestral recordings. The Whitworth family moved to Austin when his father received a music fellowship at the University of Texas. His father later served as a music teacher at McCallum High School in Austin for 27 years. Bill attended McCallum, where he played trumpet in the concert band, marching band, jazz band, and orchestra.

As he neared his high school graduation in 1972, Bill looked for ways to continue performing music. That spring, he created the Ecumenical Service Wind Ensemble (ESWE), serving as the ensemble's conductor. As the name implies, the group primarily performed for church services. Members were mostly drawn from area high schools, along with some University of Texas

students. The evenly balanced band typically included 35 to 40 musicians for each concert. There is no indication that the group met and rehearsed on a regular basis. It operated as a pickup group that rehearsed a few times before each performance. More than 120 people participated in the ESWE, most of them only playing for a few events.

The ESWE's first performance took place on April 2, 1972 at St. Luke United Methodist Church. In total, the ensemble gave about 10 to 12 performances over the two years of its existence. Its repertoire included such band staples as *Cathedral Chorus* by Alfred Reed, *The Sinfonians* by Clifton Williams, *Crown Imperial* by William Walton, and *Variations on a Shaker Melody* by Aaron Copland. For their Christmas concert in 1972, they performed *A Christmas Festival* and *Fantasy on a Bell Carol*, two pieces still regularly performed during the holidays by ACWE. In the summers of 1973 and 1974, it played concerts in parks around Austin. This initiated Bill's connection with Austin Parks and Recreation, which would be important in the early years of the Austin Civic Wind Ensemble.

In September of 1974, at only 21 years old, Bill Whitworth took the first steps toward organizing the Austin Civic Wind Ensemble. Details of the group's origin are a bit murky. People who played with Bill in the summer of 1974 insist that their group was already called the Austin Civic Wind Ensemble. However, Bill's personal documents and concert programs from that year indicate all musical activity in 1974 was under the name Ecumenical Service Wind Ensemble—or in the case of a June 1974 program for services at St. John's United Methodist Church, simply as "Wind Ensemble." For a July concert at Zilker Park, for example, the group is identified in the *Austin American-Statesman* as the Ecumenical Service Wind Ensemble. Perhaps there was so much talk about the creation of ACWE that people thought that was already the name of the group at that point.

Most evidence points to the fall of 1974 as a time of planning and recruiting members for ACWE. That fall, notices about the new band ran in the *Austin American-Statesman*. On September 22, 1974, the following announcement appeared: "Austin Civic Wind Ensemble Organizational Meeting - The Austin Civic Wind Ensemble will hold an organizational meeting at 2 p.m. Sunday in the Austin High School Band Hall at 1200 West Ave. Further information is available by calling Austin Parks and Recreation." ACWE soon held a series of open auditions, where whoever turned up would sight-read through some band pieces as a group.

Several people worked with Bill in forming ACWE. Among them was legendary Austin High School band director LaFalco "Corkey" Robinson. He provided rehearsal space at Austin High, sheet music, and other support. He would later play with ACWE and—on occasion—conduct the group. Another critical figure was Marilyn Good. A Wisconsin native, she had been a music teacher there and had performed in community music groups since she was 12. When she moved to Austin, she was distressed to discover the city had no community instrumental ensembles. There were some choirs, but no community bands or orchestras in Austin. She found out about efforts to start ACWE and became involved with the initial organizational efforts. Upon its incorporation, she became an active board member. Another person involved from the

start was Karl Shuster, who played euphonium and remained in the band for more than 20 years. He was also a board member from time to time.

Another crucial element to ACWE's creation was the sponsorship of Austin Parks and Recreation. The band's connection to the parks department facilitated performances in city parks, as well as the Zilker Tree Lighting. In return, the band played for events such as hospital openings. The city also provided organizational support, as well as a small amount of funding—around \$600 annually—in the early years. ACWE has received city funding on and off over the years, but as of 2025 ACWE receives no funding from the city of Austin.

ACWE rehearsals officially began in January 1975 at Austin High School., However, it probably wasn't anything resembling a real band until February. By March, ACWE had moved to the Blanco Street Firehouse, which would be its home for the next several years. The band rehearsed on the second floor of the old, unairconditioned building. Members usually left the large windows open, which annoyed some neighbors. Other neighbors and the firefighters seemed to welcome the entertainment. At breaks, band members would go outside to cool off. As has been true for most of ACWE's history, rehearsals were typically on Tuesdays. At some points in the very early years, they were on both Tuesdays and Thursdays. In a few rare instances, they were just on Thursdays.

The Austin Civic Wind Ensemble got off to a rocky start, foreshadowing things to come. The band has faced many difficulties throughout its history, and it is a testament to members' resilience that ACWE is still around and flourishing 50 years later. The band's first concert was scheduled for April 13, 1975 at the Elisabet Ney Museum, but it was canceled. Instead, ACWE played its first concert on May 25, 1975, at Wooldridge Square Park in downtown Austin. This was a fitting location, as the park provided a link to the history of the first town band in Austin. The park, which included a bandstand, was named for Mayor Alexander Penn Wooldridge, who sponsored its creation in 1909. That same year, the city contracted with Carl William Besserer to create a band to play concerts at the park. That group eventually became known as the Austin Municipal Band, which Besserer led through the mid-1920s. Later, Zilker Park also became a prominent venue for the Municipal Band and others. By the 1940s, high school bands and groups from the University of Texas had become more popular, and the Municipal Band as well as other central Texas bands began to fade away. By the 1960s they had become scarce, and the Municipal band would cease operating by the end of that decade. Weldon Covington, the Austin High School band director, was the Municipal Band's last director.

ACWE's first concert was performed by a small but plucky group with uneven instrumentation. The concert was broadcast at a later date on KUT radio. ACWE played a second concert on July 18 at the Zilker Hillside Theatre, advertised as an "Old Fashioned Band Concert in the Park." Much of the same music was played at both concerts.

