

A History of the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest

In Celebration of Its 75th Anniversary
by Elizabeth Rexford

THE SYMPHONY OF OAK PARK & RIVER FOREST, founded in 1931 by Gladys Welge, is one of the oldest community orchestras in the country. Originally a "Sunday School orchestra" at a church in Oak Park (one source identifies it as the Second Presbyterian Church), in its early years the orchestra played for church services and gave concerts. By 1933, the fledgling orchestra had grown in size and began to perform major works from the symphonic repertoire.

The orchestra has continued throughout the decades of the 20th century and into the early years of the 21st century, surviving economic upheavals such as the Great Depression, World War II, the rock and roll revolution, and changing tastes and mores. Some of the factors in the success of this community orchestra are the artistic vision and musical leadership of its conductors, the dedicated and talented amateurs, semi-professionals and professionals who play in the orchestra, attend rehearsals each week and practice at home, and the support of the boards of directors and community.

In addition, Oak Park's proximity to Chicago and the orchestra's relationship with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra has enriched and strengthened the quality of music-making in our orchestra. Several of the conductors of the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest have been CSO musicians, bringing to the community their extensive musical expertise and experience as orchestral players of the highest level. And through the years, the orchestra has benefited by using extra players, CSO members and other skilled musicians working in the Chicago area, fortifying the ranks of the orchestra for concerts, especially in the string sections. Many CSO members have also performed as soloists with the orchestra. On the occasion of the 75th anniversary of its



*Founder Gladys Welge
posing with the baton
she used to conduct
the Symphony of Oak
Park & River Forest
from 1931 until 1954.*

founding, the orchestra remains a vital part of the community and a source of pride and cultural enrichment.

Throughout its history, members of the orchestra have represented many professions and many age groups who have come together to pursue their love of music. Except for some leading players and outside invited players, the orchestra is essentially a volunteer, non-paid ensemble. There is a feeling of “family” within the orchestra. The members of the orchestra have witnessed births, deaths, marriages and other milestones of various players. Romance has bloomed within the orchestra at least once: Principal trumpet Dale Kerner met violinist Amy Ericksen at rehearsals. They fell in love, married and are now the proud parents of twins. Many still in the orchestra remember when the Barfords (principal oboe Debra Barford and principal French horn David Barford) brought their babies to rehearsals in baskets. It was with a sense of nostalgia that the orchestra welcomed both children as players in the orchestra when they grew up! The birth of triplets to Darren Malina, principal trombone player for a number of years, and his wife was a cause for rejoicing throughout the orchestra family.



Above: Dale Kerner and Amy Ericksen Kerner met at an orchestra rehearsal 16 years ago. They have been married for 13 years and now have twins. Right: Darren Malina rehearses while one of his triplets observes.

Members of the orchestra have been extremely loyal throughout the years. At present, one notable example is concertmaster Donald Schmalz, whose lyrical violin has led the orchestra for nearly four decades. Schmalz joined the orchestra in 1966 and was appointed concertmaster in 1968 by Perry Crafton. Other current players who have been members of the orchestra for a long time include: M. J. Luetgert (since 1956), John Staunton (1957), Valerie Meineke (1968), Sister Clemente Davlin (1970), Linda Johnson (1971), Michael Daniel (1972), Nancy Blum (1972), Elizabeth Rexford (1973), Diane Doll (1977), Beth Gavriel (1978), Dale Kerner (1979), David Barford (1979), Debra Barford (1979), Carol Janossy (1979), Arthur Granston (1980), Timothy Newitt (1981), Lance Malina (1984), Mitchell Cooper (1986), Diane Horban (1986), and Cheryl Flinn (1990).



The Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest owes its existence to the vision of a local professional violinist, conductor and teacher. An extraordinarily talented musician, Gladys Welge founded the orchestra in 1931 and was its first conductor, a post she held for more than 20 years. Well known in the area as the director of the Welge School of Music, which she opened at the age of 17 along with her older brother Vernon, Welge had deep roots in the Oak Park community. Born in Austin in 1902, Welge began as a child prodigy on the violin, giving as many as 50 concerts a year at the age of nine. Later she attended Chicago Musical College, where she studied violin, music theory and conducting. She earned her master's degree with high honors for violin performance. After a brief marriage in the mid-1920s, Welge lived with her parents on the west side of Chicago, eventually moving to Oak Park to a house on North Humphrey Avenue, where she cared for her parents until their deaths.

Immediately after graduating from college in 1925, Welge was offered a position as a violinist in the Women's Symphony Orchestra of Chicago, a newly formed group. Women's orchestras were formed in a number of major cities throughout the United States during the 1920s and 1930s because, at the time, women were not allowed to audition for major symphony orchestras. The Women's Symphony Orchestra of Chicago developed a reputation for a high level of performance. Welge was selected as principal second violin, a position she held for 12 years. In 1930, she was named assistant conductor of the Women's Symphony and held that post for eight years, after which she was appointed principal conductor of that orchestra. She continued in that role for a brief period.

In a newspaper review of Gladys Welge's appearance as conductor for six performances of the Women's Symphony Orchestra in Grant Park it was noted, "She set herself a difficult assignment, presenting four movements of the



THE EARLY YEARS, 1931–1954: FOUNDER AND CONDUCTOR GLADYS WELGE

*Gladys Welge and the Symphony
of Oak Park & River Forest in
the early years.*



The 2nd Presbyterian Church of Oak Park, at Washington and Ridgeland, is reported to be the first home of the Symphony of Oak Park @ River Forest.

Scheherazade . . . which are full of pitfalls and traps. This gifted and energetic woman escaped them all" (*Herald Examiner*, August 6, 1936). In 1937, her conducting of the Women's Symphony was described as "strikingly forceful" and "dynamic." The *Musical Leader*, a national magazine, reported that her "authority, sense of interpretation, complete command of all sections of the [Women's Symphony] orchestra" had created an ensemble of merit." In addition, Gladys Welge served on the board of directors of the Women's Symphony Orchestra for 15 years in the capacity of finance secretary.

Meanwhile, about the time she was named assistant conductor of the Women's Symphony Orchestra of Chicago, Welge formed a small orchestra at a Presbyterian church in Oak Park. After a year and a half as a Sunday school orchestra, with Welge as conductor, the orchestra presented its first full-length concert as a symphony orchestra called the Oak Park Symphony at the beginning of 1933. The concert was given at the Oak Park-River Forest High School auditorium on Tuesday evening, January 6th, with a program including Schubert's Symphony No. 8 ("*The Unfinished*") and the Suite from *The Nutcracker* by Tchaikovsky.

During the first season as a symphony orchestra (1932-33), two concerts were presented. The second season had three concerts; the third season had five concerts. After that, the orchestra usually presented from three to four concerts per season. In the first years of the orchestra, single tickets were 50¢ for adults and 25¢ for students. By the eighth season, a three-concert subscription cost \$2.00 for adults.

Welge's musical leadership attracted players from Oak Park, River Forest and surrounding communities. Then, as now, most were amateur musicians of all ages who gathered for the love of music. Interestingly, in those early days of the Oak Park Symphony, the majority of players in the community orchestra were men. During the 1930s and 1940s, there was a continuing debate on the abilities of women conductors. The critic Deems Taylor, who is probably best known to audiences today as the narrator/host of Walt Disney's movie *Fantasia*, said that women conductors could not stand the

physical strain and would not receive cooperation from male musicians. Welge responded, "I am sure my musicians have no less respect for my knowledge of conducting and musicianship because I am a woman. They accept me as a person" (*Oak Leaves*, April 3, 1943).

In 1943, in a review of a concert by the Oak Park-River Forest Symphony Orchestra, the *Oak Leaves* newspaper stated that there was "tremendous breadth, and sweep . . . and orchestral unity as Miss Welge conducted." Her baton was described "as a mighty needle stitching the fabric together, her free hand as flexible as a potter's, smoothing and molding."

