



# *Gene Kenney*

Material prepared by Tim King

Biographical Sketch  
Gene Kenney, Chairman - Vocal Division  
Texas Tech University  
Lubbock Texas • 1957-1983  
by Tim King, DMA Director of Choral Activities  
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It was 12:55 p.m. on a crisp, sunny day in the fall. Outside our choir room windows, we could hear the sound of instruments being played and a cacophony of student conversations, which were heard but not understood. The "Goin' Band from Raiderland" had just finished its marching-band rehearsal. Inside the choir room the Tech Choir was preparing for rehearsal. Most members had already found their seats, yet a few scurried in late fearing that rehearsal had already begun and were relieved to know that they had made it in time. Most of us were early for rehearsal preparing our thoughts for the music and wondering what was in store for us today. Our talented student accompanist was silently fingering the difficult passages of one of the Brahms quartets knowing full well that he must be up for the task of this and every daily rehearsal. (All of us students wished for the talent to accompany this exceptional group, but did not envy his position as Tech Choir Accompanist!) Knowing there would be no choral warm-up and that we would jump headlong into the music, the singers had already gone through their preparatory vocal calisthenics. The folding chairs where the choir sat were in their neat rows. The "throne" perched on the stage of this room, (which doubled as a Recital Hall), was nestled in the piano's crook. The music stand was seated on the floor and extended upward to the appropriate height for the higher positioned conducting chair. The portion of the stand holding the music was at its usual flat level and normally reversed position. The room was ready. We were prepared.

One minute before 1:00 p.m., one of the two heavy wooden doors of the Recital Hall opened. Every eye was fixed on the well coifed, moderately built, (yet to his students a giant of a man), figure which entered the room. His head was held high but tilted back, so that he could see through the proper level of the thick lenses of his black, horn-rimmed glasses. His arm curled gingerly around his beloved, well-used scores that had been his companions for years. He walked with rather small, quick steps to the "throne," placed his music on the stand, carefully folded his Hartt, Shaffner, and Marx, loosened his Countess Mara tie, and took his rightful place at the conductor's podium. As he reached for a pencil that served as his rehearsal baton, he announced in his basso-profundo voice yet with a quiet

forcefulness, "Take out the Brahms." Nothing else needed to be said, no elaboration, but with every instinct that one can derive from body language and interpersonal communication, we knew it would be an intense learning session.

On this day one of the choir's jokesters had secretly planned to be late. Unheard of! One dared not to be late for rehearsal in fear of being verbally punished in a most eloquent way. At exactly 1:10 p.m. the heavy wooden doors were flung open and in a John Wayne stagger, this bass shuffled his way to the middle of the choir. From the old, tattered cowboy hat on the top of his head down to his jeans tucked in his boots like a rodeo rider, he looked the part of a ranch hand, not a refined singer of art music. As the door opened, the head of the director snapped and through the thick lenses his eyes became the size of saucers as they followed this soon to be dead individual to his seat. Being a rather robust young man our jester would say "Excuse me ma'am" as he went down the row. Arriving at his seat, he tossed his folder on the floor, slapped his knees, and said in his John Wayne accent, "Well, Kenney, are we going to sing any of the Brahms (pronounced with "a" as in the word "at") today?" In unison the intake of air from the choir members was enough to rival any tornado that had ever struck the South Plains. How was this young man going die? To our surprise, Kenney's pencil flew in the air, he leaned back in his chair, and laughed until tears came into his eyes.

This is Gene Kenney, intense in his devotion to his art, and his love for each student and their education. He came from "the Old-School", no nonsense approach, which mandated that nothing stand in the way of musical achievement. To him rehearsal was not preparing for something more important, it was a daily diet or "fix" which feeds every artist. Not afraid to either laugh or criticize, it was his love, his calling which nurtured his students. In this way he showed us his deepest love and respect by giving us a glimpse of his artistry, his devotion, and his ultimate respect for choral music.

Earl Eugene Kenney was born on January 21, 1920 in Larned, Kansas to Earl and Mary Kenney. (Larned is located in Pawnee County of central Kansas.) A public servant, Earl Kenney served the city of Larned as the Water Department Superintendent. The middle class, highly respected Kenneys, had three children, Gene the middle child of the three siblings, Bernadyne, the oldest, and Rebecca. Larned, a small community situated on the old Santa Fe Trail, was a farming-ranching community. Today, we take for granted many opportunities not available to such small communities and schools during the "dust bowl" years. The Kenney's were not necessarily a musical family. However, the Larned school allowed Kenney to cultivate a love for music. Surprising to today's Texas choral

musician, Kenney's first musical love was the trumpet, and he performed in all of the school musical organizations.

The most notable event in Junior High, like so many young men, was Kenney's voice change. For most male voices, the cambiata stage is a slow, often embarrassing stage in the vocal development of a young man's life. Not so for Kenney! By his own admission, "One day I was a boy soprano, the next morning I woke up as a bass!" (Kenney, later known for his basso-profundo vocal instrument, would often demonstrate in choir rehearsals the ability to sing a fully resonant tenor high a, yet could rumble a low A1 below low c!).

Often, the city of Larned and the neighboring city of Kinsley would join forces to produce various community, theatrical performances, and particularly Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. The actors and chorus would be comprised of townspeople from the two neighboring communities who, after rehearsals, would give performances in both communities, Larned and Kinsley. It was in this setting during his freshman year that Kenney participated in his first "vocal" experience. The Kenney sisters, Bernadyne and Rebecca were both members of the chorus. The freshman-classed Kenney too was active in the production, not as a member of the cast, but the pit orchestra! Perhaps, it was his trumpet skills that offered the first step towards his professional calling. Nonetheless, Kenney decided as a youngster that he enjoyed music and wanted a career as a music conductor. "(Music directing) is something I like to do, have always liked to do, and said I was going to do since I was in high school. And that's what I've done!"

