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THE OFFICIAL HISTORY OF THE



Alabama Symphony Orchestra

1921-1955: Beginnings

The Alabama Symphony Orchestra can trace its beginnings to 1921, when on Friday, April 29, fifty-two volunteer musicians joined 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 when the Birmingham Music Club presented the orchestra, 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 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 soloist in the fourth concert, playing Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto.

In 1951, the orchestra began its long association with the Festival of Arts. There were several support groups formed in these early years. The Vanguard, a group mostly 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.

1956-1979: Early Growth

In 1956, the orchestra changed its name to the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and became fully professional. Up until that time some of its 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 time that the Youth Orchestra was founded under the direction of Herbert Levinson,



Arthur Lipkin, 1954
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symphony concertmaster. Shortly afterwards, a training orchestra of younger players from elementary and junior high schools was begun as a feeder 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 Juilliard School of Music, had conducted several orchestras in the United States and Europe and was a founding member of the Juilliard 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.

1966 was a noteworthy year 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 volunteers raised the match in record time. In the same year, the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra absorbed the Alabama Pops Orchestra, which had Walter Moeck as its conductor.

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.

1980-1993: Reorganization

Under Amerigo Marino, the scope of the Symphony increased 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 concerts now numbering some thirty annually throughout Alabama.

The Alabama Symphony Orchestra celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 1983 with eight regular series concerts, eight Pops concerts, fourteen concerts throughout Alabama, and a special annual fund concert featuring the renowned violinist Isaac Stern.

In a highly publicized move, the Alabama Symphony Association canceled the orchestra's 1984-85 concert season. There was simply not enough money available to continue to operate one of the finest musical organizations in the Southeast. The community responded immediately. A "Save the Symphony" Committee was formed by the Young Men's Business Club and, with an aggressive fund 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 search, which attracted outstanding applicants from around the world. During Maestro Polivnick's tenure, the orchestra saw impressive growth. The season expanded from 40 weeks to 46 and the orchestra made its first commercial recordings. In addition, the ASO broadened its reach throughout Alabama, including collaborations with Opera Birmingham, and regular performances in rural areas throughout the state. The Orchestra premiered *Under the Arbor*, an opera by Auburn University professor Robert Greenleaf, and performed at the opening of Moody Hall on the campus of the University of Alabama with soloist Marilyn Horne. After a performance at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C., the Washington Post described the orchestra as "a fine collection of musicians who gave a bright, precise, energetic, and highly enjoyable performance... The ASO seems to be leaving its

regional status to claim national attention." Additionally, the ASO launched three brand new summer series: "Beethoven, Brats, and Beer;" "Pops at Sloss Furnace;" and "Music at the Alabama Theatre." The ASO commissioned and debuted Russell Peck's "Peace Overture," a piece celebrating the Camp David Accords.

Unfortunately, again facing difficulties, in 1993 the orchestra declared bankruptcy, bringing an abrupt and sad ending to the sixty-five year history of the Alabama Symphony Orchestra. Almost as soon as it disbanded, Michael McGillivray, a musician representing many of the musicians, approached volunteers Rae Trimmier and Joan Parker to discuss the future of the orchestra. Through the combined efforts of many musicians and volunteers, a plan was devised to ensure that the orchestra would not be gone for long. Ten Birmingham women guaranteed a loan from SouthTrust Bank for the purchase of the orchestra's tangible assets. Upon approval of the Court, the assets were sold to the new organization - The Alabama Symphonic Association.

1994-1996: 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.

The orchestra's financial prospects improved dramatically when Mr. Elton B. Stephens joined the rebirth 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.



Mr. Elton B. Stephens

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. Hired in 1995 as the Director of Development, Kathy Yarbrough was the first full-time staff person employed by the Alabama Symphonic Association. 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 initially with a plan to add additional full-time musicians over time.

1997-2015: Expansion

In just four years, the rebirth of the Symphony was a success. 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 under his baton, 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 with Mahler's mighty "Resurrection" Symphony on the Jemison Hall concert stage of the Alys Stephens Center in May 2004.

The ASO inaugurated a search for its new Music Director with the 2004-2005 Season. Concert audiences had the opportunity to hear and see some of the world's most talented conductors during the two-year search process. In the 2004-2005 Season, Christopher Confessore also began to lead the ASO in many performances throughout the state as resident conductor of the ASO. Mr. Confessore, who currently serves as music director of the Brevard Symphony Orchestra in Melbourne, Florida, joined the Alabama Symphony Orchestra in 2000 as associate conductor. Today,

Christopher Confessore is the ASO's Principal Pops Conductor.

