Operetta Performance at
Ramsey Junior High in Minneapolis:
1932–1966

Keitha Lucas Hamann
University of Minnesota

As we enter the twenty-first century, middle-level music education (grades six through eight or nine) remains in turmoil regarding appropriate curricular offerings for young adolescents. Should music offerings be primarily performance-oriented? Should music be required of every student? What level of performance should be expected of young adolescents? How is musical experience balanced with the developmental needs of students? Are there musical experiences outside of large-group performance experiences that would attract more students to musical learning? As the profession struggles with these issues, it is important to look back at nearly a century of experience with middle-level education for models of excellence to determine the factors that contributed to their success.

One such model was the operetta performance tradition at Ramsey Junior High School in Minneapolis, due in part to the large number of operettas presented, the commitment of two teachers to giving students abundant vocal performance opportunities at the junior high level, and the perceived success of the operetta performances by community members. Between 1932 and 1966, students at Ramsey presented more than sixty-seven operettas in addition to regular choral, oratorio, and cantata performances. The operettas were full-scale productions with lighting, scenery, and costumes, and in the early years it was not unusual for the students to present four operettas in one academic year. Quotes from the editorial staff of the student newspaper, the Ramsey Record, demonstrate the perceived quality of the operetta productions: “The operetta was very much liked by the students, teachers, and parents, and congratulations are given to all those who helped make the performance a splendid success.”1 “The success of the performance was evident as wave after wave of applause swept over the audience as the curtain closed.”2 This paper describes the development of the operetta performance tradition at Ramsey and examines the people and conditions that contributed to its success.

1. Ramsey Record (Ramsey Junior High School student newspaper), 14 December 1944. Minnesota Historical Society, State Archives.
2. Ramsey Record, 8 June 1962.
Background

To fully appreciate the conditions necessary for the operetta program at Ramsey Junior High School to thrive, it is important to examine the historical environment in which the school opened. Especially important are a brief history of the Minneapolis public schools, the development of the junior high school movement in the United States, and the implementation of the junior high school system in the Minneapolis public schools.

A Brief History of the Minneapolis Public Schools

The first educational institution in Minneapolis was for children from Fort Snelling and the Mdewakanton Dakota and opened on the shores of Lake Harriet in 1834, about twenty years before Minneapolis was incorporated in 1854. As more settlers moved into the area educational opportunities continued to develop. By 1874 there were six school buildings in Minneapolis with an enrollment of 2,907 pupils, and four school buildings in St. Anthony (part of Minneapolis since 1872) with an enrollment of 900 students. The first school board met in 1860 in the village of St. Anthony. In 1878, legislation merged the two school boards of Minneapolis and St. Anthony into one Board of Education to manage all of the public schools in Minneapolis. Through the early-twentieth century Minneapolis and its schools continued to grow, and by 1933 the city served more than 85,000 students in its school system.

Development of the Junior High School Movement in the United States

The junior high school movement in the United States traces its history back to 1872 when the Kalamazoo Decision by the Michigan State Supreme Court first mandated tax-supported secondary education. Secondary education evolved unevenly over the next twenty years, with inconsistent requirements among school systems. In the early 1890s, the National Education Association (NEA) Committee of Ten recommended standardization of the high school curriculum to prepare students for college entrance, and high school evolved into a six-year program. However, there were problems inherent in the six-year plan as younger students were considered too "immature" for the studies required, and many students left school altogether.


To address these problems, the junior high school was introduced in 1909 in Columbus, Ohio, and in 1910 in Berkeley, California. Students in grades seven—nine were housed in buildings separately from their older peers so that these new schools could focus on the specialized needs of younger adolescents. In 1918 the NEA issued a report titled *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, in which the three-year junior high school was recommended and its functions were clearly delineated from the functions of the senior high school. To be effective the junior high school needed to provide for:

1. a separately housed school containing grades seven, eight, and nine
2. the needs, interests, and abilities of young adolescents
3. prevocational and vocational training and career exploration
4. educational and vocational guidance
5. departmentalization of subject matter

While some attempts were made to differentiate between the curricula of junior and senior high schools, junior high schools in the early years continued to focus on content mastery with teachers specialized into departments, thus making junior high education virtually indistinguishable from that of the high schools.

