

Susan Wagner

KR: Thank you for allowing us to interview you. My name is Kate Ranieri, we're here in Allentown at Wenner Hall in the process of interviewing band members, and I have, so, your last name?

SWH: My name is Susan Wagner Hartney. [2:00]

KR: Hartney. And if you could just give us your date of birth.

SWH: July first.

KR: That's good. Thank you very much. (laughs) I assume that we have your permission to videotape you?

SWH: Yes.

KR: We will share this with you on a DVD as well if you'd like.

SWH: Excellent, thank you.

KR: So, I have a few questions to ask you, beginning with -- let's go back. Remember when you were five, or whatever year it was, when you started feeling that you wanted to play a musical instrument. What was it that inspired you to play? Tell me about your growing up years playing, then getting into the band, move into the band at Waverly.

SWH: I grew up on a farm Bethlehem Township, Northampton County, and my parents had friends who owned a piano, and I was absolutely fascinated with this thing. I didn't know what it was as my family is not musical [03:00], and you go

and you push down on a white key and you push down on a black key, you could get all different kinds of sounds. I thought this was great. So, when I was six years old, my parents bought a used piano, which I have to this day. It was built somewhere between 1900 and 1904, and it's what they would call a Concert Upright or a Grand Upright, and it's a big piece of mahogany furniture. Still plays beautifully. I'm blessed to have a wonderful piano technician. And I started piano lessons when I was six and just took to it, loved every minute of it. When I became a little bit older, about fourth grade or so, I decided I wanted to play a wind instrument so I could play in a band. Broke my mother's heart that I didn't want to play the violin, but I didn't want any part of that. And I started out on clarinet and then transitioned to flute [04:00], and the flute and I got along much better than clarinet and I did. So I played all through school. My first acquaintance with Ron Demkee was when I started at Freedom High School, he was the band director there. I should say, instrumental music director, that's a little bit more accurate. And I played in band and orchestra wind ensemble, I did some pit work for various shows, had a wonderful, wonderful experience there. Trips to the Orange Bowl in Miami, Florida for their big parade, the Niagara

Blossom Festival, Niagara Falls, Ontario. We did some parades in Washington, DC, and in local events as well. My skills were good enough for me to go to district and regional band festivals, and I decided that I wanted to study [05:00] music in college, so Ron was extremely helpful. I was accepted at West Chester University, then West Chester State College. Had a terrific experience there. Got a conservatory education at a state school price. And, although my degree is in music education, sadly I didn't teach in a public school setting simply because, at that time, the jobs were not available where I was living. But I always taught privately and maintained my skills. I'm playing with different organizations, trios, quintets, et cetera. I moved from the Philadelphia area to northeastern Pennsylvania. I worked at Marywood University for almost 10 years. I obtained my master's degree in musicology from there, and also taught flute part time, both to credit and non-credit students, and, that, again [06:00], was a wonderful, wonderful experience, something that I'm very grateful to this day that I had. Moved back to the Lehigh Valley, late 1980s, and was playing, doing some church work. I am a church musician, do organ and choir directing and hand-bell ringing and all that kind of good material that goes along with church

music. And, lo and behold, one evening, the phone rings and it's Ron Demkee. Hadn't heard from him in a very long time, and he wanted to know if I'd be interested in playing with the Allentown Band. He said, "Come to a rehearsal, see how you like it." So, came to a rehearsal in this very room, and I fell in love and have been to this very day.

KR: I love that story. I love it. (laughs) [7:00] So, tell me about the band. What kind of things did you notice about the band in the period when you first joined to where it is now?

