

## History of the Midland Symphony Orchestra

From its humble beginnings as the Midland Civic Orchestra in 1936, through a transition to the Dow Symphony in 1944, and to the final transformation to the Midland Symphony Orchestra in 1958, the MSO has remained steadfast in its mission to provide the region with an exceptional symphonic experience. While there are indicators of orchestras and chamber groups in Midland dating back to the 1860's, it was in 1873 that the Midland City Board of Trustees approved the purchase of musical instruments for the city. From 1922-24 the community orchestra of Midland performed with help from their financial sponsor the Community Center. By April of 1923, The Midland Sun wrote, "It is safe to say that no other town in the state, under 10,000 population, has a musical organization capable of handling the grade of music rendered by the Midland Orchestra."

Though the orchestra disappeared for several years, it re-appeared on November 1, 1936. Under the direction of Dr. Vernon Stenger, 29 musicians gathered at the Community Center to present their first concert as the Midland Civic Orchestra. Early performers included many familiar names with Gwendolyn Pike as the vocal soloist, and musicians such as Guy Shipp, Harold Kendall, Rex Ward, Annie Dent, R.C. Snow, Earl Pelton, John Barstow, Mr. and Mrs. Wilson Hunt, A.T. Bliss, and Norman Hall. Following an enthusiastic reception to the first concert, a search was started for a permanent conductor. Vernon Stenger eventually gave up his baton and enthusiastically retired to the oboe section where he continued to play until 1989.

The orchestra operated independently for eight years, with performances being held at the Central High School Auditorium. In 1944, they were invited to become a part of the Dow Music Department. The invitation was accepted and they performed for nearly 15 years under the direction of Dr. Theodore Vosburgh. In 1958, a new charter was established and the Midland Symphony Orchestra Association became independent, forming its own Board of Directors with Mrs. George W. Armstrong as president. It was then incorporated as a nonprofit organization under the laws of the State of Michigan. Its volunteer auxiliary, the Midland Symphony League, was established in the spring of 1959 under President Mrs. Robert W. Cermak, who was also a charter member of the women's Council of the American Symphony Orchestra in Washington D.C.

At the opening of the first season of the new orchestra, the ensemble had grown to 70 players holding a three-concert series. Lawrence Guenther accepted the post of Assistant Conductor, which he held until 1981. Guest conductors appeared until the early 60's, which saw three commuting conductors; Robert Zeller and Joseph Eger, both from New York City, and Samuel Jones of Saginaw. During Zeller's turn at the podium beginning in 1960, the orchestra grew in popularity. A concert ballet was performed that season before a full house of 3,000 people in the Midland High School Gymnasium. Four concerts were now being offered and Mrs. Armstrong retired as board president to become the orchestra's official business manager.

The early 60's also introduced a recital series for outstanding local students and adults, with the 1963-64 Season inaugurated by Gwendolyn Pike and Marie Armstrong. These "Symphony Showcase Recitals" were presented up until the turn of the century. The 1965-66 Season started with Fedor Kabalin as conductor, and he remained so until 1969. By this time, the orchestra

(consisting of mainly Midland area residents) was in sound financial condition and gradually acquired certain physical assets through gifts from the Midland Symphony League and by purchase of the nearly 230 member Orchestra Association.

In 1969, the MSO entered a mature era as a major component of cultural life in Midland and the surrounding areas. Under the direction of Don Th. Jaeger, the concert season grew to include six performances, and in 1970, the Midland Symphony Orchestra Association became one of six member groups to form the Midland Center for the Arts, Inc. (MCFTA) and moved into its current offices at the MCFTA. The first performance in the new 1,538-seat auditorium featured the Symphony and Music Society in the 1970 Christmas Concert. The Center's month-long dedication in May 1971 premiered David Brubeck's cantata "Truth".

During Jaeger's remarkable 12 year tenure, the orchestra produced the Ashmun Chamber Series, which presented nationally and internationally known ensembles (1980-88), a jazz program featuring greats such as Buddy Rich, Lionel Hampton, Ramsey Lewis, Chuck Mangione, Count Basie, and Maynard Ferguson (1977-81), and an impressive education outreach program including the Touring ensembles (since 1976) and a Youth Orchestra (1978-2005). The 1976 Season included a European tour; in 1979 the orchestra debuted at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. as a part of the Inter-American Music Festival performing a commissioned work by Leslie Bassett, and each subscription concert now featured internationally known guest soloists.

The 1981-82 conductor search brought Music Director Adrian Gnam to the podium. Gnam, who was also the Music Director of the National Endowment for the Arts, brought with him a wealth of musical experience as a conductor and performer. He inaugurated a Young People's Concert series (1982-89), held pops concert fundraisers, started the popular "Prelude" pre-concert series, and offered master classes and residencies with guest artists. Gnam stayed on until 1986, during which symphony membership grew to over 1,000 members, and a consortium commissioning of three Michigan composers to write symphonic works for the Midland, Saginaw, and Traverse City orchestras was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (1985).

