

A Musical Renaissance: The Growth of Cultural Institutions in Houston, 1929-1936

Don Looser

Houston in the twenties was a boom town. Hubert Mewhinney of the *Houston Post* once referred to the city in its early history as a whiskey and trombone town. The rugged individualism characteristic of those years provided little encouragement for the development of sophisticating influences. The explosive growth of the city, as well as the propensity of its inhabitants to look toward the future, inhibited their appreciation of the cultural past. By 1930, however, enormous profits gained from oil, cotton, rice, lumber, and cattle had generated enough wealth to support major artistic endeavors. Hence, despite the Great Depression, the period from 1929 to 1936 witnessed a plethora of musical activity of all kinds within the city. New symphonic and operatic activity flourished. Former beginnings were revived. Individual local performers attained national reputations. Cultural leaders broadened the scope of community-based interest and support. In dramatic fashion, the events and personalities of these years demonstrate how Houston's growing urbanization, professionalism, and sophistication were reflected in the vigorous expansion of the city's musical activity.

Cultural activities were not new to Houston, but no major cultural organization dated from the nineteenth century.¹ Prior to 1930, operatic, symphonic, and concert activity had been largely of the touring variety. Major names were no stranger to the Houston stage, however. Paderewski, McCormack, Kreisler, Heifitz, the Chicago Opera, and the New York Philharmonic had all visited the city in the early years of the new century.² Local institutional activity had begun with the formation of the Houston

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¹George M. Fuermann, *Houston, The Feast Years* (Houston, 1962), 26.

²David G. McComb, *Houston: The Bayou City* (Austin, 1969), 145.



The Boudreaux String Quartet: (left to right) Josephine Boudreaux — First Violin, Octave Pimbert — Second Violin, Athelstan Charlton — Cello, Grace Keller — Viola.

Symphony Orchestra Association in the spring of 1913. The Association, whose membership was composed largely of women, employed cellist Julian Paul Blitz, a relative newcomer to Houston, as musical director. Blitz had become a popular figure among the local social set while serving as leader of the Sauter's Restaurant chamber orchestra.³ Plans were made for an opening concert in June, and a group of approximately forty local musicians was engaged.

This first trial concert was followed by a second, six months later. Rehearsals were open to children, and the musicians that year received five dollars for each rehearsal and concert. A number of \$25 patron gifts underwrote the fifteen-hundred-dollar cost of the season.⁴

Paul Berge, a popular local theater and cafe violinist, succeeded Blitz on the podium and served as musical director until the orchestra disbanded in 1917 due to personnel inadequacies resulting from World War I. The Association, however, continued to function. Ima Hogg became its second president and served until 1921. During the 1920s, the Association met regularly and sponsored performances in Houston by the St. Louis and Minneapolis orchestras, and a number of chamber groups.

Much serious musical activity graced the city in 1929, following this relatively dormant period. Most visible of all forces was Edna W. Saunders, who rapidly emerged as the city's chief cultural impresaria. Saunders, the daughter of Houston mayor John D. Woolford, virtually had kept cultural activity alive in the city through the 1920s. She first brought Anna Pavlova, Enrico Caruso, Yehudi Menuhin, the Ballet Russe, the Metropolitan Opera, and Marian Anderson to Houston. Off to New York City each year with her faithful Jesse at the wheel of her Imperial, Mrs. Saunders served Houston for more than forty seasons and is immortalized today in Houston's Jones Hall for the Performing Arts, whose green room is named in her honor. Mrs. Saunders, the Girl's Music Club, and the Museum of Fine Arts sponsored series of recitals. Josephine Boudreaux, who was later to become concertmistress of the reorganized Symphony, had formed a string quartet in 1928 that presented an active calendar of performances. Boudreaux had been with the Symphony in its earlier 1913 incarnation and had returned from six years of European study in 1928.⁵ Also in 1928, Foley Brothers department store had inaugurated a series of weekly Wednesday Musicales.⁶

³Hubert Roussel, *The Houston Symphony Orchestra, 1913-1971* (Austin, 1972), 16.

⁴Houston *Chronicle*, October 13, 1963, *Texas Magazine*.

⁵Houston *Post*, October 23, 1932.

⁶*Ibid.*, September 21, 1930.



Edna Woolford Saunders, Houston impresaria, in 1932.