SWH: Well, nothing remained stagnant, and I think that's a very good thing. There are people who have been with the band forever, like Ezra, although we tease him, he hasn't been with them since 1828, and some very talented young people who have come into the ranks, and that's very exciting to see, to observe their enthusiasm for the material that's played. Sadly, I think there is a misconception about band music, that you only perform marching in the street, you only play marches. The repertoire that we do here is just incredible, and it's challenging. I played a lot of [08:00] it prior to coming to the band, but we have pieces that are commissioned for us, like Johan de Meij and Steve Reisteter, our principal clarinetist, is a wonderful composer and does some amazing things in both his original

compositions and in arranging. So, that's very exciting to be part of that new music. And, also, another exciting thing, again, is to play some of the Sousa marches. There are so many of them, and, naturally, we don't always get to play all of them. There's like, "Oh, yes." One of my favorites is Nobles of the Mystic Shrine simply because it has a flute trio that most people don't hear, but it's scored like that. It's like, yeah, we really need to play this one again. And each march has a story. And I think Ron, in programming our concerts, keeps very much in [09:00] mind the Sousa tradition where John Philip Sousa would do, perhaps, an orchestral transcription of an overture followed up by a march, and a soloist, either vocal or instrumental, or, perhaps, sometimes, both, but a lovely mix of material like that. We do concerts occasionally that are specifically, like, on Broadway, specifically patriotic at those times of the year when that's appropriate. Our holiday concerts. There's a concert that we do in early December that is both patriotic, honoring those people who have served in the military, it's usually close to Pearl Harbor day, and festive as well with the holiday music, and that one I always find very meaningful. I knew one of the men who was honored several years ago [10:00] and just found that to be

overwhelming, and, glancing at my comrades in arms, so to speak, on the stage, you could see that a lot of them were very moved as well.

KR: I've been at one of the concerts, the one where they have what branch of the service, 'cause I was in the Air Force. You forget about that sometimes. It's beautiful. So, where do you think the band's going in the future? If you were to kind of, say, this is what I see in the future?

SWH: Well, my crystal ball has been in the shop for many years and hasn't been returned, but I'll give you my best judgment of that. It's exciting to see new people come in, younger people. Not to say that people of my age and older -- we still have skills that are [11:00] still very, very carefully honed, and, hopefully, people take their music folders home and practice because it's not the kind of group that you can come in and sit down and read and say, "OK, I'm done," you know, one rehearsal a week. There are areas that require special attention, and I usually take my folder home with me so I have time to efficiently practice. I see exciting times ahead, particularly with student outreach that we've done with the side by side concerts, which are typically in May. Selected high school students are suggested by their band directors to come and play with us. And there's a conductor, a guest conductor of fame

[12:00] who appears in 2018, it was a woman who had conducted the United States Army Band. I think she was at West Point, I don't have all the details. But she was just marvelous and worked very, very well with students. And Carol Jantsch, who is the tuba player with the Philadelphia Orchestra, came and played, and, although she played only with the Allentown Band segment, it was fascinating to watch the students. I could see some of them in the audience from where I was sitting and they were just stunned that, you know, a tuba could make these incredibly beautiful sounds, you know, it's just not on the first and second beats of the measure, and just sort of holding the beat in place. That type of exposure, and, also, with the [13:00] young people's concerts that we do, typically in November, where school students are brought in to hear the band, definitely it makes an impression on these young people, and hopefully encourages them to keep with their musical studies, not necessarily as a vocation, but as an avocation. Within the band, there are people who are from all different occupations, from doctors, to dentists, we've had attorneys, labor workers, school music teachers, performance folks, military band people, so it's a wide, wide range of occupation, but the one love is still getting together and making music, and it doesn't get much better.

KR: Not at all. [14:00] I listened to Deb. Thank you for your answer. Talking about the Education Outreach Program, it's just, well, we're definitely signing up

SFM: We want to go.

SWH: It's so exciting.

KR: I bet. I can only imagine.

SWH: Some of the students come in and they're a little hesitant, and I have the piccolo seat in the band. Piccolo is a color instrument. It's also a dangerous little instrument. It's not the easiest thing in the world to play. And I usually have a sweet young thing next to me with, you know, the big eyes, and just, like, "Honey, just relax and play. Just play. It will be all right, I promise you. And if we have a problem, we'll work it out." Never had had to work anything out. Though, you know, it's a matter of giving them confidence to go ahead. "We're not throwing you into the deep end of the pool feet first, not knowing how to swim. We're here for you. [15:00] We'll encourage you. But we'll take that first step."