Inconsistent rehearsal attendance and gaps in instrumentation hampered these first performances. Many players from the first concert did not return for the second. To cover missing parts for the July 18 concert, Bill pulled in several of his old friends from the Ecumenical

Service Wind Ensemble at the last minute. Otherwise, few ESWE members ever participated in ACWE. Clarinetist Ed Inocente was one of those few. He remained with ACWE for many years and also served as a board member. With all the extra people brought in, the second concert featured a larger and better sounding band.

Some of the selections from the first two ACWE concerts included the old New Orleans tune, *Muskrat Ramble*; *The Kadiddlehopper March*, by humorist Red Skelton; *Flourish for Wind Band*, by Ralph Vaughan Williams; *Liturgical Music for Band*, by Martin Mailman; and *The Klaxon*, by Henry Fillmore. One piece of local interest was *March Lamar* by Clifton Williams, which was written for Lamar Middle School in Austin while Williams's daughter was a student there. In anticipation of the American Bicentennial, ACWE performed selections from the musical *1776*. Also featured was a mashup of famous melodies called *Instant Concert*, which would be frequently performed by ACWE over the next several years. These concerts were reflective of Bill's programming during his tenure, which featured mainly standard wind band literature and marches.

By the fall of 1975, the fledgling band had reached an impasse. Several people had lost interest, and recruiting new members was meeting with little success. Bill, Marilyn, and others decided to reorganize and become more independent from the City of Austin Parks and Recreation Department. They wrote ACWE's first bylaws, appointed interim officers, and filed articles of incorporation with the state of Texas on October 17, 1975. The bylaws called for members to pay dues of \$5 a year to help cover operating expenses. Some connection to the city of Austin remained, as the early ACWE bylaws called for an Austin Parks and Recreation staff member to sit on ACWE's advisory board. The first officers included president Walter Horton, secretary Ed Inocente, and treasurer Mary Gad. Marilyn Good filled three roles as vice president, publicity director, and historian. Bill's future wife, Elisa, was the librarian. Bill bought much of the sheet music with his own money and borrowed some from Austin High School. Many pieces in the ACWE library still bear the stamp, "From the Library of Bill Whitworth." In the earliest years, the conductor also acted as an executive director, but it wasn't long before the conductor position was relieved of administrative duties. Since then, the board president has filled a role similar to that of an executive director.

Recruitment efforts continued. More listings appeared in the newspaper seeking new members, but building the band was still progressing very slowly. ACWE did not perform another concert until it returned to Wooldridge Square Park the following year, on May 23, 1976. Only 6 members from the 1975 concerts returned to play in 1976, and only around 18 new members had been recruited. The band was quite small, and instrumentation was still uneven. After that concert, ACWE didn't perform again until three holiday concerts in December at state schools for students with disabilities. The recordings from 1976 sound very rough, to put it kindly. The band's prospects heading into 1977 looked grim. As the year started, the band was not able to field a full board of directors, with the vice president, treasurer, and other positions left open.

The Band Matures and Then Splinters

On September 11, 1977, ACWE played publicly for the first time in 16 months with a concert at Waterloo Park. Then, in October, it played a pair of concerts at Highland Mall, followed by another there in November. Playing at area malls would be fairly common for the band through the next couple decades. Austin lacked performance spaces for a concert band at the time, not that it is not much better now.

On November 20, 1977, ACWE played at Hubbard High School in Hubbard, Texas. This was the first time the band played outside of the greater Austin area. The high school band also performed, and some high school players joined ACWE on a few selections. The concert included David Parker's arrangement of music from *Star Wars*, which had first appeared in theaters just months earlier. A woodwind quintet of ACWE members also performed, the first instance of a small ensemble born from ACWE. The band was still small and uneven, but the sounds of stronger players can be heard on recordings for the first time. Tuba player Sumner Ericson had joined the band in 1976 while a freshman at Austin High School. He would go on to become the principal tuba in the Pittsburgh Symphony just a few years later. David Parker was a horn player, composer, and arranger with degrees in music. He had played professionally and taught private lessons. The Grimmer family, including flautist Pat, clarinetist Bob and oboist Cathy, were also notable members. They were part of the woodwind quintet along with David Parker.

On December 4, 1977, the Austin Civic Wind Ensemble played for the first time at the Zilker Holiday Tree Lighting. This annual performance is ACWE's longest-running tradition and continues to this day. In most years, it is the largest single-day event for ACWE, attracting an audience of over a thousand, including city dignitaries, and drawing media coverage. The Zilker Holiday Tree is actually one of Austin's iconic moonlight towers. Since 1967, the tower has been decorated annually with lights in a spiral pattern to resemble a Christmas tree. Over the years, the event has taken place in the rain and bitter cold, as well as on days where people were mostly wearing shorts. Various music groups, including elementary school choirs, groups from the University of Texas, and jazz bands, have performed through the years. ACWE, though, is the only music group to perform for the event consistently since 1977. Prior to the start of the official ceremony each year, ACWE plays a short concert of holiday favorites as people arrive. At the moment of the lighting of the tree, ACWE has always played *Joy to the World*. At first, they used a simple arrangement by James Ployhar. Initially, the band played the melody once, but starting somewhere around the late 1980s, the band began to repeat the short segment over and over again, giving attendees time to spin under the tree. While fun for those under the tree, this became a bit tedious for band members. In 2014, Michael Bell (your humble historian) created an arrangement based on Ployhar's that provided more variety and some built in points of rest, while still allowing for multiple verses. After the ceremony has concluded, ACWE has usually played more holiday music, but how much has varied over the years.