In 1929, Robert Rice, president of the local musicians' union, estimated the Houston membership at three hundred musicians. Many of these played at motion picture theaters. Others were members of resident groups at various hotels and radio stations. Although many musicians were unemployed, apparently the best of the local musicians continued to find steady work in the area. Local press reports indicated that the Houston musicians' union allowed Kansas City players to take jobs at the Metropolitan Theater in 1929 when no local musicians of acceptable quality could be secured.⁷

Despite the depression, the 1929-30 musical season in Houston was an active one. Edna Saunders brought Galli-Curci, Benjiamino Gigli, and Mary Garden with the Chicago Civic Opera. The Girls' Musical Club presented Albert Spalding, and a number of local musicians were variously sponsored in recital and concert.⁸

The biggest musical event of the season, however, was the local appearance of the German Grand Opera Company, which performed the entire Wagner *Ring*, March 3-6, 1930. The company starred Johanna Gadschi, a star well past her vocal prime, but still a memorable performer as Brunnhilde. Under the sponsorship of the Houston Chamber of Commerce and the critical eye of impresario Sol Hurok, the company of one hundred and fifty presented an opera each evening for four nights. Governor Dan Moody and his wife headed the list of dignitaries for the top-hat opening, which received an ebullient review.⁹ The company was one of the few in Houston history to make money; the series cleared expenses by \$129.¹⁰ The opportunity to see the *Ring* in its entirety has never again come to Houston.

In the spring of 1930, developments in Houston defied the stultifying effects of the depression and created for the city a sudden flurry of serious musical activity. In April of 1930, Victor Alessandro, who since 1923 had been Director of Instrumental Music for the public schools, organized a group of thirty-five instrumental teachers and advanced students into the Houston Philharmonic Ensemble. This group rehearsed at the J.W. Carter Music Company and opened National Music Week activities in Houston with its inaugural concert on May 4, 1930, at the Sidney Lanier Junior High School Auditorium.¹¹ In the same week, Lanier student Raphael Norton Fliegel, who had won first place in the 1929 Texas Junior Violinist competition, was presented in concert.

⁷Ruth West, "Playing the Piper," *The Houston Gargoyle* (November 10, 1929): 26.

⁸*Houston Post-Dispatch*, February 2, 1930; March 16, 1930.

⁹*Ibid.*, March 7, 1930.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, August 8, 1954.

¹¹*Ibid.*, April 27, 1930.

Fliegel later became concertmaster of the Houston Symphony and served in that capacity for nearly twenty-five years.¹² Another young Houstonian, Jack Gregory Abram, home after four years at Curtis Institute, was presented in piano recital the same spring at Abe Levy Memorial Hall.¹³

In June 1930, one of the city's most colorful figures, Mrs. John Wesley Graham, resigned as choir director of the First Methodist Church after a twenty-year tenure to make room for Walter Jenkins who came with the new pastor, Dr. Clovis Chappel.¹⁴ "Ma" Graham, as she was affectionately known, had been synonymous with Houston music since 1910, when she had moved to Houston from St. Louis. She called everyone "Honey" and was recognized for her role as a church musician and a teacher of singing. Ma Graham had pioneered the first radio concert in Houston in 1922, over station WCAK, and had broadcast regular weekly student concerts since that time. Mrs. Graham's industry and reputation as a publicity hound had been humorously captured in a 1928 tongue-in-cheek newspaper satire of local New Year's resolutions:

I hereby resolve that I shall request the newspapers to refrain from using my picture more than once a month and that I shall ask them not to feature more than one of my pupils each Sunday.¹⁵

For some years, she had been openly decrying the lack of an opera company within the city. Following her retirement from her choral leadership position, she immediately set sail for Europe in search of a conductor to head her planned Civic Opera Company. Before too many weeks, Ma Graham cabled that she was returning in triumph with opera director Maestro Uriel Nespoli of Milan, director of the original production of *Madame Butterfly*. Securing the assistance of Congressman Daniel Garrett and Secretary of State Stimson to get Nespoli through Immigration, Mrs. Graham soon had permission to bring Nespoli to Houston.¹⁶

Arriving home, she promised a production of *Aida* that the town would never forget—complete with elephant and big parade. "Honey, I've already arranged for both; the Auditorium stage is strong enough."¹⁷ So, with a

¹²*Ibid.*, May 4, 1930.

¹³*Ibid.*, May 25, 1930.

¹⁴Lewis Howard Grimes, *Cloud of Witnesses* (Houston, 1951), 130.

¹⁵"I Hereby Resolve," *Houston News Weekly*, January 3, 1928.

¹⁶*Houston Post-Dispatch*, October 1, 1930.

¹⁷*Houston Post*, August 12, 1955.

conductor and an elephant, all Ma needed was an orchestra, singers, and sets.