Although the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest has existed continuously for 75 years, it has been known by various names over the years, including Oak Park Symphony, Civic Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest, and Oak Park and River Forest Symphony Orchestra.

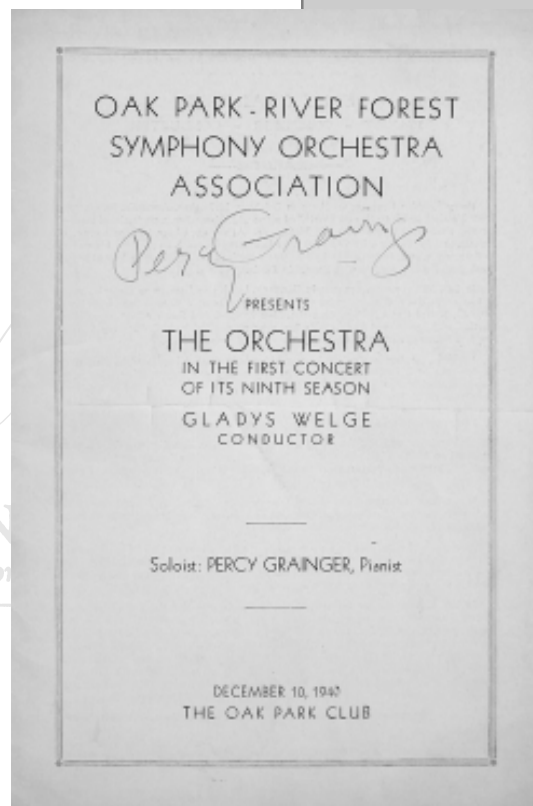
Concerts were presented at various locations. From 1933 through 1938, concerts were given on Tuesday evenings at Oak Park-River Forest High School. Starting in 1938, concerts were held at the Oak Park Club, an architecturally significant structure at 721 West Ontario. (It has since been remade into condominiums.) Many of these concerts filled the Club, whose auditorium could hold 1,100, to capacity. Dinner was served before the concert at 6:30 p.m. The cost was \$1.03 per person.



**Composer/conductor
Percy Grainger (above)
played with the Sym-
phony in 1940; opera
diva Licia Albanese
sang as a soloist
during that period.**



The orchestra gained a certain amount of national notice when Percy Grainger, renowned Australian-born composer, came to Oak Park during the 1940-41 season. On December 10, 1940, he performed his own composition for solo piano, *Handel in the*



Percy Grainger signed a copy of the program for the Oak Park-River Forest Symphony Orchestra concert featuring his works and his playing and conducting.

Strand, and conducted the orchestra in two of his works: *Harvest Hymn* and *Shepherds Hey*. Also on the program were Beethoven's Symphony No. 7, Grieg's Piano Concerto in A Minor, and Overture to *Rienzi* by Wagner. Grainger was quoted in an orchestra program booklet of 1944 stating that the Oak Park–River Forest Symphony Orchestra was

the “finest amateur orchestra I have heard. Miss Welge is a genius.”

Other well-known artists who performed with the orchestra included soloists from the Metropolitan Opera in New York, such as Licia Albanese, Josephine Antoine, Helen Jepson, and tenor John Carter. Well-known instrumental soloists of the day who were featured in concerts included cellist Alois Trnka and pianists Harold Bauer and Eugene List. Catherine Sauer Smith, pianist of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, played at a concert, and Roberta Savler Lysaght, a well known local musician and pianist, also performed as a soloist with the orchestra.

Gladys Welge invited various choral groups to appear with the orchestra. The first choral concert occurred on March 24, 1936, when Helen Leefeldt conducted a chorus in several numbers. Leefeldt was a colleague of

Welge's and played violin in the Women's Orchestra of Chicago. She was the conductor of both the Elmhurst Women's Chorus and the Medinah Ladies' Choral Club. Orchestra and chorus joined together under Welge's baton to perform several pieces, including Bizet's *Agnus Dei* and *By the Beautiful Danube* by Johann Strauss. The Chicago Swed-

In 1946, the Oak Leaves celebrated the 15th anniversary of the Oak Park–River Forest Symphony with a cover story.



ish Glee Club sang with the orchestra in 1942 and the 19th Century Woman's Glee Club joined a performance in 1945.

Beginning in those first decades and throughout the years, the orchestra and board have understood the importance of fostering young musicians in various ways. The first Scholarship Awards Concert occurred in the 1946–47 season and continued for five years thereafter. Five local public high

schools were asked to select one outstanding musician to solo with the orchestra. One of these first five students was pianist JoAnn Green, a student at Oak Park–River Forest High School, who was later known by her married name, JoAnn Rehkopf. She was to become a music teacher and an important leader in the life of the orchestra and its association, acting as a board member and heading up major fund-raising efforts.

Twenty-three years after founding the Oak Park–River Forest Symphony, Gladys Welge conducted the orchestra for the last time as its regular conductor on April 4, 1954. The program for that concert paid tribute to Welge with these words:

Tonight's concert brings to a close what might be termed an era. Tonight Miss Gladys Welge retires as the conductor of the Oak Park–River Forest Symphony, which she founded twenty-two years ago.

With the aid of civic-minded supporters who have believed that good music should be an integral part of the life of the villages, the symphony has given twenty-two full seasons of concerts and has gained national recognition as a community orchestra.

Over the years the personnel of the orchestra — teachers, physicians, dentists, clergymen, engineers, salespersons, chemists, businessmen, lawyers, housewives, stenographers, clerks, students — have gathered together from all over the western suburbs each week to rehearse for



Starting in 1938, concerts were held at the Oak Park Club. Many of these concerts filled the Club's auditorium, which held 1,100. Today, the architecturally significant structure at Oak Park Avenue and Ontario Street has been converted into condominiums.

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A work by a woman composer was featured on the orchestra's first concert, although it was performed by a singer with piano accompaniment. Tenor Philip Jones and pianist G. Gunderson performed three pieces without the orchestra, including Liza Lehmann's "Ah, Moon of My Delight" from the song cycle "In a Persian Garden."

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these concerts. They have come because of their common love of music and their desire to become better musicians, better citizens, and better individuals by working together to play beautiful music.

Through the years many of the great of the music world have appeared as soloists with the orchestra. Local musicians of stellar quality have each season been scheduled soloists. Young people, to whom we believe fame will surely come, have had their first big chances as soloists with the orchestra.

It is therefore with great humility that we meet tonight to pay tribute to a person who has steadfastly devoted her energy, her thought, her talent, her craftsmanship to this orchestra for almost a quarter of a century. Truly her contribution to the lives of all of us has been greater than we know and our debt to her more than we can repay. And so from our hearts we reluctantly say au revoir and God-speed.

Welge moved to Fontana, Wisconsin, where she was Minister of Music for a church for 15 years. Eventually, she moved to Riverside, California, where she was the concertmistress in a local orchestra and director of a string ensemble as well as the director of music at a church in Laguna Beach. She continued to guest conduct the orchestra on occasional visits to Oak Park. Welge returned to conduct the Civic Symphony of Oak Park and River Forest one final time, on October 31, 1973. She conducted the orchestra in one number at the concert — the Overture to *The Marriage of Figaro* by Mozart. After the concert, the orchestra and association presented her with the Symphony Award of Honor.

Gladys Welge died at the age of 74 on July 27, 1976, in California. Her body is interred at Mt. Emblem Cemetery in Elmwood Park, Illinois. The first concert of the 1976–77 season was dedicated to Welge's memory.



Violist Milton Preves became the Symphony's conductor in 1955, after the brief tenure of George Dasch. Preves led the orchestra until 1963.

Following Gladys Welge's retirement, George Dasch was appointed as the conductor. Dasch had a distinguished career as a conductor, a violinist, and a faculty member of the School of Music at Northwestern University and of Evansville College in Indiana. The orchestra had the benefit of Dasch's leadership for only two concerts in the 1954–55 season before his premature death.