Implementation of the Junior High School Organization in the Minneapolis Public Schools

In 1917 the Minneapolis Board of Education joined the junior high movement with the opening of three junior high schools: Seward, Bremer, and Franklin. In the ten years between 1922 and 1932, the Minneapolis school system experienced a building boom during which most of the district’s junior high schools were built. The junior high schools all had a standard floor plan, which reduced costs for the school district:

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7. While grades seven—nine are specifically listed in the NEA report, in reality a number of grade configurations developed under the label “junior high.”


The standard junior high school building contains, in addition to the usual classrooms, which are somewhat larger than common, certain features which may vary from the usual. On the first floor is an administration suite which unifies functionally and logically the work of the principal, the visiting teacher, the school counselor, the school nurse, and the clerical force. The geography and general science rooms incorporate special conveniences for the teaching of these two subjects. The music room is conveniently placed near the stage of the auditorium so that glee clubs, orchestras, and bands may use the auditorium for practice.12

By 1938–39, there were twelve junior high schools in Minneapolis, the most populous of which was Ramsey Junior High.13

The first curriculum for Minneapolis junior high schools was approved by the Board of Education on May 9, 1916. Requirements were based on a school day consisting of seven 45-minute periods per day, or thirty-five periods per week. Rather than being listed in periods per day, requirements were listed in periods per week as follows:

- English—six
- Mathematics—four
- Geography (grade seven) or History (grade eight)—four
- Freehand drawing—two
- Vocal music—two
- Physical training—two
- Hygiene—one
- Home Economics or Manual Training and Mechanical Drawing—three

Electives included English, language, shop, agriculture, home economics, commercial (business), and printing.14

The junior high school curriculum also allotted approximately one period a day for extra-curricular activities (also called a “club” period):

Thus, in one school we find those children particularly interested in physical education in clubs devoted to athletic stunts or dancing; those interested in industrial arts in handcraft [sic] clubs of various types, such as woodwork, sewing, electric repair, or art metal. Those who find satisfaction in the fine arts are in clay modeling, band, orchestra, or glee clubs; those who wish additional experience in English or in the field of

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12. Ibid.
science join clubs in dramatics, debate, writing for the school paper or for the school magazine, or participate in nature study clubs of various types.15

Originally begun as “clubs,” these “Personal Interest Activities” became part of the curriculum as “Creative Arts Courses” in 1939.

The remarkable variety of interests that children have between the ages of 13 and 17 has been considered by school people in many ways. How to guide these energetic, and so often wholesome, interests so as to insure the continuous growth of the interest, based on skill and information, is a challenge. For some time, it was thought wise to organise [sic] a large variety of clubs as a part of school life. These clubs met intermittently and, in some classes, were sponsored by teachers who felt their program already crowded. The clubs grew in number and popularity. It was, however, difficult to guide the educational purposes of clubs and difficult at times to justify their existence under the sporadic [sic] arrangement that was present as long as these club activities were considered outside of the “regular” school program.

The position taken by the twelve Minneapolis junior high schools was this: We wish to keep all that is valuable in the best club programs; but we believe these activities, if they are to be encouraged at all, should be considered as an important part of the school program, equal in prestige to other activities. Only in this way can teachers direct these interests toward worthy educational goals, and can pupils feel they are growing in their interest, skills, and self-direction.16

The development of Personal Interest Activities was lauded by superintendents of other large school districts, such as Seattle, for a progressive contribution to education.17

An Overview of Music in the Minneapolis Public Schools

Beginning in 1910, while the Minneapolis schools were growing rapidly, the music department also experienced a period of change that placed its program at the very top among school districts in the United States. New requirements for elementary music classes, the inclusion of instrumental lessons in the


elementary music curriculum, and the expansion of performance classes in instrumental and vocal music made Minneapolis a model for progressive music education.

