

Swalin, Maxine McMahon ^[1]

Swalin, Maxine McMahon [Martha Maxine]

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See also: [Swalin, Benjamin Franklin](#) ^[2]; [North Carolina Symphony](#) ^[3]

Maxine Swalin, with her husband Dr. Benjamin F. Swalin, revived a floundering [North Carolina Symphony](#) ^[3] in the late 1930s and built it into an organization that became nationally known for its innovative music education programs and is recognized today as one of America's rising symphony orchestras.

A native of Iowa, Martha Maxine McMahon received early training in music and art in Des Moines. In 1928, she graduated from the Institute of Musical Art (later called the Juilliard School) in New York with a diploma in theory and piano. She was awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Iowa in 1932 and received a Master's degree from Radcliffe College in 1936.

After marrying Dr. Swalin in 1935, the couple moved to Chapel Hill, where Ben taught in the music department at the University of North Carolina. They soon learned that the North Carolina Symphony, established in 1932 by Lamar Stringfield, was struggling for survival following Stringfield's departure from the state and the loss of federal funds. In 1937, the Swalins moved to revive the orchestra as a permanent institution to enrich the state culturally and to bring music to all its citizens, especially schoolchildren.

In 1939, with the help of [Paul Green](#) ^[4], [Joseph Hyde Pratt](#) ^[5] and others, the Swalins succeeded in reorganizing the North Carolina Symphony Society, with Ben Swalin as the unpaid director. At his side was Maxine, who played the celesta, the piano and served as an accompanist to soloists. She also became coordinator of music education programs with Mrs. Adeline McCall and later became executive assistant to the director of the orchestra.

Dr. H. G. Jones, former secretary of the North Caroliniana Society and retired curator of the North Carolina Collection at UNC Library pointed out that "executive assistant was a modest description of Maxine Swalin's role in the growth of the orchestra for she was instrumental in the organization of local chapters that arranged for concerts throughout the state and she handled virtually all of the business arrangements as the orchestra grew in size and recognition."

In 1943, the passage of the [Horn-Tootin' Bill](#) ^[1] created an annual appropriation from the general fund and the North Carolina Assembly officially recognized the nation's first state Symphony orchestra. From that point on, public support grew but fund-raising was always a vital consideration to the Swalins.

Under Ben Swalin's conductorship and Maxine Swalin's astute management, the Symphony gained recognition and conducted thousands of concerts, often in makeshift settings, throughout North Carolina. A \$1 million grant from the Ford Foundation in 1966 led to raising an additional \$2 million and when the Swalins retired in 1972, the state could boast of a national treasure.

The story of the orchestra's growth was told in Ben Swalin's book, *Hard-Circus Road: The Odyssey of the North Carolina Symphony*, published in 1987. Dr. Swalin died in 1989. Later, in 1996, Maxine Swalin authored a second book about the Symphony, *An Ear to Myself*.

Untold thousands of adults across North Carolina still treasure childhood memories of the North Carolina Symphony visiting their school. In town after town, Maxine Swalin spoke to the excited children before a performance and introduced them to the sound of the various instruments. She took pride in the fact that many student musicians who had the opportunity to perform as soloists with the visiting symphony went on to professional careers in music.

On her 100th birthday in 2003, Maxine Swalin received the [North Caroliniana Society Award](#) ^[6], which annually recognizes a North Carolinian who has made extraordinary contributions to the state's history, literature and culture. That same year, the North Carolina Symphony announced its first annual Maxine Swalin Outstanding Music Educator Award. The award recognizes "an individual who instills and inspires a love of music in North Carolina children," as did Maxine.

In 2005, she was among three recipients of UNC-CH's first annual lifetime achievement award for the performing arts, along with Broadway, ballet and orchestra composer Richard Adler and legendary film and television star [Andy Griffith](#) ^[7]. She also received the 1989 North Carolina Award for Public Service, the highest honor the state of North Carolina can bestow, "for her four decades of pioneering activity in support of the programs of the North Carolina Symphony." In 1979, she was recipient of an honorary doctorate of humane letters from Duke University for her many contributions to music and music education.

The lobby of Raleigh's Meymandi Concert Hall, home of the North Carolina Symphony since 2001, is dedicated to Ben and Maxine Swalin. At the West end of the lobby sits a statue of the two inscribed with these words by the late North Carolina statesman Terry Sanford: "But for Ben Swalin, the North Carolina Symphony would not be. But for Maxine, Ben would not have prevailed. Bravo!"

"Maxine represented all that is wonderful about our North Carolina Symphony," said David Chambless Worters, President and CEO of the orchestra. "She lovingly and painstakingly grew the organization from essentially nothing, and together with her husband Ben built these traditions of statewide service and music education that we cherish today. Thousands upon thousands of volunteers were drawn into the Symphony world because of the relentless work of the Swalins. It was an honor to know Maxine and consider her a friend. We're grateful for her tremendous contributions to the cultural life throughout the State of North Carolina."

Update from Government & Heritage Library Staff:

Benjamin Swalin predeceased Maxine Swalin, passing away in 1989.

References:

North Carolina Symphony. "Music Educator Awards." November 30, 2021. <https://www.ncsymphony.org/education/music-educator-awards/> [8]

Additional Resources:

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Swalin, Maxine M., H. G. Jones, William C. Friday, Willis P. Whichard, and John L. Humber. 2003. *Coming of age in North Carolina's fifth century*. Chapel Hill: North Caroliniana Society.

Swalin, Maxine M. 1996. *An ear to myself*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: The Author.

Benjamin F. Swalin and Maxine M. Swalin Papers #4962, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <https://finding-aids.lib.unc.edu/04962/> [9]

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Years:

1903-2009

28 February 2017

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