A mighty something which is ours

By Rachel Barham and Maurice Saylor

A n intriguing editorial appeared in The Tower on April 17, 1929. When the alma mater song is played at dances, the writer penned with dismay, “those C.U. men who are sitting remain so and those dancing continue to do so.” He concludes: “The alma mater is a C.U. song; no other school may claim it and all C.U. men should be proud to let others know that after all they do have one song which they hold above all others, and during the playing of which they stand to show their respect and love for a mighty something which is theirs.”

The Catholic University of America is privileged to have a great many pieces of music written to honor that “mighty something” — music intended to celebrate the University and inspire its community in sports, social events, and ceremonial occasions. Most are original compositions by CUA students and faculty throughout the decades, not just new words put to traditional tunes. Yet most of the music is virtually unknown to the University community. We ourselves didn’t know about this heritage until an email request in April 2010 sparked our interest. Since then, we have discovered multiple alma mater songs in 10 different arrangements, seven fight songs, two fanfares, a march, a hymn, and a drinking song that was a favorite during Prohibition.

The email request originated with the Marine Corps Band; they wanted to play area university alma mater songs and fight songs for a commissioning ceremony. When we started looking, we couldn’t find the band arrangement of our alma mater song (“Guardian of Truth”), and no one we asked knew whether CUA had a fight song. We eventually found a version of the alma mater song for the Marine Corps Band, but we were dismayed by the song’s somewhat perilous existence. There were multiple versions kept in different places, no extra copies, and no one person or department in charge. It seemed that if something got lost, it would be gone forever. At the same time, we didn’t want to give up on finding a fight song. We looked harder.

A promising early lead came in a folder called “CUA Wind Band/Ensemble History,” compiled by Robert Garofalo (Ph.D. 1963), director of the CUA Wind Ensemble from 1964 to 2002. The folder contained titles of CUA school songs and a tantalizing bit of music: two fanfares (“Entrance” and “Call of the Cardinals”), a trumpet part from a piece by Monsignor James Magner (after whom the Magner House student residence is named), and a march and a drinking song that was a favorite during Prohibition. We eventually found a version of the march and drinking song that was a favorite during Prohibition.

We turned to The Tower Online. CUA Records Management Archivist Leslie Knoblauch had recently overseen a massive project to digitize the University’s newspaper (founded in 1922) and make it searchable by keyword (http://tower.lib.cua.edu). There we found the words to “The Flying Cardinals March.” Unfortunately, there were no lyrics for any of the other unfamiliar works listed in Professor Garofalo’s history, but we did find lyrics to six other songs and six cheers. We checked the yearbooks and files at the Archives and found one more song — this time with music. By this point, we knew of the existence of some 14 pieces, but we had little of the music. This was getting interesting.

The culmination of this research and preservation project will be a concert, Songs of Old CUA. The concert is part of Catholic University’s 125th anniversary celebration and will be performed by students and alumni of the Benjamin T. Rome School of Music in the Edward J. Pryzbyla University Center, Great Room, on Sunday, Feb. 12, 2012. Many of CUA’s historic songs will be heard for the first time in decades. For more information on the concert, check www.cua.edu/125.

Celebrating 125 Years
The Mystery of the Two Alma Mater Songs

A published copy of an alma mater song by Victor Herbert (“Hail CUA”) had long been in the music library, but to our knowledge it had not been performed since the early 1960s when it was recorded for an LP record called CUA in Song with Daniel “Skip” Tomasselli directing. We had often pondered why CUA used “Guardian of Truth” as its alma mater song if we had one written for us by none other than Victor Herbert, the father of the American operetta and composer of Babes in Toyland and the song “Ah, sweet Mystery of Life.” We believe we’ve come fairly close to having the complete story.

For its first 33 years Catholic University went without any kind of official song. Upon returning from World War I, student John Joseph Relihan (Class of 1920) saw a need for an alma mater song to unify the student body and boost school spirit. After all, the war had caused a great disruption to University life, many of the students had enlisted, and many had lost friends and family members in combat. Relihan and two fellow students decided to organize a contest for an alma mater song, open to the (then all-male) student body. The prize money — $50 for first place and $25 for second place — was donated by Monsignor George A. Dougherty, then vice rector of the University. With permission from University officials, Relihan wrote to the famous and popular composer Victor Herbert in New York City. He hoped that Herbert might write a song for CUA, using the winning lyrics from the contest. Herbert agreed, writing back: “My dear Sir, I would be very glad to write your song, if I find the lyric you submit to be suitable. On the other hand, you may not know that I am not a Catholic, and that may stand in the way!” Relihan had read that Herbert was born in Ireland and assumed he was Catholic, but in a document he wrote decades later, in 1955, to the University alumni office, he noted: “It made no difference to us whether or not he was a Catholic. We would be honored to have him write the music.” Copies of Herbert’s letters to Relihan are held in the University Archives.