The supervisor of music in the Minneapolis schools was T. P. Giddings, one of the founding members of the Music Supervisors National Conference, which is known today as MENC: The National Association for Music Education. Recognized nationwide for his progressive ideas and commitment to music literacy, Giddings was a prolific author of articles and method books. He accepted the position as music supervisor in 1910 and his tenure lasted thirty-two years. He retired in 1942, having had a profound impact on music in the Minneapolis school system. His most important contribution was the development of a music curriculum in which elementary classroom teachers taught children to read music. Giddings’s system was so successful that by the time students reached sixth grade they were reading music at a twelfth-grade level, based on results from the Kwalwasser-Ruch achievement tests. There is no doubt that the success of the junior high schools in developing musical programs was in large part due to this early focus on music reading:

The teaching of music in Minneapolis is based upon the belief that appreciation must be prefaced by an understanding of music as a means of expression and that this comes best through the development of skills. In the elementary grades, emphasis is placed upon developing the ability to read and interpret music correctly, easily, and quickly and to secure beautiful musical effects. Children are taught early to develop discrimination in regard to tone quality and to hear harmony clearly.

When the Minneapolis junior high schools opened in 1917, instrumental music in American schools was experiencing a long period of growth. In 1915 the school board had approved a request from Giddings to allow voluntary classes for beginners in instrumental music—the pupils paying the cost of instruction. By 1933, all junior and senior high schools had active bands and orchestras.

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19. See www.public.asu.edu/~aajth/history/giddings-t.p/t.p.giddings.html#publication for a comprehensive listing of Giddings’s publications.
20. McDermid discusses the results of two standardized tests—the Seashore Measures of Musical Talent and the Kwalwasser-Ruch achievement tests—that were administered to Minneapolis Public School sixth-grade students in 1928. McDermid, “Thaddeus P. Giddings,” 162–172.
Instrumental music is taught through instrument classes, bands, and orchestras. There are seventy-five orchestras varying in size from ten members to ninety-six members in the elementary schools. Each junior and senior high school has its bands and orchestras, and some of these have reached symphonic size and instrumentation. They are directed by teachers trained in orchestral work. Special teachers handle classes of pupils learning string and wind instruments.  

Vocal music was an important part of the curricular offerings at all the Minneapolis junior high schools and was required for all students for two periods per week in the seventh and eighth grades. A large number of glee clubs and choruses also developed as extra-curricular offerings. A small fee was sometimes charged for these glee clubs as the Board of Education did not supply funding for music for them. Rules and materials for the glee clubs were strictly defined in the music curriculum:

Glee Clubs for both boys and girls may be formed in the junior high schools. These clubs may have unlimited membership and the members may meet two periods per week in school time. The work in a glee club may take the place of the regular chorus work.

The parts should balance as to tone. With the girls, equal numbers on the parts will usually give good balance. This rule will not work with boys. The teacher should follow the suggestions given in the preface of the second volume of The Chorus Book for Boys.

Any music arranged for women’s voices can be sung by girls’ glee clubs. Very little of the music arranged for men’s voices can be used by the junior high boys’ glee clubs. Five books are now available for these boys’ glee clubs.

One common activity for glee clubs was the performance of operettas. In fact, several other junior high schools in Minneapolis performed operettas a few

27. Courses of Study, 37.
28. Although no reference for this book was found in the available historical materials, this most likely refers to The Chorus Book for Boys, A Selection of Favorite Compositions, compiled and arranged or composed by Ella M. Probat and J. Victor Bergquist, with foreword by T. P. Giddings (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., ca. 1922).
29. Courses of Study, 37.
years before Ramsey Junior High School opened. Lincoln Junior High School singers performed *Love Pirates of Hawaii* in fall 1926,\(^30\) the Bryant Junior High School girls' glee club presented *My Spanish Sweetheart* in fall 1928,\(^31\) and the Nokomis Junior High School boys' glee club gave a performance of *Uncle Sam's Boys in Camp* in fall 1931.\(^32\) A centralized library of operettas was kept in the Board of Education library, and operettas were available at the Minneapolis Public Library as well.\(^33\) These operetta performances were not without controversy, however, as evidenced in this March 28, 1924, letter from Superintendent W. F. Webster to Music Supervisor Giddings:

In talking with the supervisors not very long ago I got the information that in the junior high schools specially, and possibly in the senior high schools, much time was being taken in the training of children for operettas and operas. I know in some places this is being done without any interruption of the children's program; but in other places this certainly is not true. I have talked with two principals since, and they both have said that the time of children is taken.