During 1978, ACWE saw a significant increase in the number of public performances. Band members were starting to feel better about the quality of the group, and many new people joined the band. One of those new members was Janet Rice, who joined in the summer of 1978. She has by far the longest tenure of any ACWE member, still playing with the group in 2025. At the time, Janet worked for IBM, as did many other early members of ACWE. IBM, then one of the largest employers in Austin, had so many employees interested in playing in a wind band that it almost started its own group. Luckily for ACWE, IBM instead helped support existing community groups. A grant from IBM helped ACWE purchase its first set of timpani. IBM also continued to support ACWE financially throughout much of its history.

On August 20, 1978, ACWE performed at the Zilker Hillside Theatre to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Austin Parks and Recreation. The concert was supposed to feature the premiere of a new work by ACWE member David Parker called *Waterloo Parks Suite*. Unfortunately, in 1978, rehearsal attendance was still inconsistent, instrumentation remained uneven, and overall performance quality was lacking. The new piece turned out to be challenging for the band, and it was not played at the concert. It is unknown if the piece has ever been played, and copies of it are not in the ACWE library. On December 12, 1978, ACWE played for the first time at the Texas School for the Blind, the beginning of a strong relationship that would develop between the two. The school would later be known as the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI).

From 1978 into 1979, many of ACWE's more musically accomplished players became increasingly frustrated with the band's quality. The group began to split into two factions. On one side were people who wanted to get more serious about making music. The other side, which included Bill Whitworth, wanted to keep the band more fun and casual. The division unfortunately caused bad feelings that would last for decades.

Despite the growing tensions, 1979 started out promising. A February newsletter from board president David Parker was hopeful about the band's progress and future. ACWE was invited to be part of a benefit concert for the Austin Symphony at Waterloo Park in April. This was a very high profile event, and many band members hoped it would lead to bigger and better things. Following that, the band performed in May at the Elisabet Ney Museum and in June at the Zilker Hillside Theatre. These concerts are among the very few for which Bill Whitworth does not document the band's personnel. At the June concert, Bob Grimmer and David Parker played solos with the band. It seems likely this was a special send-off for them, as it was their last non-holiday concert with ACWE. In addition to the solos, the band played repertoire that was not typical of them at the time, including the Finale from Dvořák's Symphony No. 9 and music from *Slaughter on 10th Avenue*. In the recording of the June performance, the band sounds significantly better than it ever had before. It seems likely this was the last hurrah for several of the stronger members of the band, mostly the faction pushing a more serious focus for the group. Many of them left the band around this time. The departures were a major blow to ACWE in terms of both quality and numbers. ACWE played no concerts in the fall of 1979. Several of those leaving must have felt a special attachment—or at perhaps obligation—to the Zilker Tree

Lighting, and they did return for that performance. Four other holiday concerts that December involved a much smaller and weaker band.

Some of the people who left ACWE, including David Parker, became part of the wind section of the newly formed Austin Community Orchestra, which was later renamed the Austin Civic Orchestra. Others, including Marilyn Good and the Grimms, would become involved with the creation of the Austin Symphonic Band (ASB) a few years later. Marilyn remained a core member of ASB for decades.

Perhaps because of the intraband squabbling, people continued to leave ACWE. As a result, spring 1980 was a very low point in ACWE's history. A pair of April concerts included just 19 players on one and 22 on the other, with poor playing on both. Some rehearsals around this time had as few as 10 people attending. Janet Rice recounts that at some of these rehearsals, the band would sit in a circle rather than a traditional band formation. Bill Whitworth and the remaining members soldiered on. As 1980 went on, ACWE added new members, but unfortunately, the quality still remained low. Nevertheless, ACWE played 13 events in 1980, significantly more than in previous years, or even in many later years.

Resurrection

In the fall of 1980, Stan Beard joined ACWE playing trombone. He also served as an assistant conductor and board president. His joining would be a turning point for the band. Stan had just become the band director at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI), having served previously as a band director in some small Texas school districts. Not only did ACWE benefit from having a music educator performing in the band, but it also gained a new rehearsal space. ACWE was able to start rehearsing and performing concerts at TSBVI, a huge improvement over the old unairconditioned fire house. In addition to Stan, several new people joined the band. The quality improved substantially in 1981, and ACWE began playing more challenging music. In addition to classic marches and standard band repertoire, ACWE started playing more film and Broadway music around this time. To recruit more new members, ACWE started placing ads in the Personals section of the Austin American-Statesman. These really stood out among the other ads of people looking for love!

On April 23, 1981, ACWE played a joint concert with the TSBVI Jazz Band. A recording of this concert was pressed on an LP record—most likely a very small pressing run. On June 28, ACWE played at the Luckenbach World's Fair in Fredericksburg, Texas, a satirical event. The band, starting to feel more confident, made a big deal out of its 50th concert on October 28, 1981, at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired. The women wore long dresses and the men wore coats and ties. The ambitious program consisted of British wind band classics from Holst, Vaughan Williams, and Grainger. The program also included a performance by a brass quintet consisting of Bob Zirpoli and Bill Whitworth on trumpet, Preston King on horn, Richard Klingner on euphonium, and Mark Cain on tuba. In fact, a brass quintet drawn from ACWE members performed fairly often around this time, including for TSBVI events.

The summer of 1982 saw some significant personnel changes in ACWE. That summer, Stan Beard left both ACWE and his job at TSBVI, although he would return to ACWE later. Even with his absence, ACWE continued rehearsing at TSBVI until October of the next year, when it moved to the Dougherty Arts Center. In August of 1982, ACWE found itself without a tuba player for a concert at Waterloo Park. Sumner Erickson, on break after his first season playing with the Pittsburgh Symphony, filled in.

The year 1983 turned out to be a difficult one for both Bill Whitworth and the Austin Civic Wind Ensemble. Bill was no longer documenting the band's activities as thoroughly as he previously did. He was at odds with the board, and ACWE was not as musically strong as it had been the previous two years. The band played significantly fewer concerts in 1983—only five total. There were three during the summer, including one in conjunction with the Austin Aqua Festival, and only one holiday concert besides the traditional Zilker Tree Lighting.