The winning texts were sent to Herbert, who concurred with the faculty judges that the more suitable text was that written by the first-place winner, Robert H. Mahoney (Class of 1920). Herbert wrote music, making a couple of suggestions for text changes, and donated his song to CUA. The October 1920 University Symposium, which preceded The Tower, triumphantly proclaimed that “Hail CUA,” the Herbert/Mahoney song, was “awarded the decision in the Alma Mater Song Competition . . . and will be the official Alma Mater Song of the [sic] Catholic University of America.” Some mystery surrounds what happened next. The second-place winner, Thomas J. McLean (who was studying at the Sulpician Monastery), wrote his own music to the lyrics he had submitted for the contest. Not long after the competition, his piece, “Guardian of Truth,” was being performed as CUA’s alma mater song and was still used today although it’s reserved largely for special occasions. The only two references we found to the change in songs referred to the idea that the CUA Glee Club simply found “Guardian of Truth” to be more suitable for men’s voices.

The Glee Club was formed in 1920 — about the same time the contest results were announced — by German language professor Leo A. Behrendt. At that time there was little music on campus, and the Glee Club became wildly popular, performing every Sunday evening of the school year in McMahon Hall. It began touring and frequently broadcast over three radio stations — first nationally and later internationally. For more than 30 years, Behrendt and the Glee Club performed McLean’s “Guardian of Truth,” until Behrendt retired from directing the Glee Club just before his death. Small wonder that everyone came to think of “Guardian of Truth” as our official song.

Every generation or so there is a flurry of activity at Catholic University when the Victor Herbert piece emerges and is touted as somewhat of a lost gem. The piece was recalled in a 1935 Tower article, as well as in later articles with such headlines as “Have We Rediscovered CUA’s Real Alma Mater?” (1954); “Strains of Alma Mater Are Nearing Extinction” (1957); and “The Lost CUA Alma Mater” (1960). A brief history of the two songs and an interview with the lyricist, Mahoney, appeared in the 1974 Envoy, the predecessor to CUA Magazine. The discussion about the songs has never completely left the campus consciousness.

One of our favorite finds is from The Tower in 1954, a year when there was a push on campus to familiarize the students with the Herbert piece; it was performed at Homecoming and numerous other events. In a feature called “Candid Card,” random students were interviewed about a campus issue. On one occasion the question of the week was “Why do you think that CUA should adopt the Victor Herbert alma mater?” Junior George Rieber responded: “Gee, Dad, sounds wild! Seriously it’s been so long since CUA had something that could arouse school spirit, and in my book this song can help to do just that.”

Putting It Together

For a few weeks, we worked on reconstructing the songs. One bit of information would answer a question while another bit might create a new mystery. “The Flying Cardinals March!” for example, was a jumble of no fewer than four versions of the piece. A piece called “CUA, We’re Rooting for You” took weeks to figure out. We couldn’t get the lyrics and the music to match until we realized that it was actually two songs that had morphed into one over time. The “chorus” of the stitched-together piece was a traditional sports song, adapted as “CU Will Shine Tonight,” while the “verses” were original lyrics set to a popular tune called “My Little Girl” by Albert von Tilzer, composer of “Take Me Out to the Ballgame.” It was only after a good deal of confusion that we finally figured out why “My Little Girl” was being played at football games! Maurice spent many hours pairing up lyrics with tunes, editing, and making new engravings to ensure that the music would be preserved and accessible electronically.

One of the most difficult songs to track down was a 1931 piece called “Sing a Song of CUA” or “CU Marching Song,” with words by Clement “Clem” Ducy and music by Michael J. MacDonald, both CUA students (Classes of 1933 and 1931, respectively). The words were printed in old issues of The Tower and are still circulated on campus today as a display of school spirit. The song was raved over by the student body in the 1930s and performed at every possible event, with the authors taking an active hand in promoting and performing the work. To our dismay, though, the music was not to be found anywhere.