The next season of guest conductors ended with the appointment of Maestro Leon Gregorian to the 1987-88 Season. Gregorian made the transition to a semi-professional orchestra of 86, drawing musicians from across the state of Michigan, and setting membership records in 1989 and 1990. The MSO began its sponsorship of the public schools Fourth Grade Recruiting Concert, created the Midland Community Orchestra for local amateur musicians under director Robert T. Ralston in 1991, and coordinated a Suzuki String Education Program until 1998. The Symphony's annual holiday collaboration with the Midland Music Society became the most popular event at the MCFTA, with the elaborate Nutcracker Ballet selling out five performances in 1992. Under Gregorian's baton, the MSO began recording concerts for delayed broadcast on public radio and community television. With the 1994-95 Season came the first corporate sponsors for the symphony, and a variety of educational initiatives including a Harp School in conjunction with the Midland Public Schools, and a pilot Music Appreciation Series. The MSO professional staff was now working with over 200 volunteers each season to carry out its subscription concerts and outreach programs.

The 1996-97 Season brought significant changes to the Midland Symphony as it entered into a collaboration with Central Michigan University School of Music in carrying out an aggressive nationwide search for the combined position of MSO Artistic Director and Director of Orchestral Studies at CMU. During a major reorganization of the MCFTA, the MSO Board of Managers committed to hiring a resident conductor and increased compensation for its musicians, among other steps to facilitate new growth and programs of higher quality. Dr. Carlton R. Woods was appointed new Maestro to begin the 1997-98 Season, an exciting new era for an orchestra becoming even more vital to the entire mid Michigan region.

The collaboration with CMU grew to include annual MSO concerts on the CMU campus, master classes at their School of Music by MSO guest artists, and the MSO String Fellowship Award to CMU string players. Increased numbers of CMU music faculty now held principal positions in the MSO and several of these positions were now endowed chairs. With ever increasing talent on the MSO roster, Maestro Woods lead the orchestra to a new level of artistic quality and critically acclaimed performances of challenging symphonic repertoire and fresh, unusual works. The MSO was performing with the master classical artists such as Itzhak Perlman, Sharon Isbin, Paula Robison, Edgar Meyer, Sarah Chang, John O'Connor and Yolanda Kondonassis.

Symphony outreach expanded with family concerts and subscription concert spin-off activities designed to reach a broad and varied audience. These educational programs were now covering a wider base of area schools and non-traditional educational institutions, steadily growing the regional awareness and partnerships of the MSO. By the year 2000, the sounds of the Midland Symphony were being broadcast live statewide on CMU Public Radio. The 2001-02 Season saw significant changes when the Orchestra opened in a renovated MCFTA Auditorium with electronically enhanced acoustics, improved lighting and a sweeping new look to the stage shell and seating area.

Now performing year-round, Maestro Woods conducted the MSO in its first free outdoor concert in collaboration with the City fireworks on July 4, 2002 with over 5,000 people in attendance at Chippewassee Park. Regular chamber orchestra performances were established along with run-out concerts throughout the state, a popular "Tunes for Tots" program for pre-schoolers, and a community lecture series. In 2004, the MSO took another step forward presenting the complete Puccini opera Tosca to rave reviews, and returning with a smashing production of La Boheme two seasons later. Entering its seventh decade, the Orchestra enjoyed corporate sponsorship of its subscription series, along with travel and media sponsors. Maestro Woods retired at the conclusion of the 2006-07 Season with two incredible performances of Beethoven's Ninth.

As the Midland Symphony Orchestra entered its 72nd Season at the Midland Center for the Arts, the collaboration with Central Michigan University School of Music continued with a nationwide search for the combined position of MSO Artistic Director/Conductor at the Center for the Arts and CMU Director of Orchestral Studies, and Antonia Joy Wilson was appointed in spring of 2008.

Throughout Maestra Wilson's three years as conductor, the MSO performed exciting and challenging repertoire and engaged in large collaborations with area choirs and arts groups. Collaborations included three performances of "The Nutcracker" which featured the Grand

Rapids Ballet Company, a multi-media concert of Gustav Holst's "The Planets" accompanied by images from the Hubble Telescope, Shakespeare narration, four vocal soloists, and two large choral groups. During the 2010-11 Season, Maestra Wilson orchestrated a presentation of Orff's "Carmina Burana" as the ending piece of the MSO's 75<sup>th</sup> Season. Maestra Wilson and the MSO continued to foster education through a Music Appreciation Series with Dr. Etcyl Blair, "Tunes for Tots" (both established by Dr. Woods), Halloween concerts, and community outreach initiatives.

The 2011-2012 Season brought a series of guest conductors as the MSO searched for a non-resident music director separate from Central Michigan University. A model followed by many smaller orchestras across the country, the search for a non-resident music director allowed the MSO opportunities for new collaborations and growth by building on its strengths. In May 2012, the MSO announced Czech Bohuslav Rattay had been selected as its new Music Director.

Maestro Rattay is an active ambassador for classical music, working with orchestras across the globe to produce symphonic works of all kinds to a diverse audience. As he gains a reputation as one of the finest young talents of his generation, Rattay combines impassioned and virtuosic musicianship with a determination to bring great music into the lives of all people. In addition to the MSO, Rattay serves as the Music Director of the El Paso Symphony Orchestra and Lake Charles Symphony Orchestra in Louisiana.

- *Updated August 2013*