In the spring of 1984, the Austin Civic Wind Ensemble board voted 6–1 to dismiss Bill Whitworth as music director of the group he had founded. He conducted his final concert with ACWE on April 13, 1984, at the Episcopal Church of the Resurrection. The board's letter of dismissal is dated that same day. There is no indication in the program or in any concert announcements that this would be his last performance. Bill did not accept an offer from the board to remain as a player in the band. Although other concerts had been scheduled for the spring of 1984, it is unlikely that any of them actually occurred.

Despite no further formal involvement with the band, Bill Whitworth held great affection for ACWE until his final days. He continued to follow the progress of the band as well as its former members. He eventually moved to Dallas, where his involvement in community music resumed. Sadly, Bill died of a rare disease on November 14, 2021. Although he had not been a member of the group for decades, he had saved many documents, artifacts, and audio cassette recordings of ACWE. Thankfully, his widow Cathie Whitworth and daughter Christine Mendez shared that material with ACWE, providing a detailed picture of the early history of the group..

Unstable Years

The years after Bill Whitworth's dismissal were very unstable and also not well documented. ACWE had seven conductors over the next six years, with others filling in as needed. Stan Beard returned as interim conductor for the spring and summer of 1984, and then again around the spring and summer of 1985. Corkey Robinson, still director at Austin High School, took the podium in the fall of 1984, returning to fill in several times through the rest of the decade. Other ACWE conductors in the late 1980s included Joe Adams, Lake Travis High School director Leroy Osmon, Gary Slechta, Burnet Middle School director Tracy McElroy, and percussionist John Rice. With each change of conductor, ACWE's repertoire focus and style shifted as well.

ACWE's rehearsal location also changed a number of times during this period. With Corkey's return in 1984, ACWE returned briefly to the Texas School for the Blind. Later, it began rehearsing at Mathews Elementary School. In August 1987, ACWE rehearsed for a few weeks at Burnet Middle School and then moved to the Austin Groups for the Elderly (AGE) building at 38th and Cedar. The building had been purchased and refurbished by AGE the previous year, but it had been built in 1907 as the Confederate Women's Home. The space ACWE used for rehearsal had originally been intended for medical purposes and consisted of tile and metal surfaces—a less than ideal acoustical setting. Around May 1989, ACWE began rehearsing at the Episcopal Church of the Resurrection.

With all of the changes in this period, member retention became a greater problem than before. Membership was unstable, with more people than usual coming and going. These issues were reflected in a short blurb in the *Austin American-Statesman* in 1986, which mentioned that ACWE was undergoing some revitalization. Clearly, then, things had not been well for a few years. Adding to ACWE's instability was the growth of the new Austin Symphonic Band, which had become well established by this point. Many seeking a community band saw ASB as an enticing alternative. ASB's appointment of Richard Floyd as music director in 1986 made it even more desirable to some. Formerly the director of bands at Baylor University, he had recently been appointed music director for the Texas University Interscholastic League (UIL). His UIL ties gave ASB a very close connection with all of the music educators in central Texas.

On May 11, 1985, ACWE hosted the Spring Music Festival at the Zilker Hillside Theatre, the largest and most elaborate event produced by ACWE during this period. Besides ACWE, the event featured the Mathews Community School Swing Band Workshop led by Stan Beard, the Austin Horn Society, and a brass quintet called Quintessence. With Stan Beard conducting, ACWE performed marches, movie music, and some pops tunes, which was very typical programming for him.

Although Bill Whitworth had been fond of performing in parks—which had also been required by ACWE's arrangement with Austin Parks and Recreation—the group had started to move away from that a few years after his departure. During this period, the band struggled to find performance spaces and to attract an audience, a common problem throughout most of its history. Some concerts took place at the Episcopal Church of the Resurrection, which would remain a popular performance spot for ACWE to the present. By the late 1980s, ACWE found itself frequently performing at shopping malls around the greater Austin area, particularly during the winter holiday season. It also played at community picnics and other similar events. Fewer in parks, usually in conjunction with some other event. One such event was the Lampasas Spring Ho, where ACWE performed each summer from 1984 to 1991. This was a county fair-style event with a wide variety of activities.

We only have two recordings of ACWE from the late 1980s. One is from a July 14, 1987, concert at Symphony Square. This was the final concert conducted by Gary Slechta, a professional trumpet player and arranger with a remarkable résumé that included playing in the Austin Symphony. The band is small and a bit scrappy at times, but it gives a spirited

performance. Overall, it sounds fairly good, although the players struggle a bit with William Schuman's *Chester*. On the recording of ACWE's return to Symphony Square a year later, the band plays with enthusiasm, but the performance is very sloppy and has significant tuning issues.

Two prominent members who helped hold the band together through the late 1980s and into the 1990s were Dale and Esther Porter. Dale was a percussionist, and Esther played horn. They served as board members, helped with fundraising, and performed other essential tasks. Esther was the quintessential "band mom," frequently serving as board president or vice president. Despite poor health later in life, Esther continued involvement with ACWE until 2010. She died in 2012. Also of note was Bob Zirpoli, a fine trumpet player who also served on the board during his 15 years with ACWE. Preston King was an excellent horn player who joined the band as a teenager. He performed the Mozart horn concerto with ACWE on several occasions. Percussionist Ronald Reed also joined ACWE in the mid 1980s. Still a member of the band in 2025, his longevity with ACWE is second only to Janet Rice's. Horn player Carol Boeck joined in the early 1980s and has played with the group on and off since then.