Another thing which should be said is that children in junior high schools have not yet learned to keep their even poise when a thing of this kind is going on; and I am sure that school work is suffering because of it.

It would seem to me better to limit the number of musical entertainments which require extra practice. We are doing everything we can to let children alone and let them study; and certainly inside the school administration we should be the first to set the example of leaving the children alone. I shall be very glad to talk with you about this.\(^34\)

Despite the superintendent's protest, operetta performances continued and the number of performances increased as new schools opened.

The early-twentieth century was an important period for growth in music education, especially in the city of Minneapolis. Music instruction was required

\(^{30}\) *Lincoln Life* (Minneapolis school newspaper), 15 October 1926. Minnesota Historical Society, State Archives.

\(^{31}\) *Bryant Times* (Minneapolis school newspaper), 22 November 1928. Minnesota Historical Society, State Archives.

\(^{32}\) *Nokomis Wi Ca Ho* (Minneapolis school newspaper) 29 October 1931. Minnesota Historical Society, State Archives.

\(^{33}\) *Courses of Study*, 1.

through eighth grade for every student, and performance opportunities in band, orchestra, and chorus were available in the secondary schools. The rapid building of junior high schools provided adolescents with many opportunities for musical expression, and it seemed that each junior high school took advantage of the available opportunities in a slightly different way.

Music at Ramsey Junior High School

On June 30, 1930, the Minneapolis Board of Education approved names for eight schools, among which was Alexander Ramsey Junior High School. On March 4, 1931, the school board authorized the business department to advertise for bids for the building of Ramsey Junior High, and in January 1932 the school opened its doors.

Music Opportunities at Ramsey

The school had been open for only six weeks when the first “clubs” were announced. It is apparent from an announcement in the student newspaper that there was a dramatic increase in the number of clubs because more students than originally expected were interested in the available club activities:

Forty-Five Clubs Begin Work

Thursday March 10, the clubs of Ramsey junior high were organized after six weeks of hoping. The first announcement said there were to be twelve clubs. Later it was changed to thirty. The organizing continued on Friday. Six dramatic clubs, three public speaking clubs, one on puppetry, one on tumbling, one athletic, two orchestra, one band, glee club, art, clay modeling, and sculpture are among those organized.

Vocal music clubs that developed over time included Seventh-Grade Glee Club, Girls’ Glee Club, Boys’ Glee Club, A Cappella Choir, and Madrigals, thus expanding the opportunities for students to perform vocally. The clubs at Ramsey Junior High (RJH) also provided a wide variety of offerings for instrumentalists, including Orchestra (which had sixty-three players in 1933), Band (seventy-five members in 1933), and Drum and Bugle Corps. In order to fulfill the need for instrumentalists a Beginners Band was started in 1934:

35. Board of Education Minutes, 30 June 1931.
36. Board of Education Minutes, 4 March 1931.
38. Ramsey Record, 24 October 1933.
The Beginners Band under the direction of Miss Amy Molstad is a new club at Ramsey, organized this semester. It has a membership of thirty-one pupils. ... This group is the largest of its kind in the city. Mr. Giddings is much interested in them and said they are making "marvelous progress."