We found that lyricist Clem Ducy’s papers had been accepted by and then weedied from two archives, one in Wyoming and one in Colorado, before finally ending up with his great-niece, notable American author and historian Kate Kelly. Delighted that someone was interested in her
great-uncle’s lyrics, she offered to go through the boxes of Ducy’s papers, but was unable to find the song or anything about its history. Seeing that the work was copyrighted in 1931, we requested a copy of the music from the Library of Congress. What they had was just a tune with lyrics — no chords or accompaniment — but we were happy to get whatever we could. The piece is characteristic of a march from the 1920s. Maurice was able to write an accompaniment in the appropriate style so that it can be performed.

Some mysteries remain: we have found lyrics to a song called “Spirit of CU” from 1954 or earlier. We have yet to locate music. Reviews of dances and other social events mention other songs. Some, like “Drink a Highball” (which surfaced at CUA around 1928), are traditional college songs modified for CUA, but others might be original. Could they be out there somewhere?

The Future

Music-making isn’t what it used to be. The advent of radios and phonographs led people toward listening and away from performing, and the rock and folk music movements in the 1950s and ’60s saw a divergence in the styles of popular music and the style of music traditionally used for school songs. Many children don’t receive a basic music education anymore, and therefore music-making is increasingly left to professionals and skilled amateurs. Until just recently, the only Catholic University song that anyone performed was the McLean alma mater song “Guardian of Truth.”

Some of these old songs will likely never catch on again because they are too long and complex for the nonmusician, and the lyrics are also difficult to memorize. However, others can certainly be used at games and other events, and at the very least are likely to be picked up by the a cappella groups that have recently been enjoying a resurgence on campus. Little did the founders of Redline, Sixtus, and Take Note know that they were a part of a CUA tradition begun in 1920 with the Glee Club.

We have come to realize that our research into CUA songs and cheers will never be over. We invite you to contact us via email at saylor@cua.edu if you have a story to share about historic CUA songs or cheers. CUA

Music Librarian Maurice Saylor (B.M. 1980, M.M. 1984, M.L.S. 2005) and Music Library Technician Rachel Barham (M.M. 2005) are pictured on page 17. Outside of CUA, Saylor is a composer and instrumental performer, and Barham is a classical singer. They offer a note of thanks to Director of University Libraries Stephen Connaghan for his support of this project.

Here are a few other songs that deserve some recognition

Clement B. Fenton and James J. Conlin — “Through the Town” (1916) This is the earliest known song written specifically for CUA. One reference said that the students would march through Brookland after victorious games singing this song and then build celebratory bonfires. This song includes the lines, “Hurl the pigskin cross the chalk-line” and “Let Brookland town rejoice tonight.”

Peter A. Brazinski — “Catholic University March” (1937) This is our most bizarre discovery. A Polish-American military band musician with little experience in composition and no known connection to CUA wrote a march for CUA and gave it as a gift. Though it is possible to ascertain his intent of what the piece should sound like, it is noted erroneously (as he freely acknowledged in a letter) to the point that playing what is written on the page has the sound of a carousel of monsters at a demented circus. As far as we know, it has never been performed and will receive its premiere at the concert in February, in one form or another.

Leo A. Behrendt and Frances Fitch — “Alma Mater Song of The Catholic University School of Nursing Education” (ca. 1943) This was awarded just in time for the nursing school’s 75th anniversary. It was composed by Behrendt, founder and conductor of the original Glee Club. Fitch, a nursing student, wrote the lyrics.

Monsignor Donald J. Reagan — “Alma Mater” (1976) We have yet to discover lyrics to this music, composed by the man whose arrangement of the McLean piece has been used more than any others in recent years.

Charles Gary — “Cardinals Forever,” “CUA Hymn,” and “Smash Bang” (ca. 1993) Charles Gary, a professor of music education at Catholic University, wrote several CUA songs. They are the most recent ones written for the University. The hymn is beautiful, and the two fight songs are not only rousing but also multipurpose, appropriate for use at any sort of game.

Listen to some of the songs on the new website of historic music, http://cuexhibits.wrlc.org/exhibits. We will be adding content to the pages for quite some time.