

The Northwest Indiana Symphony Orchestra - A Historical Portrait

Written by Scott Bocock / Edited by Thomas Kutzer

Courtesy of Steve McShane, Archivist/Curator, Calumet Region Archives at Indiana University Northwest

Edited and updated by John Cain, Executive Director, South Shore Arts & Northwest Indiana Symphony, August 2016

Arthur Zack and the Beginning of a Great Symphony

In September of 1941, Arthur Zack, a cello teacher from Chicago, moved to Gary to organize an orchestra. A meeting was held in the office of Mayor Ernest Schaible, where Zack met Mildred Wirt, director of auditoriums for the Gary Schools and M.C. Snyder, school superintendent of music. Wirt and Snyder, along with many others, believed that the idea of a local orchestra wouldn't last very long. After a meeting between Mrs. Wirt and civic leaders, however, it was decided that the project would be supported.

To encourage musicians to attend the first rehearsal, Zack placed an ad in the Gary Post Tribune. Twenty-six musicians appeared at the first rehearsal, but the next rehearsal resulted in sixty individuals attending. Many of these early rehearsals were performed in the YMCA building. Although many musicians were gained through advertisements, Frances Monfort was appointed as recruiter of musicians.

The first concert was performed on Dec. 7, 1941 at 8:30 p.m. at Seaman Hall. Jennie Gaudio (Wilkinson) was made mistress of the orchestra and Frances Monfort was principal cello, secretary to the first board of directors, and on some projects, acted as orchestra manager. Anne Mac Isaac was asked to be soloist. The program included the Corelli Christmas Concerto Grosso, a symphony by Haydn, an overture by Boieldieu, two woodland sketches by Mac Dowell, Strauss' Emperor Waltzes and Three Dances from Smetana's The Bartered Bride. Miss Mac Isaac performed an aria by Glueck and three songs accompanied by pianist Helen Leefelt. A few of the musicians were paid and came from Chicago, but most were volunteers.

Unfortunately, word of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was soon received and this influenced Zack to begin the concert with the playing of "The Star Spangled Banner." According to cellist Violet Hayes Wray, "It was the most emotional rendition of the national anthem in which I had ever taken part". Fortunately, this concert became very successful and proved that Gary and its surrounding communities could support a civic orchestra. To finish the 1941-42 season, three more concerts were performed.

Meanwhile, the roots of the orchestra's organizations were being formed. Sydney Lighthill, a local real estate and insurance broker along with Mrs. William A. Wirt contacted seventy-five of Gary's outstanding civic leaders to become directors of the orchestra. At the first board meeting, Rabbi Garry J. August was elected the first president. In the next season, E.N. Ripley, insurance broker, took over the Presidency and with Mr. Paul Howard, Librarian of the Gary Public Libraries, organized a campaign and sold their first season subscription tickets. By 1943, \$2000 had been raised to support the 1943-44 season.

The greatness of this organization was due to the loyalty and dedication of the members of the orchestra. The management of which included: Dr. H. Bratton, President; W.P. Cottingham, Mrs. R.T. Griffith, Mrs. W.A. Wirt, R.F. Gordon, Vice Presidents; W.S. Goedcke, Treasurer; Frances Monfort, Mrs. D.R. Wray, Secretaries; M. Dreyfus, W.W. Mathews, A.P. Greene, E.N. Ripley, P.H. West, Mrs. H.B. Snyder, Mrs. W. Wilkinson, Mrs. C.R. Black, Elizabeth Scheddell, Norma Largura, Elmo V. Roessler and others.

The Symphony Finds a Home

In 1943, Arthur Zack, resigned as conductor and went to devote himself to the Rockford, Illinois Orchestra. However in his four years as conductor and founder, he made a great contribution to Gary. His energetic enthusiasm and leadership helped to forge the Gary Civic Symphony Orchestra.

During its existence, the Gary Civic Symphony Orchestra / Northwest Indiana Symphony Orchestra performed at various locations. From 1941 to 1953, the main home of the orchestra was Seaman Hall of City Methodist Church in Gary. During these years other concerts were performed at Froebel High School, Horace Mann High School and Memorial Auditorium all in Gary. In 1954, the orchestra moved its home base to Memorial Auditorium and remained here until 1960, but then moved back to Seaman Hall for one season. At this time at least one concert was performed at the Gary Center of Indiana University Northwest. Concerts were moved in 1961 to Indiana University Northwest on a regular basis, but some were performed at Seaman Hall and at Gavit High School in Hammond. Concerts were held at Indiana University Northwest Memorial Auditorium and Gary West Side High School from 1966-1971.

