

P R E F A C E

Loyal symphony audiences have always been fascinated by the musicians on stage, and particularly by the conductor who stands before the entire orchestra and shapes the music. He seems unerring, authoritative, powerful.

I am part of this loyal, music-loving audience, and from this perspective I have focused this book on the three past music directors of the Philadelphia Orchestra: Eugene Ormandy, Riccardo Muti, and Wolfgang Sawalisch. Although their professional lives are also tied to Europe, I have concentrated on the contributions of their years in Philadelphia. The three maestros are dissimilar in many ways – in personality, in conducting technique, in rehearsal policy, in repertoire and programming goals – yet they are alike in their complete dedication to their art.

In considering the role of the conductor, I have endeavored to probe the artistic and professional attributes of each of these music directors as well as the human factors bound up in their careers. The relationship between conductor and musicians is strangely contradictory; it is momentarily very close, particularly with principal players, but must also remain distant. The challenge for any conductor is to bring as many as a hundred or

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more musicians together to cooperate in a unified ensemble, and any partiality or particular friendship would be detrimental. Thus the conductor's working personality may differ from his natural personality.

Responsibility for the interpretation of the music belongs to the conductor, and the players must adhere to his will and adjust to his methods. Those of us sitting in the audience can appreciate the outer conformations of a conductor's interpretation, but we will probably not be able to hear all the subtleties that can be attributed to a particular conductor. Even an orchestra member who happened to be in the audience for a particular performance might not recognize every nuance and shading. As one musician said to me, you have to be within the music to detect all the subtleties and differences that are the results of the conductor's concept. But they are always there.

At times, to illustrate certain comparisons, I have mentioned the conductors on either side of the three maestros, Stokowski before Ormandy, and Eschenbach after Sawallisch. There seems to be an alternating pattern in their appointments. The tempestuous Stokowski, a consummate showman, was followed by the outwardly unassuming Ormandy, who could forge amiable relations with the board of directors. The dramatic, exciting Muti was followed by the dignified, formal Sawallisch, the embodiment of Old World refinement. Eschenbach gives evidence

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of a return to showmanship, but of a different kind. Stokowski, Ormandy, and Muti were in their thirties when they assumed their posts with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Sawallisch and Eschenbach are mature conductors who have proved themselves with other major orchestras. Each of these maestros was trained in a principal instrument: Stokowski in organ, Ormandy in violin, and Muti, Sawallisch, and Eschenbach in piano. Some say that each conductor's approach to an orchestra reflects his particular instrument.

Everyone has heard about the "Philadelphia sound," a phrase that usually refers to the lushness of the strings and is associated particularly with Ormandy. This "sound," however, really varies according to the conductor, the composer, and the venue. The seeds were sown by Stokowski, flowered with Ormandy, were strictly cultivated by Muti, and flowered again, but with more definition, under Sawallisch. Eschenbach's influence is just beginning. In this book I discuss the changes that occurred under the batons of Ormandy, Muti, and Sawallisch, for the sound is transformed according to the conductor's wishes. It is always his orchestra.

The Philadelphia Orchestra has been fortunate in the continuity of its conductors, counting only six through the twentieth century, with the seventh arriving near the beginning of the twenty-first. November 16, 1900, is the

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Orchestra's birth date. Fritz Scheel served as its first music director until his death in 1907. Next came Carl Pohlig (from 1907 until his resignation in 1912), followed by Leopold Stokowski (1912 to 1938). Eugene Ormandy served as co-conductor from 1936 until 1938 and held the post of music director until 1980. Riccardo Muti became the music director in 1980, serving until 1992, and Wolfgang Sawallisch was the music director from 1993 to 2003. Christoph Eschenbach assumed the directorship in September 2003. All were Europeans: Scheel and Pohlig were German; Stokowski was born in London of a Polish father; Ormandy was a Hungarian who became an American citizen; Muti is Italian; Sawallisch and Eschenbach are German.

The Orchestra itself has become quite international in its makeup and has shifted from the initial predominance of European players to Americans, with the recent addition of Asian and Latin American musicians. The fact that so many musicians are trained in the Curtis Institute of Music contributes to its cohesion. Playing together are fathers and sons, brothers, husbands and wives, teachers and former students.

