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# THE OFFICIAL HISTORY OF THE

# ASO ALABAMA *symphony* ORCHESTRA

The Alabama Symphony Orchestra can trace its beginnings to 1921, when on Friday, April 29, fifty-two volunteer musicians came together to perform at the Birmingham Music Festival at the Old Jefferson Theater. It was not until 1933, however, that the orchestra gave its first “formal” concert. The Birmingham Music Club presented the orchestra in concert, under the direction of Dorsey Whittington, at Phillips High School.

On October 23, 1933, the Birmingham Symphony Association was officially formed and J.J. Steiner was installed as president. With a budget of \$7,000, four concerts were planned for its first season. By the 1935-36 season the orchestra had as many as eighty players, and a budget of \$410,000. A full rehearsal cost \$100 and guest artists’ fees were low by today’s standards- the renowned composer-pianist, Percy Grainger, was paid \$350 for his appearance with the orchestra in October 1939.

Symphony concerts continued throughout the 1930s with enthusiastic public acceptance, including open-air concerts in Avondale Park on Sunday afternoons. In 1942, American involvement in World War II put a temporary stop to these auspicious beginnings. After the end of the war, community interest in a revival of the Symphony Association continued, culminating in an editorial in the *Age-Herald* on September 14, 1948: “Birmingham needs a symphony orchestra. A city of this size, with a stirring musical life, needs an orchestra of symphonic size as a crown to its efforts...” Shortly thereafter, the Civic Symphony Association was reactivated and began the task of rebuilding the orchestra.

In April 1949, Arthur Bennett Lipkin became the orchestra’s second conductor. Lipkin had been a conductor of suburban orchestras on Philadelphia’s Main Line, a violinist in the Philadelphia Orchestra and president of the American Orchestra League. Warmly recommended by famed Philadelphia Orchestra conductor Eugene Ormandy, Lipkin conducted his first concert on November 1, 1949. This was followed by four other concerts during that 1949-50 season with Dorsey Whittington, the orchestra’s first conductor, appearing as a soloist in the fourth concert, performing Beethoven’s Third Piano Concerto.

In 1951, the orchestra began its long association with the Festival of Arts. There were also several support groups formed

in these early years. The Vanguards, a group mainly comprised of young couples, produced its own magazine and published the concert programs. Another support group, the Symphonettes, was organized in October 1954. It later changed its name to the Symphony League.

## MIDDLE YEARS

In 1956, the orchestra changed its name to the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and became fully professional. (Until that time some of the musicians had been paid weekly salaries, some by the rehearsal or concert, and some remained strictly amateur.) Growth continued throughout the fifties and it was during this



Arthur Lipkin, 1954  
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time that the Youth Orchestra was founded under the direction of Herbert Levinson, the symphony’s concertmaster. Shortly afterwards, a training orchestra of younger players from elementary and junior high schools was begun as a feeder program for the Youth Orchestra.

Arthur Lipkin retired in 1960 and was succeeded by Arthur Winograd, who led the orchestra for the next four years. Before coming to Birmingham, Winograd had been a member of the faculty of the Julliard School of Music, had conducted several orchestras in the United States and Europe and was a founding member of the Julliard String Quartet.

In 1964, the fourth music director and conductor, Amerigo Marino, was appointed. Marino came to Birmingham from Southern California where he had been composer/conductor of the CBS Radio and Television Orchestra, as well as first violinist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra. The year before, in 1963, Marino was one of four winners out of a field of 200 of the Ford Foundation Conductors Project.

The year 1966 was noteworthy for the orchestra. First, it was chosen as one of thirty-three in the nation to receive a conditional grant of \$600,000 from the Ford Foundation. Payable over a ten-year period, the grant required the orchestra to raise a matching amount. A dedicated group of symphony volunteers raised the match in record time. In the same year the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra absorbed the Alabama Pops Orchestra, which had been conducted by Walter Moeck.

The orchestra changed its name in 1979 to the Alabama Symphony Orchestra, reflecting the popular support and enthusiasm for the symphony throughout the state, and to recognize the fact that many of its concerts were played in various locations around the state.

## REORGANIZATION

Under Amerigo Marino the scope of the Symphony expanded to include a regular subscription series at the Birmingham-Jefferson Civic Center Concert Hall, home of the Symphony since 1973, a Pops series, and a series of thirty plus concerts performed throughout Alabama.