KR: It's an amazing program.

SWH: It's wonderful. I look forward to that every year.

KR: You can also look forward to seeing it continue. Go Allentown Band.

SWH: (laughs)

KR: Do either one of you have any...?

SFM: No, I... if you have any. It's when you look at the makeup of your band itself. Have you noticed how it's changed, say, in the last 50 years?

SWH: I can't respond to 50 years. I could respond to the time I know. When you say makeup, give me a little bit more...

KR: In terms of male, female, white, Caucasian.

SWH: Well, at one time, it was all male. And I think that changed in the mid '70s. [16:00] I don't have an exact date. We have one player who was African American, actually we have two players who are African American, excuse me. A trumpet player and a euphonium player. And the euphonium player is particularly interesting, and I know him better because I've known him longer, he came from the Salvation Army Band tradition of brass band, and he's shared a lot of information about that tradition with me, and his playing is exquisite, and it's part of that tradition. Male, female -- since women came into the band in the mid '70s, I'm going to say we probably have maybe a 50/50 demographic. That's really hard for me to judge because I don't think in those terms, I think, "OK. Oh, yeah. OK. So-and-so's coming in, I got to match that pitch," or "Here's my cue for this entrance." [17:00]

KR: That's what you're doing, isn't it? Playing music.

SWH: Playing music.

KR: You're not looking at demographics.

SWH: No, you know, we've had some heated discussions politically, but usually within a framework of respect. We've got all different folks here from different walks of life, different religions, different opinions, but our job here is to make music and to outreach to the community. You know, it's sort of a selfish profession because I play for me, but I also play as a communication device.

KR: It's also a group. The camaraderie.

SWH: Yes, we've done some European Tours. I have been on three, and it's just been marvelous [18:00] to see the reaction of people in other countries. I have a dear friend who says you're an expert if you travel 50 miles from home and carry a clipboard, so you're not a prophet in your own backyard, and I'm amazed -- this is such a marvelous cultural institution that some people don't know about it. Many people are not aware that there are four community bands in Allentown. That's unheard of. And when you think of, like, the Goldman Band in New York, that is no more. And it's tragic. You know, Edwin Franko Goldman wrote so much music, and that organization has ceased to exist. And that's New York City. Here, we've got four concert bands in the city, though, you know, it's just a remarkable thing

to me that the city can sustain that type of interest.

[19:00] And it's come directly from the players and from the conductors.

KR: When you're on your European tour, do you find music is the language, the lingua franca, if you will, that everyone understands the music, whether it's -- because you're not [singing?], necessarily.

SWH: We've always attracted people who are interested. I remember playing in France, and that was in 2008, I think, we did some informal concerts there, and people were just fascinated. They'd walk by and then they'd stop. And this was part of a Winds Festival on the French Riviera, and other bands would come through and they'd come and listen. We would do the same if we happen to fall upon them at any given time. The formal concert was just remarkable [20:00], and people commented on our uniforms, wanted to know if we were in the military. We said, "No, it's a military style coat. It's based upon the United States Navy, and that's what Sousa did. But, no, we are not in the military."

KR: I'm sure it must have been a marvelous experience.

SWH: The trips were just fabulous. The enthusiasm of our audiences was amazing. And it's something I'll always

have. And we got to share what we do with people in other countries.

KR: How would you compare audiences here, the states that you've been to, the concerts, compared to Europe?

SWH: As you said, it's like the lingua franca. There's almost always something that will touch someone, and you don't necessarily know [21:00] what it will be. One of my favorite pieces that we do is Wagner's "Elsa's Procession to the Cathedral," and, it's from *Lohengrin*. I have a long time before I make my entrance. I can just sit there and listen. And we played that at Carnegie Hall, and I'm thinking, "This is the first selection we're playing. I am sitting on stage in Carnegie Hall." I was almost in tears, and I thought, "You better pull it together, girlfriend, you've got an entrance to make." And just to hear that silence before the applause and know that you've touched somebody is a wonderful, wonderful feeling.

