

## Completing the “S” Curve

The conductor of a symphony orchestra is an inescapable focal point for everyone in the audience of a symphony concert. Newcomers to the experience, as well as old hands, form emotional links to what they are hearing and what they are seeing him (or, rarely, her) do on the podium. And the artistic side of an American orchestra has grown to be one person’s responsibility as music director. He or she meets with donors, supervises auditions, and adjusts artistic goals to the patrons’ tastes and the organization’s financial realities.

Conductors know the scores, of course, and help the trained musicians in the orchestra display in real time their conception of each piece on the program, hopefully realized in performance. The visual communication goes both ways, to the musicians and to the audience, though the latter direction should be secondary. “The conductor is a kind of sculptor,” Leonard Bernstein said, “whose element is time instead of marble. And in sculpting it, he must have a superior sense of proportion and relationship.” That sense must be rendered by the ensemble in performance. Its members are the material out of which the in-person listening experience is shaped.

The music director bears the burden of private study on one side; on the other, relationship-building with donors, musicians, patrons, the general public, and administrative personnel. Holders of the position are given the opportunity to guest-conduct elsewhere and fill other titled positions. They are not expected to be in residence year-round, which sometimes raises eyebrows, given their customarily high salaries.

Concert by concert, the public believes it's entering and being invited to stay inside the musical experience it has paid to attend, with one person as a guide in gesture and stance as to the music's meaning and appeal. Assuming they are paying attention, the concert attendees may shift focus to the occasional brief solo or the score's spotlight on a particular section that may stand out as the performance unfolds. But their attention regularly returns to the conductor.

After a few early attempts, Indianapolis formed an orchestra with enduring potential in 1930. My essay concentrates on the Indianapolis Symphony's first three music directors, emphasizing the third, Izler Solomon. Since 1930, symphonic music in this city has been continual, with an unbroken string of music directors, until recently, when the selection of Jun Maerkl took a few seasons before the gap could be bridged last spring with his appointment. At its start, the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra was spearheaded by a local violin teacher named Ferdinand Schaefer, born and trained in Germany, where he was slightly acquainted with Johannes Brahms, who called him "Ferdie".

At first comprising volunteer musicians who split the revenue from ticket sales, the ISO weathered the Great Depression to become a professional orchestra with salaried musicians by 1937. That's when Renato Pacini, the mainstay of ISO spirit in its years of burgeoning professionalism, joined. He remained for 50 years, including multi-year positions as assistant conductor and assistant concertmaster. He had been hired at \$50 a week for a 20-week season. Outside jobs were necessary to sustain members' livelihoods.

Pacini had joined the ISO at the invitation of its second reigning maestro, Fabien Sevitzy — Russian-born and a nephew of eminent Russian-American conductor Serge Koussevitsky, long resident in Boston and a definitive influence on the development of the aforementioned Leonard Bernstein. Sevitzy's appointment as music director was highlighted in an April 5, 1937, article in Time Magazine, which began: "Of Midwestern orchestras, none has risen so rapidly or so recently as the Indianapolis Symphony."

For its musicians, however, the job didn't amount to much until the first strike in 1966, Pacini told me in an Indianapolis Star interview upon his retirement in 1987. Working conditions were set and salaries improved from time to time. Some highhanded conductor behavior, like rehearsals lasting until 11 p.m. for players who had to report for day jobs in the morning, was checked along the way.

What about the music that was favored here by symphony patrons? What place in the Indianapolis cultural sphere did Izler Solomon, the ISO's third music director, inherit? Well, by 1950, a taste survey focusing on the ISO was summarized in a New York Herald Tribune article by Virgil Thomson, a prominent American composer who made a strong impression with his elegant, sometimes caustic, reviews between 1940 and 1954. As reported by Thomson, the survey revealed that an interest in American music was expressed by one-fourth of the ticket-holders, who favored American compositions for up to half of the ISO programming.