After only five and one half weeks of practicing, they were asked by Mr. Giddings to appear before the music section of the M. E. A. [Minnesota Education Association]. Favorable comments were made regarding this demonstration.40

Ramsey's musical program was so strong that two of its students achieved rare honors for performance. In 1934 violinist Jeanette Muralt won the honor of playing as a soloist with the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra for a Young People's Concert.41 Muralt was the only junior high school student in the competition. In 1945 sixteen-year-old Robert Marcellus signed a contract to play second clarinet in the National Symphony Orchestra, directed by Dr. Hans Kindler.42

Musical life at R[J]H was not limited to student activities and performances. Starting with Chester Gould's Banjo Band in November 1932,43 a wide variety of musical acts stopped at Ramsey, including The King Quartet,44 and Emmanuel Mansfield.45 Other performers included Italian lyric tenor Giovanni Sperandio, Minneapolis Symphony harpist Henry Wilson, and noted American tenor Pruth McFarlin, who all appeared at Ramsey in the fall of 1945.46 The Minneapolis Symphony played a series of Young People's Concerts each year, sometimes in the schools but most often presented at a central location such as Northrop Auditorium on the University of Minnesota campus.

**Operettas at Ramsey Junior High**

**A Brief History of Operetta**

Operettas seemed to fit well in the junior high music curriculum because of their short length and interesting history. Operetta is a diminutive of opera, so it literally means "little opera." The original operetta form was a one-act opera, although many operettas extended beyond one act. The first professional operetta productions began in France with *La Chalet*, written in 1834 by

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40. *Ramsey Record*, 4 December 1934.
42. *Ramsey Record*, 30 April 1945.
44. *Ramsey Record*, 14 February 1940.
45. *Ramsey Record*, 19 October 1944.
Adolphe Adam. Operettas were productions that were “of the people for the people.” Chorus numbers were common in operettas, giving many junior high singers the opportunity to participate in the production. Universal appeal to “common people” was an essential quality of this genre, which allowed operettas to be accessible to students:

The first operetta written for both children performers and audience was Hänsel und Gretel by Engelbert Humperdinck. Its first production was in 1893 in Weimar, Germany. This was a turning point in the development of operettas for the schools because it paved the way for others to write operettas for youth.

The death of the operetta occurred with the development of musical theater and musical comedies. Audiences no longer seemed to crave the fairy tale, Cinderella-like stories that operettas once posed.

**Leadership**

The vocal music teachers at Ramsey Junior High School were Lois Powell and Agnes Smith. These women worked together for thirty years and were responsible for almost all of the operetta productions at RJH up to 1966. Their dedication and training was key to the success of these operettas.

Lois Powell was born in White Rock, South Dakota, on September 4, 1897, and moved to Minneapolis with her family in 1918. She traveled to Oberlin Conservatory to study music before returning to graduate from the University of Minnesota. She taught in the Wayzata and Gilbert, Minnesota, schools before she began her Minneapolis teaching career. Powell’s joy in teaching music was especially evident in a 1964 interview with Jaqueline Andre of the Minneapolis Tribune. “If I’d start over again, I’d be a teacher and I’d teach music,” she was quoted as saying. In the spring of 1965, Powell was one of 200 teachers nominated for “Minnesota Teacher of the Year,” and she was one of thirteen finalists interviewed by the judges. Though she did not win the award, she received a plaque indicating her place on the Honor Roll.


Unfortunately, no information has yet been found on the life of Agnes Smith, other than that which has been obtained from her students and the writers of the Ramsey Record. Articles and editorials in the student newspaper contribute important insights into the zest Smith had for teaching, and the respect students had for her. When interviewed regarding a performance of H.M.S. Pinafore, Miss Smith said, “We expect to have every child at least get an introduction to Gilbert and Sullivan through this operetta, because they [Gilbert and Sullivan] are the outstanding collaborators in opera.”

When asked what she thought about the operetta The Mikado, Smith replied, “Although the weather has been bad, thus shortening the number of practices, I expect this operetta to turn out equally as well as the former Gilbert and Sullivan operettas.” When the A Cappella Choir was formed, the newspaper read, “The members of the Ramsey Record and the entire school send their congratulation[s] to Miss Smith on behalf of the work that she has done thus far and hope that it [sic] will keep on its [sic] fine work.”

It is apparent from these quotes that Smith was committed to challenging her students with difficult music and creating new opportunities for them to have musical experiences. In turn the students appreciated her efforts and rose to the challenges she presented.