Upon graduation from high school, Kenney attended Emporia State in Emporia, Kansas. With approximately ten hours before graduation, his graduation was postponed due to his induction into the military service (1942). Kenney served in the Army Medical Corp in North Africa and Anzio, Italy. His 3rd Army Division was the main force in the invasion of Anzio. Soon after the Anzio invasion the war ended and Kenney was entrusted by his commanding officers to stay behind and "close-out" his unit. At the close of his service, Kenney returned home and after a semester of "R and R," completed the remaining hours, graduating with a Bachelor of Music Education degree. During this final semester, Kenney made his first trip to Texas.

Most years Emporia State's madrigal group would tour various U.S. areas and this was not unusual. Being one of the ten members, Kenney went with the group. Normally, the group traveled in cars, but because of war's fuel rationing still in effect, this year's tour transportation was a regularly scheduled bus as opposed to

today's chartered bus. The tour covered Emporia, Kansas to Wiley College in Marshall, Texas and points in between.

Fort Scott College, Fort Scott, Kansas, was Kenney's first directing experience. The college was located on the third floor of a building that also housed the high school. Kenney's first teaching assignment (fall, 1945) was the daunting task to teach all music courses for the college and high school. Due to the bumper wheat harvests, the combined college and high school had plenty of money to carry-on a successful music program. However, as a result of the freedom that college students have to come and go, it was difficult to maintain the discipline required for the entire group, especially since there was a donut shop across the street! The ineffective discipline of the school, (a result of the combination of both the college and high school and the varying expectations of each group), led Kenney to quickly resign this position. In 1946, after one year in Fort Scott, Kenney took the band-directing job at Bucklin High School. Soon after starting his position, Kenney wasted little time in formulating a choir. While at Bucklin, one event changed the course of Kenney's musical direction and led him to specialize in choral music.

Just as the band was about to leave town to perform at a state contest---scheduled an hour later in another town---his clarinet soloist approached him with the body of her clarinet in a bag. She had tried to clean her clarinet pads and didn't know how to put it back together. In panic, Kenney arranged to stop in a town on the way to the contest long enough to swap clarinets with one of the student's teachers. The teacher agreed to have the instrument repaired. The band went on to compete in the contest and student performed her solo. Kenney thought to himself, "I could be doing this for the rest of my life!" What was the result? He resigned his job and took a one-year solely choral position in Junction, Kansas.

Kenney was not long for the Jayhawk State---soon to become a Texan. Orville Borchers, Kenney's Dean of the Emporia's music school, had become head of the department at Southern Methodist University. After Kenney's 1952 SMU graduation with a Masters of Music degree, Edna Mary Jones [the Music Supervisor for the Abilene (Texas) school district] knowing full well the music and educator potential of Gene Kenney, lured him to take the choir directing vacancy at Abilene High School. Kenney's high school choirs soon built a statewide reputation for singing with maturity of choral tone, style, and music understanding. It was in Abilene that Kenney developed his ever-guiding principal. "I had to lead them (his choir members) in some way to instill in them that it was their job to make the music." The best way for Kenney was with firm leadership, insisting on

discipline and commitment. Kenney would push and drive his students to a point, but as a master director would instinctively know the line over which not to cross.

Conventions were completely the opposite of today's organization and scheduling. The "leading" choirs of the state would send a quartet and, if each school's director thought worthy, an extra bass and tenor. These students from around the state would then comprise The early TMEA (Texas Music Educators Association) All-State Choir. Kenney recalls his first convention. It was in Mineral Wells, Texas. The names of the All-State students were submitted and everyone looked forward to the convention. There was no further communication to the directors. As it turns out, the students would be housed in private homes with help from the Chamber of Commerce. One slight problem, however, no one told this first-year director that he had to call the Chamber to make reservations! Ultimately, everything was fine and the convention was a success.

In every leader's life there are always one or two events that help shape his or her character, talent, and professional direction. The Robert Shaw Summer Workshops in San Diego were such happenings for Kenney. Here, in these early formative years of the workshops, Kenney met life-long friends such as John Wustman (the renowned accompanist/coach), Tom Pyle (soloist on many Shaw recordings), and Alice Parker (composer and arranger). More importantly, during this three year relationship Shaw befriended Kenney to the point that "if we were quiet!" Kenney and a select few directors were allowed to attend score analysis sessions between Shaw and Julius Hereford, music historian/scholar and Shaw's friend/colleague. In addition to the obvious insights into the techniques of score study and musical insights of great masterworks, these sessions solidified the principal which served Kenney throughout his professional career, "We (Shaw) want to make music." So simple yet so profound. "It matters not whether the singers are professional or amateur, or church choir or college-select, nothing, no object, circumstance, or person should stand in the way of music's capacity to speak to listeners and performers." This too became Kenney's creed.

While in Abilene, Archie Jones, the Choir Director of the University of Texas, contacted both Kenney and Gene Hemmle, the Choir Director at Texas Technological College---later to become Texas Tech University---to become charter members of a new group of Texas choral directors. Today we know this group as the Texas Choral Directors Association.

The year 1955 was a transitional year for Kenney as he embarked on a short-lived career as a regional representative for the Carl Fisher Music Publishing Company.

His region was the Southeastern portion of the United States, primarily Texas, Oklahoma, the Carolinas, Arkansas, and Florida. During his employment with Carl Fisher, Gene Hemmle, department Chair, and Texas Tech choir director, contacted Kenney as a possible faculty replacement for the voice faculty position held by Ira Shantz and to relieve Hemmle of his choir directing responsibilities. (There were only a certain number of faculty positions allotted to the Department.) Hemmle was well aware of Kenney's successes at Abilene High School and thought this would be a grand recruiting step for the young department at Texas Tech. Hemmle was in hopes of Kenney taking his position as choir director in order for Hemmle to concentrate his efforts toward the Chair position. Shantz, surprisingly did not resign. As a result, Kenney took a one-year position (1956-57) at Amarillo High School until the following year when Shantz did resign and moved to Texas Christian University.