The Stan Beard Years

When he wasn't handling conducting duties, Stan Beard was a member of the ACWE trombone section through much of the 1980s. He preferred to play rather than conduct. However, like others in the band, he grew frustrated with the frequent leadership turnover and member attrition that left ACWE in fairly dire condition by the end of the 1980s. In July 1990 Stan reluctantly assumed the role of music director and stayed in that position for seven years. The band, which had been rehearsing at the Episcopal Church of the Resurrection, returned to its old home at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired in November 1991. With a regular conductor, as well as rehearsal and performance space at TSBVI, ACWE settled into a more stable routine—and into a degree of complacency. As conductor, Stan tended to focus on marches, big band jazz, show tunes, and other pops-oriented fare, although for more formal concerts he would also program wind band classics and well known orchestral transcriptions. Some band members grew frustrated with his emphasis on pops programming and with repeated programming of the same old warhorses. The band tended to be more laid back during this time, and Stan didn't push it very much. When they did play more challenging music, they often struggled with it. But they still had fun!

By the end of Stan's tenure in 1997, ACWE had improved considerably. The band was still a bit ragged, but it was significantly better sounding and more disciplined than the small very rough sounding group he inherited in 1990. On April 6, 1996, ACWE held a concert at McCallum High School that included the premieres of two pieces by ACWE members: *Spiritual and Hallelujah* by Corkey Robinson, and *Pecan Street Parade* by David Earl Holt. Holt, a notable composer and arranger, played trombone in ACWE. He had previously performed with the bands of

Tommy Dorsey, Tex Beneke, and Gene Krupa. For more than 20 years, he also served as the head director of the Austin Public Library.

Unfortunately, documentation about other details of the band in the 1990s is rare. The band generally remained on the small side with around 30 to 35 players, and some parts were not covered. Membership was still very transitory, but as the 1990s wore on more and more members began to stick around longer. Corkey Robinson, by then retired from teaching, was a regular member of the clarinet section. Long-time member Kathie Goldsmith, who still plays with ACWE, joined the flute section during this time. In her time with ACWE, Kathie got married and had two daughters, whom the band watched grow up. Both girls attended rehearsals with Kathie and, when they were young, often danced as ACWE rehearsed. Both later played harp with ACWE: Willow, was featured in a harp concerto in May 2022, and Scout played harp in the fall 2024 concerts. Other long-time members who joined in the 1990s include trumpet player Duke Tanner, clarinetist Amy Chu, and trombonist Warren Gill. As always, many members worked in high-tech industries, so it is not too surprising that ACWE had a website as early as 1996. Years later, Warren became the band's webmaster and a valued voice on the board.

Finding performance spaces and audiences remained difficult for ACWE at this time. The band continued to perform at shopping malls, such as Northcross Mall and Highland Mall, as well as its home at the TSBVI. It also performed for a variety of local events, aiming to take advantage of a built-in audience whenever possible. These included the annual Teddy Bear Picnic at Northwest Recreation Center, school events at TSBVI, and holiday events.

From around 1993 through 1997, the band dropped *Civic* from its name and became the Austin Wind Ensemble. With the arrival of a new conductor in 1997, though, the old name was restored. Fall 1997 programs list the group as Austin Civic Wind Ensemble, and in January 1998 the board made the name *Austin Civic Wind Ensemble* official again.

While he wasn't inclined to push any boundaries as conductor, Stan Beard stepped up repeatedly to help out ACWE when needed over the 17 years he was associated with it. Stan stepped down as conductor in 1997. An avid sailor, he later drowned while pursuing that hobby.

Rick Glascock and Another Resurrection

The appointment of Rick Glascock as music director in the fall of 1997 represented one of the most significant turning points in the history of the Austin Civic Wind Ensemble. Rick held bachelor's and master's degrees in music, and he had performed professionally as a percussionist. Before moving to Austin in 1993, he had been the principal percussionist of the Guadalajara Philharmonic in Mexico. In 1997 he earned a music pedagogy teaching certificate from the University of Texas at Austin and began a new career as a band director at Covington Middle School.

Rick's musical knowledge, thoughtful interpretations, enthusiasm, and keen understanding of how an adult community band operated transformed ACWE into an entirely different group in a matter of months. His fresh programming, which focused on high quality newer original band works as well as classics, further endeared him to band members. It also attracted new talented players, which increased the quality of the band even more. By the end of 2000—its 25th anniversary—ACWE had nearly doubled in size to around 65 players. The group had never been so large up until that point.

Rick knew exactly how much he could push members in order to make them better players, and he knew when he needed to back off. Long time ACWE member James Barnard remarked about Rick Glascock:

"He was very enthusiastic and selected worthwhile literature that was challenging. He was also a great person and very approachable. He always pushed us to be better but knew when to pull back to keep everyone engaged."

I remember one rehearsal in particular where we ran through Elsa's Procession to the Cathedral. I got goosebumps and a lump in my throat at the sound we produced and was totally caught up in the music as it swelled to the conclusion. When we finished, it was dead silence for what seemed like forever as everyone realized the incredible thing we'd just done. That was one of the best musical experiences I have ever had."

Kathie Goldsmith remembers a similar experience during a performance. *Elsa's Procession to the Cathedral* would become a recurring favorite of the band in the years to come.

This was the beginning of the Austin Civic Wind Ensemble that we know today. The band was taking music making more seriously than it ever had, but also remained fun, welcoming and open to all. The board of directors also began taking things more seriously and started to step up its game regarding the band's administrative aspects. There was more effort put toward fundraising, particularly due to the efforts of Shirley Frasier. Publicity and printed programs started to take on a more professional look, aided greatly by the rise of the computer age.

No longer playing concerts at shopping malls, ACWE was now presenting many of its concerts in auditoriums such as those at Westview Middle School and Covington Middle School. It also performed at Faith Presbyterian Church and the Texas School for Blind and Visually Impaired, where it was still rehearsing. Although it continued a few outdoor performances, such as the Zilker Tree Lighting, the band became much more focused on more formal concerts in good spaces.

Throughout its history, other ensembles have sprung up as an outgrowth of the Austin Civic Wind Ensemble. This activity increased significantly in the late 1990s with the creation of groups such as brass quintets, a trombone choir, a clarinet choir, and polka bands in a variety of forms.