In 1957, when Ramsey Junior High School celebrated its Silver Anniversary, Smith and Powell were among the honorees. A photograph of the two directors appeared on the first page of the student newspaper along with this tribute:

**Ramsey Pays Tribute to ‘Pioneer’ Staff Members**

Miss Powell, chorus, got her greatest thrill from presenting the operetta, “Briar Rose.” She is proud to say that the Madrigals group is the only one of its kind in the United States. She says today’s students are more aggressive. Miss Smith, music, was very thrilled with teaching in a brand new school and was also thrilled with the principal and teachers. Miss Smith hopes she will never lose her zest for travel and education.

**First Performances**

Due to the popularity of the operetta genre, it was not at all surprising that the Ramsey Glee Club would choose to present an operetta in the first semester that the school was open. The first operetta to be performed at Ramsey Junior High was Tulip Time, which was double-cast and presented on May 26 and 27,

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52. *Ramsey Record*, 22 November 1944.
55. *Ramsey Record*, 15 October 1957.
1932, by a cast of ten and a chorus of sixty. The leads in the play were chosen by popular vote after tryouts and the cast practiced after school and on Saturday mornings. Straws were drawn to determine which of the two casts would perform on which date. Lois Powell supervised the production, assisted by Marguerite Johnson. The Ramsey orchestra, directed by Florence Harper, accompanied the first performance, and two violinists, Jeanette Muralt and Marjory Thacker, played between acts.

In the fall semester of Ramsey's second year (1932), Agnes Smith organized the Seventh-Grade Glee Club. For their first operetta, the younger singers chose *The Magi's Gift*. The books arrived in early November, and tryouts for the leads were held shortly thereafter. The performance was held in the school auditorium on December 13, 1932, assisted by the seventh-grade Dancing and Dramatic Clubs and the Ramsey Orchestra. In addition to the eighty-five singers in the Choral Club, there were at the performance "twenty-six carol singers, eight musicians, six Christmas trees, six peasants, fifteen angels, and eighteen dancers."

Another important first occurred in the fall of 1933 when the Ninth-Grade Glee Club chose *The Spinster Detective* for their operetta. This production's music was written by Bill Stokes, a June 1933 Ramsey graduate, and the lyrics for all of the songs in the operetta were written by two of his classmates, Janice Todd and Maria Hale. Stokes also directed his operetta, assisted by Lois Powell as musical director and May Seavey as dialogue director. *The Spinster Detective* was presented in a matinee performance on January 31, 1934. Music Supervisor T. P. Giddings attended the performance and remarked, "The play was strangely different, having a dramatic ending. The music had a touch of originality." The school newspaper noted, "This is the first time that a boy of junior high school age has attempted a project of this type and completed it so successfully."

Over the next thirty years, the Ramsey glee clubs and choruses gave more than sixty-seven operetta performances. The busiest school years for these performers were 1932–33, 1935–36, 1939–40, 1944–45, and 1950–51, years in which four different operettas were presented by the energetic singers. The number of performances per year gradually tapered off to an average of two per year in the 1950s. In the first five years of the 1960s only one operetta was produced each year. Between 1932 and 1966, thirty-seven different operettas

56. *Ramsey Record*, 22 April 1932; 8 April 1932; and 10 May 1932.
60. Ibid.
were produced, with twelve performed more than once. Seven operettas were performed three or more times (see Table 1). During this period, the students and music instructors were kept very busy. Not only were they performing regularly, but they sometimes took the time to make presentations at other schools. For example, *Shooting Stars*, by Don Wilson, was presented at the Michael Dowling School in January 1945. In this creative production, the boys' parts were taken by girls in the choir.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operetta</th>
<th>Librettist and Composer</th>
<th>Times/Years Performed</th>
<th>Performed Years</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The Count and the Coed</em></td>
<td>O'Hara and Morgan</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1939, 1942, 1945, 1955</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>A Waltz Dream (Waltzertraum)</em></td>
<td>Dörmann and Straus</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1953, 1958, 1962</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Blow Me Down</em></td>
<td>Benedict and Crane</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1943, 1949, 1952</td>
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<td><em>Mikado</em></td>
<td>Gilbert and Sullivan</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1935, 1940, 1957</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>The Belle of Bagdad</em></td>
<td>Johnson and Morgan</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1939, 1953, 1964</td>
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</table>