Ormandy, Muti, and Sawallisch faced many ordeals in their respective tenures – economic difficulties, strikes, upheavals with the board, difficult personnel, recording cancellations, disagreements over leaving the

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Orchestra's original home in the Academy of Music. Over all these problems looms the graying of the audience. The chauffeured limousines with matrons from the Main Line may have disappeared, but they have been replaced by lines of buses from retirement communities. What concerns everyone is the necessity of attracting new and younger audiences, and each of the three conductors has proposed solutions.

Philadelphia audiences owe a debt of gratitude to the three music directors who guided the Orchestra during 66 years. In spite of the anxiety inherent today in all symphony orchestras, the Philadelphia Orchestra continues to be one of the greatest in the world.

CHAPTER ONE

 Eugene Ormandy 

The Friday afternoon audience on October 30, 1931, waited expectantly for the idolized Arturo Toscanini to stride onto the stage. Instead, they watched with amazement as a diminutive, very young-looking conductor with reddish hair, unknown to most of them, ascended the podium. This was Eugene Ormandy's first appearance at the Academy of Music, an unexpected debut that led eventually to 44 years of his leadership of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Toscanini had been engaged as guest conductor for two weeks of concerts, but shortly before the first rehearsal he cabled from Italy that a bout of neuritis in his right arm would prevent his arrival. The Orchestra's manager, Arthur Judson, frantically approached many major conductors to substitute for Toscanini, but no one accepted. Some had previous commitments, but others surely declined because they did not want to be compared with the adulated Toscanini, or with the equally famous

Leopold Stokowski, the music director of the Philadelphia Orchestra, who was on vacation. Ormandy was the only one available. In spite of being warned that it might be a disastrous move, Ormandy accepted the risk.

The scheduled program was not an easy one: Brahms's Symphony No. 4 in E Minor, Op. 98; Jaromir Weinberger, Polka and Fugue from *Schwanda*; Strauss, *Till Eulenspiegel* and Waltzes from *Rosenkavalier*. And there were only three days before the first rehearsal! Ormandy memorized everything over the weekend. On Monday he took the train from New York, where he was living, to Philadelphia and began rehearsing with the Orchestra. He conducted the program on the following Friday afternoon.

The critics and the audience were unanimous in their praise of his absolute authority over the music. His success even became national news. Judson, who had prudently waited to see the results of this challenge, offered him the second week of substituting for Toscanini.

Ormandy's good fortune continued. The Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra (now called the Minnesota Symphony) was placed in an impossible situation when its conductor, Henri Verbrugghen, suffered an incapacitating stroke. The orchestra manager, having read the newspaper reports about this Ormandy "who was good enough to substitute for Toscanini," desperately phoned a Minneapolis lawyer, Willis Norton, who happened to be

in Philadelphia. She asked him to attend one of Ormandy's concerts and form an opinion of the young conductor. Norton was present for the following Saturday night concert and called back to say that Ormandy was wonderful. Judson was contacted and arrangements were made for Ormandy to leave immediately for Minneapolis when he finished his engagement in Philadelphia. After his final, very successful Saturday night performance, Ormandy boarded the night train for Minnesota. His first rehearsal with that orchestra went well; in fact, the musicians stood and applauded. After the second rehearsal, the board of directors signed him to a five-year contract.

The Minneapolis Symphony at that time was a fairly respectable orchestra in the Midwest, but it was certainly not one of America's great orchestras. In his few years with the orchestra, Ormandy transformed it into an excellent symphony ensemble. He persuaded, cajoled, goaded, and endlessly drilled the musicians. He brought in new personnel, introduced more extensive repertoire with new twentieth-century works, and began tours throughout the Midwest, often under trying conditions. Because the orchestra was in debt during these depression years, he instituted "Viennese Afternoons," which were very popular. He became a civic leader of sorts and appeared at any function that would benefit the orchestra.