In March of 1998, ACWE played a new work by Rick Glascock called *Mulanje*. The band would play more of Rick's compositions and arrangements over time. In November 1999, ACWE played for the first time at the HEB Feast of Sharing. The band would perform at this event for many years, initially with the full band and later with a much smaller band playing polkas and marches. Besides providing a new performance opportunity, HEB would become helpful in supporting ACWE financially.

It's easy to believe ACWE had always been playing July 4 concerts, but it didn't do so until 2000 at Lakeway. At that concert, the band played some pieces that became perennial July 4 favorites, including *America the Beautiful*, *The Stars and Stripes Forever*, and the *1812 Overture*. Since that time, playing concerts on and around the 4th has become an annual tradition. ACWE played July 4 celebrations for the next nine years in Lakeway. In the years that followed, the band continued to perform at fireworks shows and neighborhood picnics around the Austin area. Perhaps the most common July performance has been at the Milwood neighborhood association picnic at Balcones Community Park, just down the road from ACWE's current rehearsal space at Covenant United Methodist Church. The performances reached a peak in 2013 when ACWE played three concerts on the 4th: the Milwood Picnic in the morning, a concert at Unity Church of the Hills at midday, and a fireworks display at Lake Pflugerville in the evening. Exhausted band members agreed it best not to try that again.

After the horrific events of September 11, 2001, ACWE performed at the Rally for America at the Texas State Capitol in November. Later that year, at the Zilker Tree Lighting, ACWE was joined by local singer Tish Hinojosa, who sang the *Star-Spangled Banner* and *America, the Beautiful* in memory of those lost on 9/11. The evening also featured a candlelight vigil.

The 1990s saw the arrival of several notable and influential members. One such member was Ted Rachofsky, who had played in the Guadalajara Philharmonic with Rick. He quickly became known as a spiritual leader of ACWE. He played trombone and euphonium and was often featured in solos. He also conducted the group on occasion. James Barnard, a euphonium player and an active board member for many years, was another who joined at this time, along with trumpet player Paul Puffe. Clarinetist Karen Delk, tubist Jim Schwobel, and multi-woodwind player Herb Holland served in a variety of board positions and greatly helped strengthen the administrative aspects of the band.

Rick Glascock's tenure as ACWE's director came to an end in mid-2003. The program for his final concerts contained this note:

"Rick has challenged all of us, continually upgrading the quality and difficulty of the music we play and helping us grow more as musicians. We'll miss Rick's wonderful sense of humor, engaging manner and mastery on the podium."

A Pair Conductors Who Don't Quite Fit

After Rick's departure, Paul Crocket led the Austin Civic Wind Ensemble for two years. At the time, he was the associate director of bands for Westwood High School in Round Rock ISD. Prior to that, he had been a band director at Bailey Middle School, Murchison Middle School, and Tyler High School. Paul was a fine secondary band director, but he didn't seem to have the same understanding of an adult community band that Rick had. He tended to program works he already knew, rather than considering what might be more appropriate for ACWE. He was also not very inclined to push the band with challenging music, which came as a frustration to those who had appreciated that aspect of Rick's conductorship.. While the band did not sound significantly worse that it had under Rick, it was missing a certain spark. Perhaps as a result, several people left the band around this time.

In October of 2004, ACWE dedicated its two formal concerts to Ted Rachofsky, who had been seriously injured in a bicycle accident. The program featured *Elsa's Procession* and *Lassus Trombone*, works sure to bring a smile to Ted's face. The next month, the band performed at the dedication of the new Austin City Hall

Among the prominent players who joined ACWE during the Crockett years was Pati Dukett. A horn player and band mom in the vein of Esther Porter—who was finally getting a well-deserved break from helping keep ACWE running for so long—Pati quickly took on a series of leadership roles.. Fortunately, ACWE had reached a point where the same few people didn't have to keep things running year after year. Another new member during this time was trombone player Jarred Prejean, who has as of 2025 served as ACWE's steadfast librarian for more than a decade.

New ensembles continued to spin off from ACWE during this time. Of particular note was the Austin Wonder Brass, a British-style brass band which began rehearsing in July 2005. The Wonder Brass was later renamed the Austin Brass Band, and it has grown and flourished over two decades as a strong independent organization. Various ACWE-adjacent polka bands also evolved over the years. Some of these groups grew out of an unofficial collaboration between ACWE and the Wurst Band, a free-form, unrehearsed polka group that met at Scholtz Garten and a tradition nearly as old as ACWE. Players from ACWE and the Wurst Band eventually banded together in the Austin Polka Band, which today is one of the major attractions at Oktoberfest events around Central Texas.

Paul Crockett stepped down as ACWE's conductor in May 2005. That September, the board of directors appointed Dr. David Whitwell to be the new music director. He had had a long and highly regarded career in the college band world. With ACWE, he conducted a pair of concerts in November 2005. After the second concert, when confronted about his abrupt or even harsh treatment of the band during rehearsals, Dr. Whitwell promptly resigned.

Despite his knowledge and abilities, Dr. Whitwell showed no real understanding of how an amateur community band operated. He chose music too difficult for most of the members and had a stern old school approach to rehearsing, often berating players who were struggling. He also ignored or abandoned many of ACWE's long-term practices, such as rehearsing at the

Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Instead, he moved rehearsals that fall to Covington Middle School, 15 miles south of TSBVI. All this unfortunately caused several people to skip rehearsals or quit the band altogether, which had already been shrinking in size.

Robert Laguna and Two Decades of Growth

Robert Laguna joined the trumpet section of the Austin Civic Wind Ensemble in 1997. He had completed studies in music education at Southwest Texas State University (now Texas State) in 1987 and then spent several years directing middle and high school bands. Like many members of ACWE, though, Robert stepped away from his instrument for a few years. His career shifted to Asian medicine, and for a while music was left behind. ACWE helped reignite his passion for music.