That winter, Uriel Nespoli arrived in Houston, set up offices at Mrs. Graham's school of music and announced after beginning auditions for *Aida* that he was "well pleased with the Texas throat."¹⁸ Mrs. Graham had not been inactive, and soon community support was evident for the Houston Civic Opera Company. Following its first meeting on February 10, at the Lamar Hotel Ballroom, the troops moved to the M and M Building auditorium for ensuing rehearsals. Nespoli was surprised to discover that he was expected to build his own orchestra for the Company, for none existed. More than one hundred and fifty instrumentalists—professional and amateur—attended the first meeting of this proposed symphony in the M and M Building's cotton warehouse. Norman Beard, president of the Houston Chamber of Commerce, and C. G. Risley, president of the musicians' union, pledged their endorsement and cooperation. The city's second orchestra was thereby formed.¹⁹

Meanwhile, in the fall of 1930, Foley Brothers announced a new series of monthly "Grand Opera Etchings" for its Town Hall. Edna Saunders, the Tuesday Musical Club, the Museum of Fine Arts, and the City Department of Parks and Recreation announced their calendars of musical events. In addition, the Houston Symphony Orchestra Association retained sponsorship of the Boudreaux Quartet for a second season.²⁰ In November, Walter Welschoff announced the formation of the Houston Symphonic Club, Houston's third orchestra, and called opening rehearsals at the Phenix Dairy. Alessandro's Philharmonic entered its second season with a benefit performance at the City Auditorium which featured soloists Jack Abram and Nancy Swinford, winner of the Southeast Texas Atwater-Kent radio contest.²¹

As activity advanced on all three symphonic fronts, Ellison Van Hoose, Music Director at the First Presbyterian Church, announced formation of the Van Hoose Little Symphony. Van Hoose had come to Houston in 1915 in search of a warm climate for his wife, who was ill. A former Metropolitan Opera leading tenor, Van Hoose had been Madame Melba's leading tenor for five years. He had created the title role of *Eugene Onegin* and had sung the first performance of Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius*.²²

In a major tactical victory, Mrs. Graham persuaded the Welschoff Symphonic Club to merge with the Nespoli aggregation. Welschoff was named

¹⁸*Houston Chronicle*, January 25, 1931.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, March 1, 1931.

²⁰*Houston Post-Dispatch*, October 12, 1930; October 26, 1930.

²¹*Ibid.*, November 16, 1930.

²²S.C. Red, *Brief History of First Presbyterian Church, Houston, Texas* (Houston, 1939), 126.



Two of the promising young performers of the time, Drusilla Huffmaster and Raphael Fliegel.

Business Manager of the new group. Moreover, Mrs. Graham secured the sponsorship of the Houston Symphony Orchestra Association for her organization. Dr. Joseph Mullen, a prominent local physician and the first male President of the Symphony Association, announced that the premiere concert of the Nespoli orchestra would be held on May 6-7, 1931, at the Palace Theatre.²³ Van Hoose, meanwhile, secured the sponsorship of Edna Saunders for his Little Symphony. This twenty-two piece group premiered April 23, at the Palace. Alessandro, not to be outdone, scheduled the second concert of the season for his fifty-piece orchestra at the Scottish Rite Auditorium on May 3.²⁴

The first concert of the reorganized Nespoli orchestra was held at the Palace, the same theatre which housed the inaugural concert of the Houston Symphony in 1913.²⁵ Dr. Harry Barnstone greeted the audience prior to the concert—as he had done in 1913.²⁶ Critics generally were positive in their response to the first concert of the Nespoli group, and Dr. Mullen announced plans for a full season of six concerts in the 1931-32 season. Shortly thereafter, N.D. Naman, a cotton and real estate broker, chartered and chaired the executive board of a new Houston Philharmonic Ensemble. This ensemble announced a five-concert season of its own for the following year, under the guidance of Mario Guiranna, Assistant Conductor of the Chicago Civic Opera.²⁷

Young people were a major part of the Houston musical scene during the early thirties. Fourteen-year-old Drusilla Huffmaster, daughter of the organist at St. Paul's Methodist Church, Hu Huffmaster, was soloist at the opening Houston Symphony Orchestra concert of the 1931-32 season.²⁸ Her performance of the Grieg *A minor Piano Concerto* began a long and distinguished professional career. Beside the activities of Miss Huffmaster and Jack Abram, thirteen-year-old Raphael Fliegel received a glowing press review following his 1932 debut performance.²⁹ Moreover, six members of the newly-formed Welschoff Junior Symphony were selected by Nespoli to play with the Houston Symphony.

In February 1932, the Symphony Society announced:

²³Houston *Chronicle*, April 5, 1931.

²⁴*Ibid.*, April 12, 1931.

²⁵When a new Majestic Theater was built in 1923, the old Majestic was renamed the Palace Theater; see Houston *Chronicle*, March 21, 1946.

²⁶Houston *Chronicle*, May 7, 1931.

²⁷*Ibid.*, May 24, 1931.

²⁸Houston Symphony Orchestra program, 1931.

²⁹Houston *Chronicle*, January 24, 1932.

Since the first concert of the season, there has been much discussion of the programs, many feeling that a lighter diet would be more advisable until Houstonians have been led gently to the higher symphonic heights.³⁰

The symphony finished its first season with a deficit of \$292. Attendance had averaged about 3,500 for the six concerts.³¹ Laying *Aida* aside, Harry Girard, newly-hired aide to Mrs. Graham, directed two performances of *Il Trovatore* in April to benefit the city's unemployed.