Violist Milton Preves was selected as the new conductor in 1955 and held the position until 1963. A member of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra since 1934, Preves had been appointed principal violist in 1939, a position he held for 46 years, until 1986. He was a member of the Mischakoff String Quartet and the Chicago Symphony String Quartet. He was a highly respected musician, known around the world through his recordings and live performances. Preves was often featured as a soloist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, playing such works as Bartok's Concerto for Viola and Berlioz's *Harold in Italy*. Preves also conducted other community orchestras, including the North Side Symphony Orchestra for a number of years, as well as the Wheaton Summer Symphony.

Soon after Preves was appointed, the orchestra celebrated its 25th anniversary season in 1956–57. To mark this important milestone, Gladys Welge returned as guest conductor for a concert on November 18, 1956, and afterwards joined Preves, members of the board, members of the orchestra and sponsors at a celebratory reception held at the Oak Park Arms.

Now in its maturity, the orchestra was a solid member of the Oak Park–River Forest community, supported by its audience, association and board of directors. The Village of Oak Park declared one week in the fall of 1962 and another week during the 1965–66 season as "Symphony Week" in order to give recognition to the orchestra and its contributions to civic life. Perhaps community recognition spurred a name change in the 1963–64 season from the "Oak Park and River Forest Symphony Orchestra" to the "Civic Orchestra of Oak Park–River Forest."

THE MIDDLE YEARS, 1954–1966: CHANGING TIMES

Community outreach strengthened in the 1960s. In order to continue to encourage young people's understanding and enjoyment of music, annual youth concerts were instituted beginning in March 1960. The concerts were free and were presented in

Milton Preves congratulates violinist Carol Anderson after she performed as a member of the Civic Orchestra of Oak Park–River Forest. According to a report in the Sun-Times, which also covered the concert, the audience of 750 rose to its feet at this gesture.



cooperation with the musicians' union, the American Federation of Musicians. The first concert featured *Carnival of the Animals* by Camille Saint-Saëns. Eventually, the annual concert became a showcase for talented high school soloists, many of whom went on to become career musicians.

Within the larger community, the orchestra's unfolding story

in the 1960s reflected the upheavals experienced in Oak Park and in the nation. In December 1962, Milton Preves invited a violinist by the name of Carol Anderson to play with the orchestra. The fact that Anderson was an African-American disturbed some members of the board of directors to the extent that a standoff developed between the conductor and the board over the issue of whether the young woman could join the orchestra.

The orchestra's board president declared that it would not be a good idea to start integrating Oak Park at that time and in that way, and informed conductor Preves that Anderson could not be allowed to play. The orchestra and board were divided and troubled by these events. Churches in Oak Park gathered together to protest racial discrimination in Oak Park, which was not integrated to any extent at that time. Local and national news media covered this story extensively. Bowing to the resultant pressure, the president of the board of directors rescinded her position. This incident, while em-

barrassing to many still today, eventually led to open discussions about integration and discrimination and eventually helped Oak Park to become a national leader as an example of a community which had achieved successful racial integration.

At that time, the orchestra came perilously close to extinction as members of the orchestra quit in protest and chaos reigned among the board of directors. Thanks to the efforts of three people, the orchestra and board were reorganized and the orchestra was able to overcome this difficult time. These people were Dr. Vladimir Flowers, a prominent physician; Laura B. Smith, a board member; and William Meyer, a cellist in the orchestra. Meanwhile, Milton Preves resigned as conductor because of all that had happened. Following his resignation, for the next three seasons, the orchestra was conducted by a series of guest conductors: Rudolph Reiners, Russell Harvey, Harold Little, Harold Rohlfing, Gordon Peters, Irwin Fischer, Perry Crafton and Harold Bauer.



This brochure was published for the 1963–64 season, describing the reorganization of the board and orchestra. It delineated the principles of a new policy, including, “The opportunity for participation in a community orchestra must be open to all qualified musicians, and that this principle is the best insurance for maintaining high orchestral standards.”

THE PERRY CRAFTON ERA, 1966–1994: STABILITY & GROWTH

*Conductor Perry Crafton
led the Symphony of
Oak Park & River Forest
longer than any other
person, his tenure
lasting 28 years.*



Perry Crafton was appointed the permanent conductor of the orchestra beginning with the 1966–67 season. Before becoming a member of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as a first violinist in 1948, he had attended the University of Chicago on a full scholarship, and he earned his undergraduate degree in 1941 from the American Conservatory of Music, where he also earned his master's degree in 1962. Like Welge,

Crafton was an accomplished violinist who had performed solos with orchestras in the United States and abroad. As a conductor, Crafton honed his skills with Pierre Monteux and was a member of Raphael Kubelik's conducting seminar during the time Kubelik was the conductor of the CSO.

Crafton brought a "wealth of musical experiences to the [Oak Park] Symphony," in the words of longtime concertmaster Donald Schmalz. This wealth included his solo work as a violinist and his performance with various chamber groups. Most significant, perhaps, was the fact that Perry Crafton played in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra during the entire reign of Fritz Reiner, who conducted the CSO from 1953 to 1963. Reiner was noted for helping the CSO create a new sound, a highly precise and rich sound, which catapulted the

CSO into the highest rank of orchestras in the world. Reiner had been a student of Bela Bartok at the Liszt Music Academy in Budapest. Reiner was also a personal friend of Richard Strauss, with whom he worked in opera houses in Europe. Later, as conductor of the CSO, Reiner championed the music of Bartok and Richard Strauss, garnering favorable audience reaction to these unfamiliar styles by his compelling interpretations of the music. Recordings of Bartok by Reiner and the CSO won numerous awards and are still admired today.

Perry Crafton was a part of this heady and demanding atmosphere. He absorbed the

musical qualities of these performances, he loved the music, and he transferred that feeling to his community orchestra, the members of which considered themselves lucky indeed to have this kind of direct connection to some of the greatest performers in the world. Under Crafton's direction, the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest performed many of Bartok's works: the Concerto for Orchestra (twice), Piano Concerto No. 3, the Dance Suite, the *Hungarian Sketches*, Two Romanian Dances, and last but not least, the tremendously difficult *Miraculous Mandarin*.

Perry Crafton's broad musical tastes and his ability to conduct various musical styles allowed him to program many unusual and interesting pieces, in addition to the standard orchestral repertoire. Among the memorable concerts of the Perry Crafton era were, in addition to the Bartok pieces mentioned above, Symphony No. 2 by Rachmaninov; Charles Martin Loeffler's *La Mort de Tintagiles*, a tone poem that featured principal violist Arthur Granston playing viola d'amore; Mahler's Symphony No. 2; and *Petrouchka* by Stravinsky. CSO cellist Philip Blum thrilled concertgoers with his stunning performance as soloist in Richard Strauss' *Don Quixote*. Interestingly, Blum had soloed with the orchestra in 1950, when he was in high school (he played first chair cello in the orchestra at the time) playing the Saint-Saëns concerto under the baton of Gladys Welge. Many remember with pleasure the "organ concert" in January 1989, featuring G. Nicholas Bullat playing the organ at First United Church of Oak Park, which included Albinoni's Adagio in G minor, Poulenc's Concerto for Organ, Strings & Timpani, and Saint-Saëns' Symphony No. 3, "*Organ Symphony*."

In 1994, Jean Darling, a member of the orchestra and an amateur videographer, produced a short video, *Rehearsing With Perry Crafton*. This video documentary had excerpts from rehearsals and interviews with Crafton. During the interviews, Crafton said, "The job of the conductor is to try to decide exactly what the printed page means and to interpret it . . . I don't depend on recordings — I try to study the score itself. . . . There's an exhilaration about conducting. I get extremely excited at concerts, and the orchestra does, too, I think, and this is conveyed to the audience." Conducting an orchestra was something that Crafton very much enjoyed. He said, "When you play in an orchestra, you subjugate your will to that of the conductor, but when you conduct, you seek the



Perry Crafton leads a January 1980 dress rehearsal of the Mozart Sinfonia Concertante for Violin & Viola with violist David Tartakoff (left) and violinist Donald Schmalz, concertmaster of the orchestra.