Technicians from RCA Victor came to Minneapolis for two weeks in 1934, and again for two weeks in 1935. Within this timeframe the orchestra recorded every day for six hours. More than a hundred works resulted, and for a while the Minneapolis Orchestra was the most recorded symphony orchestra in the United States. Although neither Ormandy nor the orchestra members received royalties, the recordings brought prestige and recognition to both the orchestra and Ormandy himself.

During these years Ormandy appeared several times as guest conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra, where he was always greeted with special affection by the Philadelphia audiences. When Stokowski decided in 1936 to withdraw as full-time director of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Ormandy became the natural choice for the position of co-conductor. The board's decision was acceptable to Stokowski, who had recommended three names for the position: Carlos Chávez, José Iturbi, and Eugene Ormandy. Ormandy would conduct for 22 weeks, and Stokowski for six. There were some months left on Ormandy's contract with the Minneapolis Orchestra, but its board of directors, grateful for all he had done for that orchestra, graciously released him.

Relations between Ormandy and Stokowski remained amicable during their shared conductorship. This was principally due to Ormandy's patience and his ability to defer

to his flamboyant co-conductor. For example, Ormandy chose his programs after Stokowski had decided what he wanted to conduct. At one point Stokowski referred to the “delightful friendship between Mr. Ormandy and myself [which] is unusual between conductors.”¹ The two did differ on the arrangement of the orchestra sections, for Stokowski put the strings behind the brass, woodwinds, and percussion; Ormandy moved them to their usual positions when he was conducting. Another difference concerned the manner of bowing in the violins: Stokowski permitted free bowing, while Ormandy, a violinist, preferred uniform bowing.

After two years as co-conductor, Ormandy became the music director of the Philadelphia Orchestra, a post desired by many world-renowned conductors. Stokowski would maintain the same connection with the Orchestra. His turbulent association with the board of directors had occasioned several proffered resignations, which then were withdrawn. In March 1941, after his relations with the board had further deteriorated, Stokowski announced his final resignation.

Pessimists predicted that the Orchestra would never survive without Stokowski, let alone maintain its excellent reputation. They favored engaging a conductor with extensive experience and a charismatic personality. Although Ormandy had fine European training as a violinist, as a

conductor he had relatively limited experience, especially to be named music director of an Orchestra considered by many to be the finest symphony orchestra in America. But the board of directors emphasized the economics of the situation. A conductor of Stokowski's stature would mean a correspondingly high salary, and after eight years of deficits, this situation needed to be taken into account. Ormandy's salary was considerably lower. Moreover, the board wanted someone who would consider the audiences' preference for familiar music and institute the type of programming that might augment ticket sales. Ormandy was the opposite of a celebrity conductor; he was completely dedicated to this one Orchestra; and his appointment held the promise of a smooth relationship with the board.

On September 28, 1938, Ormandy received the official title of music director of the Philadelphia Orchestra, with "full authority over the orchestra's personnel, the content of programs, and the selection of soloists and guest conductors."²



Eugene Ormandy (Jenő Blau) was born in Budapest, Hungary, on November 18, 1899. His father named him Jenő (Eugene in English) in honor of Hungary's greatest violinist, Jenő Hubay; the conductor himself would change his last name to Ormandy.³ His father was a dentist whose

ambition had been to be a violinist, and he was determined that his son would be a violin virtuoso. A precocious child, Jenő, before he was two, could identify many compositions after only a few bars; at three he was reading music; at four he was studying violin with his stern father, on a one-eighth-size violin made especially for him. That he possessed perfect pitch is illustrated by a frequently repeated story: as a very young child, he was taken to a violin recital, and from his seat he shouted, “You played F sharp instead of F natural.” (Some versions say, “F natural instead of F sharp.”) At five-and-a-half, he was the youngest student ever admitted to the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest. He made his concert debut at age seven. At nine he entered the violin master classes of Jenő Hubay, after whom he had been named, and he studied composition with Zoltán Kodály. Just before he turned 14, he received an artist’s diploma, and at 17, with a professor’s certificate, he became the youngest person ever to teach violin at the Royal Academy.