In 1932, the depression was at its height in Houston.³² The traditional view that the depression was felt less severely in Houston than in the country at large is correct. No banks closed in the city, due largely to Jesse Jones, who formed a money pool among the city's banks and forced management changes in weak institutions.³³ Moreover, a population rise combined with the uncompleted building boom of the city helped to ease the hard times.³⁴ Nonetheless, the depression was hard on the local musicians. Critic Hubert Roussel wrote:

When Hoover's act closed at the White House, I was keeping all necessary dates for the winter on the edge of a cuff, and I lost my shirt before the season was over.³⁵

Few musicians devoted their attention solely to musical pursuits, as few could afford that luxury. Ten stalwart members of the 1932 Houston Symphony Orchestra had also been in the 1913 organization. Herman Weiss, tympanist and flower grower, had moved to Houston from San Antonio in 1907 with Carl Beck's Band. From 1919 to 1922, he played for Julian Blitz in San Antonio and raised chickens. In 1922, he returned to play in orchestras at the Palace, Queen, Metropolitan, and Kirby theaters. Most other members of the orchestra also had other full-time jobs. Juan Gutierrez, a bass player from Zacatecas, Mexico, ran a print shop. He had three children who were also symphony regulars.³⁶ Joe Stokes, percussionist and charter member of the 1913 orchestra, doubled in later years as secretary of Local 65 of the American Federation of Musicians, served on the Symphony Board, and was a truck

³⁰*Ibid.*, February 21, 1932.

³¹*Ibid.*, June 19, 1932.

³²Clarence Peckham Dunbar, *Houston: 1836-1936* (Houston, 1936), 22.

³³McComb, 168.

³⁴Works Projects Administration, *Houston: A History and Guide* (Houston, 1942), 119.

³⁵Scrapbook, 1936-37, Houston Symphony Orchestra Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

³⁶*Houston Post*, October 23, 1932.

farmer.³⁷ Symphony rehearsals that season averaged about twenty hours per performance and were held alternately at the YWCA and Foley's.³⁸

Several anecdotes suggest the state of the musical arts in Houston at that time. The Tuesday Musical Club was forced to cancel a performance by the Old World Trio when they were unable to get a needed musician "to come this far south."³⁹ Roussel, in his daily columns, often told the story of the Symphony Board member who pleaded, "Whatever they cost, we simply must get a couple of basinette players."

Over the summer months, Franco Autori of the Chicago Civic Opera assumed leadership of the Houston Civic Opera, and Frank St. Leger was named Conductor of the Houston Symphony. Nespoli set up a private studio and announced plans to organize a civic chorus.⁴⁰ The Italian had done excellent work with the talent he had available. Bassoon parts had been transcribed for saxophones, and other severe reorchestrations had been made. His powers of adaptation alone deserved applause. Hubert Roussel later wrote that Nespoli

... took the orchestra through its ... difficult infancy, bled freely at every pore when it assaulted his ears with all manner of tonal and technical colic, and did remarkable feats of adjustment. ... He was a great organizer and had a Herculean task.⁴¹

However, Nespoli, whose command of English was limited, had neither the charisma nor the social sophistication to last on the Houston podium. In the fall, Nespoli hired a business manager and made plans to produce opera — the job he had been brought to America to do.

His replacement, Frank St. Leger, was an eloquent and thoroughly charming gentleman. He listed among his hobbies fishing, photography, golf, mechanics, boxing, and surgery.⁴² He was supremely confident on a conductor's podium, and equally at home on the lecturer's dais, at his Rotary Club meeting, or at a cocktail party. St. Leger had come from the defunct Chicago Civic Opera Company and was a highly experienced conductor. His social graces and urbanity contrasted sharply with his Italian predecessor.

Following a sold-out performance of *Cavalleria Rusticana*, complete with a sixty-piece orchestra, the Houston Civic Opera company set to work on

³⁷*Houston Chronicle*, October 13, 1963, *Texas Magazine*.

³⁸*Houston Post*, November 23, 1932.

³⁹*Houston Chronicle*, November 8, 1931.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, July 24, 1932.

⁴¹*Houston Post*, November 6, 1951.

⁴²Scrapbook, 1933-34, Houston Symphony Orchestra Collection.