Lora Aborn (1907–1995), a 75-year resident of Oak Park and River Forest, and a longtime organist and music director at Unity Temple in Oak Park, was one of a number of local composers whose works were performed by the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest under Perry Crafton.



will of the composer. Conducting is not the equal of composing, but it's close."

A local newspaper reviewed the concert of November 4, 1990. The headline stated, "Crafton And Symphony Excel In Season Debut." The review, by Jacqueline Taylor, began, "The season opener of the Symphony of Oak Park and River Forest brought one of the orchestra's most impressive performances in recent memory." It continued, "The sizable crowd . . . was rewarded . . . by a marvelous reading of Shostakovich's First Symphony by conductor Perry Crafton. The orchestra never sounded better, attacks clean, the sound bright, Crafton in fine interpretive control throughout the striking program." In the Shostakovich Symphony, "Crafton delivered a playing of this difficult music that was masterful in its understanding of the score."

Perry Crafton endeared himself to the players in his orchestras by his self-deprecatory and wry sense of humor. He was good with words and demonstrated a thorough knowledge of German, French and Italian musical terms. One of his humorous sayings was (to the orchestra), "Let's go back to Letter B, may we?" Then, he answered himself in French, "Mais, oui!" In an interview with the *Chicago Tribune* on November 16, 1986, Crafton recounted an amusing incident. He said the English horn player in one of his orchestras was so nervous about a solo during an orchestral piece that he literally could not put the reed in his mouth because his hands were shaking so much. So, Crafton improvised a solution on the spot by singing the entire solo himself during the performance.

A new aspect of performances by the orchestra was the debut of the Civic Symphony Chorus, which sang its first concert with the orchestra under the direction of Frank Kratky on April 12, 1964, performing *Carmina Burana* by Carl Orff with the orchestra. The Symphony Chorus, prepared by Victor Hildner, performed major choral works with the orchestra every year from 1966 through 1994. These works included Poulenc's Gloria, the Brahms Requiem, Symphony No. 9 by Beethoven, the Verdi Requiem, *Alexander Nevsky* by Prokofiev, *The Bells* by Rachmaninov, the *Sea Symphony* by Vaughan Williams, the Stabat Mater by Rossini, the *Chichester Psalms* by Bernstein

and Symphony No. 2 by Mahler, among many other works.

Perry Crafton championed the work of local composers such as Hollis Thoms, Robert Mann, Lora Aborn, Arthur Lauer, Daniel Tucker and William S. Walker, whose works were performed at the orchestra's concerts.

During Crafton's tenure a number of internationally known musicians appeared with the orchestra, including pianists Vladimir Leyetchkiss, Eugene Istomin and George Shearing.

Youth soloists were often featured, especially at the Youth Concerts. Some performers were Wendy Warner, Brian Davis, Isabella Lippi, Kathy Chang, Eunice Lee and Rachel Barton. Ms. Barton's first of several appearances as a soloist with the orchestra occurred in 1986, when she was 11 years old. She has gone on to achieve great success as a concert violinist in demand as a soloist in Chicago and throughout the country.

Crafton was noted for his ability to accompany soloists; he had a facility for listening to soloists, watching their movements and keeping in time with them. "Perry Crafton works incredibly well with a soloist," said Joe Cisar, a piano soloist with the orchestra. "He knows how to conduct and allow a soloist to do whatever you want to do." (*Oak Leaves*, September 25, 1991)

The abilities of many of the players in the orchestra, particularly the principal players, were recognized and appreciated by Crafton, and he invited various orchestra members to solo with the orchestra. These included Donald Schmalz (violin), Michael Daniel (percussion), Debra Barford (oboe), Diane Horban (flute), David Barford (French horn), Dale Kerner (trumpet), Diane Doll (clarinet), Carol Janossy (violin), Nancy Blum (cello), Arthur Granston (viola) and others.

During the 1970s, Bob Morsch, then principal French horn of the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest, served as ad hoc assistant conductor, leading rehearsals when Crafton was unavailable. Later, another French horn player, Richard Fischer, director of bands and professor of music at Concordia University, and the conductor of Concordia's renowned Wind Symphony, officially served as assistant conductor of the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest for 17 years.

Because of his connection with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Perry Crafton was able to invite a number of his colleagues to play solos with the orchestra, including CSO musicians Blair Milton (violin), Lynn Turner (harp), Edward Druzinsky (harp), Milton

The Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest Greatest Hits

The pieces played most often over the years —

8 times:

- Brahms, *Academic Festival Overture*
- Schubert, *Symphony #8*, "The Unfinished"

7 times:

- Liszt, *Les Preludes*
- Glière, *Russian Sailors Dance*
- Mozart, *Overture to The Marriage of Figaro*
- Wagner, *Prelude to Die Meistersinger*

■ MOST POPULAR COMPOSERS

Played most frequently
by the Symphony of
Oak Park & River Forest:

- Tchaikovsky (72 times)
 - Mozart (71)
 - Beethoven (50)
 - Brahms (43)
 - Dvořák (40)
 - Mendelssohn (37)
 - Saint Saëns (37)
 - Wagner (32)
 - Bach (30)
 - Prokofiev (29)
 - Johann Strauss Jr. (27)
 - Schubert (26)
 - Verdi (26)
 - Rossini (24)
 - Haydn (23)
 - Copland (22)
 - Richard Strauss (21)
 - Bizet (21)
 - Rachmaninov (20)
 - Sibelius (20)
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Preves (viola), William Scarlett (trumpet), Francis Akos (violin), Adolph Herseth (trumpet), Catherine Sauer Smith (piano), Leonard Chausow (cello), Michael Henocho (oboe), Ruben Gonzalez (violin), David Taylor (violin), Louise Dixon (flute), Philip Blum (cello) and Edgar Muenzer (violin).

Then, as now, the orchestra was able to continue to exist because of the efforts of outstanding members of the community, volunteers who donated their time and energy to the orchestra. One of these was Edna Ruth Wood. Wood served on the board of directors and she was chairman of the Chorus Committee for the Oak Park–River Forest Symphony Chorus. Later, she founded the Friends of the Symphony, a group that raised money to support the Symphony in various ways — by selling t-shirts and mugs at concerts, for example, and by sponsoring major fund-raising events. For her efforts in support of the symphony, Wood received the first Award of Honor from the Association of the Oak Park–River Forest Symphony in 1972. Other leaders of the Friends of the Symphony included Marian Tetzlaff and Joanne Rehkopf, who organized the Ballet Chicago Benefit Evening on April 29, 1989. Rehkopf had soloed with the orchestra as a high school student and was a long-time oboist in the orchestra. When she was no longer a member of the orchestra, she continued to work hard supporting the orchestra in all of its activities for many years.

Another key volunteer was Laura B. Smith. “Laura B.” had a long association with the orchestra. As personnel manager, she was devoted to finding the best possible musicians to play at each concert and she was fervid in her support of conductor Perry Crafton. Smith, a music teacher at Whittier School in Oak Park for 30 years, had played bass with the orchestra in her early years. Her tireless efforts on behalf of the orchestra were fundamental to its existence, as she demonstrated earlier, during the Milton Preves era, when the orchestra board had to be reorganized and the orchestra almost ceased to exist. Laura B. Smith formed the Women’s Committee of the Oak Park–River Forest Orchestra Association in 1962. This committee worked on expanding the financial support of the orchestra by creating various levels of donations and by designing marketing strategies. At the end of the 1972–73 season, Smith was honored at a dinner reception, where, in recognition of her dedication to the orchestra, she was presented with a silver plaque and became the winner of the second Award of Honor.

