

Howard S. Swan
1906 - 1995
PROFESSOR OF MUSIC, EMERITUS

A.B., Pomona College; A.M., Education, Claremont Graduate School, June,
1941
Honorary degrees, D.M., Pomona College, June, 1959; LL.D., Occidental
College, June 4, 1986
California State University, Fullerton From September 1, 1972 To June 1, 1977
Birth: March 29, 1906; Death: September 18, 1995

Howard Swan was born on March 29, 1906, in Denver, Colorado. In 1913 he came to Hollywood, California. His family all loved to sing, and their musical life centered on church. In elementary school Howard began to study violin and in high school he joined the choir. In 1923 he enrolled at Pomona College, where he majored in history and sang oratorios. (His father had declared, "you don't want to be a poor musician all your life!") While he was working on his teaching credential, the director of the Glee Club took a sabbatical, and Howard filled in. Thus began an illustrious conducting career. After graduation he made a name for himself as a tenor in LA's churches and synagogues, and in the new talking movies.

Howard began teaching Social Studies at Eagle Rock High School in 1929 - Robert Shaw was his student there. Soon thereafter he was invited to sing in a professional quartet that performed "everything that was new and exciting and all that was good and old," and he discovered a world of choral literature unknown to most conductors of the day. He was so captivated by this experience that he formed an a-cappella choir at the high school. In the following years, he conducted at Immanuel Church and Highland Park Presbyterian Church and became the first conductor of the University Glee Club of Los Angeles.

His association with Occidental College, his home until his "first retirement" in 1971, began in 1933, when his church choir sang at Commencement. This led to an invitation to take over the men's and women's Glee Clubs while he continued to teach at the high school. Four years later the College hired him full time.

Tragedy struck the same year that opportunity knocked at Occidental, when one of Howard's vocal cords became paralyzed. With the help of John Finley Williamson, he regained a weak falsetto, which remained his voice until 1969, when Teflon injections gave him greater strength and a lower speaking pitch. In compensation, he mastered the arts of imagery and persuasive speech, which gave him a greater power of communication than a mere voice ever could.

Robert Shaw once wrote without exaggeration that Howard's thirty-seven years at Occidental quite possibly "witnessed the most distinguished and varied choral repertoire at the highest levels of performance in American

collegiate musical history." Yet, his greatest achievement was not in performance, but in teaching. His choirs and summer classes drew students from around the country, who carried his gospel far and wide. He traveled ever more frequently, giving seminars, adjudicating, and directing honor choirs. Along with a handful of other greats of his generation, he transformed choral music and conducting into a serious art and profession.

Mandatory retirement forced Howard to leave Occidental in 1971, far before he was ready to go. A year later, David Thorsen of California State University, Fullerton, coaxed him out of retirement to teach at CSUF. Once again, the students followed, and another generation was touched by his magic. At CSUF Howard taught choral conducting and choral literature. He also served as Coordinator of the departments' new graduate program, doubling its size nearly overnight. Of course, most of the new students came to study with him. Howard also conducted the University Chamber Singers and a community chorale organized for him by David Thorsen. Monday nights in PA 118 were magical times, because all the assembled singers knew they were working with a master in his last productive years - or so they thought. Howard was once again forced by law into his "second retirement" in 1977. UC Irvine saw the opportunity to snap him up, and that they did. Howard taught part time in the graduate program there until the late 1980s. Despite his age, he continued to direct honor choirs around the country, travel, and teach, teach, teach. He even started a choir of the residents of Regents Point, the retirement community where he resided for the last fifteen inguished and varied choral repertoire at the highest levels of performance in American collegiate musical history." Yet, his greatest achievement was not in performance, but in teaching. His choirs and summer classes drew students from around the country, who carried his gospel far and wide. He traveled ever more frequently, giving seminars, adjudicating, and directing honor choirs. Along with a handful of other greats of his generation, he transformed choral music and conducting into a serious art and profession.

Howard's honors were many. He received an honorary doctorate from his alma mater, and the American Choral Directors Association dedicated its 1987 National Convention to him. He wrote one book, *Music in the Southwest*. A collection of his writings and lectures was published under the title *Conscience of a Profession: Howard Swan, Choral Director and Teacher* (Hinshaw, 1987), and a *Festschrift* entitled *Five Centuries of Choral Music: Essays in Honor of Howard Swan* (Pendragon Press, 1989) was published in his honor.

A few personal remarks might be in order. Howard Swan was the most inspirational man I have ever known. Had we never met, I would be working for the telephone company. During Howard's last years at Oxy, the time I was a student there, society seemed to be falling apart. "Drop out" and "do your own thing" were the credos - ideas antithetical to the synergy that forges choirs. Over the turmoil came his unyielding call for commitment, dedication, and quality. Howard was not a great physical conductor; that he readily admitted. It mattered not at all, however, because he understood and

loved people, and he knew how to reach straight into their hearts and minds, and how to make them to perform beyond their potential.

It is a once-in-a-lifetime gift to know someone like Howard - especially in one's youth. How fortunate that he chose to teach, and that his career was so long and touched so many.

Submitted by
Gordon Paine
Professor of Music
October 11, 1995