

THE SAN JOSE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA:
THE SYMPHONY THAT COULD

An Essay
Presented to
the California Pioneers
of Santa Clara County

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Title</u>	<u>Page</u>
INTRODUCTION	1
THE YOUNG SYMPHONY	2
WAR AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION	5
THE SYMPHONY'S REORGANIZATION	8
A NEW MAESTRO AND THE 1950s	10
AN ERA OF PROGRESS	12
1960s	16
1970s AND BEYOND	18
CONCLUSION	22
NOTES	23
BIBLIOGRAPHY	24

INTRODUCTION

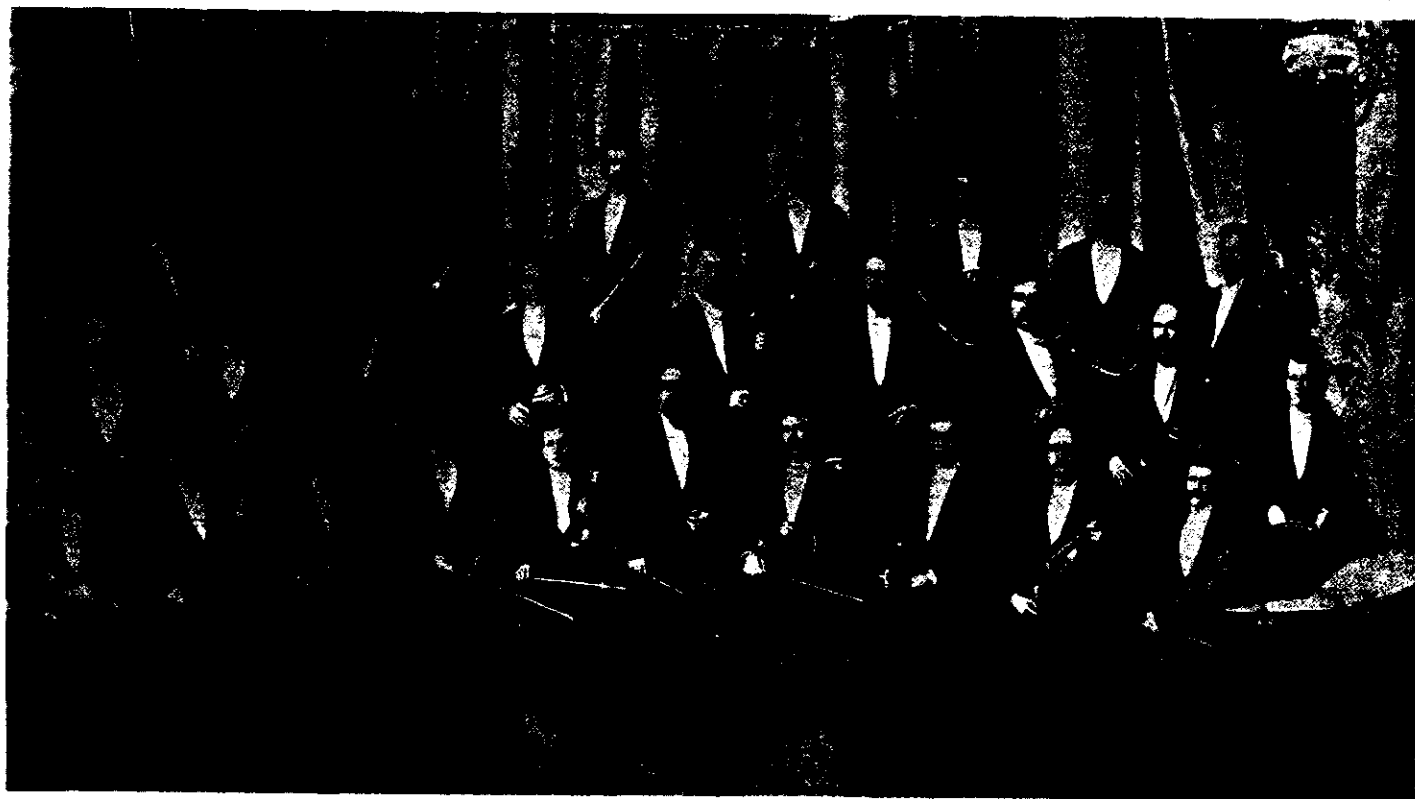
The San Jose Symphony Orchestra has played a large part in the cultural history of this fine municipality of San Jose, and in conjunction with the growth of the city, the orchestra has evolved from a small community ensemble to a locally celebrated musical organization. California's oldest orchestra and one of the first few symphonic institutions established in the United States, the San Jose Symphony has survived for over a century. Battling constant financial problems, periods of low membership, crises of war, and even the Great Depression, the symphony now stands as a symbol of perseverance and dedication as well as a source of musical enjoyment. This symphony that dared to be different has a colorful past filled with trials and tribulations and triumphs. From its small, initial form it has matured into an outstanding professional orchestra.