In 1972-73, the Gary Symphony became the Northwest Indiana Symphony Orchestra. Because of the name change, the organization no longer contributed to just Gary but also to all of Northwest Indiana. The organization abandoned the idea of a home hall and began to hold concerts at high schools of the area. These schools included Hammond Morton High School, Munster High School, Merrillville High School, West Side, Wirt High School, Highland High School, Crown Point High School and Valparaiso High School.

The first performance at the Star Plaza Theater in Merrillville was a cabaret pops concert in September 1981. In November of the following year, the first concert was performed at the Star Plaza Theater. In 1983, the orchestra established the Star Plaza Theater as its home concert hall. Concerts have also been performed at the Crown Point Community Building, Southlake Mall, the Resurrection Chapel of Valparaiso University, and the Center for Visual and Performing Arts in Munster. Outdoor performances have been held at Munster Park, John Woods Mill Park in Hobart, Marquette Park in Gary, Main Square Park in Highland, Redar Park in Schererville, Central Park in Griffith, Whiting Park in Whiting, the Newton County Fairgrounds, Our Lady of Mercy Hospital in Dyer, St. Anthony Medical Center in Crown Point, and Southlake Mall. Performances outside Northwest Indiana include Orchestra Hall in Chicago, South Bend, and Indianapolis for the Indianapolis Ballet Theater.

Bringing the Best

Since the birth of the Northwest Indiana Symphony Orchestra, many well-known musicians, entertainers, and other artists from around the world have performed with the Orchestra. For example, during the "Big Band Era", the legendary Benny Goodman played in a concert with the Orchestra.

Respected conductors, including Boston Pops' Arthur Fiedler have also contributed their talents. Over the years, guest artists have included international superstars such as Van Cliburn, Dizzy Gillespie, Itzhak Perlman, Rudolph Nureyev, Marvin Hamlisch, Doc Severinsen and the Tonight Show Band, The Smothers Brothers, Andre Watts, Peter Nero, William Marshall, Emmanuel Ax, Pete Fountain, Hal Linden, Roger Williams, Rachel Barton, and many others!

Some of the best professional musicians in the Chicagoland and Northwest Indiana area are members of the Orchestra. Many also play with other orchestras in the area including the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Lyric Opera Chicago, the Chicago Sinfonietta, the South Bend Symphony, the Elgin Symphony, the Lake Forest Symphony, the Southwest Michigan Symphony, and the Illinois Philharmonic Orchestra among others. Many are on the faculty of prestigious music programs at Northwestern University, Valparaiso University, VanderCook College of Music, and Saint Xavier University.

During the 1990-91 season, the orchestra celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. This was done by performing a concert commemorating the first concert of the Gary Civic Symphony at Seaman Hall. It was performed on April 20, 1991. The Opus 50 Rhapsody in Gold Gala was the social highlight of the celebration. During this time, the orchestra also received letters congratulating the group on the anniversary and for becoming a major cultural force in the community from President and Mrs. Bush and Governor Evan Bayh.

The Conductors

The Gary Symphony Society was organized in early 1941 and the first concert was planned for December 7, 1941 under the direction of **Arthur Zack**. Zack was also founder of the Cincinnati Civic Orchestra and New Orleans Civic Symphony Orchestra. A graduate of the Institute of Musical Art of New York, Zack continued post-graduate work in Europe. Prior to founding the Gary Symphony, Zack was a member of the New York Symphony Orchestra under Walter Damrosch and the National Symphony under Artur Bodanzky.

Rudolph Reiners was born in Chicago, the son of a long line of distinguished musicians. At an early age, he showed a marked aptitude for the violin. Following musical development from his father, Reiners took advanced training in the United States and Europe. His musical credits included being a member of the first violin section of the Chicago Symphony from 1926 to 1948 and a member of the second violin section from 1948 to 1956. Reiners performed under the batons of Dr. Desire DeFauw, who later became conductor of the Gary Symphony, Artur Rodzinski and Fritz Reiner. Reiners also conducted the Chicago String Ensemble.

Irwin Fischer came to the Gary Symphony Orchestra from the Chicago Symphony, where he was organist from 1944 to 1966. Besides his musical abilities and conducting, Fischer was also a composer. One of his works, "Adventures of a Tune," was premiered by the CSO at the first concert of the 1974-75 Petites Promenades Series for Young People. Fischer was also a member of the literati private club, The Cliff Dwellers, as well as a teacher at a music conservatory in Chicago.

During the 1950s, the Gary Symphony was extremely fortunate to have as its music director, **Désiré Defauw**, the former Music Director and Conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Born in 1885 in the ancient city of Ghent, Belgium, he studied violin and graduated from the Royal Conservatory in Brussels. Defauw's American debut was made conducting Toscanini's NBC Orchestra in 1939. Defauw was also Music Director and Conductor of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, as well as the Belgian National Orchestra.