Shortly after joining the band, Robert took on the role of Rick Glascock's assistant conductor, which ACWE, in a nod to one of Austin's major industries—called the semiconductor. As assistant conductor, Robert would have been a logical choice to take over when Rick stepped down, but Robert was much more interested in playing trumpet. He conducted the band's summer 2005 concerts after Paul Crockett stepped down, and he applied for the position of music director. However, he withdrew his application when Dr. Whitwell applied. Then, when things didn't work out with Dr. Whitwell, Robert again stepped in to conduct the 2005 holiday concerts. Soon afterward, the board offered him the conductor position. Although he was still reluctant, he eventually accepted it. As then ACWE board president Herb Holland put it, "Everybody knew we were going to be Robert's band when Rick stepped down, except Robert." Robert still serves as the ACWE music director today.

Robert has always been a strong advocate of community music as a form of life-long learning, and he tailored his conducting approach to that goal. In his years playing and conducting under Rick Glascock, Robert had carefully observed Rick's rehearsal techniques, style, and approach. From this, he developed a good understanding of how an adult amateur band differed from a middle or high school band. He also learned what not to do by observing Paul Crockett and David Whitwell. Together, these lessons served him well as he stepped into a potentially difficult position.

Heading into 2006, Robert was dealing with a shrunken and demoralized band. It was not unusual to have fewer than 30 members at a rehearsal. Some sections, most notably the percussion section, were consistently too small to cover all needed parts. In fact, part coverage was so thin at times that the board even considered paying substitute players to cover some of the missing parts, but it doesn't appear it ever came to that. Adding to the percussion issue was the fact that ACWE didn't own a full range of concert band percussion equipment, and much of what it did have was in poor condition. While ACWE was rehearsing and performing at schools, it was able to borrow much of the equipment it needed. By 2006, however, ACWE's regular rehearsal space at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired had become less

reliable. More and more often, the band was bumped for school-related activities and had to find rehearsal space elsewhere. Rehearsals shifted at the last minute to other locations around town, including Covington Middle School, St. Paul Lutheran Church, Grace United Methodist Church, and Burnet Middle School. Even when it was available, TSBVI presented some logistical issues as a rehearsal space. For example, the only storage available for ACWE's music stands was in a loft high above the stage, so the band ended each rehearsal by lifting stands high above their heads and passing them to someone in the loft. This was unwieldy at best, and band members are amazed no one ever got hurt in the process.

Despite the challenges, ACWE remained resilient, just as it had when faced with adversity in the past. There were some notable successes at this time. The first Texas Community Music Festival (TCMF) took place in April 2006 over four days at Central Market in north Austin. This festival was the largest endeavor ever attempted by ACWE. TCMF was the brainchild of ACWE president Herb Holland. Although no longer an active member of ACWE, Herb still runs the annual festival, along with ACWE member and "Herbterpreter" Kathleen Brotherton. The festival, still held at Central Market, now lasts 10 days and attracts thousands of people to hear a wide range of community music groups. The festival has proved a lasting success, and in March 2014, Herb was awarded the "Unsung Hero Award" by Austin Music People for his efforts in running it.

Also in 2006, the Austin Chronicle proclaimed what ACWE members already knew by listing the band as the "Best Excuse to Be a Band Geek Again":

(Best of Austin 2006 issue)

Best Excuse to Be a Band Geek Again--*Austin Chronicle*

Austin Civic Wind Ensemble

One time, at band camp, we heard about this great group of musicians in A-town: As Austin's oldest community band, the Austin Civic Wind Ensemble (ACWE) has been charming Central Texas audiences since 1975. Besides treating our town to the best in-concert band performances, this ensemble also provides an outlet for Austin area musicians, amateur and professional, to get out there and play. So, whether you are looking to rekindle fond memories of your band-geek glory days or you wish to simply revel in that sound that takes you to another time and place, check them out. Their Web site is loaded with information on how to get involved.

Clearly, Robert was undaunted by the initial challenges he faced and encouraged by the spirit of the group. From the start, he had a long-term vision for ACWE's future. He knew the band had the potential not only to stabilize but to grow in both size and musical ability. He understood that growth was the key to success in a community band. Having benefited from his own experiences as ACWE's semiconductor, Robert also championed giving other conductors a chance to lead the band and develop their own skills. Over his years as ACWE's music director, he appointed a series of assistant conductors. The two people who held that position longest were Gary Sapp and Thomas Stowers, both of whom had backgrounds in military bands. In

addition, he gave members of the band opportunities to conduct pieces both in rehearsals and concerts.

As conductor, Robert has often taken a creative and theme-based approach to his programming. For example, the spring 2007 concerts featured artist J Muzacz painting spacescapes behind the band as it played *Jupiter* by Gustav Holst. The concerts also featured solo performances by Dara Smith on bassoon, Chris Pawling on clarinet, and Brian Edwards on tuba.

In early 2009, ACWE found a new home, thanks in large part to the efforts of vice president Pati Dukett. ACWE began rehearsing at Covenant United Methodist Church around April of that year. Under the agreement between the band and the church, ACWE would be able to use Covenant's fellowship hall for rehearsals and the sanctuary for performances. In addition, the church allowed ample storage space for percussion equipment and music stands and smaller spaces that could be used for rehearsal by ACWE's small ensembles. In exchange, ACWE would provide musicians for church services, particularly for cantatas at Easter and Christmas. Covenant UMC music director Kathy Smallwood was most welcoming to ACWE and very pleased to have a "house band" at the church. As the band begins its 50th anniversary season, ACWE is still rehearsing at Covenant UMC.