THE YOUNG SYMPHONY

In the 1860s, the roots of what was to be the San Jose Symphony manifested itself. In its initial stage, it was referred to as a "musical aggregation". This primitive configuration of the orchestra was mainly composed of instrumentalists from local theaters, music halls, and the area's four colleges. The instruments the musicians played showed the diversity in the character of the young, amateur group and its members. These instruments included the accordion and the harmonica which now would not be cast as part of a symphony orchestra.

Though the earliest specks of the symphony are traced back to the 1860s, the official birthdate of the orchestra is dated from the 1879 foundation of the San Jose Orchestral Society. Despite the newly-founded organization and new name, the post-1879 group couldn't be considered a symphony orchestra. The group didn't give regularly scheduled concerts. Instead, as described by a local newspaper, "...the San Jose musicians usually acted as small pickup groups playing in music halls and theaters, often accompanying visiting artists."

The first formal picture recording the symphony's dignified affiliation was achieved in 1892, less than twenty years after its formation. In company with the photo is an amusing legend which in itself is a special chapter in the history of the symphony. Entrusted with the task of taking this historical photograph were the Loryea Brothers on South Second Street. And the task proved to be quite a challenge to them. The first obstacle the photographers faced was brought about by the symphony organization's wish to have the picture taken with the musicians in full dress. Not one of the men owned a suit or formal garment, and no suits were to be found in San Jose until it was discovered that Leopold Hart, founder of Hart Department Stores, possessed the lone white tie and tails available in the city.



The Loryea Brothers adroitly posed the musicians individually, each taking his turn with his instrument in the single tux. One symphony player was even photographed lying in his sickbed. With the aid of scissors and paste the separate snapshots were pieced together into the symphony's "solitary suit"² photograph.

The symphony was extremely popular at that point in history and in the immediate years thereafter.

"In its heyday near the turn of the century [the symphony] was playing to capacity audiences who, according to a historian of the period 'were not deterred by the two dollar and fifty cent ticket cost.'"³

Fans of the classics throughout San Jose and its surrounding communities always looked forward to the symphony's concerts with a great amount of interest and excitement.

WAR AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The San Jose Symphony encountered its first crisis with the coming of World War I. While U.S. servicemen went to do battle for their country, the symphony, at that time a community orchestra, was left in a state of uncertainty. The war put a halt to whatever musical activities there might have existed. The symphony was in actuality still alive and present, but didn't perform regular concerts during that period. The next appearance of an organized orchestra was in 1937 when the San Jose Civic Symphony began delivering concerts. Symphony concerts were made free to the public that season and this policy was continued for approximately ten years. The city had assisted in the establishment of this service by putting money aside especially for that purpose.

Whatever problems the first world war had instigated on the symphony they were mild in comparison to the difficulties aroused by the Great Depression of the 1930s. The impact of the Depression was so severe that the symphony organization (which was in hiatus) was sent reeling. Continuation of the orchestra was in serious financial jeopardy. But a persistent symphony association came through, instituting a "Dollar a Year" membership drive, and the symphony was back on its feet.

The 1940s proved to be a climatic and taxing decade in the history of the symphony as well as the history of the world. Much of the blame for that could be placed on the events of World War II. The symphony faced the regular problems of inadequate funding and inservicability of musicians, but it was the preoccupation of the U.S. in the war that proved to be the most difficult matter to overcome. Concerts were performed through 1940 and 1941 with Willem Van den Burg and Charles Richards sharing the role of the maestro. The programs tended to be light in content. The 1941-42 season was cut short when the bombing of Pearl Harbor shocked the nation and propelled the U.S. into the world conflict.