In addition to his academy studies, he practiced three to four hours a day at home, until, he says, his fingers were numb. His taskmaster father kept rigorous control over his progress, and, in fact, was never convinced that his son’s subsequent career as a conductor was the equal of being a violin virtuoso. A later episode illustrates his father’s intransigent ambition for his son. In 1935 a magnificent

international concert was given for the Eucharistic Congress held in Budapest. Joseph Szigeti was guest violinist and Jenő Hubay was host. Eugene Ormandy, conductor of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra at that point, was asked to conduct. All that his father could say, tearfully, after the concert was, “If I had only disciplined you more severely, you might have been in Szigeti’s place tonight.”⁴

In 1917 Ormandy began his studies in philosophy at the University of Budapest. In that same year he became the concertmaster and soloist with the Blüthner Orchestra and toured Germany and Hungary. Later he concertized in Austria, France, and central Europe. Meanwhile Hubay had resigned from the Royal Academy, and Ormandy took his place. He was not very successful, however, because others on the faculty resented his youth.

At one point, two so-called concert agents (some say it was only one) proposed a contract for 100 concerts in the United States for a total of \$30,000. Thinking of the famous, well-paid European violinists in America, Ormandy jumped at the chance. He sold everything to pay for his voyage and, almost penniless, arrived in New York on December 2, 1921. The promoters turned out to be amateurs who had no idea how to proceed in America. The contract was worthless, and since nothing could be arranged without money up front, the promoters disappeared.

Ormandy was alone in New York with no money, no job, and very little command of English. How he wound up in the Capitol Theater Orchestra has several versions. According to one, he remembered meeting a Hungarian friend in one of the many management offices that he and his agents had visited unsuccessfully. He went back to the office, obtained the man's address, and contacted him. This friend suggested that he present himself to Erno Rapee, music director of the Capitol Theater Orchestra. A more dramatic version has Ormandy standing on the corner of 50th and Broadway, with only a few cents in his pocket, when an acquaintance from Budapest bumped into him. He gave Ormandy a loan and advised him to see Erno Rapee, a native of Budapest, who held an important music position at the Capitol Theater, a silent movie house. (Still another version has Erno Rapee himself as the acquaintance.) Whatever the details, the important thing is that Ormandy was hired for the last row of the violin section. Within a week he was promoted to concertmaster. For two and a half years, four times a day, and every day of the week, he performed in this capacity, and he memorized his own parts and those of the other musicians as well. There were no thoughts of becoming a conductor.

Unexpected changes came suddenly. One day in 1924, the current conductor, David Mendoza, fell ill. Ormandy

was given 15 minutes' notice to take over the conducting. The orchestra was playing a movement from Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony, which Ormandy had already memorized; consequently, he conducted without a score. His performance was so successful that he became an alternate assistant conductor as well as concertmaster, and in 1925-26, when two conductors left, he became the full-time associate conductor. He also played violin solos on a weekly radio program that originated in the Capitol Theater.

His friends kept telling him that it was madness to devote his talents to motion-picture-theater music. But since the orchestra often played classical music before the silent film began, Ormandy was acquiring an extensive repertoire. In addition, as they performed every work more than twenty times in succession, Ormandy said that it gave him "an almost incomparable opportunity to learn the music with intensive minuteness."⁵ In his spare time he kept on memorizing new scores and attending symphony concerts. And he began to follow assiduously Toscanini's rehearsals at Carnegie Hall.

Word began to spread about the fine performances of the Capitol Theater Orchestra. The well-known concert manager Arthur Judson appeared at one of these performances. He listened and watched Ormandy carefully. He also heard Ormandy conduct an orchestra at Carnegie Hall that was made up in large part of musicians from the

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New York Philharmonic. (The occasion was a dance recital given by Anna Duncan, the adopted daughter of Isadora Duncan.) Convinced of his potential, Judson offered a contract to the young Ormandy with the plan of developing him into a symphonic conductor. Ormandy resigned from the Capitol Theater in 1929.