The only operetta over this thirty-five-year period that was directed by someone other than Lois Powell or Agnes Smith was *Cinderella*, which was directed by Mr. Wood in 1957. The Girls' Glee Club was responsible for this production, so creativity was needed when costuming and casting the male parts. Even the accompaniment included a creative twist:

The gentlemen of the ball consisted of some of the girls effectively costumed in Washburn's band uniforms while the Lord Chamberlain was outfitted in a band uniform from one of our neighbors, Southwest High. A few of the costumes were from past operettas. Cinderella, the Fairy Godmother, Stepmother, and the Stepsisters were all clothed in very striking costumes.

Instead of having the usual full orchestra the cast was accompanied by an organ, a flute, a piano, two trumpets, and a xylophone which made a very different and interesting arrangement.”

Operetta performances were collaborative efforts at RJH. Many different clubs and groups participated in the variety of elements that were necessary for a successful operetta production. For the February 1933 performance of *The Boxin’s Bride*, the ninth-grade art class worked on the scenery, and the seventh-grade dancing club was responsible for the dances. Florence Harper and the orchestra accompanied the production and three other teachers took care of the programs. Stella Hillgren, one of the history teachers, was a regular collaborator in operetta productions. She “coached the dramatics” of many operettas through the years, including the December 1, 1944, performance of Gilbert and Sullivan’s *HMS Pinafore*.

**Changing Times**

Powell founded the Madrigals in 1948, and for a few years, her commitment to the development of the new group seemed to slow down her direction of operettas. The Madrigals was a small group—less than twenty students—who performed a cappella works such as “Early One Morning,” “In These Delightful Pleasant Groves,” “The Silver Swan,” and “When Allen-A-Dale Went A-Hunting.” Among the venues at which the Madrigals performed were other junior high schools in the school district, including Baxter and Phillips, and the National Music Convention in Minneapolis on March 19, 1963. During one very busy period in December 1963, the Madrigals performed for the Women’s Rotarians, the College Women’s Club, and the Thursday Club in St. Paul. In a 1963 interview, eighth-grader Cliff Haloverson revealed his feelings about being a member of the Madrigals: “It is a challenge, and a great honor to be in. To be a Madrigal can be and is a great amount of fun. This class gives me an opportunity to sing with other people.” In 1963 Fred Fox, a composer who was part of the Ford Foundation Young Composers’ Project, wrote three pieces and dedicated them to the Ramsey Madrigals: “The Look,” with words by Sara Teasdale; “Who Master is in Music’s Art,” with words by James Hilton;

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64. Ibid.
and "It Pays," with words by Arnold Bennett. The Madrigals performed twice on television; their first performance was on May 21, 1951, and the second occurred on December 4, 1965.

In spring 1964 the Ramsey Chorus and Madrigals performed *Belle of Bagdad*, which was billed as Miss Powell's fiftieth operetta. *Belle* was composed in 1929 by Geoffrey Morgan with librettist Frederick Johnson, and is a fairly typical operetta of the time.71 The operetta is in two acts and contains marches, waltzes, and big production numbers. Voice parts were written in ranges that were easily sung, and the plot included love stories and shenanigans with a happy ending.

The story is based on a movie company who [sic] sends some scouts to Bagdad where it was reported that there was a beautiful girl. When the company arrives to find the girl, difficulties begin. The natives are suspicious and think the movie company has guns hidden in their cameras. The natives lock the city gate so the company cannot get out. They, however, finally succeed in finding a way.72

The end of the operetta era at Ramsey Junior High School began at the close of the 1962 school year when Agnes Smith retired. Lois Powell retired four years later at the end of the 1966 school year. Unfortunately, the 1967–1974 files of the *Ramsey Record* are missing, so the date of the last operetta performance cannot be pinpointed, but in 1974 the performance focus for the year was the musical *Once Upon a Mattress*.