It should be understood that the twelve-tone school and extremely dissonant modernism had not established itself as the dominant compositional style by then, and that what has sometimes been

called “Americanist” music was represented chiefly by Thomson himself and Aaron Copland, among a few others. At the same time, the federal government took an interest in culture as part of the New Deal. President Franklin Roosevelt said that “the American Dream was the promise not only of economic and social justice but also of cultural enrichment.” The Federal Music Project was one approach to fulfilling that promise. This had a lot to do with Solomon’s advancement. In the late ’30s, the music project transitioned to the Works Progress Administration until that agency was phased out in World War II.

Of the eight ISO music directors, just two have been American-born: Between 1956 and 1975, Izler Solomon was the first, and John Nelson succeeded him in 1976. Fascination with European maestros took hold again firmly with the appointment of Raymond Leppard in 1987. To this day, Solomon has had the longest tenure of any ISO maestro, just beyond Sevitzy’s 18-year span. The S-curve traced in my title, besides being the first three conductors’ surname initials, also suggests the historical curves the ISO went through during his time here with two major milestones: chiefly the labor troubles in 1966 and 1971-72 and the 1963 opening of Clowes Hall.

Born in 1910 in St. Paul, Minnesota, and moving as a child with his family to Kansas City, Izler Solomon came of age during the Depression, and first acquired a reputation as a violinist who nursed conducting ambitions. In his 20s, he was to show administrative skills in setting up regional Federal Music Project programs in the Midwest, starting with Michigan, and soon absorbed into the WPA.

The system he developed there was applied nationally. It led to his appointment as conductor of the Illinois Symphony Orchestra, a WPA project, from 1936 to 1941, where he programmed 150-plus American works, according to the entry under his name in the New Grove Dictionary of American Music. He gained appointment as director of the Women's Symphony Orchestra in Chicago, from which a national radio pickup spread his reputation, launching his guest-conducting career.

Harold Schonberg's 1967 historical survey, "The Great Conductors," mentions Solomon briefly as "American-trained," but his training was wholly self-directed. In "Dictators of the Baton" (1943), David Ewen wrote of the then up-and-coming maestro: "He never has had a conducting lesson in his life. The concert hall was his principal conservatory." He had gained a crucial professional academic foothold with appointment to the music faculty of Michigan State College in 1938, where he learned more about violin playing and musical interpretation from his boss, Michael Press. He helped form an orchestra in East Lansing, was chosen as its concertmaster, and suddenly became director upon the unexpected death of its conductor.

After subsequent positions on orchestra conducting staffs in Columbus, Ohio, and Buffalo, New York, Solomon earned the top job here after besting six finalists for the post in 1956.

Solomon was able to build upon Sevitzy's forays into forging a national reputation for the ISO, when national radio broadcasting picked up some of the orchestra's concert performances.

Solomon also directed the orchestra on domestic bus tours, mainly in the Midwest in fall and spring, under the auspices of Community Concerts. Lots of musical experiences in the

hinterlands can be credited to Community Concerts: I doubt that I, as a boy, would have heard a recital by Isaac Stern in a movie theater in Flint, Michigan, if it had not been under its auspices.

The current history page of the ISO misleads about the extent of the orchestra's travel, saying "throughout the 1950s and 60s, the ISO traveled around the world to perform 'Salute' concerts in countries such as Finland, Korea, Japan, Portugal, the Netherlands, Israel, Mexico, Austria, Venezuela, Thailand, Greece and Chile." The "Salute" concerts, begun in the Sevitzy era, were in fact a program of tape recordings, each including a work from the saluted nation (those I just mentioned), in exchange for which Indianapolis would receive a concert recording from the saluted country that was broadcast on a local radio station. Thomas Akins' "Crescendo" (2005), a history of the ISO at 75 written by the orchestra's longtime principal timpanist, makes that clear. That effort, during a time of heightened U.S. stature on the world stage, brought the orchestra a citation from the Voice of America and the U.S. Information Agency, and an unprecedented presidential letter of commendation from John F. Kennedy.

