



A Historical Narrative of the Columbus Symphony Orchestra

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Columbus has been home to several performance and symphonic music organizations since the 1800s. Between the 1800s and 1950, a number of symphony orchestras were founded, existed awhile but then became extinct. Most notable of these was the Columbus Philharmonic from 1941 – 1949 under the direction of Izler Solomon. This Philharmonic achieved a national reputation for excellence. The Lazarus & Wolfe families (of Lazarus Department Stores and The Columbus Dispatch) were primary sponsors of the Philharmonic. Unfortunately, after Solomon's departure and after its annual fund drive was unable to meet its goal, causing a large deficit of over \$18,000, the Columbus Philharmonic shut its doors in 1949. As one supporter described it, "true symphony devotees were experiencing pangs of regret and music hunger." The symphony hall in Columbus went dark, but not for long.

Thanks to the Women's Association of the Philharmonic, the story does not end here. Without the tireless efforts of this Women's Association, present-day residents of Columbus and Central Ohio may not have been able to enjoy the present-day Columbus Symphony Orchestra whose roots trace directly back to these women's efforts. They refused to let their dream die - Columbus would have its own symphony orchestra. They devoted themselves to raising money towards that end. Card parties, fashion shows, teas and other various projects continued.

The Women's Association was subdivided into geographical units of greater Columbus. An extension of the Women's Association – the Young Associates – also continued after the dissolution of the Philharmonic and established the Interlocken Scholarship Fund. It enabled talented young people to attend a summer music camp in Interlocken, Michigan in 1950 and 1951.

In 1950 and 1951, there were approximately 500 – 600 symphony orchestras in the U.S., but Columbus, then the 28th largest city, did not have one. In 1951, former Philharmonic musician George Hardesty (with encouragement from Theron McClure and William Poland) began looking for musicians who could play in a small, re-organized orchestra. He assembled an orchestra of 28 musicians to play a single, sample concert on May 6, 1951 at the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Museum. The Women's Association was so pleased with what they heard that they continued the music by presenting a series of five concerts – the first held on November 11, 1951 at Central High School in downtown Columbus. Mayor James A. Rhodes gave the welcoming address.

This series began the first regular season of the Columbus Little Symphony. That same year, the Young Associates investigated the possibility of the Little Symphony presenting young people's concerts. However, financial concerns were raised unless an orchestra could be established. Thus, a constitution

was drafted for the Little Symphony, and incorporation followed in 1952. The young people's concerts began a tradition of educational programming that continues in today's Columbus Symphony Orchestra. The 1951 budget was approximately \$13,000. According to a report by Mrs. Montcastle, Women's Association President, she states, "We started the 1951-52 season with \$7,000. The cost for the season was between \$12,000-\$13,000 and we ended the season in the black with \$5,925."

When George Hardesty was unable to continue his work for the entire 1952-53 season, a search for a new conductor yielded Henry Mazer, conductor of the Wheeling (WV) Symphony. After finishing this season, he returned to Wheeling and also became conductor of the Florida Symphony Orchestra at Orlando. During this time, the Symphony moved its concerts from Central High School to Mees Hall of Capital University, and a new conductor from New York started this task – Claude Monteux, son of renowned Pierre Monteux. Monteux took a special interest in ensuring that the orchestra performed for the youth of the community. The School Ensemble concerts were initiated under his suggestion. The orchestra continued to grow, and he conducted the first rehearsals of the newly formed Youth Orchestra in 1955. In 1955, the Columbus Little Symphony officially became the Columbus Symphony Orchestra. In 1956, an extra Board session was called by Women's Association President Mrs. Beth O'Brien as it was announced that Mr. Monteux had resigned. His photo had already been printed on brochures and the next season was soon to begin at Veterans Memorial. The vacancy was announced and over 80 applications were received. In June, 1956, the Board voted to hire Evan Whallon to fill the position, who at that time was conductor of the Springfield, Ohio Symphony.