Rigoletto. Nespoli, meanwhile, had formed the Southern Opera Company, which presented *Madam Butterfly* in April 1933, with imported leads and a sixty-piece orchestra. Mrs. Graham, in addition to her duties as President of the Texas Music Teachers Association, was touring a musical production within the city, complete with scenery and a fifteen-piece orchestra. In March, she announced *Aida* would be ready for National Music Week in May.⁴³

No effort was spared to make *Aida* a memorable production. Mrs. Graham arranged to use costumes from the Metropolitan Opera. She hired Vittorio Verze of New York to conduct, and she landed an invitation for the production to be repeated at the World's Fair in Chicago in August. Governor and Mrs. Ferguson came from Austin for the first performance, which boasted a nine-hundred member cast. The City Auditorium was filled, and a second performance had to be scheduled.⁴⁴

In late spring, Dr. Joseph Mullen, President of the Symphony Association, announced a fund-raising drive for the Symphony with Ima Hogg as the head of the Ways and Means Committee.⁴⁵ Additionally, the Society sought to enroll three thousand season subscribers for the fall season. Mildred Sage, Director of the Houston Recreation Department, arranged for the resumption of band concerts at Miller Theater during the summer months, and the Metropolitan and Majestic Theaters inaugurated a series of entr'acte musical extravaganzas based on standard symphonic and operatic literature.⁴⁶

In August, Governor and Mrs. Ferguson accompanied the *Aida* train to St. Louis for two performances and then went on to Chicago, where five thousand persons saw the World's Fair production by the Texas Grand Opera Company—complete with Chicago Lyric Opera Orchestra. Thus, Mrs. Graham's reputation as a producer was established firmly in the minds of her fellow Texans.⁴⁷

The 1933-34 musical season was the most active to date in the city's history. Houston impresarios announced their most impressive rosters; movie theaters again began presenting musical reviews; major hotels reinstated floor shows and resident orchestras; and a parade of nationally-touted dance bands swept in and out of area supper clubs. Local artists were also active. Victor Alessandro formed an orchestra at the new Houston Junior College in the fall of 1933, while Victor Alessandro, Jr., entered the Eastman School of Music. At

⁴³Houston Post, March 19, 1933.

⁴⁴Ibid., May 14, 1933.

⁴⁵"Symphony Orchestra Plans Final Concert," *Houston Magazine* (April 1933): 26.

⁴⁶Houston Chronicle, June 4, 1933.

⁴⁷Ibid., January 21, 1934.

about the same time, Houston Public School's Cedric Seaver organized an All-City High School Orchestra of sixty-five players for the purpose of continuing to develop youthful talent during the depression. Raphael Fliegel served as concertmaster. Arnold Caplan, also a young Houston violinist, won a scholarship to the Juilliard School of Music in 1933. Another impressive talent, the eleven-year-old violin prodigy Fredell Lack, presented a formal recital at the Public Library Auditorium in late January.

By this period, the depression had eased in Houston, but jobs for musicians remained in short supply. In an attempt to provide work for more local musicians, Eddie Collins, City Manager for Interstate Theaters, instituted a new policy at the Metropolitan Theater in accordance with new NRA theatrical regulations. The regular nine-piece orchestra at the Metropolitan played three weeks of each month, and a pick-up group of available local musicians played the fourth week.⁴⁸ So successful was the new vaudeville policy in the movie theaters that the Interstate Theater chain formed the largest circuit in the country, offering contracts for five weeks' employment in Texas and an option of up to twenty weeks' employment touring southern states.⁴⁹

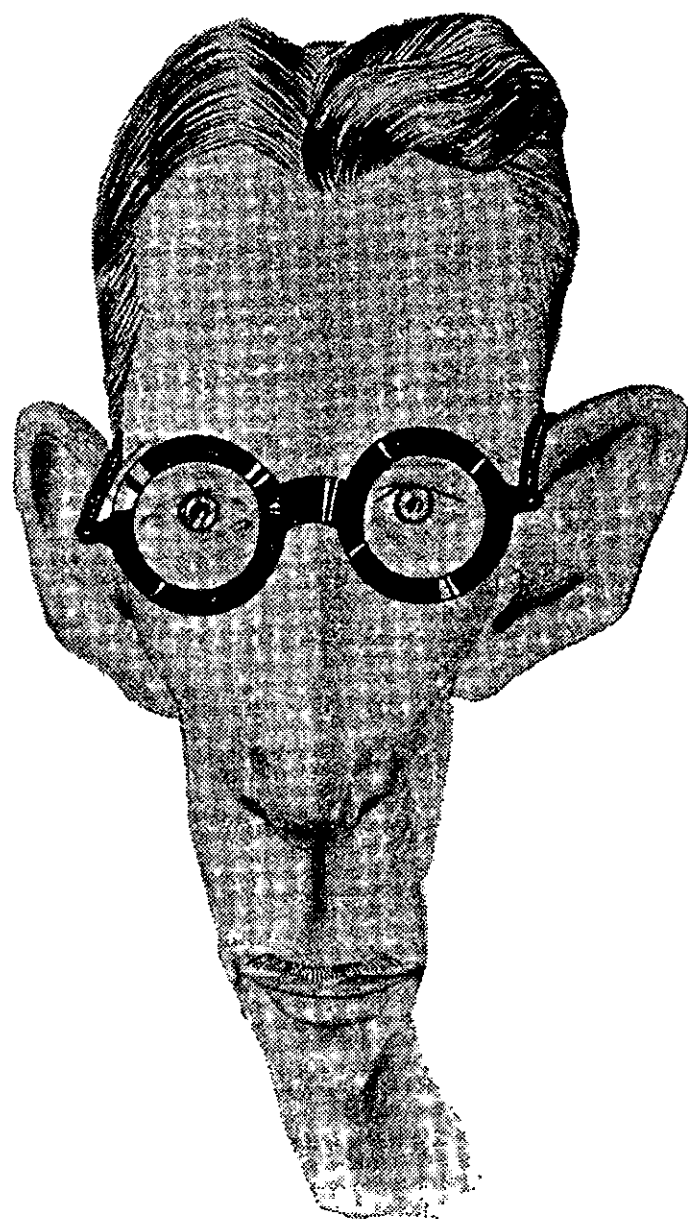
Had it not been for the continuous employment provided to a core of professional musicians by the local theaters and clubs, it is doubtful that a symphony of any distinction would have developed at this stage in the city's history. The weekly payroll of the Metropolitan Theater alone added some \$4850 to the Houston economy through salaries paid to its forty-four employees.⁵⁰ Some of the touring entertainers whose Houston appearances provided employment for the local musicians were Fannie Brice, the Boswell Sisters, Cab Calloway, Phil Harris, Morton Downey, Perry Como, Kate Smith, and the Mills Brothers. The Metropolitan also housed national touring productions of *The Student Prince*, the *Ziegfeld Follies*, *Rose Marie*, and *Blossom Time*.