In the first year of Kenney's Tech tenure, Hemmle appointed Kenney as Vocal Department, Chair. The 1957 Texas Tech Voice faculty consisted of Kenney, Mary Kelly, Charles Post, and Mrs. Dunn, (an adjunct member of the voice and piano faculty). From high school, where there were no voice teaching responsibilities, to teaching college voice, to leading established voice faculty members, Kenney by his own admission said that for him this was the most difficult of transitions. Kenney remained an active member of the voice faculty until his retirement.

Upon retirement Kenney said, "I think there's a lot of music-making in this world, and I wanted to put forth my two cents worth and hopefully make it a better world." The twenty-five years of his Texas Tech tenure was proof positive of this humble statement. Kenney never longed for the "lime-light." He never pressed his choirs or his position to achieve his "own agenda"--- completely to the contrary. Kenney's entire professional career was devoted to his students and making music. Awards and invitational concerts did come his way. One needs only point to the Tech Choir's four TMEA performances (Ft. Worth, San Antonio, and 2 Dallas appearances), and the MENC (St. Louis, Missouri) performances for verification.

The quality of the performances can best be described by the conductor of the Springfield (Missouri) Symphony Orchestra that appeared with the Tech Choir on the MENC performance. The orchestra conductor described himself as "the director of the group that appeared on the Gene Kenney program." His Texan peers also recognized Kenney, the Texas Choral Directors Association (TCDA), when they made him one of the two original recipients of the Distinguished Choral Directors Awards. Years later at the 1989 summer convention, TCDA formally established the Gene Kenney Scholarship to benefit future Texas Choral Directors.



In 1972 Kenney's personal life took an abrupt turn. A committed bachelor, Kenney's professional life dominated his personal life. However, an event transpired to change this. One of his talented students, Kathy Kilgore, (now Horseman), was contemplating dropping her music aspirations and changing her major. Kenney ever the consummate educator, immediately contacted her mother to discuss his student's future. The developing relationship resulted in Kenney's marriage to Kathy's mother Billie on August 12th.

After twenty-five years of service, Kenney announced his retirement, but because of faculty circumstances, Harold Luce, the Chair of the department, coaxed Kenney into staying one more year. Kenney formally ended his active teaching career in 1983. Living in Lubbock, he continues to be a mentor to three generations of Texas choral directors.

For Kenney, awards and accomplishments are found in memories. One can easily glean that his main focus was his students' musical experience. Whether it was his devotion to his high school or college students, Kenney's desire to "make a difference" was paramount in his professional and artistic drive. As one looks back on such a prestigious career, one fact springs to the front. For thirty years, his most productive years, Kenney never left West Texas. Through his talent and long tenure, the strength of the West Texas choral tradition owes him its gratitude. Generations of choral directors have experienced the impact of this dedicated musician/educator. For the thousands of musicians whose lives have been directly or indirectly touched by Gene Kenney, Al Skoog's introductory article in the first TCDA (Texas Choral Director's Association) magazine, *The Texas Choirmaster* (1959) may summarize our feelings the best. Skoog says : "Many people are responsible for this gradual, but constant growth in the development of vocal music. Certainly the advancement of music would not be so evident without the help of a number of our great musical predecessors who have overcome numerous obstacles in their struggle to lay a foundation upon which you and I may build for the future."

Legacies are left in many ways, through inventions, events, or circumstances. Yet, there is one thread, one common denominator, which links all great leaders. That one element is the ability to inspire. Time has already begun to judge Gene Kenney and has found his inspiring contributions much more worthy than his estimated "two cents." The price of art instilled in another's soul is priceless and truly Kenney has fulfilled his dream to make a "better world."

## Gene Kenney Remembered by Charles Nelson

I can't really say when I first became aware of Gene Kenney, but I do remember that his name was always spoken with respect and even awe, by those who had heard his choral work at Abilene High School, Amarillo High School and Texas Tech University. I have heard, first hand, from several who knew and cared about good choral work, that during his tenure in Abilene, his choirs sang better than any choir in town, including the several college choirs. That was his reputation.

The first time I remember hearing his work first hand was during the year he spent at Amarillo High School. I was one of the three judges who heard his choir sing at the UIL contest. I was embarrassed to "judge" a choir which I knew sang better than I could have prepared them to sing. Following their performance of "Death I Do Not Fear Thee" from Bach Motet #3, all I could say was "I wish I had taught you to sing that well"!

Two doctoral student choral directors, who were house sitting for Gene one summer, while looking over his record collection, came across some recordings of his Abilene High School Choirs. These choral directors, who considered themselves superior teachers and conductors, chuckled as they pulled out Gene's old recordings. They were anxious to compare Gene's high school choirs to theirs. As the music unfolded, they sat in stunned silence. They were not ready for such excellence from high school students.

In his years as choral director at Texas Tech University, his reputation expanded. He was known as a no nonsense teacher and conductor who, when it came to making music, would brook no incompetence. He was a clinician par excellence and was unselfish with his talent. He conducted clinics throughout the State and beyond. Once, I received the benefit of his outstanding work. The teachers of one TMEA Region had brought their students to the All-Region Clinic unprepared. I did not hear what Gene said to them. The important thing is, they heard and remembered. When I arrived to direct the same choir the next year, everyone was on time, every singer automatically assumed a correct singing posture and every note was in place.

There is no doubt that Gene Kenney belongs in the pantheon of Texas choral directors who have had outstanding influence upon generations of choral directors

and singers.

## Gene Kenney Remembered by George Biffle

The first time I heard the Tech Choir, I was enchanted. I first met “Mr. Kenney” as a freshman Architectural Engineering major who thought that choir and orchestra were fun things to do. It took one rehearsal to figure out that this man was firmly “in charge.” As each day passed, one or more of the Tech Singers would arrive after Mr. Kenney’s clock said it was time to rehearse, and boy, was that student in for a shock.

Mr. Kennney expected your warm body there every day, fifty-five minutes (his time), no excuses! When the choir struggled, he fixed it. There was no fear on earth like becoming the center of his attention, whether it was over your failure to know the notes, your inattention, being tardy, or being unable to literally “choke out” a sound when he bolted out off his conductor’s chair and descended upon a hapless student and said “you sing.” Almost all of us were hapless and witless and when singled out, incapable of making any kind of noise, much less a singing tones under his gaze.