The Alabama Symphony Orchestra celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 1983 with eight regular classical series concerts, eight Pops concerts, fourteen concerts throughout Alabama, and a special annual fundraising concert featuring the world-renowned violinist Isaac Stern. However, by one year later, lack of funding forced the Alabama Symphony Association to cancel the orchestra's 1984-85 concert season. The community responded immediately. A "Save the Symphony" Committee was formed by the Young Men's Business Club and, with an aggressive fundraising drive, over \$120,000 was raised and the 1984-85 season was mounted. In addition, a new three-year contract was signed between the Association and the musicians.

In 1985, Paul Polivnick was named the new music director/conductor of the ASO after a year long search that attracted outstanding applicants from around the world. During Maestro Polivnick's tenure, the orchestra achieved a high level of artistic excellence and began to attract national and international attention. Leon Spierer, the ex-concertmaster of the Berlin Philharmonic, commented at the time that the ASO's performance of Mahler's Fifth Symphony was equal to that of the great European orchestras. To help cement the ASO's reputation, Polivnick helmed several commercial recordings during this period, including works from William Kraft (Timpani Concerto and *Interplay*) and Russell Peck (*The Glory and the Grandeur*).

It was during this time that the ASO made its debut in the Nation's Capital. Audiences at the Kennedy Center got a taste of ASO talent on Sunday, October 2, 1988 with a program including Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition." The glowing review in *The Washington Post* complimented Polivnick's accomplishments and called the evening a "bright, precise, energetic and highly enjoyable performance." (Oct. 4, 1988)

Unfortunately, despite the artistic acclaim, difficulties surfaced again. In 1993 the orchestra declared bankruptcy, bringing an abrupt and sad ending to the sixty-five year history of the Alabama Symphony Orchestra. Realizing the blow to the community, dedicated musicians and volunteers began to devise a plan to ensure that the orchestra would not be gone for long. Ultimately, ten Birmingham women guaranteed a loan from SouthTrust Bank for the purchase of the orchestra's tangible assets. Upon court approval the assets were sold to the new organization - The Alabama Symphonic Association.

## REBIRTH

The Women's Committee voted to change its name to The Symphony Volunteer Council and broadened its organization to include both men and women. They continued to present the Decorators' Showhouse, the profits of which are donated to the Symphony's endowment fund. Birmingham's business leaders sought financial support from state and local governments and worked with the business community to renew interest in financial support for the future new Symphony.



Mr. Elton B. Stephens

The orchestra's financial prospects improved dramatically when Mr. Elton B. Stephens joined the re-birth efforts in 1994 and accepted the position of Chairman of the Board of Directors. Mr. Stephens, with the help of many dedicated volunteers, set

out to achieve the daunting task of raising funds for both operating expenses and an endowment. Under his leadership the board devised a no-debt policy and began soliciting gifts to build a \$10 million Endowment Fund and a \$5 million Operating Fund.

These efforts were further validated when Dr. Charles A. "Scotty" McCallum, former president of the University of Alabama at Birmingham, accepted the position of the President of the Board of Directors. Mr. Stephens, Dr. McCallum and the board of directors prepared budgets and operating plans. A contract with the musicians' union was negotiated and accepted.

After these initial steps were taken to ensure the Symphony's return, the board began working to put together a full-time staff to run the Symphony. Gustav Meier was retained as Artistic Advisor to organize the orchestra's inaugural season and Douglas Gerhart was hired to serve as the Executive Director.

The musicians of the previous orchestra were invited back to the new organization. Eventually forty-eight full-time musicians were hired to form the core of the ASO. A decision was made to hire additional musicians on a pay-for-service basis with a plan to add additional full-time musicians over time.

## EXPANSION AND FUTURE PLANS

In just four years the rebirth of the Symphony was successful. The first notes of the new Alabama Symphony Orchestra were played on September 11, 1997, under the leadership of Artistic Advisor Gustav Meier and Principal Conductor Mark Gibson. An international search for a music director began in 1997, concluding with the appointment of Maestro Richard Westerfield to the post. Mr. Westerfield's impressive credentials included positions as music director of the Harrisburg Symphony and as associate conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra under world-renowned conductor Seiji Ozawa.

During Mr. Westerfield's six-year tenure as music director, the Alabama Symphony Orchestra flourished, displaying artistic excellence and operating in financial stability. Maestro Westerfield received critical and audience acclaim for his interpretation of a broad repertoire of classical compositions, with an emphasis on choral and baroque works. He concluded his leadership of the ASO in May 2004 with Mahler's mighty "Resurrection" Symphony on the Jemison Hall concert stage of the Alys Stephens Center.