Following the United States' formal announcement of war, there was a heightening movement in the civilian war effort and many symphony members joined the fighting forces as well. That, along with President Roosevelt's requisition to abridge all activities not directly pertinent to the war effort, resulted in the "temporary disbandment"⁴ of the symphony. During the war years, all cultural activities in San Jose were definitively reduced or eradicated. As the world came to an agreement for peace and the war came to an end, the San Jose community sensed a broadening cultural void.

"In fact concern had manifested itself as early as January 18, 1944, when the Music Committee of the Citizen's Planning Council of Greater San Jose held an organizational meeting at Hotel St. Claire. At that meeting, the Music Committee initiated an inquiry into the possible reorganization of the symphony. Although no reactivation of the symphony was initiated at that time, a rekindling interest was experienced which ultimately resulted in its reorganization."5

THE SYMPHONY'S REORGANIZATION

Leaders of the San Jose community reorganized the symphony in 1946 following a two-year reprieve. Edward Azhderian was named the conductor for the first season of the reconstructed symphony, and he fulfilled the reorganizational needs with surprising proficiency. His skill in handling the difficult situation was more of a surprise because the Egyptian born Azhderian was not a professional conductor. He had, however, studied music with men of great musical integrity like Willem Van den Burg, a former music director of the San Jose Symphony in the 30s and early 40s. Edward Azhderian had also been a member of the San Jose Symphony in the years preceding World War II. His experiences as a student and musician prepared him to an adequate degree for his role as a conductor.

To the symphony's advantage, many of the musicians from the pre-war orchestra were back to reassume their positions in the organization. This group of seasoned San Jose Symphony players formed the core of the new orchestra. The difficult part was obtaining competent, qualified musicians to fill the remaining vacancies. Another post war problem was low membership in the symphony association -- the group that accomodated the performing end of the organization with sponsorship and support. Sufficient funding presented yet another obstacle.

The organization appealed to the city council for aid, but they were turned away and sent to seek assistance from the City Recreation Commission. That action occurred when the city settled that symphony concerts were a division of city recreation.

Despite all of the hindrances, a determined San Jose Symphony was able to launch (and finish) its first postwar season. The opening concert was performed by the seventy-six musicians under the direction of Edward Azhderian in the Civic Auditorium. That season, the music was relatively light. In the following year the symphony and its material were significantly more aggressive.

The economic problems which had surfaced with the very first concert of 1946 continued to trouble the symphony through the next season. The organization felt that administering an admissions fee was in order and unavoidable. It was determined that this action was necessary and imperative in aiding the symphony's constantly troubled economy. At the last concert of the 1947 season an admission fee was charged for the first time since 1937.

A NEW MAESTRO AND THE 1950s

At the conclusion of the the concert season in 1947, a new symphony conductor was announced to lead the San Jose Symphony in the next season. The newest director was an Italian by the name of Gastone Usigli, a well-known composer and conductor who only strengthened the orchestra during his short stay (1948-51) as the musical director. Gastone Usigli's aim was to perform works of young American composers. Under his expert direction "the symphony gave the first local performance of Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings in the opening concert of the 1950-51 season."⁶

The dawning of the 1950s saw the institution of one more city effort to boost the symphony's popularity. San Jose Mayor Fred Watson made the week of January 23-30 (1950) "Symphony Week". This event was established in an effort to inform the people on the importance in keeping the symphony and contributing to its economic welfare. During the course of the week, the symphony gave three free concerts, newspapers printed spotlights on the musicians, and local stores presented displays promoting the symphony. It was a whole community effort.

"Symphony Week" became an annual event through the decade. In 1951 during "Symphony Week", Mayor Clark L. Bradley stressed the significance of the orchestra in the

cultural life of San Jose. Community members of all areas of profession again banded together to inform the public about the orchestra and its meaning to San Jose. At that time the orchestra was composed of seventy players. Some members were professionals, some were teachers, and others were students, prominent businessmen, or just enthusiastic amateurs.

AN ERA OF PROGRESS

When Gastone Usigli's worsening health caused him to limit his activities, the symphony organization selected Stanford professor of Music Sandor Salgo as his successor for the 1951-52 season. This choice proved to be very beneficial for the symphony's reputation and stature. Salgo's tenure as musical director and conductor was also a time in which he carried out an ambitious building program encompassing nearly two decades.