When my sophomore year began, I had an engineering class in the Textile Engineering building, completely across the campus, and I soon found that only by a dead run could I get to the Singer’s rehearsal on time (all classes started at five minutes after the hour except for choir, which started on the hour (Oh my God, I’m dead again). I soon figured out that those conflicts were irreconcilable and subsequently dropped out of choir.

At the end of my sophomore year, I wasn’t accomplishing much as a potential architect or civil engineer, so I decided to major in music. When I finally got past all of the barriers, I received a letter the following Fall semester announcing that Tech Choir rehearsals would commence on a certain day and hour. It was addressed to me, but surely was a mistake. So . . . I telephoned him to clear up the misunderstanding: We had a very short conversation. I was to be at the rehearsal, and I felt rather idiotic that I assumed that he would or could make a mistake like that. The “Tech Choir”-- unless you’ve been there or heard it, words can’t explain the awe! I was on “cloud nine!”

That opportunity turned my life around completely. I had a direction, a challenge, and a perfectionist for a teacher. I could not have been happier. I spent four wonderful years under his tutelage as a choir member, section leader, and graduate assistant.

Gene Kenney was the ultimate teacher, an impeccable musician, an incredibly talented singer, and accepted nothing but the best that could be from all of his choirs. He taught us that nothing short of the best was ever good enough, to come prepared to every rehearsal, to sing as diligently as was possible, that music was far too important to our existence to be taken for granted. There is no doubt that he has forgotten more about music than I will ever learn. I thank him for setting a standard that could be approached, but never attained. I have carried into every rehearsal for forty-three years the lessons he taught all of us. Such a gift is truly priceless. There can never be another Mr. Kenney.

### Gene Kenney Remembered by Harriett Snider Koen 1968-1971

"Gene Kenny.....Words can never suffice in describing this brilliant MUSIC MAN!.....a plethora of knowledge, musicality, keen wit, finesse are just a few.

One of my many memories of Gene Kenny is singing soprano in his choir. Here I was.....a freshman.....not knowing if I wanted to become a lady band director or choir director. All I know was that I had just finished going through Greek rush..... Ha! Why didn't anyone tell me that it was just NOT COOL to wear your Tech Beanie during CHOIR REHEARSAL???.... The look he gave me over his glasses were enough to make me denounce my legacy.....Why didn't my pledge captain tell me that Mr. Kenny would react like that???.....Please know I never wore the thing again, and yes, I remained a voice major, much to Killion's disappointment. I absolutely thought the sun rose and set with GENE KENNY!!"

### Gene Kenny Remembered by Gerre Joiner

When I graduated from Lorenzo High School in 1966, I already knew Gene Kenney because I'd been studying voice with Charles Post for a few years. I came to Tech from a small high school with a limited world-view. My first days at Tech created an environment that was new to me. I was nervous. In those years, I wasn't smart enough to be nervous about most things.

Then I started working on a daily basis with Gene Kenney in the Tech Choir and the Madrigal Singers. A few days into the university experience with Gene Kenney and I had a new appreciation for the word “nervous.” It seemed to me that Kenney was the only one who wasn’t nervous.

Four years later, my world had been expanded after touring with the Tech Choir, and I was a better musician because of the high expectations of one Gene Kenney. I never said, “Thanks,” to Mr. Kenney. I’m hoping he reads this, accepts a word of appreciation, and recalls...

## Gene Kenney Remembered by Jack Bowers

Wow! Lucky me to be a retired choral director and get to listen to great choral music every day of my life without having to do anything but turn on my sound system and make my selections of what I choose to listen to. What could be better? As I get older, it seems the enormous listening library I’ve collected over the years shrinks more and more. I find myself listening to the same works over and over again led by the same conductors. I live for those “special moments” in music that always excite me and bring about an emotional response that I can’t explain to anyone else.

Music that makes my hair stand on end, tears flow from my eyes, and a feeling my heart is going to burst inside my chest. Sad to say the list of conductors shrinks with each passing year to a smaller select few. Conductors that can really make great music have always been in short supply it seems. My short list of great choral conductors includes those of national renown and many who were not known on the national level.

Gene Kenny is one of the most admired choral conductors. His influence on Texas choral music is considerable and continues to have a lasting legacy. Mr. Kenney served at Texas Tech University in Lubbock for more than two and a half decades as director of choral music and was a driving force in music education in the state of Texas and beyond.

I was so very fortunate to have Mr. Kenney as a mentor for my choral music studies and his teaching was invaluable. His pursuit of excellence and attention to detail in the mastery of the choral art was extraordinary. He was a very demanding taskmaster and never did he accept anything but the very best.

I feel very sure that many singers can still feel those big eyes behind those black horn-rimmed glasses boring a hole just like a laser into your very soul. He had little patience for anyone not willing to give full attention to the task at hand. Sadly, many of his students and peers never really got to know Mr. Kenney on a more relaxed and personal level away from the rehearsal hall. If they had been afforded that opportunity as I was, they would have seen the man as I know him, which is different than a generally perceived persona. Gene Kenney is one of the warmest hearted and kind men I have ever met. He wouldn't hurt a fly but sing wrong notes at your own risk!

Mr. Kenney never tried to be anyone but who he was. He did not play games. He took a stand for the highest ideals and expected the same from his singers. If you sang in his choirs you were only given the best choral literature to prepare under the leadership of a distinguished director who was always prepared to give you the best of himself. I have been afforded the opportunity to sing under the direction of nationally known choral directors and Gene Kenney is every bit their equal!

Mr. Kenney, I thank you for all you have given to choral music, for being such a great teacher, and especially for being a dear friend. Although I do not get to see you often I do get to hear your music making and it touches my heart everyday, as I know it touches others. I want you to know that you are revered and loved by so many.

## Gene Kenney Remembered by Mike Medly

I was a member of the Tech Choir at Texas Tech University from the fall of 1976 to Spring 1980 and had the privilege of being the Bass/Baritone section leader for those 4 years. Mr. Kenney was my voice teacher and my faculty advisor. Somehow he saw me through. My major was Vocal Performance and in 1980 I received a Bachelor of Music degree Magna cum Laude.