The Houston Symphony Orchestra Association entered a new era with the election of Joseph Smith as President. Under its new head, the Association began an aggressive development campaign. St. Leger was a major asset to the orchestra. He was a highly engaging, personable man-about-town. St. Leger was the life of many parties, playing the "Pilgrim's Chorus" from *Tannhauser* at the piano, using a whisk broom to brush treble keyboard figures over the melody. Another St. Leger crowd-pleaser required a grapefruit for arpeggios

⁴⁸Ibid., February 4, 1934.

⁴⁹Ibid., January 21, 1934.

⁵⁰Ibid., April 15, 1934.



Gargoyle Roussel

Critic Hubert Roussel, from a group of caricatures of the *Houston Gargoyle* staff drawn by *Gargoyle* artist C. Garza Rivera in 1929.

on the black keys. Many men in Houston bought Symphony tickets and attended the concerts for the first time because they had been asked by "good old Frank."⁵¹

The orchestra numbered eighty musicians for the 1934-35 season. The new manager, Harry Bourne, declared that year's symphony the "best ever" and hypothesized, "The extraordinary work of the orchestra appears to be drawing musicians to Houston. . . ."⁵²

Newspaper coverage of musical activities during the early thirties was extensive. Chief in influence were critics Ina Gillespie of the *Houston Chronicle* and Hubert Roussel, then of *The Houston Gargoyle* and the *Houston Press*. Gillespie's writing was informed, sparkling, and opinionated. An active community woman, she served at various times as president of the Tuesday Musical Club, a member of the board of the Houston Grand Opera Association, and was a soprano soloist. Journalism was a family tradition. Her father, C.B. Gillespie, had been the first managing editor of the *Chronicle* and later served as its editor.⁵³ Her incisive prose reflected her literary heritage as well as her active personal association with those who were most intimately involved in the Houston musical scene.

Hubert Roussel was born in Houston, after his parents had left Louisiana. He was educated in New York, served on various magazine staffs there, wrote some fiction, and returned to Houston in 1928 as associate editor of *The Houston Gargoyle*. Roussel, like Ina Gillespie, shaped the musical destiny of the city with his brilliant wit and his unrelenting attention to cultural development. Roussel's wife, Dewey, also wrote for *The Houston Gargoyle* and later was actively involved with the Houston Little Theater on Chelsea Boulevard.

The first children's concert in the history of the Houston Symphony was held February 28, 1935.⁵⁴ An overflow crowd of 3,000 paid twenty-five cents to attend the City Auditorium performance. During the following spring, however, serious trouble beset the symphony. Apparent discontent with St. Leger, coupled with financial doubts, were the principal reasons. Ina Gillespie reported:

St. Leger found little when he came to Houston. Now is not time for quibbling. We must continue to support the symphony.

