

A Brief History of the Suburban Symphony Orchestra

Celebrating its 50th season, the Suburban Symphony will be performing in Severance Hall on Sunday, November 14th at 3:00 p.m., in addition to several other special musical events. Under the leadership of Martin Kessler, the ensemble performs five free concerts each season in the Beachwood High School auditorium. The orchestra was founded and exists for the enjoyment of its member-players in the rehearsing and performing of great music. It also exists to provide concerts free of charge to our audience and to provide a forum for local performing talent, including professional, amateur and student. Today the orchestra remains loyal to this original purpose. During this season's celebration of 50 years of music making, we will also recognize Martin Kessler's 25 years as music director and Emilio Llinas' 25 years of service as concertmaster.

In 1955, a group of 8 amateur musicians, all high school friends devoted to promoting fine music, founded the Suburban Symphony Orchestra to continue to develop as musicians and share their love of music with the surrounding community. By inviting friends to join them, the orchestra grew to 35 members by the end of the first season.

The first concerts were given at Highland View Hospital, the VA Hospital at Wade Park, and at the Mayland Theater in Mayfield Heights, as a benefit for Mayfield Heights Kiwanis Club. Before moving to Beachwood in 1965, the orchestra rehearsed and performed in the auditoriums of Warrensville Heights High School, Byron Junior High School in Shaker Heights, and Wiley Junior High in University Heights. Today the orchestra presents its traditional season of five concerts in the 800 seat Beachwood High School Auditorium and has built a solid community following.

The history of the Suburban Symphony is rich in musical traditions. In 49 years, the orchestra has had just 3 music directors. Leo Esral, a classmate of the founding members, conducted for just one season. In 1956, Robert C. Weiskopf was chosen to lead the orchestra. "Bob," as the orchestra members knew him, brought with him high musical standards and established strong connections with The Cleveland Orchestra. To assist the players in reaching a high level of performance, SSO recruited Cleveland Orchestra member Bernhard Goldschmidt as a string coach in 1963. "Bernie" became concertmaster and a frequent soloist, remaining in this position until 1979. By 1965, three more Cleveland Orchestra members, Felix Freilich, Thomas Dumm and Thomas Liberti, became second violin, viola and cello coaches and section leaders respectively. Today, Emilio Llinas, assistant principal second violinist in The Cleveland Orchestra, is concertmaster. Bob built Suburban Symphony into a solid community orchestra, bringing nationally known soloists and performing standard repertoire. Many of today's traditions began under his leadership.

Following Bob's death in 1979, Martin Kessler was selected as Music Director from several invited guest conductors in 1980. "Marty" brought great enthusiasm and an interest in presenting repertoire that challenges players to achieve new musical heights, while still following established traditions.

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The Suburban Symphony takes pride in presenting outstanding young talent to the community through the annual *Young Soloist Program*, which was instituted in 1965. Many of our former young soloists have advanced to professional careers. Recent winners of the annual competition have gone on to lead successful professional careers such as; violist, Eleisha Nelson, now a member of the Cleveland Orchestra, and pianist Ning An, now an international touring artist. The orchestra is dedicated to presenting outstanding professional performers to the community. Eunice Podis, wife of Robert Weiskopf, was a frequent piano soloist in the 50's, 60's and 70's with The Cleveland Orchestra and Suburban Symphony. Since 1979, Emilio Llinas, has not only been concertmaster, but has also performed concertos and conducted the orchestra. In recent seasons, Cleveland Orchestra members Daniel Gilbert, clarinetist, and Stanley Konopka, violist, have been featured performers. In 1987, Martin Kessler initiated "Operation Springboard" concerts to showcase emerging professionals such as guitarist Jason Vieaux, now head of the Cleveland Institute of Music guitar department.

The "Guest Conductor" tradition may have been started through the Suburban Symphony support of the WCLV Marathons for the benefit of the Cleveland Orchestra by offering the opportunity to "guest conduct" the Suburban Symphony as a premium. Yoel Levi was a guest conductor, turned "resident conductor" during Robert Weiskopf's illness. Martin Kessler's invitation of Carl Topilow to be a guest conductor for SSO's Pops Concerts inspired Topilow to start his own Cleveland Pops Orchestra. The guest conductor program is now an annual happening, and SSO has enjoyed working with Cleveland Orchestra conductors Wilson Hermanto and Steven Smith as well as Dwight Oltman of the Ohio Chamber Orchestra, and William Slocum of the Cleveland Philharmonic Orchestra.

The founders of the Suburban Symphony wanted to have fun while making music. Today's members agree and present one concert each year specified as a "pops" program. These concerts typically occur mid-winter, and bring special guests to the stage. In years past, *Slider*, Cleveland Indians mascot, was seen dancing to the music of Bach with Tom and Susana Evert. Ron McCroby whistled the *Stars and Stripes*, and the Walt Disney film of *Fantasia* was shown in Beachwood Auditorium.

Members of the SSO are encouraged to share their individual talents by performing as soloists. While this tradition has existed since the 1950's, the Suburban Soloist program is now a biennial event. The "Musician of the Year" award is given at the annual party for outstanding musicianship and/or outstanding contributions to the orchestra in volunteer activities.

Suburban Symphony has collaborated with other cultural organizations in Northeast Ohio. In the early years, SSO played concerts as benefits for Kiwanis Club or Cystic Fibrosis. In Beachwood, SSO helped dedicate the music wing at the middle school, performed for AFS spaghetti suppers and opened the high school auditorium with a concert performance of *Carmen!* The orchestra appeared at Beachwood Place for the celebration of Beachwood Day. Musical collaborations include the Singers Club and Singing Angels. In October 2000, Choral Arts Society of Cleveland and Western Reserve Chorale joined with SSO for a gala performance of Beethoven's *Symphony #9* to benefit the Cleveland Music School Settlement. In March 2003, Chorale Arts Society and the orchestra presented Dvorak's *Stabat Mater*.

A number of the orchestra's 75 members are music professionals. Some work in nonperformance areas of the arts such as music therapy, public school music or private teaching. Other members are well-trained musicians with chosen vocations in medicine, architecture, education, business and other fields. All are highly skilled instrumentalists who are "amateurs" in the best sense of the word: true lovers of their art. The intergenerational membership of the Suburban Symphony spans more than a half-century in age. While the talents of new members are added to the mix each season, the roster also includes one charter member, horn player Ethel Epstein, who helped to form the organization in 1955.

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Funding

The Suburban Symphony is funded by donations from loyal supporters. Four funds have been established to assist the orchestra in different areas of operation. The Operating fund covers day to day expenses. The **Herbert Perla Violin Scholar Fund** benefits both violinists and the orchestra by giving serious violin students the opportunity to play a concert with the orchestra. The **Wilbur Grodin Music Library Fund** enables the orchestra to purchase music to add to its permanent library. The Robert C. Weiskopf Sustaining Fund Concert is dedicated to the memory of Robert C. Weiskopf, who served as SSO's leader from 1956-1979. **The Robert C. Weiskopf Sustaining Fund** was established in 1980 as the orchestra's endowment fund, to ensure the continuation of the Suburban Symphony's free concert format.

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