I learned a lot of things from Mr. Kenney. Condensing that into a summary like this is difficult. So, here are three things of the many he taught me.

Be Consistent: Mr. Kenney taught what it means to be consistent. (But, of course, being taught something doesn't mean that you will apply it!) His demand was simple: Think. Use your brain to remember what you just did, because I'm going to make you turn right around and do it again. His dictum: "Don't try. Do."

It didn't matter if what you did was right or wrong. It mattered that you remembered what you did. If you couldn't do it the same way then you weren't thinking. Mr. Kenney never hesitated to point out that salient fact to you. And it was his job to do that. If it was wrong, you at least had to do the wrong thing consistently before it could be changed.

As an illustration I recall a time the Tech Choir rehearsed 2 bars of one of Benjamin Britten's Five Flower Songs for about two weeks. No kidding. Every rehearsal for two weeks. We finally got it. A Choir is One Instrument Made of Many Parts. Mr. Kenney was exacting when it came to us being a Choir. About us forming one instrument made up of many individual singers, an accompaniment, and a conductor.

Many folks through the years have spoken to me of their remembrance of him as a feared taskmaster. The legendary "Look" that he could incinerate you with coming over the top of his thick-lensed spectacles. But, overall, I remember him differently. I remember him as one part of the choral instrument called the Tech Choir. He shared our excellence, our mediocrity, and our failures.

What really counted to him was getting us to be an entity. Attacks, cutoffs, consonants, and vowels; all elements had to occur simultaneously as if coming from one person. Mr. Kenney could get our 40 voices to sound like a gigantic quartet. Rehearsal is 99 Percent of a Good Performance. We were serious in rehearsal. 6 hours a week. I remember preparing for a TMEA concert. By the time we finished that concert we all had it memorized. Every note. Every nuance. People saw an amazing thing at that concert in the River Room of the San Antonio Convention Center. We arranged ourselves in quartets and double choir formation. Mr. Kenney gave us a downbeat and then folded his arms across his chest. J. S. Bach's Cantata 50 unrolled like a magic carpet. All that came from him for the duration of the piece were a few nods, a few subtle and well-placed cues. But don't think this was a miracle. We had rehearsed it that way. 40 people spread out in a circle all around the perimeter of our rather large choir room with Kenney in the center. Listening. Teaching.

A Personal Recollection: Gene Kenney made me laugh. Halloween of 1978. The Tech Choir decided to have a costume party at Kenney's house. His wife, Billy, thought it to be a great idea and she broke out the Waterford. Kenney didn't care as long as the party started after cocktails. I remember spending days on my costume.

Peter Sellers doing Toulouse-Lautrec in The Revenge of the Pink Panther. The most difficult part was getting the dang shoes to stay strapped on my knees. After several rounds of Chivas Regal Kenney pegged it, "Mike, I've got it. You are Mike Medley - doing Peter Sellers - doing Inspector Clouseau - doing Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec." Even I hadn't thought it through that far!

The first songs I worked on as Mr. Kenney's voice student were Brahms' Vier Ernste Gesänge. I remember what he said. It went something like this, "You have to experience a lot of life to be able to sing these songs. I'm going to teach you how to rehearse and perform them. And then you're going to put them away. You will learn what they are about as you get older. They will be there when you need them to be."

I sit here in March 2004 with my Brahms songbook in hand. The opening piece of Vier Ernste Gesänge contains the text, "all have the same breath...all is vanity...everything is made of dust and turns to dust again...there is nothing better than that man should rejoice in his work, for that is his portion." I hope that everyone he touched during his long career realized that above all — except, maybe, for golf— Gene Kenney rejoiced in his work. I am glad and thankful to have had him as a teacher.

## Gene Kenny Remembered by Jana Bullard King Evans

I was so honored when called to write my thoughts about Gene Kenney...that's "Mr. Kenney" as we all knew him. Since graduating from Texas Tech University in 1975, my musical career has spanned over a wide genre of music. I have taught public school choir, directed church choirs, taught private voice lessons, sang on national television for over 13 years on The Nashville Network with every artist imaginable from all styles of music, recorded in the studio and arranged and sang backup vocals on hundreds of hit records for everyone from Garth Brooks, Kenny Rogers, Lorrie Morgan, Clint Black, to Neil Diamond...and sang on many national commercials such as "...and like a good neighbor...State Farm is There"...etc. There has not been one time that I have opened my mouth to sing that I haven't been touched by something Gene Kenney had taught me.

I am sure all his students agree...that he had a gift of teaching. He never professed to be a great singer, or a professor of sort, or a musicologist. So what was he?



I can describe him only as a wonderfully talented human being with a passion for making beautiful music. He knew how to make people FEEL the music. He gave us insight to feelings and passion that we may have never thought before as young musicians. His big glaring beautiful eyes looking thru those thick glasses are etched in my memory forever. I loved his laugh, and I loved him even more when he got so mad that you could feel everyone's heart pounding around you with fear. He truly had the voice of GOD!

Of all the musicians I have had the great fortune to work with, he was the BEST at knowing DYNAMICS, PHRASING, AND INTERPRETATION! The world is a better place because of Gene Kenney...mainly because of the gift he gave us all to stretch and get everything we can out of every single note that we perform as musicians.

And hopefully we will all attempt to share with our peers and students just a taste of what he gave us. He is truly one of the world's most passionate musicians, and I will forever be indebted to him as to what he taught me.

## Gene Kenny Remembered by Eddie Quillin

### Lessons from The Man Behind Those Glasses

Most of what I've learned about choral music and a good deal about life I learned from Gene Kenney. He stands as one of the most memorable, influential men in my history.