From its founding until the spring of 1961, CSO was unique among other symphonies throughout the country – it was governed entirely by women! From 1951 to 1956 there was not even a manager simply because there were not enough funds to employ one. President Beth O'Brien's breakfast room was literally turned into the Symphony's administrative office! Duties included, among others, selecting concert series, paying musicians, printing programs and tickets, arranging musicians for each concert, arranging for tour concerts, and approving arrangements with the Musicians Union Local 103. Awards were offered for the selling of season subscriptions. In 1960, the all-volunteer Columbus Symphony Chorus was organized. Mrs. Helen Thompson, Executive Vice-President of the American Symphony Orchestra League visited Columbus in 1960 and presented to the Board of Directors the result of her research – that it was time to consider bringing men into the Board and creating a separate Women's Association. The annual meeting that year, held at the Southern Hotel, established a Board of Trustees and a separate Women's Association with overall authority given to the Trustees. As to be expected, there were questions and emotions around the issue, but everything overall worked out well with the meeting culminating in a new Code of Regulations as well as the election of new Trustees who had already expressed a willingness to serve. Additionally, the Chairman of the Board remained a woman – Mrs. Frank W. Bentley. The next day, one newspaper's headline read, "Columbus Symphony Goes Co-educational." The next year saw a continuing interest and more leadership positions held by men in the community. One notable and exciting event for early Trustees was in 1966 when Chairman A.F. Miller was interviewed by the Ford Foundation and submitted a petition of \$600,000 which was in turn granted to the CSO.

One of many notable achievements of Music Director Evan Whallon was helping to save the Ohio Theatre. In the late 1960s, many community leaders felt it should be demolished because of its state of decline. However, Whallon and the CSO Board believed it to be an important cultural icon and asset to

Columbus. As a result, in 1970 (the year of its 20th anniversary season), the Symphony moved its concerts from Veterans Memorial to the Ohio Theatre. This effort along with the forming of the Columbus Association for the Performing Arts preserved the great Ohio Theatre where present-day goers to the Symphony and other arts activities can enjoy its enchanting architecture and ambience. During the 1970s, a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts helped CSO to produce *The Barber of Seville*, and thus, CSO was one of a few orchestras in the country that was also producing opera. By 1980, the “Columbus Symphony Opera” was presenting three fully-staged productions a year. Whallon and his wife, Jean, also helped to establish Columbus’ professional dance company, BalletMet.

Also during the 1970s, a \$1- million grant from the Battelle Foundation made it possible for the CSO to hire full- time musicians for the first time, helping to achieve a higher quality of performance than ever before. By 1981, as the Symphony celebrated its 30th anniversary, it had grown from three concerts in its first season to a nine-concert symphonic series, three pops concerts, a chamber orchestra and ensemble series, more than 200 educational programs and three major outdoor pops concerts! The Women’s Association and other volunteers remained active in helping to raise funds as financial needs grew with the Symphony as well. In 1975, the CSO’s 25th anniversary season, the Annual Fund Drive goal was set at \$225,000. By 1980, the goal doubled to \$500,000. They also assisted in various efforts including a popular “Lectures of Notes” series fundraiser where notable people such as Alex Haley participated. In 1981, the Columbus Symphony Orchestra League was formed as an additional fundraising organization that has raised over \$1 million – accomplished during the 25th anniversary year of its founding! The first \$400,000 was endowed for the Harp Chair and other funds have been utilized for concerts, the Music Library, purchasing instruments and various items for running a Symphony office.

Other historical notes of interest:

- In 1967, the CSO and its Chorus were conducted by legendary composer Igor Stravinsky in a concert of his works.
- In 1983, the CSO held its first Picnic with the Pops series on the lawn of Chemical Abstracts with 2,000 people attending. Romanian-born conductor Christian Badea begins his 9-year tenure as Music Director.
- In 1988, CSO’s recording with Roger Sessions is nominated for a Grammy for Best Contemporary Composition.
- In 1991, Italian-born conductor Alessandro Siciliani begins his 12-year tenure as Music Director.
- In 2000, a young singer, Charlotte Church, made her Midwestern debut with the Columbus Symphony.
- In 2006, Japanese-born Junichi Hirokami was chosen as the seventh Music Director of the CSO.

The following people contributed to this narrative:

Muriel and Allen Gundersheimer, Frances Thurman, Beth O’Brien, Kay Graf, Lois Allen, Janet Wade, Sue Inglis.

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