"Throughout his eighteen years as musical director and conductor of the symphony, Salgo kept himself aware that 'audiences are not born, they are made.' His programs, therefore, were not necessarily chosen for audience popularity, but rather to bring a wide variety of more serious music to the community. Selections were limited somewhat according to the technical capabilities of the players, but he was justly proud of the increasingly professional sound and balance achieved by the musicians."⁷

Sandor Salgo, a world renowned violinist, was a native of Budapest, Hungary, and graduated from the Royal Hungarian Academy of Music. He was "a gentleman from the old world who really did know his music."⁸ This inventive and challenging conductor was the individual given credit for laying the foundations of the present day organization. While many in the music community were moderately conservative in their tastes and remained loyal to the "true" classical music (music from composers like Bach,

Beethoven, Brahms, and Mozart), Sandor Salgo introduced "a revolutionary repertoire of contemporary works by Stravinsky, Bartok, Kodaly and American composers."⁹ Maestro Salgo's contributions were so great that following his retirement in 1970 he was paid the tribute of being recognized as "Conductor Emeritus."

The San Jose Symphony, in Salgo's first season leading them, had a record number of members. The next year, the orchestra experienced a sharp decline in the amount of musicians at its service. After those two erratic seasons, membership each year was consistently in the vicinity of eighty players.

A case which had been brought up during Usigli's reign as the San Jose Symphony's musical director was the need for pay for the symphony members barring the conductor who was already being rewarded for his services. The musicians were only paid for their services through donated income. This issue continued to be a point of difference between the symphony players and the association.

In the early 1950s, the San Jose Symphony was still a community orchestra. The musicians "rehearsed in the Markham (Jr. High) cafeteria and then in 1955 the new music building opened at Willow Glen High School...and the orchestra rehearsed...in the music room."¹⁰ The rehearsals took place at Willow Glen High School for several years until the symphony moved its practice performances to nearby Lincoln High School.

The arrival of a new executive director of the symphony association in 1955 occasioned a modification in the symphony personnel. With Wesley Lindsay's arrival the standards for admittance into the symphony's ranks were raised. Both experienced and new musicians were auditioned for posts in the orchestra. Never before had there been such a requirement for membership in the San Jose Symphony. Subsequent to the auditions was a change in the seating arrangement so the best possible quality of music could be derived.

Prior to 1955 the San Jose Symphony musicians "were really just amateurs."¹¹ They came out of that year a highly competent, semi-professional group.

1960s

The 1960s was not as revolutionizing a time for the symphony as one would assume considering the intense uproars and numerous reforms the United States underwent in this decade of non-conformity and social awareness. The devastating Vietnam War made not even a dent in the symphony's functioning ability as previous U.S. involvements in war had. The 1960s, in comparison to the decades leading up to it, was very much a quiet time for the San Jose Symphony. There were, however, several events during these years worthy of mentioning.

One noteworthy event was that the San Jose Symphony players joined the Musicians' Union. Players in earlier times had joined the union of their own accord, but in the 60s this became required.¹²

A problem revealed itself in the form of another orchestra only miles away. The Santa Clara Philharmonic, established in the 1950s, was interfering in the San Jose Symphony's market. The community had a difficult time supporting two orchestras so near each other. The other aspect that suffered was in membership. The number of San Jose Symphony musicians fell considerably in the 60s.

The San Jose Symphony, at that time still rehearsing at Lincoln High School and performing at the Civic Auditorium, was in search of a more suitable building to give concerts in. Its quest for a new site for performances would be resolved in the 1970s as would other problems nagging the organization.

1970s AND BEYOND

The San Jose Symphony in the 1970s was guided under the baton of three separate conductors, not considering guest conductors. As the 1969-70 season closed, Sandor Salgo also brought his distinguished tenure to an end. His successor, James Guthrie, had a short-lived career in San Jose, lasting only three seasons. He resigned from his post due to "irreconcilable differences" between himself and the symphony association. The most important and greatest acquisition the symphony made was that of George Cleve. He began leading the symphony in May of 1972. When he first arrived at his San Jose post, several of his musicians were immediately turned off. The new conductor had a fiery temper and his appearance was not at all what most would expect of a professional musician, let alone a professional conductor.¹³ In the early 1970s he resembled more "a hippie...in Berkley...with his blue jeans.....and long hair"¹⁴ than someone at the head of a symphony orchestra.