The board and orchestra were constantly seeking ways of publicizing the orchestra.

Toward this end, the Oak Park–River Forest Symphony performed an outdoor concert on the evening of June 28, 1978, in downtown Oak Park, at what was then known as the “Oak Park Mall,” an stretch of Lake Street from Harlem Avenue to Forest Avenue that was converted to a pedestrian mall. A huge wooden platform was constructed at the intersection of Lake and Marion Streets to accommodate all the players. Arrangements of Beatles tunes (“Yellow Submarine,” “Eleanor Rigby”), the Prelude to *Die Meistersinger* by Wagner and the Finale from the *New World Symphony* by Dvořák were among the pieces played. The conductor and musicians were plagued by hot weather and errant winds, but it was agreed that it had been a successful publicity event for the orchestra.

The annual Youth Concerts, which began in 1960 under Milton Preves, continued during the Perry Crafton era. A special effort was made to connect with local schools to publicize these concerts and encourage young people to attend. In February 1981, the Momenta Dance Troupe performed with the orchestra for the first time. The young dancers were all students of Stephanie Clemens of the Academy of Movement and Music in Oak Park. Copland’s *Rodeo* and *La Boutique Fantasque* by Respighi were two works for which Ms. Clemens choreographed dances, performed by Momenta as the orchestra played. Clemens has continued to create original choreography for the Youth Concerts every year, delighting audiences on each occasion.

Festive events have helped the orchestra celebrate a number of milestones. To commemorate the 50th-anniversary season of the Oak Park–River Forest Symphony (1981–82) the orchestra presented a “Viennese Concert” in October 1981. Greta Damrau, soprano, was the soloist. She sang songs by Hugo Wolf, Franz Lehar, and concluded with “Wien, Wien, nur du allein” (“Vienna, City of My Dreams”). The orchestra played waltzes, including *The Beautiful Blue Danube*, as well as the *Tritsch-Tratsch* Polka by Johann Strauss. After the concert, a champagne reception was held at the Oak Park Club to



The flyer for the 50th-anniversary season, 1981–82.

■

The first performance of a Beethoven symphony by the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest was Beethoven's Fifth on November 13, 1934 (3rd season).

■

which audience members were invited. Horse-drawn carriages were offered as a means of transportation to this event, although most people used their cars. A small orchestra, conducted by Perry Crafton and composed of Symphony members, performed waltzes. Audience members danced and enjoyed champagne and Viennese pastries.

Perry Crafton was honored by the Village of Oak Park and by the orchestra on a number of occasions. To celebrate Crafton's 20th year as conductor, a gala celebration was planned. Judith Newitt, president of the board of directors of the Symphony Association, presented Crafton and his wife, Josephine, with a gift of a large stained glass panel with a design inspired by those of Frank Lloyd Wright. The president of the Village of Oak Park proclaimed October 19, 1986, as "Perry E. Crafton Day." The proclamation included these words:

His exceptional musical training, experience, and high professional standards have ensured quality performances for appreciative audiences and earned him the respect and admiration of the performing arts community . . .

On May 7, 1988, Rosary College (now Dominican University) in River Forest presented Crafton with the Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters. The citation stated:

In Perry Crafton, violinist and conductor of community orchestras, Rosary College honors a person whose life and talents are spent in the exultant creation of beauty for others . . . he interprets, teaches, inspires, and leads with disciplined precision, musical sensitivity, and dynamism. He has made it possible for hundreds of instrumentalists to share in the experience of symphonic performance, and his orchestras offer local communities delight and education in a full range of orchestral programs. . . .

The 60th-anniversary season of the orchestra was celebrated on January 19, 1992, with a reception after the concert at the home of the Midwest Diocese of the Orthodox Church of America at 605 Iowa Street. Hors d'oeuvres, wine and birthday cake were served.

To celebrate Crafton's 25th year as conductor of the orchestra, in May 1992, members of the orchestra presented Crafton with a scrapbook of letters from nearly one hundred then-current and former players. Also in May, the board of directors presented Crafton

with a CD player to honor this special occasion. In one of the letters in the orchestra scrapbook, Edward Druzinsky, harpist with the CSO and soloist with the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest, wrote: "Finding the finest of musicians, best conductor, and most perfect gentleman in one person is unique."

In 1963–64, the name of the orchestra had reverted to the "Civic Symphony of Oak Park and River Forest," and accordingly the name of the association became "The Civic Symphony Association of Oak Park and River Forest." According to the by-laws that had been in effect for a number of years, a board of directors was legally in charge of the affairs of the orchestra. Members of the orchestra were voting members of the association. At each annual meeting of the association, all members of the association voted on items such as approval of the budget and other matters.

From 1984 to 1989, the orchestra was known as the "Oak Park & River Forest Symphony Orchestra." In the season of 1989–90, the name of the orchestra and of the association was again changed, to "The Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest." And, in 1993, the bylaws were changed to reflect the general recommendations of the American Symphony Orchestra League. A mission statement was drawn up and adopted, the conductor's job description was changed, and, according to the new bylaws, orchestra members were no longer considered members of the Association. A great deal of dissension arose at that time among members of the orchestra, who opposed the board with regard to the new bylaws and with regard to whether Perry Crafton could remain as the music director and conductor of the orchestra. However, with the orchestra's support, Crafton remained in place for one more season. Happily, even under the new bylaws, orchestra members continued to play active roles as members of the board of directors and the relationship between the board and the orchestra returned to normal.

Perry Crafton retired from the CSO at the end of the 1988–89 season, but he continued to conduct the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest through the 1993–94 season, becoming the orchestra's conductor for the longest tenure to date: 28 years. One of the secrets of his longevity with the orchestra was his personal connection with the players. Sister Clemente Davlin, a long-time player, said,

*Sister Clemente Davlin,
a member of the Symphony of
Oak Park & River Forest since
1970, with conductor Perry
Crafton, under whose baton
she played for 24 seasons.*



The Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest's long-time concertmaster, Donald Schmalz, seen here during a rehearsal in 2005, joined the orchestra at the same time that Perry Crafton became conductor, 1966, and was appointed concertmaster in 1968.



"Perry is a great teacher as well as a conductor. He is a courteous gentleman who is patient with the players." Crafton had a knack for encouraging each player to do his or

her best so that many players blossomed and grew under his tutelage. His reputation as a congenial person in addition to his reputation as a consummate musician attracted instrumentalists far and wide who wanted to join the orchestra. Donald Schmalz, who played violin under Crafton's direction during those 28 years, most of that time as concertmaster, was interviewed by the *Wednesday Journal* in early 1994. Schmalz said that Perry Crafton's wide experience as both a musician and a conductor allowed the

symphony to flourish: "He has brought an incredible wealth of musical experience to the symphony. He has brought us to preeminence among community orchestras."

On May 1, 1994, Perry Crafton conducted his last concert with the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest. Titled "Maestro Crafton's Farewell Concert," the program consisted of the First Essay for Orchestra by Samuel Barber; the premier performance of *Circles* by local composer Hollis Thoms; *Lieutenant Kije* Suite by Sergei Prokofiev; and Symphony No. 2 by Robert Schumann. After the concert, audience and orchestra members alike attended a reception to honor Crafton. A special exhibit with photos, programs and displays designed by Suzanne Rexford and Elizabeth Rexford, a long-time member of the orchestra's violin section and personnel manager for 11 years, was set up in the high school lobby to highlight Crafton's career with the orchestra. In the ensuing years, through the 2000-01 season, programs for each concert continued to list Perry Crafton as "Conductor Emeritus." Crafton and his wife, Josephine, continued to live in their Park Ridge home, until his death in May 2001 at the age of 80.