My first encounter with Kenney was one about which I knew nothing until after it was over. I was one of the very fortunate high school students to enjoy choir with a Kenney protégé by the name of Bill Cormack. Billy Rex assigned me with a solo for choir contest in our Amarillo, Tascosa High School Boys Glee Club...“Wait for the Wagon”. Only after the performance did Cormack inform me that Kenney was in the audience. Then he introduced us. I 'bout fainted! What was it about those coke-bottle lenses that consumed the courage out of many a cocky kid? Next thing I knew Kenney was calling me to offer me a scholarship to Tech. Lesson #1 – Know and recruit talent whenever and wherever you hear it.

So there I was, a seventeen-year-old freshman, two full hours from Mama, seated in the Tech Choir and the Tech Madrigals. We were preparing for spring tour, swinging through Brownwood and San Angelo and back by way of Odessa. But we couldn't sing in tune to save our bacon. Kenny was so \_\_\_\_\_ed off. "Tenors, for the hundredth time, it's D natural not D half flat!" And then it happened... dumdadumdum- dummmmmmmmm...off came the glasses "If music is worth singing at all, it is worth singing well." "You people have the taste of pigs." "With people like you in public school music, I give it two years." He blustered and blistered us blue. Then he put back on his glasses (which also focused his instruction we came to learn) gave the downbeat and we took another run at it. Lesson #2 - Excellence is worth the hard work it takes to get there. Lesson #3 - Intimidation can be a good thing...healthy fear is not all bad.

That afternoon in Madrigals, with just the eight of us and concentrated Kenney, he looked little old me in the face first. And with both eyes fully filling the frames of those black-rimmed binoculars of his and those salt and pepper eyebrows pinched tightly together Kenny growled, "Quillin, what's the matter with choir?" All I could think about was my intense desire to suck my thumb while I wet my breeches. Praise the Lord; Mary Jane sat right beside me. She flew into Kenney like ugly on a gorilla. (Only two people I've ever known who could get and keep Kenney on the ropes, Mary Jane Rose-Johnson and Harriet Snyder-Koen...I've got the stories.) We were too afraid to sing D natural in choir. Next rehearsal was so different... a different rehearsal hall and a different Kenney. He actually laughed, maybe twice. Lesson #4 - Singing in tune feels great! Lesson #5 - The ability and commitment to exegete your students and come to their rescue is mandatory for a great conductor. (And Gene Kenney is a GREAT conductor.)

On Choir tour that year I got news of the death of my grandfather. Kenney held me in his arms as I cried. Behind those thick lenses was a safe place. Lesson #6 - Great leaders give their heart away to those who will follow. Lesson #7 - It is okay to be dangerous if you are also good.

Years later, leaving Tech was really tough. Though I enjoyed successes in my school years, the future with a new wife, Mary Dirks-Quillin, and a baby daughter was unclear. Kenney was one voice I sought for advice and confirmation. He encouraged me to reach for what I thought was beyond my ability. Lesson #8 - Launch your students well; bless them for their journey.

Ornery as you were then, and I understand you are still, you are one man God has used to equip me for my life calling as a pastor. Thank you Mr. Gene Kenney,

my teacher, my mentor, my encourager, and my friend. Thank you for showing me the heart of a great man. Lessons learned.

Gene Kenny Remembered  
by Richard Snyder  
New Mexico Music Educator's Hall of Fame '00

Gene Kenny taught me more about musicianship than any other Tech professor did! I still rely heavily on not only the knowledge he imparted to us but the "nasty boy" attitude he gave us each and every day. I continue to give the "Kenny stare" over the top of my glasses to any student who "dares call himself a musician..." when they screw something up.

I somehow escaped his wrath as an undergraduate, but when I took grad level choral conducting he reamed me out royally one day: The assignment was to review a performance of ELIJAH given by the Tech Choir with maybe 1st Prez or 1st Meth choir. I really thought the work was "sappy" and I told him so in the report...especially after doing Faure and Mozart's Requiems and Carmina Burana as a member of Tech Singers. I don't quite remember all the words of his tirade, but it was in a graduate level class and I was completely humiliated. He made a man out of me!

Gene Kenny Remembered  
by Mary Jane Johnson

I remember the time I sang with Sir George Solti in 1983 in Chicago and I called Gene Kenney on the phone from there and said, " Well, Kenney, I have finally met your match". To this very day, I thank God for Gene Kenney. I have had quite a history with my mentor and friend. Of course, all of us that were under his musicianship think of him as our friend and mentor. He is the very age my father would be if he was still alive and I have always thought of him in that way, as a second father. There have been three main men in my life---my father, my husband, and Gene Kenney.

When he was recruiting me for Texas Tech in 1968, he would call my father every day and try to convince him that Tech was the place for me. When I went on a recruiting trip to TCU and returned home and got off the plane, I looked at my dad and said, "I am going to Tech!" My dad said, "Thank God, Gene Kenney has been

calling me all weekend, driving me crazy.” You see Tech needed an alto in the choir and I had been an All-state alto for two years and Kenney and been watching me for that long.

He put me in the Tech Choir, next to a really smart senior who could read the notes off the page. I didn't know what all this meant at the time, but I did know that I was involved in something so special and I got to be involved in this adventure for the next four years. Who would ever know that I could possibly accomplish the musical achievements ahead of me? I owe a lot of people a lot of things, but I owe my musical passion and love for this art to Gene Kenney. Thank you for being you, Kenney, and thank you for giving so many of us part of you and your love for music.

## Gene Kenny Remembered by Ken Fulton

I sang under Gene Kenney only twice. The first time was as a member of the West Texas Choir Directors Chorus that sang for the TCDA Convention around 1970 (made up of high school choir directors in West Texas - after my singing audition, I was “elected” to be librarian for that chorus). The second and final time was as a member of the Texas Tech Chorus for a performance of Belshazzar’s Feast by William Walton when I was working on my Ph.D. at Texas Tech.

While my “singing” time was relatively brief, my “learning” time spanned over thirty years. I first became acquainted with him as a tenor in Tennie Thompson’s Sophomore Choir at Amarillo High School and Mr. Kenney was the conductor of the junior and senior singers at that same school and later as a young high school choir conductor at Perryton High School and Coronado High School in Lubbock where Kenney later became Director of Choirs at Texas Tech University. I did both my MM and Ph.D. at Tech and had the great privilege of studying with him during that time.