KR: Or a reward.

SWH: It is a reward. And, sometimes, depending on the [22:00] site, we're close enough to see faces, and particularly like at West Park, which is a far more informal venue than a concert hall would be, sometimes we'll have children marching back and forth, they're dancing. That's just so gratifying to know we're touching them in that kind of way,

where they feel they want to have movement. And we have other people who sit, you know, and they're very thoughtful and giving it an indoor concert venue setting, outdoor. I really do enjoy seeing that.

KR: It's lovely.

SWH: It is.

KR: Thank you very much.

SWH: You're welcome.

KR: You've given us a window into other things that no one else has told us about their concerts, which is lovely, it really is. It's nice to hear how music works with people, just... [23:00]

SFM: Is there much crossover between the four community bands? Are there many people who play in more than one?

SWH: Not to my knowledge. There is a festival of bands that's held every year. It used to be at the field house at Muhlenberg, it'd been there for years and years and years and years and years. And the funds that are raised there goes to help support organizations for people who are developmentally disabled. And the last several years, I believe, it has taken place in Northampton at their community center. So the four bands get together to play there. But as far as people crossing over, sometimes, if a substitute is needed in a given section, you know, that

type of activity [24:00] takes place. But I think it would be very challenging to play in all four and try to make concerts and do things like that.

KR: Scheduling?

SWH: Scheduling could be very, very difficult.

KR: Also the fact that you have your own culture here. Not that it couldn't be done, but you have a long, long history here. A very rich history.

SWH: The history is just amazing. As I mentioned before, just what's in this building alone, just the photographs in our kind of like our waiting area, there are headshots from 1911, little oval headshots, and I'm absolutely fascinated with that collage. The people are in -- they were all men, of course -- in the high collar [25:00] uniforms that must have been terribly uncomfortable in which to play. But to know that we in the band now are part of that long standing tradition, 190 years, that's so unique, and it is 190 continuous years. It wasn't called the Allentown Band in 1828, but that tradition has gone through to this place at this time.

KR: Definitely an institution.

SWH: Yes, very much so.

KR: Thank you so much.

SWH: You're welcome.

KR: This is exciting. Each interview just kind of peels another layer of the onion. (laughs)

SWH: That's good.

SFM: It is an honor to go through the materials upstairs [26:00] and to inventory them, and, you know, someday, to digitize them all, but to be able to introduce students this Fall to, you know, to this material, and the respect that they will have. I'm going to be lucky if I can get them to, you know, put it in order at all, 'cause they get awestruck by the materials, to let them be part of that. I had a great email the other day from the chief librarian at the Marine Band, and I was asking how they have their, you know, finding [units?] organized, and she was so welcoming and so happy that I was involved with you all, and shared openly material that she doesn't even have ready to be public yet just to help learn and collaborate and, you know, and make this history and this story, to help with the outreach by making the research [27:00] parts of it, and the web presence and these interviews and the student's digital stories to help tell your story even bigger.

SWH: The Allentown Band had played at the Kennedy Center, I'm going to say this was maybe eight, nine years ago, in that ballpark. And, as part of that trip, we got to go to the Marine Corps building where they house the music. The

rehearsal areas and the library, it just, incredible holdings, just amazing. And we have a repository like that, not quite as great, but a repository of similar materials here. And I'm just in awe of what the [28:00] holdings are. Aside from the photographs that everybody sees, just, the music and the amount of music is incredible.

KR: There's things like, simple as they are, the little signs that people, they played a number that has some cardboard and [carry it through?]. Anyone outside of this area, this room, would not know what those were. I certainly didn't know until Ron explained to us what they were. That's a whole chapter of history of how people played in kind of...

SWH: Yeah, "The Kid Come Through," you know, name of the encore. And that...

KR: Every little piece, though, has a story. Just, like I said, peeling back another layer. This onion is very big.

SWH: (laughs) Wait till you interview some more people, it's going to get peeled back even more.