The move to Covenant did generate some challenges. The fellowship hall at Covenant had very problematic acoustics. Fortunately, ACWE's roster included experts in acoustics, Cale Montgomery and Ted Argo, and some craftsmen, including Greg Kahn and Giuseppe Maccagan, who could build sound panels to help tame the very live room. Another problem was that Covenant was significantly further north than previous rehearsal locations. Faced with a longer drive to rehearsal, more people left the band, which was already suffering from low numbers. Rehearsals in the first several months at Covenant typically had under 30 players. The instrumentation was very uneven, with the brass sometimes almost double the number of woodwind players. Today it is hard to imagine ACWE playing with just one flute player, but it happened. Over the next few years, ACWE's board concentrated on a campaign to recruit new members and brought the group up to a good concert band size. Although it still struggles from time to time to cover parts like bassoon and oboe, today the band is larger than ever.

With rehearsal space settled, ACWE's board turned its attention to fundraising. Led by board member Kathleen Brotherton, ACWE began seeking new grants and other sources of funding to buy needed materials. For example, a \$10,000 grant in 2012 from IBM helped the band purchase a set of chimes, a tam-tam, and other needed percussion instruments. This grant was won through a joint effort of Kathleen and various IBM employees in the band, including Paul Wadehra, Jennifer Mulsow, and Warren Gill, as well as Kathleen's husband Casey Brotherton. Later, ACWE also acquired a new set of timpani, a new larger bass drum and more mallet instruments. Kathleen also ensured a dramatic increase in funding from the City of Austin Cultural Contracts program.

With a music director in for the long haul and a good home to meet in, ACWE settled into a stable routine of making music, having fun and enjoying each other's company. In the spring of 2011, ACWE performed a western-themed program featuring works like *Equus* by Eric Whitacre and the classic *La Fiesta Mexicana* by H Owen Reed, as well John Williams's score from the film *The Cowboys*. Instrumentation was uneven, but the band was becoming much more confident with challenging material. In the spring of 2012, ACWE's program was based on a circus theme. In addition to marches and other festive music, the band sang a choral arrangement of Charlie Chaplin's *Smile*. Covenant UMC music director, Kathy Smallwood, assisted with the preparation.

In the fall of 2013, the band performed a pair of concerts entitled "ACWE and Friends," which featured several guest artists. John Caputo, the conductor of the Austin Brass Band and a euphonium virtuoso, performed *Harlequin* by Philip Sparke. ACWE commissioned member Ben Aldridge to compose a work called *Three Wishes* for Baroque trumpet and wind ensemble, featuring specialist Nathaniel Mayfield. Covenant UMC music director Kathy Smallwood and her husband Don sang *You Raise Me Up*. The concerts concluded with the *Finale* from the Saint-Saens Symphony No. 3, featuring Covenant UMC organist, Steve Wottrich. Also in 2013, several members of ACWE's flute section formed the Violet Crown Flute Choir, which has since flourished as an independent ensemble. Christina Ryan was instrumental in the formation of this group. She was also a prominent voice in drafting ACWE's current mission statement as was president Sapana Donde. Sapana also encouraged the board to really focus for the first time on setting goals and planning for future growth.

"The Austin Civic Wind Ensemble is a gathering of adult musicians enjoying the challenge of a high-quality repertoire. The wide range of age and skill level supports our value of inclusion and fosters our mission of using music for lifelong learning, while promoting joy in our community through live performances."

In the spring of 2014, ACWE performed a program of French music, with one of the performances at the historic French Legation in Austin. For ACWE's 40th anniversary in the spring of 2015, it performed wind band classics including *Rocky Point Holiday* by Ron Nelson and *Divertimento* by Vincent Persichetti. The program also included well known orchestral transcriptions such as Gershwin's *An American in Paris* and two pieces by Shostakovich: *Festive Overture* and the *Finale* from his fifth symphony. To commemorate the anniversary, historian Christina Ryan compiled a photo book of ACWE's first four decades.

By 2019, ACWE was in very good shape both financially and musically. The next year, however, brought the crisis of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Unable to meet due to health precautions and quarantine restrictions, the band found a creative way to continue to grow and learn. ACWE held online virtual sessions organized by Robert, assistant conductor Thomas Stowers, and president Tom Hensle to keep the band engaged with music and connected to each other. These sessions covered topics in music theory, history, community music and other areas.

As the band resumed normal operations in the spring of 2022, there was concern about how many players would not return. For once in the band's history, however, adversity didn't cause a loss of players. In fact, the band grew significantly. As the band completed its 50th season in 2024, it was much larger than it had ever been. Concerts typically feature 70 to 80 players, and the roster lists well over 100 active members. But what would ACWE be without adversity? During the pandemic, while Covenant was left largely unattended, the band's equipment trailer was stolen from the church parking lot. After the pandemic, changes in the city of Austin's cultural arts program left ACWE unable to secure city funding, once its largest funding source. This, coupled with rising prices for venue rentals and other expenses after the pandemic, has created feelings of financial insecurity. Nevertheless, ACWE has weathered on, and will certainly continue to do so.

In the spring of 2024, in the run-up to its 50th anniversary, ACWE achieved a major milestone in Robert's vision for the group. He had long wanted the band to reach a point where it was capable of playing long-form symphonic works, to go "full court," in Robert's phrasing. ACWE pulled off its most adventurous programming, performing the *Lord of the Rings Symphony* by Johan de Meij. To celebrate the event, the band also recorded the symphony in a special recording session at KMFA's Draylin Mason Studio. Horn player Nancy Middlebrook's connection with KMFA and general support of ACWE helped make this recording possible.

For ACWE's 50th anniversary year, the band celebrated its long history. Following a program of celebratory music in the fall, the spring 2025 concerts featured the same music performed at the very first ACWE concert in May 1975. Looking forward, Robert has planned more ambitious programs featuring more challenging works, including more full-length masterworks, as the band enters its second half-century of existence.

Robertisms

"Why am I yelling? I have a microphone"

"Put your music in dis order" (this order)

"Go to my cousin's tempo" (tempo primo)

For counting rhythms:

Do - you - read - the - Chronicle

Yes - I - read - the - Chronicle

Purple hippopotamus