In a unanimous decision by the orchestra's Search Committee, British conductor Justin Brown was named to the Elton B. Stephens Music Director Chair of the Alabama Symphony Orchestra on November 23, 2005. Brown then assumed leadership of the Alabama Symphony Orchestra with the

commencement of the 2006-2007 Season. Brown came to this appointment having already established a reputation of artistic acclaim. The Maestro received a GRAMMY nomination for Best Classical Album for the 2006 release of Peter Lieberson's Buddhism-inspired "The Six Realms," part of "Lieberson: Rilke Songs, The Six Realms, Horn Concerto." He conducted the Odense (Denmark) Symphony Orchestra on the project. Throughout his career, Maestro Brown worked



Justin Brown

with numerous orchestras throughout the UK and Europe including the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, BBC Symphony, Royal Philharmonic, Bournemouth Symphony, English Chamber Orchestra, Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, St. Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra, Dresden Philharmonic Orchestra, Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

As a pianist, Justin Brown has been hailed in the Swedish press as "one of the most sensitive and emotionally rich chamber musicians of recent years". In addition to chamber concerts and recitals in the UK, France and Scandinavia, he performs regularly as both soloist and conductor.

Maestro Brown and the ASO are recognized as one of the most outstanding symphonies in America.

The New Yorker music critic Alex Ross states, "In less than a year, Justin Brown has established the Alabama Symphony Orchestra as one of the country's most adventurous regional orchestras," in his June 25, 2007 article. Ross also praised the rapport between ASO musicians and its conductor. "Great performances can happen anytime skilled players respond with unusual fervor to a conductor whose vision is secure," said Ross. "That's what happened in Alabama..." Finally, Ross recognized the ASO alongside Berlin, Los Angeles and New York Philharmonics after listing the Alabama Symphony Orchestra's (ASO) May 18, 2007 Masterwork's performance of Beethoven's Eroica on his music blog's list of "Top Things I Heard this Year."

During the 2007-2008 Season, Maestro Brown and the Alabama Symphony Orchestra celebrated the 10th Anniversary of the organization's rebirth in September 1997. Since the rebirth, the ASO has grown significantly, both in size and scope. Additionally, meaningful collaborations with composers such as Paul Lansky, Avner Dorman, Edgar Meyer, Judd Greenstein, and Hannah Lash, were central to the artistic growth of the ASO. By winning over their audience through a mastery of traditional repertoire, the ASO earned a sincere receptiveness to contemporary music and inventive programming.

The Alabama Symphony Youth Orchestra began in 2010 during Justin Brown's tenure as Music Director. Past ASYO Music Directors include Fawzi Haimor, Roderick Cox, Blake Richardson, and currently Kevin Fitzgerald. They perform four concerts annually, including a side-by-side performance with the ASO. The group is comprised of roughly 60 students from throughout the state and is pleased to offer scholarships to all in-need members.



Christopher Confessore
Principal Pops Conductor



Kevin Fitzgerald
Alabama Symphony Youth
Orchestra Conductor



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In 2011, the ASO was awarded the John S. Edwards Award for Strongest Commitment to New American Music—ASCAP’s highest honor. Further recognition of their innovative programming and the ASO-commissioned works by Lansky and Dorman alongside Beethoven’s Symphony No. 7, the performance at Carnegie Hall showcased the ASO’s organic relationship to composers past and present.

2015-Present: The ASO Today

At the beginning of the 2015-2016 season, the baton was passed to the ASO’s new Music Director, internationally-acclaimed Carlos Izcaray. Izcaray now leads the ASO in a variety of concerts each season, and plays a key role in programming, community engagement and educational activities. Throughout his career, Izcaray has shown special interest in tackling some of the most complex scores in the symphonic repertoire, and he has premiered or commissioned instrumental, choral and operatic works by composers worldwide. He is a regular guest at Wexford Festival Opera, one of today’s leading stages for rarely performed and contemporary repertoire. His 2010 production of Saverio Mercadante’s *Virginia* won the Best Opera prize at the Irish Theatre Awards, immediately followed by another nomination for his 2011 production of *La Cour de Célimène*, by Ambroise Thomas. He is equally distinguished as a passionate performer of the standard repertoire. His performances of *Carmen* at Opera Theatre of St. Louis earned him rave reviews from the North American Press.

A distinguished instrumentalist, Izcaray was featured as concert soloist and chamber musician worldwide, and he served as Principal Cello and Artistic President of the Venezuela Symphony Orchestra prior to engaging fully in a podium career. During his student years, he won the Kuttner Prize, the top chamber music award at Indiana University’s Jacobs School of Music. Increasingly active as a composer, Izcaray’s most recent orchestral piece, *Cota Mil*, was premiered by the Orquesta Sinfónica Municipal de Caracas. He also currently holds a position as the Music Director of the American Youth Symphony.

During his first year as Music Director, Maestro Izcaray unveiled an ambitious program to further heighten the orchestra’s profile in the classical world. Since his strong start with the ASO, Izcaray has been named the ASO’s 2017-2018 Season Sound Investment Composer. Bold new programs are part of the Alabama Symphony’s plans for coming seasons, a celebration of the organizations efforts to cast a wider net both in terms of audiences and musical offerings.

During the 2016-2017 Season, the ASO launched the Sound Edge Festival, a 9-day event held throughout the city of Birmingham. Over the course of the festival, the Symphony performed at a variety of new and exciting locations. The festival represents one of the ASO’s many successful attempts to grow their audience and reach.

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 leaders in Birmingham, and the State of Alabama, the ASO is moving ahead with commitment to its ever-broadening mission of making professional, symphonic music available to every resident in our state.



Carlos Izcaray
Music Director

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