All of us who worked around him have our “Kenney” legends. Studying with him was akin to a rite of passage and you couldn’t overcome your musical puberty unless you were “baptized” in the Kenney fire (although there was no body paint involved at all!). He was a fierce and demanding adversary in rehearsal and the singers worked under constant and unrelenting pressure. He expected perfection from the first reading to the performance and certainly wasn’t reluctant to share his opinion of your contribution (or lack of it) with you and the rest of the chorus. As I

did my residency for my doctorate, I was simply an observer for each rehearsal with the Tech Choir and even then as an observer, I felt obligated to be ready to contribute when he called for it.

One simply didn't come unprepared for the rehearsal and while there, you didn't dare to leave any powers of musical problem solving somewhere else! Kenney wore thick glasses (we secretly referred to them as his "bottle-bottoms!!"), which tended to exaggerate the actual size of his eyes to the point where, even though he was facing the other side of the choir, you would swear that he was glaring straight at you on the opposite side of the room. When Kenney drew those glasses slowly and deliberately down to the end of his nose, the room became very silent very quickly - everyone knew what was coming. You loved your friends, but in these times you loved yourself more and you prayed it was them and not you that was about to be selected for public examination.

Often during those rehearsals and classes, I wondered at times why we put ourselves through that. Yet we absolutely adored him and couldn't wait for more! ! Now, in retrospect, I think have a much clearer picture of these mysterious rituals of the "Kenney-ites." As I reviewed my old 331/3 RPM's in preparation for writing this, I was reminded that the repertoire list for the Texas Tech Choir in Lubbock, Texas circa 1960-1975 reads like a Who's Who in composers and literature. Composers like Arnold Schoenberg, Ernst Pepping, Ernst Krenek, Johannes Brahms, Franz Schubert, George Rochberg, Robert Schumann, J.S. Bach, Benjamin Britten, Giovanni Gabrieli, and Giovanni Palestrina to name only a few, appear on those record jackets with some of their most difficult and challenging works. Yet, as I listened, for the first time in many years, to those scratchy old recordings, the quality and integrity of the interpretive process and the sensuousness of the choral sound remain as impressive to me as the day they were recorded. That's the secret. That's why we came back over and over again for his advice, wisdom, and learning. He taught us not by word, but through "doing" to always maintain the highest artistic and creative standards!! The quality which he demanded in rehearsal and performance, as well as in the literature which he selected to be performed HAD to be of the highest artistic integrity. There were NO compromises allowed - you simply rose to the occasion. And in so doing, your aesthetic and musical values were so expanded and enriched that it became inevitable that you would begin your own search for the great musical literature and the accompanying spiritual rewards. It is the nature of this "beast" that we are constantly trying to conquer, that one doesn't always reach one's musical and aesthetic goals.

And in the end, it's also difficult to determine which has been more meaningful, the search or the occasional "mountain-top" experience. But finally, one has to realize that it was the sum total of all those musical journey experiences that has made our musical and human existence, to quote a popular commercial, "priceless!" That's why I have such admiration, love, and respect for Gene Kenney. That's what he gave us who were lucky enough to have been around him - a life filled with an affiliation of the highest and most significant experiences humanity can produce. Thank you Kenney - you gave me the means to enrich my life and those around me beyond belief!

## Gene Kenny Remembered by Glenda Casey

GENE KENNEY...just to think the name evokes a multitude of memories and emotions. The name is also synonymous with many other names in my mind such as fanatic, tyrant, intimidator, conductor, musician, mentor and friend. There are numerous tales and experiences that could be told here; however, I will share only a few!

As Gene Kenney, the fanatic, Mr. Kenney was marked by his excessive enthusiasm and often intense devotion to what was stylistically appropriate and correct. If J.S. Bach could award one person for the interpretation and conducting of his music, it would be Gene Kenney. He served all music with a passion and demanded it from the singers as well. I made a "C" in choral conducting under his tutelage because I am left-handed. In Kenney's opinion, dominant left-hand conducting was not appropriate or correct, and he ordered me to keep my left hand behind my back! The next semester, I made an "A" in orchestral conducting, with baton in left hand; however, I believe it was because Dr. Ellsworth thought I would never choose to be an orchestral guru anyway!

As Gene Kenney, the tyrant, the man demanded uncompromising superiority in the performance of his music. I recall a time in a choral rehearsal when the choir could not achieve the sound and musical effect he had in his heart, ear and head. He was relentless in his pursuit for the perfect outcome, and I think we stayed on the first page of the work for two weeks! Then, there was the coke bottle (back in the days when cokes came only in bottles!) incident—some brainless person brought a coke into the choir room and preceded to kick the bottle over in the middle of rehearsal. Kenney closed his music, the "stare" emerged over the top of

his “coke-bottle-bottom” glasses, and the tirade began. The rehearsal had ended, but the “lesson” had started for the rest of the class period.

As Gene Kenney, the intimidator, one would have to be taken back to the “stare”. That stare over the glasses was merciless. The look went inside you rather than at you. It could take you to the depth of embarrassment or the height of euphoria with the words or the silence that might follow. The anxiety came with trying to guess which one it would be!

As Gene Kenney, the conductor, one never had to guess what his gestures and expressions meant. He was an artful, articulate, elegant, and sensitive master at conducting the performers. The hands, face, body and spirit spoke to all that had the privilege of working under his direction.

As Gene Kenney, the musician, his ability and soul for the art of musical presentation are difficult to verbalize. My husband, Jim Casey, says, “He had an uncanny sense of taking the written page and bringing music to us in the unique Gene Kenney way. He was always willing to share his talent and genius with anyone—especially those of us who were fledglings and were clueless”! I take the position that having facility of the basic skills of musicianship does not make a musician. Mr. Kenney’s gift of interpretation and inner knowing of what is beautiful created the need, not just the desire, for musical experiences throughout the lives of those he touched.