During this time, Christopher Confessore began to lead the ASO in many performances throughout the state as resident

conductor of the ASO. Mr. Confessore, who also currently serves as music director of the Brevard Symphony Orchestra in Melbourne, Florida, joined the Alabama Symphony Orchestra in 2000 as associate conductor. He now has assumed the role of Principal Pops Conductor, in which he has been lauded for his “special talent for drawing the broadly lyrical out of his orchestra.”

The ASO inaugurated a search for its new Music Director with the 2004–2005 season. During the two year search process, audiences had the opportunity to hear and see some of the world’s most talented conductors. Among them was British conductor Justin Brown, who led the ASO in Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 27 and Mahler’s Symphony No. 4. Brown and the ASO “clicked,” and he became the ASO’s Music Director and Principle Conductor starting in September of 2006.

Brown started his tenure with in Alabama with the intent to bring the ASO’s talents to national and international attention. Realizing its strengths were its “no-holds barred playing style” and nimble adaptability, Brown honed in on two “central pillars for [the] work together: Beethoven and contemporary music.” Along with beloved classics, Brown programmed works from contemporary composers like Poul Ruders, George Crumb, and Elliott Carter. He championed the evolution of an existing evening series into one focused specifically on pushing the definition of “classical” music. Originally titled “Symphony7: The Classical Edge” (now called just “The Classical EDGE”), the series has welcomed guest artists like Chris Thile, Joshua Redman and Béla Fleck to the stage, and has premiered works by “pop” artists like Radiohead’s Jonny Greenwood. Finally, Brown instituted a Composer-in-Residence program that has had benefits far beyond the works composed; the roster thusfar includes Paul Lansky, Avner Dorman and double bassist Edgar Meyer.

It did not take long for recognition to follow. In 2007, nationally acclaimed music critic Alex Ross featured the ASO’s performance of Beethoven’s *Eroica* in a *New Yorker* article celebrating small regional orchestras:

“In less than a year, Brown has established the Alabama as one of the country’s most adventurous regional orchestras.”  
 ~ Alex Ross “On the Road,”  
*The New Yorker*, June 25, 2007

Awards also flowed in. In 2010, Justin Brown and the ASO won ASCAP’s Adventurous Programming award and 2011 saw them receive the John S. Edwards Award for Strongest Commitment to New American Music. Building on the successes, the ASO will be performing at Carnegie Hall in 2012 as part of the prestigious Spring For Music program.

Education has also played a major role in the tenure of Justin Brown at the ASO. In 2010–2011, a long-held dream came to fruition as the Alabama Symphony Youth Orchestra was inaugurated. Under the nurturing of Education Director Meaghan Heinrich and musical direction of Fawzi Haimor, the ASYO was developed as an ensemble dedicated to giving young musicians in the state of Alabama the opportunity to learn and grow through the rehearsal and performance of great orchestral music in a highly professional setting. Members of the ASYO rehearse weekly and work regularly with the musicians and conductors of the Alabama Symphony Orchestra.

The ASO also offers a very successful series for school children –Young People’s Concerts. Each season thousands of students



Justin Brown  
 Music Director and Principal Conductor | The Elton B. Stephens Chair



Christopher Confessore  
 Principal Pops Conductor



Fawzi Haimor  
 Asst. Conductor and Principal  
 Conductor of the Alabama  
 Symphony Youth Orchestra

attend a total of six Young People’s Concerts. Teachers receive study guides in advance to help prepare students for the concerts and to enhance the educational experience.

The ASO continues to be an integral part of the cultural fabric of the state. In addition to the concert season in Birmingham, concerts locations have included Tuscaloosa, Tuskegee, Montevallo, Clay County, Dothan and Selma. The ASO’s association with the Alabama Ballet and Opera Birmingham flourishes as the orchestra accompanies many of their performances.

The Alabama Symphony Orchestra now looks to the future and the boundless opportunities it holds for expanding its programs and activities in new and exciting ways. Working together with the leaders of Birmingham, Jefferson County and the State of Alabama, the ASO is moving ahead with renewed commitment to its ever- broadening mission of making professional symphonic music available to every resident of our state.

If you have further questions, contact Britney Elliott, Director of Marketing  
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