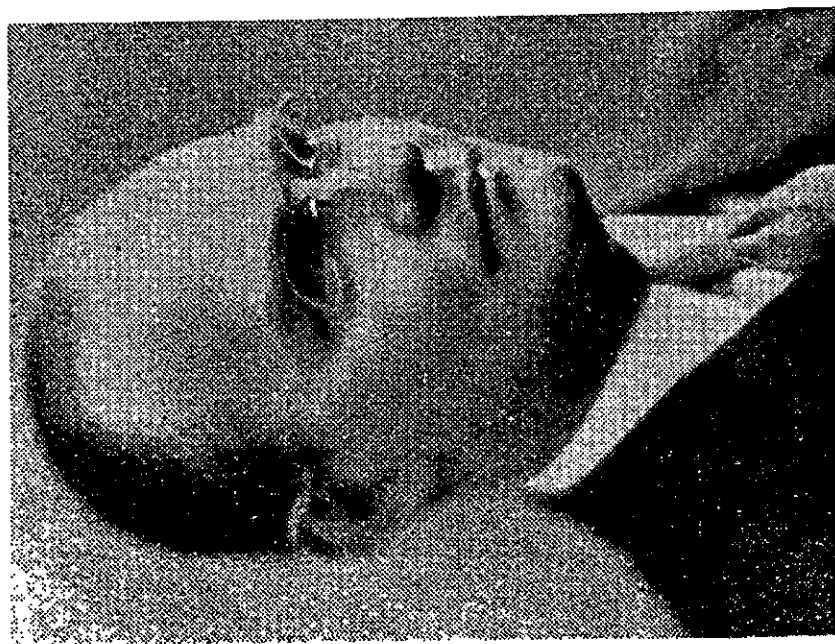
. . . the Houston orchestra has weathered the financial storm. . . . I think

⁵¹Houston Post, April 18, 1947.

⁵²Ibid., October 28, 1934.

⁵³Houston Chronicle, April 4, 1967.

⁵⁴Houston Post, February 28, 1935.



Houston Symphony conductors Uriel Nespoli (left) and Frank St. Leger (right).

we've made a pretty good record. It's a record I should hate to see fall next season for many reasons. . . . I'd hate to see us lose the investment which the orchestra represents to Houston.⁵⁵

St. Leger attempted to unite the community behind its orchestra and to dispel the dissension that was rife. In the face of difficulties, Symphony Association President Joseph Smith urgently requested donations to underwrite a \$25,000 Symphony budget for the 1935-36 season. A goal of 1500 subscribers was set.⁵⁶ This was the first significant effort to broaden the orchestra's base of support beyond a small nucleus of patrons. In 1934-35, for example, a group of only fifteen individuals had contributed \$7500 toward underwriting that year's budget.⁵⁷ Plans were also set for booking one major concert artist annually as an orchestra guest and for including two children's concerts in the regular symphony schedule.

In late July, the St. Leger controversy became public knowledge. Charging that the Symphony Association had delayed in submitting his contract, St. Leger wired President Joseph Smith a list of demands, which included a larger orchestra, a longer season, and a personal raise. When Smith replied that his requests were impossible, St. Leger wired, "Am sorry cannot sign contract. Regards." Ima Hogg, Mary Fuller, Mrs. Herbert Roberts, and Dr. Joseph Mullen were already in New York when the telegram arrived. Smith wired them either to confer on the demands or to arrange for another conductor. Roussel reported, "By this time, they may have been killed in their rush" to hire a new man.⁵⁸

St. Leger had gotten the position when jobs were scarce, had been paid a salary of \$3,600 for seven months employment, and had been provided a home. The orchestra made swift progress under his direction, but had reached a plateau in the 1935-36 season. His resignation was a disappointment to many concertgoers, although it was generally agreed that he had forced the Symphony Association Board to take the only action left open to it.

Frank St. Leger had led the orchestra through its infancy. He changed the direction of the programming from a repertoire that exposed the weakness of the brass section and uneven instrumentation to programming which featured the more dependable strings. Unlike Nespoli, St. Leger's command of the English language frequently made his despair fluent and eloquent. Where Nespoli had given the orchestra vigor, St. Leger gave it polish, grace,

⁵⁵Houston *Chronicle*, March 17, 1935.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, April 28, 1935.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, May 5, 1935.

⁵⁸Houston *Press*, July 26, 1935.

and restraint. Although Roussel placed much of the responsibility for the resignation on St. Leger, Gillespie condemned the Symphony Board.

... they first put forward likeable little Uriel Nespoli ... and, for no given reason, after one adulatory season, withdrew him. ...