KR: And then, as each person is talking, I'm thinking, "Oh, now I'm sort of seeing some themes, you know, coming [29:00] here," just like... And we help the students see them as well so [you don't have?] to point them out.

SFM: At least one of the students who's taking the class we know is very involved in the music of Muhlenberg. So right, yes.

KR: So what we're looking for, at least for this coming semester, is that they will do an oral history, at least one, which some of what we've just done. They will also have to do a digital story, some aspect of the band, and have a public poster session too so that they can look and see, you know, what this experience has been like, getting to know the band and actually doing an oral history. Of course, we have to do all the front work like teach them how to do interview, you know, basic stuff like that.

SWH: "So, what do you think?" (laughs) It's not a leading question.

KR: "Don't give me the yes or no questions. It's not in the..." (laughs) [30:00] Which we do sometimes.

SWH: "Do you like playing in the band?" "Yes." (laughs)

KR: "How long?" "Two years."

SFM: "OK, thank you very much, we're done."

AD: We should edit out the point where we start talking trash about [Susan?]. (laughs)

SWH: (laughs)

KR: Thank you.

AD: And cut. (laughs)

KR: Back that up a little bit.

SWH: They're not going to... the band is their specific assignment, but they're not going to know -- it's training ground for them to be able to go and do other type of documentaries as well.

KR: Right. And there's a lot of skill building, and several -- the aspects of the field work, and also the field work in the archives and doing documentary. You know, before it's -- all kinds of things.

SFM: When we do the base of the first, early level work, earlier level class documentary research, [31:00] that's in-house, and they're learning a lot more of the technology.

KR: A lot of the ethics.

SFM: And they learn the archives. When we do it, they learn the archives, too. Not every section of doc research does, but more and more of them do now. So this is a chance for them to be out and to have, you know, the oral history part is not really a component of the earlier one.

SWH: So the doc research is the first course that somebody would take toward that?

SFM: Yes. It's a prerequisite to field work.

SWH: That makes sense, because if you don't understand the basics, you're not going to be able to do what comes along. It's progressive.

KR: Right, so they understand the tradition, at least, you know, the American tradition of doing documentary work, ethics, copyright issues, you know, all that sort of stuff that -- I'd say we introduce them and try and hold their feet to the fire for that.

SFM: Because we [let them?].

SWH: Copyright is challenging.

AD: And we don't want them to go to jail and so on. (laughs)

KR: Well, no, but I have to say that there are students that come [32:00] back after they've been out for a few years, can still talk about, you know, the points where they've had to make a decision that put them in a little bit of an ethical quandary. But, you know, I think they get a good grounding in our department. That's...

SWH: The church that I serve, there's a man -- every year, the budget comes up, and we pay copyright fees to several different places. "Do we really need to do this?" And one year, I just looked at him and I said, "Yes, we do. People deserve to get paid for their work. And if we don't do it, it's theft."

KR: And you can always [pose that], "It's a moral issue as well." (laughs)

SWH: And, to me, theft is a moral issue as well as a criminal issue, and he just looked stunned. Like, "You mean, we just can't copy this?" "No, we can't." [33:00]

SFM: "You mean, every time I've downloaded a picture from the Internet, that wasn't OK?" So, yeah.

SWH: There are things that are in public domain, that's fine. But if it's not in public domain... I mean, it's like "Happy Birthday" just became public domain. Summy-Birchard's copyright finally expired. (laughs)

KR: Every year we have one or two students that have kind of pushed the envelope and we've said, "You just can't do this. You're going to have to find some other music." "It's not fair!" It's not about being fair.

SWH: It's about being ethical.

AD: It is fair for us to not let you do it. (laughs)

SWH: It's appropriate for us not to let you do it.

KR: As much as you'd like to just be chummy, sometimes I have to... Right?

AD: Yeah.

KR: We should not get in front of the camera.

AD: It's OK. All this is going to get cut out.

SWH: Good. That's excellent. Thank you.

KR: Thank you. Let me just get this --

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