As Gene Kenney, mentor and friend, he was a master of his art and served his students as professor, teacher, advisor, counselor, and comrade. He observed and had insight into the direction his students might or should go with their musical careers. I was never one of Kenney's star singers, but he recognized in me some potential as a music educator. Near graduation to earn my bachelor's degree, he took me to his side and asked me if I wanted to sing in his choir or teach. My answer was “teach”. Within a week, I was interviewing for my first job as a teacher of choral music because of his recommendation and influence. Two years later, after a successful performance by one of my choirs at the Southwest Music Festival in Amarillo, Kenney came up to me, hugged me, and said (with a grin on his face), “Where did you get your education?” That was his personal way of acknowledging approval and granting credibility.

From Jim – Kenney always had time for you. One of the greatest gifts you can give a person is your full and undivided attention. He never failed to do that when any

of us needed his expertise, opinion, or advice. I will always respect and admire him for his contribution to my musical insight and career.

From Glenda – Kenney had an incredible influence on my life and career as a music educator. The following quote came from the eulogy of the late Dr. Hugh Sanders: “He did not use people to make music. He used music to make people”. What a beautiful thought and tribute! Those words, in my heart, constituted the ultimate compliment for those of us who strive to be the very best we can as choral musicians and teachers. I feel it more than appropriate, deserving, and a privilege to pass those words on to Gene Kenney. I am one of those “people” he was instrumental in molding through his music.

## Gene Kenney Remembered by J. W. Neuenschwander

Gene Kenney is the principal reason I majored in music. Our first meeting was in 1965. I was a freshman at Tech majoring in pre-dental. It was the night of the Festival of Carols held on the Texas Tech campus each December. Several men from the dorm in which I was living had combined with the ladies of another dorm to perform some simple songs for that event. When our songs were done, there was a tug on my pants leg and a man with a rather gruff, authoritative, deep voice said, “Why aren’t you in choir?” Being my usual red-headed, not easily intimidated self, I replied, “I am taking 19 hours and simply do not have time for choir.” And that was that...I thought.

One day during the second semester when I had finished a particularly difficult chemistry exam I began to wonder exactly what I was trying to do with my life. I remembered Mr. Kenney’s question and it seemed to make sense. I asked myself, “Why aren’t you in choir?” I had played trumpet and French horn in high school and was enjoying the Tech Marching Band playing trumpet and playing French horn during concert season. I had a wonderful experience in choir in high school for the only semester my schedule would allow. I immediately turned right and headed for the music building. I found Mr. Kenney and became a Music Major.

I sang with the Tech Singers the first year and then auditioned for Tech Choir and was fortunate to sing in that elite group for two years. During those years I was fortunate to watch Mr. Kenney conduct and work with the choirs. He was an immaculate and fluid director. As he conducted the choir you understood exactly what he wanted. He was very demanding. Someone once said that music is an



unforgiving art. I do believe that is true and Mr. Kenney was an unforgiving director. He was true to the music and expected everyone to have the same passion as he did for each piece of music we performed.

Since he was so demanding, there were times when Mr. Kenney would get frustrated at our efforts. When it was your section's turn in the 'hot seat' you were in for a very, very long day!!! Not only was Mr. Kenney's voice intimidating, but also his GLARE could be quite un-nerving. I am near-sighted and can see things up close without any difficulty, but really need my glasses to help get things in focus when they are at a distance. When Mr. Kenney started in on the tenors, I would take off my glasses. I could not see him clearly and could concentrate on what he was 'saying' without any thought that he was staring at ME!!!

I have the utmost respect for Mr. Kenney. I think he was musically brilliant. He had an innate musical talent, but he also worked and studied continually to improve. I think that was his greatest gift; his undying desire to learn and improve. If anyone was trying to follow his example, they would have to be willing to spend many hours, days, months and years of study to reach his level.

## Gene Kenney Remembered by Randy Jordan

He stood no taller than 5'8", and I towered over him at 6'2", but he still remains the most intimidating man I ever met. The coke-bottle thick lenses of his glasses made it impossible for you to be able to tell which direction he was looking whenever he was casting his glare of consternation over the choir. He could seemingly be looking straight at you while leveling the soprano section at the same time. He usually saved his most vitriolic attacks for the beleaguered sopranos. He was Gene Kenney, choir director for Texas Tech University, and I learned more from watching his hands than any other person in the profession. He was my mentor, and he barely even knew me. I seriously doubt he remembers me at all.

I guess you could say that you felt in good company when he sought you out during a rehearsal to berate; at least you knew he saved no one from his wrath, and that you had caught his attention. He had the classic look of an arched eyebrow over his glasses, frequently taking the glasses off to sweep his hand through his thick graying hair to express some frustration or displeasure. I imitated both of those maneuvers and incorporated them into my rehearsal scheme. Unfortunately,

my hair is now graying, but not thick. Now my students imitate those same moves. Kenney lives on, whether he knows it or not.

It was under Kenney that I experienced my first performance at TMEA in Fort Worth. We were to sing before a nationally known collegiate group (I will not mention) whom everyone was looking forward to hearing. We did the Lamentations of Jeremiah by Ginastera, which the following group also had programmed. The group that followed us dropped it from their program. Kenney beamed. I began to understand what it meant to “experience” a choral performance. Where I came from, there had been four different choir directors in four different years at my high school, all of whom were coincidentally the adult choir directors at the First Baptist Church. Baptists and choir directors were a dime a dozen in my town, but good music was a rarity.

Shortly after I gave up my dream to become the next John Denver (took me almost two whole weeks to figure that one out) I decided to try my luck at acting, and changed my major to drama. While walking down the sidewalk away from the theater department pondering my dismal failure at becoming the next Robert Redford, I ran into Kenney. In the course of the discussion about my fate, he mentioned that he thought I had the ability and the gestures to make a good choral director. That changed everything. I would become a choral director. Twenty-nine years later, I haven’t looked back.

I’ll be the first to admit that I have rarely had an original thought when it comes to every musical thing I have ever taught. I have stolen most, if not all, of my ideas from someone else. 90% of all I have ever taught still comes from watching Gene Kenney’s hands. Maybe one day I’ll do Lamentations. Thanks, Kenney.