Leo Krakow served as Music Director of the Orchestra from 1960 to 1968 and again for the 1971 concert season. A Fellowship student at the Juilliard School of Music, Krakow's studies concentrated in violin, conducting, chamber music and theory. In addition to his position with the Orchestra, Krakow served on the faculty at Indiana University Northwest. He also performed with the National Symphony under Hans Kindler for six years as principal violin. Krakow was later Music Director of the Skokie Valley Symphony and General Music Director of the Shubert Theatre.

Tibor Kozma was the next man to fill the position as Music Director and Conductor of the Symphony. The Hungarian-born Kozma was a student conductor at the Saxon Opera in Dresden, Germany. He conducted operas in Czechoslovakia and Broadway musicals in New York. He served on the Metropolitan Opera conducting staff before joining the music faculty at Indiana University. Kozma was well known as a teacher and conductor. The Northwest Indiana Symphony was the first community orchestra that he ever conducted. Kozma was killed in an auto accident in early 1976 following a return trip to Bloomington after a Symphony rehearsal.

Robert Vodnoy served as Music Director from 1976 to 1996, the longest period of any director, conducting performances with artists such as Itzhak Perlman, Andre Watts and Marilyn Horne. Vodnoy was also the youngest Music Director and Conductor the Symphony had worked under at the time of his hiring. A native of South Bend, he was a graduate of Hartt College of Music of the University of Hartford. Vodnoy has guest conducted numerous orchestras throughout the United States, as well as internationally. He is currently Director of Orchestral Activities/Associate Professor of Strings at Northern State University in Aberdeen, South Dakota, and is the newly appointed conductor of the Huron Symphony Orchestra

Since 2000, the Symphony has been under the artistic direction of Maestro **Kirk Muspratt**. In July 2004, Mr. Muspratt was named both Music Director of New Philharmonic and Artistic Director/Music Director of DuPage Opera Theatre. From 1991 to 1996, Muspratt served as Resident Conductor to Lorin Maazel at the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. He was appointed Associate Conductor to Joseph Silverstein at the Utah Symphony Orchestra from 1990-1992. From 1987 to 1990, Muspratt served as Assistant Conductor to Leonard Slatkin at the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. Summer debuts have included the Tanglewood, Chautauqua, and Sewanee Music Festivals. Over the time with the Symphony, Muspratt has instituted several educational programs, including a popular solo competition for children. In order to involve the community, Mr. Muspratt has created "Just Ask Kirk™" cards for audience members' questions and a "Kirkature™" cartoon to help advocate the credo: "Symphonic music is for everyone."

In 2006, Mr. Muspratt was named a “Chicagoan of the Year” by music critic John von Rhein and the writing staff of the *Chicago Tribune*, and was initiated as a National Arts Associate with the Lake County Alumnae Chapter of Sigma Alpha Iota International Music Fraternity.

A New Era

South Shore Arts and the Northwest Indiana Symphony Society entered into a business management agreement between the two organizations on July 1, 2008, making South Shore Arts the exclusive management and operations agent for the Symphony.

Under the terms of the agreement, South Shore Arts was granted operational control of the Symphony, including planning, budgeting, fundraising, marketing, governance, education, administration, contract negotiations and accounting. The five-member Symphony board was charged with monitoring the management agreement.

“Our idea was to create an environment where the arts and culture can thrive under a consolidated structure, combining resources and synergies, both for the visual and performing arts, keeping them distinct but managed with one vision for the benefit of residents along the South Shore” said Symphony board president Chris Morrow.

“We have collaborated for many years with the Symphony on educational outreach programs for children,” said South Shore Arts Executive Director John Cain. “We are also one of the Symphony’s funders in our capacity as a Regional Arts Partner of the Indiana Arts Commission. We have a good working history together, so our board was very excited by the prospect of combining the talents of both organizations, believing that it would be pleasing to both donors and participants.”

Looking Forward

In 2010, the Symphony began performing its classical concerts, often to sell-out houses, at Bethel Church in Crown Point, Indiana. Today, the orchestra consists of approximately sixty-five musicians. The orchestra has provided a great cultural contribution to Northwest Indiana and it continues to grow. This season, the Northwest Indiana Symphony Orchestra celebrates its 75th year, presenting the finest musical programs to Northwest Indiana and surrounding communities. 2016 has also been the 10th anniversary of the Symphony’s South Shore Summer Musical Festival of free outdoor concerts in five Northwest Indiana communities. The Northwest Indiana Youth Symphony has also celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2016.

The 2016-17 concert season marks the Symphony’s 75th anniversary as a major cultural institution in Northwest Indiana and the greater South Shore region.