Then Frank St. Leger ... for three seasons bore the uneasy crown. Now, it seems ... they have 'offed with his head' because he insisted on a meed of progress for the orchestra. ... Houston lost in him not only a musician of distinct merit, but worst of all, the orchestra has lost a real friend since friendship is not always best shown by being blind to the faults of the object of its affection. Funny things you find, hiding under a Board.⁵⁹

In August 1935, Houston boasted three million dollars of theater construction.⁶⁰ The rise of interest in movies, however, marked the decline of vaudeville in local theaters. The Metropolitan Theater orchestra, the most active in the city, was disbanded late in the summer of 1935. About the same time, the University of Houston, formed from the Houston Junior College, expanded its music program to include vocal and instrumental activities, with enrollment limited to available space.⁶¹

Three conductors were announced for the 1935-36 Symphony season: Dr. Alfred Hertz of the San Francisco Orchestra, Dr. Modeste Alloo of the Cincinnati Conservatory Orchestra, and Vittorio Verse, former conductor of the Texas Grand Opera Company. Six new professional violinists were secured for the new season. Irving Wadler was moved from violin to viola, and Tony Russo and E.E. Schmidt were recruited for solo clarinet and flute respectively.⁶² Two thousand attended the Symphony opening concert under Conductor Verse. The critics were uniformly reserved. Following a performance which included the Beethoven *Fifth Symphony*, Roussel reported with characteristic wit, "This reporter has never encountered a rendition of any work that sounded less like Beethoven had written it."⁶³ In December, Verse redeemed himself somewhat by serving both as conductor and piano soloist for a Mozart concerto.

Following the December concert, Verse handed the baton to Dr. Alfred Hertz. This Wagnerian master had been contracted through his agent, and Hertz had no personal knowledge of the Houston Symphony. Despite the pride which Houstonians had in the quality of their orchestra, Hertz

⁵⁹Houston *Chronicle*, September 15, 1935.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, August 18, 1935.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, September 1, 1935.

⁶²*Ibid.*, October 20, 1935.

⁶³Houston *Press*, November 5, 1935.

conducted only five minutes of the first rehearsal, when he suddenly broke off, exclaiming in his strong accent, "Imbossible! The orchestra is not ready. We must have extra blayers."⁶⁴ Faced with such blatant dissatisfaction with the orchestra, the Symphony Association quietly and quickly imported several key musicians from other orchestras. Hertz was also awarded three extra rehearsals.⁶⁵ The first Hertz concert was stunning. However, when the public later learned of the augmented orchestra arrangement, the pro-St. Leger forces claimed foul. When Hertz learned the maneuver had nearly broken the Symphony budget, he agreed to conduct the regular complement of musicians. Although the February concert failed to measure up to its predecessor, Symphony leaders were made aware of the dividends which the additional musicians provided. Hertz was one of the most colorful guest conductors in the history of the Symphony, and was one of the few who ever rehearsed with a police whistle.⁶⁶

The third of the season's conductors was Modeste Alloo. Except for his exceptionally long legs, his reported use of two batons, and the fact that he spent forty-five minutes of valuable rehearsal time tuning the orchestra, his tenure was unmemorable. Roussel referred to this period of Symphony history as "Much Alloo about Nothing."⁶⁷

One of the by-products of the flurry of musical activity within the city was a growing sensitivity to qualitative concerns. The St. Louis Symphony had included Houston as a regular stop on its tour for many years. However, when that orchestra performed in Houston in March 1936, the Houston community realized in more specific terms than ever before that the local symphonic activity was not of the quality the touring orchestra displayed. The city's leaders recognized they had received a taste of the musical excellence they sought for Houston itself. With the election of Walter Walne as President of the Symphony Association, the announcement of plans to construct a new Coliseum and Music Hall, and the employment of Ernst Hoffman as new conductor of the Houston Symphony Orchestra, the musical life of the city left its infancy.

These, then, were the beginnings of Houston's musical reawakening in the 1930s — an era of unparalleled activity in the city. A great variety of opportunities for musical performance existed. Houston boasted a chamber orchestra, a string quartet, a symphony, several oratorio choirs, two youth

⁶⁴Houston *Post*, March 30, 1947.

⁶⁵Dallas *Times Herald*, February 23, 1936.

⁶⁶Houston *Post*, March 30, 1947.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*

symphonies, a college orchestra, and many other choral and instrumental groups. Professional musicians were drawn to the city by employment opportunities which existed in churches, vaudeville, radio, hotels, supper clubs, and dance bands, as well as in the more formal groups. Performance opportunities were also provided by the Junior League, the Museum of Fine Arts, Foley Brothers, and the City Parks and Recreation Department. Young performers soloed or appeared in their own instrumental and choral groups. The city had an active corps of dedicated music teachers, music stores, and music clubs.

Civic pride, rather than cultural longing, motivated much musical activity. The participation of the business community, including the Chamber of Commerce, stemmed largely from a sense of the need for civic musical development. Few forces in the musical life of Houston were as powerful, however, as the major newspaper critics — Ina Gillespie and Hubert Roussel — and local impresaria Edna Saunders. By striking the public conscience and by molding its taste, these people exerted more direct influence on the community-at-large than any other single factor. Sharing a commitment to musical values and a genuine love for the city, these outstanding individuals strongly influenced Houston's musical history. Restless, urgent, impatient, competitive — the city's musical life in the 1980s continues the Houston tradition.

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