A few years after George Cleve assumed his post, the symphony relocated to the newly built Center for the Performing Arts in downtown San Jose. Shortly afterwards, the moveable ceiling and balcony crashed in while construction people were working at the site. Fortunately, no one was injured, but the building needed immediate repair.

And so the symphony was left to perform in its old home, the Civic Auditorium, until the Center for Performing Arts was sufficiently mended. Remodeling took one year to complete. With that done, the symphony returned and this time they came to stay.

A major event in the 1970s was celebrating the United States' Bicentennial, and the symphony celebrated it in grand style. That season the symphony played tremendous amounts of American twentieth century music by actual living composers. Of course, the general public didn't like this type of music as people don't like things that stray from the fixed rule. And the rule in the music community was still to play compositions by Bach and Beethoven and others of their times. The people called for the traditional classics; the symphony continued to play contemporary American works. A lot of subscriptions were cancelled that year. Also, the audiences sometimes seemed almost hostile. When the symphony played its controversial pieces "the audience was booing, and it was scary [for the musicians on stage]." ¹⁵ That stirring Bicentennial season was the final momentous year of the decade.

The 1980s could be called a decade of transission in reference to the symphony's financial situation. In 1985, the organization nearly went bankrupt, but since then various grants, both federal and private, have helped the symphony continue on.

Throughout its history, it seems that the symphony has lacked a real commitment from San Jose though there have been times when the city has shown its support and appreciation in full force. There also exists, and has existed in the past, groups of symphony boosters that have provided strong support for the organization. To blame only the community for the orchestra's still relatively modest state would be unfair. The symphony for some reason has not been able to build itself up to the calibur and stature of other orchestras, like San Francisco's symphony. The San Jose Symphony still plays in the shadow of the orchestra sixty miles to the north. The organization has survived, but has it thrived?

The city of San Jose in the 1980s has made a whole-hearted effort to improve its image and establish itself as a major metropolis. San Jose's efforts have paid off with the revitalization of the downtown area. During its renovation, signs were put up downtown stating, "San Jose is growing up." Maybe the symphony should adopt that idea. The orchestra has definitely matured from earlier

years, but to make a strong finish of the 1980s and move on boldly into the 1990s it will need more effort and support from San Jose, the organization, and the orchestra itself. It is for certain that if the community doesn't continue to back the symphony it will cease to exist because the orchestra cannot stand alone. Without support, San Jose very possibly may no longer have the luxury of having an orchestra in its own backyard. Instead, residents of this community will have to venture north to hear a symphony orchestra perform.

CONCLUSION

When a young symphony was first established in San Jose who knew in which direction the orchestra would travel and that it would last for more than one hundred years. And why did San Jose start up a community orchestra in the mid-19th century? Possibly to enhance its cultural image when it was a relatively young town, or maybe for other reasons. But even if the orchestra had not served its purpose, it would remain a part of San Jose history. The organization has lived through troubling times and shined at its moments of modest glory. The members were enthusiastic and dedicated as they would have to have been to stick with the organization through all of the hardships. The symphony orchestra itself has come a long way from the small community group of the 1860s. Today it is a fully professional regional orchestra.

NOTES

1. "Suitable Photo for 1892 was a Feat," San Jose Mercury News, p.7L, California Room of San Jose Main Public Library.
2. "Symphony's Solitary Suit," San Jose Mercury News California Room of San Jose Main Public Library, August 9, 1973.
3. "California's Oldest Orchestra," Notes. San Jose Symphony Office.
4. Ibid.
5. Harry D. Reed, The San Jose Symphony (1975), p.7.
6. Ibid, p.13.
7. Ibid, p.16.
8. Gilda Mazzanti, interviewed by Sandy Lee, by telephone, 4 P.M., April 3, 1989.
9. "Suitable Photo," Op Cit.
10. Ruth Pfaff, interviewed by Sandy Lee, Thrasher Ln., San Jose, 4 P.M., April 5, 1989.
11. Ibid.
12. Lois Swift, interviewed by Sandy Lee, by telephone, 5:30 P.M., April 17, 1989.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.

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Willow Glen High School

Mrs. Kathryn Philp