The season of 1994–95 was one of guest conductors. These were: Barbara Schubert, Paul Vermel, Jay Friedman, Richard Fischer and Donald Chen. At the end of that season, the Board of Directors announced that the new permanent conductor would be Jay Friedman, starting with the 1995–96 season. A highly talented musician, Jay Friedman had attended Yale University and Roosevelt University. He joined the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1962 and was appointed principal trombonist in 1964 by conductor Jean Martinon. In addition to his solo work as the principal trombonist with the CSO, he has appeared as a soloist with that orchestra. Friedman has been a guest conductor for a number of orchestras throughout the United States and Europe. He is well known for his published arrangements of brass music. Friedman has recently recorded a CD entitled “The Singing Trombone,” which is intended to aid trombone students. He is principal guest conductor and head of the wind and brass department at the Chicago College of Performing Arts of Roosevelt University.

“While I realize that the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest is not the CSO, my aim is to bring the same quality performance of America’s ‘big five’ orchestras,” Friedman said in an *Oak Leaves* interview. “We might not have the same budget or facilities, but we can be just as musically sophisticated, enjoyable, and satisfying.” Many audience members will agree with his statement, especially after hearing many notable and exciting performances by the orchestra of major works such as the symphonies of Mahler under the direction of Jay Friedman.

The Illinois Council of Orchestras has honored the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest with a number of awards during Friedman’s tenure. These awards highlight the excellence of the orchestra, the conductor, the general manager and supporting organizations, and have given statewide recognition to the orchestra.

INTO A NEW CENTURY WITH JAY FRIEDMAN



Jay Friedman, the current conductor of the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest, has now led the orchestra for more than a decade.



*Jay Friedman accepts the
Conductor of the Year award
for 1999–2000 from the
Illinois Council
of Orchestras.*

- 1998 — Programming of the Year Award
- 1999 — Special Events of the Year Award (for services to young musicians)
- 2000 — Jay Friedman, Conductor of the Year Award
- 2002 — Outstanding Community Relations of the Year Award
- 2004 — Community Orchestra of the Year Award
- 2004 — Beth Gavriel, General Manager of the Year Award

A notable event in the orchestra's recent history was the world premiere of a work entitled *A Symphony of Place, Celebrating Fair Housing and Diversity in Oak Park, Illinois*, on January 27, 2001.

Written for symphony orchestra by Columbia College professor James Kimo Williams, the symphony included vocal soloists, chorus, gospel choir, children's chorus, jazz ensemble and narrators. It was commissioned and sponsored by the Oak Park Area Arts Council, which has continued to support the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest.

In addition to music-making, Friedman has shown much initiative in innovative fund raising for the orchestra. In 2001, he organized the extremely successful "Brass Buddies" concert. In fact, it was reported at the time that the event was the largest fundraiser in its 69 years of existence. An audience of about 2,000 attended the event at Orchestra Hall. The concert not only raised funds for the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest, but it was a musical tribute to Adolph "Bud" Herseth, who had recently retired as principal CSO trumpet. Friedman said, "I wanted to do an all-brass concert as a benefit for the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest and I wanted it to be a tribute to the great trumpeter I have had the honor of sitting next to for my 38 years with the CSO, Bud Herseth. We both live in Oak Park and he has been a big supporter of our orchestra. The board of directors planned to use \$25,000 of the funds to establish a permanent endowment, earnings from which will fund an annual internship grant and a 'Young Conductors' program award, among other endowments and projects."

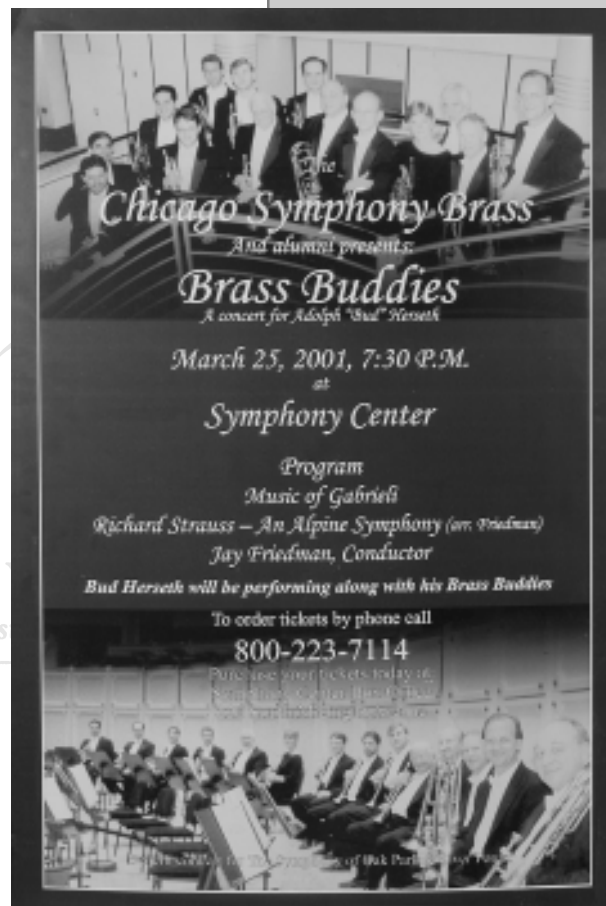
Jay Friedman and the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest were invited to perform at the annual fireworks celebration on July 4, 2003. The early evening program, played outdoors on the OPRF High School football field with the audience in the stands,

included *American Salute* by Morton Gould and *Lincoln Portrait* by Aaron Copland. The latter was narrated by Henry Fogel of River Forest, president and CEO of the American Symphony Orchestra League and former executive director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Association for 18 years. As is the tradition at many 4th of July concerts, the *1812 Overture* by Tchaikovsky was the grand finale, dovetailing with the beginning of the fireworks display.

The Family Concerts (formerly known as Youth Concerts) continue to be performed annually. With Stephanie Clemens' original choreography, the Family Concerts have often featured the Momenta dancers, the troupe of young people from the Academy of Movement and Music, presenting such selections as excerpts from *Hansel and Gretel* by Humperdinck, *Carnival of the Animals* by Saint-Saëns, *Baba Yaga and Dance of the Dolls* by Liadov, *Tubby the Tuba* by George Kleinsinger (with Gene Pokorny of the CSO as soloist), excerpts from Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Babar the Little Elephant* by Poulenc. The Family Concerts also provided a venue for humorous offerings such as music by P.D.Q. Bach and the "infamous" St. Luke's Bottle Band from Park Ridge, Illinois.

Members of the orchestra attend rehearsals on Wednesday evenings at Concordia University. For many years concerts were held in the auditorium at Oak Park–River Forest High School. Grace Episcopal Church in Oak Park was the venue for concerts during the 2002–03 season and at times before that season. Beginning in the 2003–04 season, all regular concerts have been held at the First United Church of Oak Park. The Family Concerts continue to be held at the high school, where there is sufficient room on the stage for the Momenta dancers.

The board of directors has been persistent in its efforts to initiate innovative ways of attracting new audience members. For example, at the start of the 1997–98 season, "Flex Tickets" were offered to subscribers. These tickets could be used in any combination for any or all of the concerts. This successful venture continues to the present day. The "Encore Club" continues to be offered to patrons, who receive preferred seating in



The poster announcing the immensely popular Brass Buddies benefit concert for the orchestra, held at Orchestra Hall in Symphony Center in Chicago.

a special section at concerts, as well as coupons for local shops.



Members of the Oak Park dance troupe, Momena, which has been performing with the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest since 1981, stage the tale of Babar in 2005. The orchestra, with assistant conductor Kim Diehnelt, play onstage at the high school, behind the Momena performers.

A concerto competition was initiated during the 2004–05 season. High school students are invited to audition for a chance to perform with the orchestra at the annual Family Concert in January, as well as to receive a monetary reward. This program was funded by Mel Noel, past president of the board of directors, and his brother John Noel, in honor of their mother, Kathryn H. Noel. The concerto competition has become an annual event and continues to be offered to area high school students.

