

DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI AWARD

Nick Strimple '69

Associate Professor of Choral and Sacred Music, University of Southern California
Director of Music, Beverly Hills Presbyterian Church Los Angeles, California

CLAIM TO FAME: It may seem unlikely that a kid from Amarillo would grow up to be a renowned expert on music of the Holocaust. But from Dr. Nick Strimple's point of view, it all makes sense. Well, once you throw Jimmy Stewart into the mix.

IN THE PANHANDLE: Strimple's father was in the grocery business; his mom stayed home until Strimple was in junior high, when she went to work as a medical secretary. A self-described "lazy student," Strimple barely missed graduating with honors from high school and Baylor. As a child, he was fascinated with the history of World War II. His uncle was highly decorated in the war, and Strimple spent hours reading a set of books his parents bought titled *Pictorial History of World War II*. "Instead of doing math homework, I was either out playing ball or living in those books," he said. Or going to church. His family was at First Baptist Amarillo for one reason or another every day but Friday.

AN EARLY MUSICIAN: Everyone in Strimple's family read music and sang, and he took private music lessons for the flute as a child. But a revelation came when his fourth-grade music teacher, Bernice Parrott, gave a lesson on Mozart, explaining that he started writing music as a child. "She played up the idea that he was writing this great music when he was our age," Strimple remembered. "I thought that if he could do that, then I can do that." Strimple started writing that year, and by the tenth grade the school orchestra was performing his

pieces. "I was just compelled to do it," he said. Former U.S. ambassador to Sweden Lyndon Olson '69, a friend of Strimple's from Baylor, saw all the obvious talent in his fellow student. "He was one of those people you just thought was going to have an interesting life," Olson said.

MANY VOICES: After earning a Master of Music degree in church music and a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in choral music from the University of Southern California, Strimple landed a job at Beverly Hills Presbyterian Church, a position he still holds. One year, Strimple asked the congregation's most famous member, Jimmy Stewart, to read *The Christmas Story* as part of a Christmas concert. That led to a popular tradition, a TV Christmas special, and a meeting with a record producer who introduced Strimple to the pop group Air Supply. Strimple arranged the group's Christmas album and other music for two years, afterward working in the same capacity for Frank Sinatra, Rod Stewart, and others. Around the same time, he began a successful career as a guest conductor with symphony orchestras in Europe. On one trip to Prague, he found himself engulfed in the music of the Holocaust—the songs sung in the ghettos and concentration camps, as well as pieces written by Jews during and after the time. "There are places where vocal music is really a very integral part of people's culture, an extension of language," said Strimple, author of the book *Choral Music in the Twentieth Century* and co-author of the book *Jewish Resistance to the Nazis*.