At the beginning of their association, Judson had Ormandy conducting orchestra concerts on several regular radio broadcasts. In the summer of 1927, he placed him as the guest conductor of the New York Philharmonic at Lewisohn Stadium in New York, and in the summer of 1930 as guest conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra for three concerts at the Robin Hood Dell in Philadelphia's Fairmount Park. The next summer Ormandy was invited back to the Robin Hood Dell for seven concerts.



It is to Ormandy's credit that, from the first, he never attempted to imitate Stokowski in spite of his admiration for his spectacular co-conductor. With confidence in his own abilities, Ormandy remained himself, an unostentatious conductor whose aim was to produce beautiful music, not the creation of a celebrity personality. There were no podium dramatics, for he was not a showman in any way. The audiences saw a mild, confident leader whom they liked.

Within the Orchestra, the atmosphere was very different. Ormandy was probably the last of the dictatorial conductors, and he remained a rigorous taskmaster. With his authoritative approach to the Orchestra, the musicians always knew that he considered them players who needed to be formed by him.

Ormandy's initial years as music director were often clouded by the public's continuing fascination with Stokowski. In 1939, after a 15-month absence, Stokowski returned to the Orchestra for three weeks. Music critics in Philadelphia and New York lauded the splendor, the sonority, the brilliance of color, and other qualities that they stated were possible only with Stokowski.

During this transitional period, there was unrest in the Orchestra itself. Two players resigned, a first violinist and a trombonist, who said that they missed the inspiration of Stokowski. Others criticized Ormandy's dismissal of the principal cellist, Isidore Gusikoff, for insubordination. (The cellist attributed his firing to Ormandy's perception that he had played better for Stokowski.) At a Friday afternoon concert, Stokowski defended Ormandy to the audience by saying that the players were performing magnificently and that under Ormandy they had fine guidance.⁶ Subsequently the Orchestra members and the board supported Ormandy in public statements. After 1941, when Stokowski had

definitely left the Philadelphia scene, Ormandy emerged in his own right.

The musicians respected Ormandy's prodigious memory, his infallible ear, and his intuitive musicianship. Yet Ormandy was not the easiest conductor to follow because he was usually imprecise in his indications, preferring, instead, more general signals. He used a style of conducting which did not dictate a distinct and simultaneous beginning attack by all the instrumental sections, but one which, in the Academy of Music, would roll through the Orchestra and be heard as a cohesive sound in the hall. In addition, he was more interested in elongating a phrase than in precise rhythm.

Ormandy soon discovered that the Academy, home of the Philadelphia Orchestra, had its acoustical peculiarities, and he took rehearsal time to go out and sit in various spots of the Academy in order to judge the sound from the audience's point of view. It can be said that Ormandy geared his conducting to the acoustics of the Academy. As a violinist he was, of course, string-oriented. The famous "Philadelphia sound," which over the years became a mantra to describe the Orchestra, refers to tonal beauty, to a resplendent sound that comes particularly from the strings.⁷ The tone is rich, glowing, luxurious. On this point the normally unassuming Ormandy was adamant. "The Philadelphia sound? The Philadelphia sound is me."⁸

To produce the brilliance and lushness that he wanted, Ormandy insisted that the strings play strenuously. For more sonority he often had the second violins play in the same register as the first violins. Preferring a higher pitch, he wanted the Orchestra to be tuned to A442 rather than the usual A440 or A441. Sometimes he changed the instrumentation of a composition: for example, having the contrabassoon double the bass clarinet, or giving parts to the trumpets or trombones to augment the horns. He edited and cut the music, making personal inserts, even in well-known works. This was accomplished by taping strips of music paper over the original scores. (Hundreds of these inserts were kept in envelopes and used when Ormandy conducted, then removed for guest conductors.) Obviously Ormandy was not a purist or a music historian, and he was not concerned with the “authenticity” that has come to be seen as essential today, particularly in early music. His approach to music was uncomplicated: music was for enjoyment, even for entertainment.

Ormandy stood quite still on the podium, without much body motion and without moving his feet. The soaring climaxes that he could produce came from increasing his arm gestures. He used a baton for the first two years with the Orchestra until he tore a ligament in his right shoulder, which necessitated surgery. Following his doctors’ orders, he began to limit his use of the baton, with