Another benefit for audience members has been the series of “Conversations” with Carl Grapentine, which began in 1990. During these pre-concert discussions, Grapentine offers insights into the music for each concert. Carl Grapentine, now a popular morning announcer on Chicago’s classical music station, WFMT, and a resident of Oak Park, has said, “There’s always a good story behind most classical music works. And all of my ‘Conversations’ end with a question-and-answer session.”

The *Upbeat* newsletter was created as a means of informing subscribers about upcoming concerts and other news about the orchestra. Board member Bob Garland was the first editor. Beth Gavriel, General Manager of the orchestra, edited the *Upbeat* for a number of years. Presently, Gail Friedman, wife of the conductor, has been editing this publication. She is a valuable asset to the orchestra and works tirelessly in its behalf.

Jay Friedman has graciously shared the podium with two young conductors, acting as their mentor and allowing them the experience of conducting an orchestra. In return, the assistant conductors were able to conduct rehearsals in the absence of the conductor as well as in occasional performances. The first of these assistants was Ho Chung Yeh, who emigrated to the United States from China. During the 1999–2000 season, Ho Chung Yeh was named associate conductor of the orchestra, the same year he was appointed as apprentice conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra by Daniel Barenboim. Yeh continued as SOPRF associate conductor through the 2005–06 season. In 2001, Yeh formed

the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest Chamber Orchestra, drawing members from the larger orchestra. He was the music director and conductor of the ensemble, which generally presented two concerts each season, in addition to the concerts by the full orchestra. Shortly after their debut concert, Yeh and the Chamber Orchestra were invited to play at the Oak Park Centennial Gala concert in 2002, a celebration of the founding of the Village of Oak Park 100 years ago.

Kim Diehnelt was appointed assistant conductor during the 2001–02 season and continued in this role through the 2005–06 season. Diehnelt studied clarinet and composition with teachers and musicians from Scandinavia, Russia and other countries in Europe. She studied conducting at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, Finland and with the German conducting pedagogue, Walter Hügler, at the Biel Academy, Switzerland. While in Europe, Diehnelt conducted a number of orchestral groups, and she has been an active conductor for various orchestras since her return to the United States. She feels strongly that performers must constantly keep in mind that, “Notes without communication are nothing.” Ms. Diehnelt conducted at rehearsals and at some concerts of the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest. She was particularly interested in outreach programs. She made a number of visits to schools to teach children about the symphony orchestra and about music in general. Diehnelt also presented “open rehearsals” at the Oak Park Public Library, with a small group of musicians from the orchestra. Another outreach project of Diehnelt’s was her participation in a symposium at Unity Temple in Oak Park which compared architecture and music. She was appointed director of community relations for the symphony during the 2004–05 season.

One of Jay Friedman’s efforts has been to revive the tradition of the Symphony Chorus, which had been inactive for a few years. The Oak Park & River Forest Symphony Chorus was prepared by Edward Zelnis from 1997 to 2000. The next performance by the Chorus took place on March 9, 2003, when Mahler’s Symphony No. 3 was performed. The choirs of Grace Episcopal Church in Oak Park sang the choral parts of this work. They were prepared by Dennis Northway, music director at the church. The Symphony Chorus was again revitalized on November 16, 2003, under the baton of William Chin, music director at the First United Church of Oak Park, in a performance of Mahler’s Symphony No. 2. Chin also prepared the Symphony Chorus in a perfor-



*Associate
conductor
Ho Chung Yeh*



*WFMT’s Carl Grapentine
an Oak Park resident,
participates as narrator
(from amidst the orchestra)
at the Children’s Concert.
He also leads pre-concert
conversations.*

Leading the Symphony of
Oak Park & River Forest
“is a great musical experience. . . . There’s literally
no music that is beyond
our capability. This is
an exceptional community
orchestra.”

— Jay Friedman,
in the *Oak Leaves*,
October 22, 2003

mance of *Alexander Nevsky* by Prokofiev. This work was performed with the orchestra on October 10, 2004 and was conducted by Jay Friedman. During the 2005–06 season, Symphony No. 9 by Beethoven was performed to a standing room only crowd.

Jay Friedman has said that leading the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest “is a great musical experience. . . . There’s literally no music that is beyond our capability. This is an exceptional community orchestra” (*Oak Leaves*, October 22, 2003). At the same time, under Friedman’s leadership, the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest has begun to develop a reputation as a fine “Mahler orchestra.” The symphonies of Mahler, well known for their complexity and profundity, have been played to great acclaim and packed halls: Symphony No. 6 on March 17, 2002, Symphony No. 3 in March of 2003, and Symphony No. 2 on November 16, 2003. Friedman has spoken of Mahler’s Third as “a huge composite of emotional feelings that speaks of nature, love, and mankind” (*Oak Leaves*, March 5, 2003). The Mahler tradition continued into the 2005–06 season with a performance of his Symphony No. 1, which opened the gala 75th-anniversary season, and in the 2006–07 season with the Symphony No. 4, again in the season’s opening concert.

Another interest for Friedman has been the great works of opera. He and the orchestra have presented a number of concerts featuring opera arias. The first was an acclaimed concert on May 23, 2004, the “Opera Spectacular,” featuring the vocal artistry of soprano Theresa Ludden, mezzo soprano Deborah Guscott and tenor Cory Winter. A suite from *Carmen* was a highlight of Part One and excerpts from Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde* were the main offerings in Part Two of the concert that day.

The orchestra continues to benefit greatly from its proximity to Chicago. Many of Friedman’s CSO colleagues have played concertos and other solos with the orchestra, including Robert Chen (concertmaster), David Taylor (assistant concertmaster), Mihaela Ionescu (violin), Charles Pikler (principal viola), John Sharp (principal cello), Walfrid Kujala (flute), Alex Klein (principal oboe), Grover Schiltz (principal English horn), Adolph Herseth (retired principal trumpet), Chris Martin (principal trumpet), John Hagstrom (trumpet), Dale Clevenger (French horn), Charles Vernon and Michael Mulcahy (trombone) and Gene Pokorny (tuba). Finally, Friedman himself eventually bowed to pressure to solo with the orchestra in 2004 in the *Koncertstück*, Op. 7, by Wilhelm Mühlfeld. These master musicians have enriched the musical life of Oak Park through their stunning performances. In addition, such eminent conductors as Yoel Levi, Mark Elder and David

Robertson have conducted the Symphony of Oak Park and River Forest in rehearsals.

Many other talented professionals and amateurs have been soloists with the orchestra in the Friedman era. David Leehey, an Oak Park resident and a physician by profession, performed Brahms' Piano Concerto No. 1 on October 10, 2001. Later, Dr. Leehey became even more highly involved with the orchestra when he accepted the position of President of the Board of Directors. Spencer Myer was another outstanding piano soloist, playing Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 24 and Ravel's Concerto for the Left Hand on February 27, 2005, and on the following day venturing "off-site" for a performance in Riverside, Illinois. Among other locally prominent musicians, trumpet players Charles Geyer and Barbara Butler thrilled audiences with their virtuosic playing on two occasions — in May 1996 with the *Carmen* Suite and in December 2000 with a performance of *Under Gypsy Skies* by Hunsberger. Principal flutist Diane Horban performed Mozart's Concerto for Flute and Harp with harpist Deanne van Rooyen on October 17, 1999.

"Edifice of Sound" was the theme of an unusual concert and lecture in October and November of 2002. Cosponsored by the Frank Lloyd Wright Preservation Trust and the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest, the concert in October featured the music of Beethoven, which Frank Lloyd Wright considered as a prime influence on his architectural principles. "Scores and Blueprints — A Conversation" was the title of an intriguing lecture/discussion which took place at a later date. An architect, Erol Altay, and a musician, Kim Diehnelt, assistant conductor of the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest, explored structural and aesthetic similarities between architecture and music.



The Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest in 2002 in the Grace Episcopal Church, where concerts were held for the 2002–03 season. Front and center, conductor Jay Friedman is flanked by associate conductor Ho Chung Yeh and assistant conductor Kim Diehnelt.

CONTINUING THE SYMPHONY'S LONG TRADITION

A notable aspect of the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest is the loyalty of its players throughout the years. A number of players have been with the group for 20 years or more. At least three players have been honored for playing with the orchestra for half a century. In 1984, a cellist in the orchestra, William Meyer, was honored by the Orchestral Association at their annual meeting. He had played with the orchestra for 50 years. In 1989, violinist Linnea Anderson received a plaque in honor of her 50 years with the orchestra. And in June 2003, at the Annual Meeting of the Board and Orchestra, Helen Regan, longtime cellist with the orchestra, was presented with the first Gladys Welge Award, "presented to Helen Quirk Regan, stalwart cellist and 'mother hen' of the cello section of the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest, for 46 years, with gratitude, respect, and love from her fellow musicians and from all the members of the Board."



*The Symphony of Oak Park
& River Forest in a dress
rehearsal at the First United
Church of Oak Park, its concert
home since the 2003–04 season.*

Audiences continue to be thrilled by performances of the orchestra. In an article that appeared in the May 11, 2005, issue of the *Wednesday Journal*, reviewer Cathryn Wilkinson stated: "A moment when art touches you to the point that you lose inhibitions is a sacred slice of time. . . . To experience such a moment with an audience of several hundred at First United Church of Oak Park on May 1, at the Symphony of Oak Park and River Forest's season finale, was nearly on par with an adrenaline rush from bungee-jumping." Schumann's *Konzertstück* for Four Horns and Orchestra, Wilkinson noted, ". . . under the inspired direction of Jay Friedman, was played wonderfully. . . ." She continued, "[The musical playing of the four soloists] held such

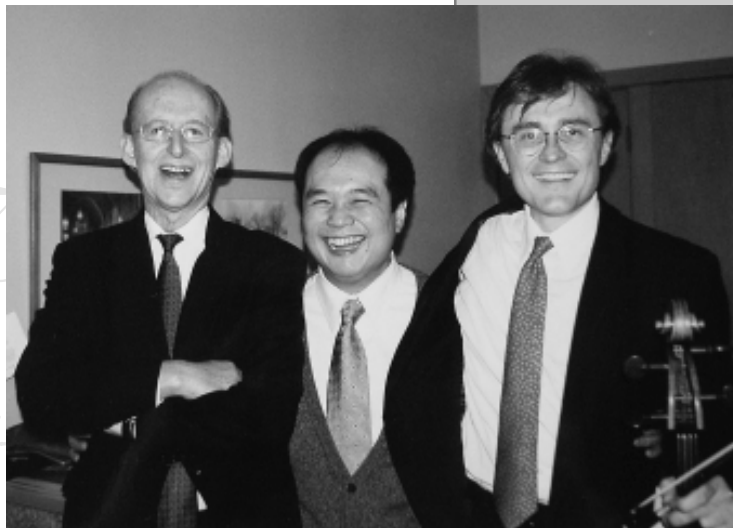
depth, drive and sparkle that the crowd was swept up in the brilliance of it all. The response was lengthy and fervent applause and shouts of 'bravo' worthy of a grand slam home run." The "dramatic readings [by Henry Fogel, narrating the *Romeo and Juliet* story as the orchestra performed from *Suites* by the same name, composed by Prokofiev] and intense musical interpretation of this anguish-filled story finished off a cathartic, adrenalin-packed afternoon and ended the symphony's season with more raving accolades from the happy crowd."

As talented and dedicated as the musicians and conductors may have been, the

Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest could not continue to exist without the support of many dedicated volunteers. With vision and purpose, these leaders have worked hard to maintain and develop the continuance of the orchestra from year to year. At the beginning of the orchestra's history, Gladys Welge was able to enlist support from the community for fund-raising and for many kinds of help in ensuring the smooth running of the orchestra and its continuing success. Throughout the years, the boards of directors have continued their invaluable support. In recent years (1970–2005) the presidents of the boards of directors have included Richard Tribble, Dr. Howard Buchner, Dr. Stanley Martin, Dr. Carl Waldschmidt, William Shorney, Donna Stephens, Bruce Hubbard, Judith Newitt, Tim Newitt, Susan Cartland Bode, Karen McGirr, Melbourne Noel and David Leehey. The names of countless other board members and volunteers can be found in the orchestra's programs, housed at the Historical Society of Oak Park & River Forest.

Despite the many changes in the world today, the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest continues to provide a local venue for musicians and for its audiences 75 years after its founding. This community orchestra provides an outlet for players who want to continue to explore the orchestral repertoire in an intimate way, by rehearsing the music week after week. Playing in the orchestra allows amateur musicians in the community to continue to make music on a high level with other excellent musicians in performing major symphonic works. From its humble beginnings as a "Sunday school orchestra" in 1931, the orchestra grew in numbers and abilities under the capable direction of Gladys Welge. Gladys Welge was a part of a new breed of women who in the 1930s sought to take a more active role in many aspects of public life. Barred from playing in or conducting a major symphony orchestra, Welge made her own opportunities and in doing so has enriched our community for 75 years.

Over the years, many things remained constant. The gifted founder Gladys Welge was succeeded by a line of equally talented and highly accomplished musicians as con-



Conductor Jay Friedman after a December 2002 performance by the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest of Brahms' Double Concerto with the soloists — fellow CSO musicians, violinist/concertmaster Robert Chen (center) and cellist John Sharp (right).

ductors, from Milton Preves to Perry Crafton to Jay Friedman. The loyal players continue to come to rehearsal each week, while dedicated board members provide organizational and financial support. The diverse and intelligent Oak Park and River Forest community that forms the bedrock of the



Symphony's audience base has never faltered and continues to expand.

The Symphony has served as a catalyst for change in the community, as when the racial integration of the orchestra caused Oak Park to examine its views on race and to move forward progressively as a result. Through the latter years of the 20th century, a period of tremendous societal changes, including the increase in many alternative forms of entertainment, the orchestra has continued to attract enthusiastic audiences. Entering the new century with Jay Friedman at the helm, the orchestra's performances

seek new heights of artistic excellence, while at the same time, the board of directors redoubles its efforts toward keeping the orchestra on a sound financial footing and providing support for all its musical endeavors. The orchestra and its board of directors look forward optimistically to the future, to continued music-making, artistic success, commitment to the community, and to providing an opportunity for cultural enrichment and a chance for everyone in our local communities to share in the joy of music.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ELIZABETH REXFORD is a 34-year resident of Oak Park and a 33-year member of the Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest. A graduate of Boston University, she taught music in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor, Michigan, and in District 97 in Oak Park for total of 38 years. She retired from teaching in June 2003. She served as personnel manager of the Symphony and as a member of the board of directors for 11 years. She is the author of an article on Gladys Welge in *Women Building Chicago 1790-1990: A Biographical Dictionary*, published in 2001 by Indiana University Press.

Editorial disclaimer: The Symphony of Oak Park & River Forest has been known over the years by many name variants. Between Oak Park and River Forest there is sometimes a hyphen, sometimes an “&” and sometimes an “and.” It has been sometimes a Symphony and sometimes an Orchestra. The word *Symphony* sometimes comes before the names of the towns and sometimes after. No attempt has been made in the text to adhere to one standard name. Generally, the name in the text is what the orchestra was called at the time being discussed. We hope readers will forgive these inconsistencies and trust that you know what orchestra we are referring to!

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- Gail Friedman — page 2 (both photos), 20, 21, 22, 24, 25 (both photos), 28, 29, 30
- University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia — page 5 (Grainger photo)
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