**Analysis**

**Why Were Operetta Performances at Ramsey So Successful?**

Thirty-four years is a long time to sustain yearly operetta programs in one school, especially when the period from 1932 to 1966 included the Great Depression, World War II, and the Korean War. Operettas are complex productions that require many resources, so how was Ramsey Junior High School able to sustain this performance tradition for so long?

First and foremost was the commitment of the directors. Powell and Smith worked together for thirty years, and a great deal of teamwork was involved in making these productions successful. They shared resources, such as the operettas both conductors performed with their groups. Their training undoubtedly contributed to the success of these teachers. Although Smith's level of training is unknown, Powell attended Oberlin Conservatory as a music major

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71. Morgan wrote a number of the operettas that were performed by school choirs, including *The Count and the Cossack*, which was part of the Ramsey repertoire.

and completed her education at the University of Minnesota. It is also apparent from more than twenty years' worth of articles about the Ramsey Junior High music program that the students enjoyed working with Smith and Powell, and the directors were passionate about their commitment to the musical successes of their students. If such a streak of performances of musicals and operettas were to occur again, one key ingredient for success would have to be the commitment and training of the director(s).

Second, collaboration and enthusiasm across programs and clubs in Ramsey Junior High School contributed to the long-term success of the operetta productions. Stella Hillgren's dramatic coaching was one such collaboration that continued throughout most of the era, and other clubs, groups, and classes participated by dancing, building sets, making costumes, marketing, management, and painting. These collaborations were essential to maintaining the quality and rate of operetta production at RJH over such a long period of time, and the operettas gave the students the opportunity to develop useful skills as well.

The third essential ingredient contributing to the success of operetta performance at Ramsey Junior High was the commitment to the development of music reading skills in the elementary schools. While Supervisor Giddings's methods were strict, he was successful in guiding elementary classroom teachers to teach young students to read music. By the time students were in sixth grade they were reading music at a twelfth-grade level. Therefore, students entering seventh grade had the ability to quickly learn the complex music in operettas. Given that the Ramsey "clubs" did not always meet every day, it was essential that students learn the music quickly. Without the emphasis on teaching music reading in the elementary classrooms, the successful string of operetta performances in the junior high would most likely have been impossible.

Finally, the rich musical environment in the Minneapolis public schools contributed to operetta performance success. Student orchestras accompanied each of the operetta productions. Instrumentalists played between acts, and many of the singers who performed were also members of instrumental groups in the schools. Students were given many different opportunities to explore their own interests in music, and they were not forced to limit themselves to only one form of musical expression. While students had many opportunities to explore "Personal Interest Activities" outside of music, the plethora of choices was not a limitation. Rather, student involvement seemed to increase as students were given more opportunity to choose.

There are other factors that also undoubtedly contributed to the successful operetta era at Ramsey. During this period operettas were performed frequently at high schools and junior high schools in the United States, so materials were available, as were good role models and experienced teachers. The fact that all Minneapolis public school students were required to take vocal music in
seventh and eighth grade may also have played a part in supporting operetta performances, as these children were comfortable using their voices and boys were encouraged to continue singing through their voice change. Finally, the contributions of the music supervisors should not be underestimated. T. P. Giddings and his successors proved adept at finding resources to support the music programs, and ran interference with other administrators when complaints were made. This kind of administrative support allowed teachers to focus on the students and the performances.

The retirement of directors Lois Powell and Agnes Smith was probably the most critical factor that led to the decline of the operetta performance era at Ramsey Junior High School. Although personnel changes often bring about programmatic changes, the increased popularity of the musical, changing demographics of the city and its school system, and changes in the way that elementary music was taught were other factors that contributed to the end of the operetta era.

Musicals and operettas are still performed at the middle school and junior high school level. Although it is difficult to “disprove the negative,” in this author's research and experience, the number of performances that were presented each year over a sustained period of time at Ramsey Junior High is a goal that is rarely achieved in middle-level music education today. The long streak of operetta performances at Ramsey can provide important insights into the musical culture that existed during the early years of middle-level education, insights that should not be ignored as music educators continue to define and develop programs for young adolescents in the twenty-first century.