ISO patrons' conservative inclination reflected tastes that Solomon sometimes challenged, but not beyond a tidy, U.S.-focused modernism: Roy Harris, Henry Cowell, Paul Hindemith (an American by adoption), William Schuman. During Solomon's 19-year tenure, there was a lot of Aaron Copland, one player I interviewed said. The music director loved Hindemith's most colorful work, "Symphonic Metamorphosis on Themes of Carl Maria von Weber." And he was partial to one contemporary Hoosier composer in particular, Indiana University's Bernhard Heiden, whose "Envoy for Orchestra" opened the inaugural concert at Clowes Hall in October 1963. It launched a ten-day festival, with guest stars including Bob Hope and, for a children's

concert, the children's TV fixture Bob Keeshan (Captain Kangaroo). Musicians' hopes for a year-round season also took flight at the time. As Akins puts it colorfully: "Like a marriage begun in delirium, great joy and some sorrow would lie ahead."

Heralded by spotlights arcing across the sky above Butler University, the inaugural program at Clowes was filled out by the kind of solid late-Romantic works from the mainstream that Solomon favored. Having to engage community support as music director, he pulled back from the heavy American representation that the Federal Music Project encouraged. That's reflected in the inaugural program: Apart from "Envoy," the works were Brahms' Second Piano Concerto and Sibelius' Second Symphony.

Jan Sibelius loomed large in mid-century American orchestra programming, thanks largely to the advocacy of the premier newspaper critic of the day, Olin Downes of the New York Times. Thomson's withering assessment early in his Herald Tribune tenure was an outlier: At a New York Philharmonic concert 84 years ago this month, he found the Sibelius Second "vulgar, self-indulgent, and provincial beyond all description." The work has nonetheless retained a place in the ISO repertoire as part of the programming mainstream of American orchestras. It was the main piece in a subscription concert here just last May.

So what kind of artistic values did Solomon impart to the orchestra? A man of few words in rehearsal, he conducted without a baton, a rarity represented in the 20th century chiefly by Leopold Stokowski, whom Solomon observed closely during a sojourn in Philadelphia, by Dimitri Mitropoulos in New York and later, Pierre Boulez with the Cleveland Orchestra and the

New York Philharmonic. Despite the expressive gain perhaps imparted by the use of two baton-free hands, the baton is the norm for the clarity that the point of the stick gives to the players.

You will never play Mozart, percussionist Paul Berns was told by an older colleague when he was new to the orchestra. Solomon “had an interesting way,” said Carol Frohlich, a recently retired violinist: “The downbeat was when his hands reached the bottom button of his shirt.” It was easy to come in too early, she said. As a newcomer, this violinist was warned about the tricky ending of Richard Strauss’ “Till Eulenspiegel,” with its fadeout near the end that abruptly yields to a few measures completing the mischievous scamp’s portrait. A colleague told Frohlich early in her tenure: “Don’t watch him; watch me instead, or you will get it wrong.”

Solomon was collegial with the older players; on bus tours, a few of which were national in scope, he would sometimes play bridge with other devotees of the card game. In rehearsal, he preferred speaking to principal players only, and assumed that they would fix any lack of precision and ensemble in their sections. On the plus side, he was resolutely non-confrontational, except for the time a rebellious horn player flipped him the bird in rehearsal and was fired on the spot. He worked well with guest artists, and had particular affinity with the baritone Robert Merrill. As a violinist who stayed active in chamber music, he was also partial to violin soloists.

Pre-concert conductor-player interactions were usually rather placid, with few words. “His rehearsal technique,” the percussionist told me, “was to play things through.” The three veterans I spoke to, all of whom knew him in the twilight of his career, have no recollection of him sharing artistic insights with the players. “There was no detail work,” Paul Berns continued. “He



would get to the end of a piece and say something like, 'Watch your dynamics.' He relied on the players to correct themselves. In rehearsal, we'd play the same thing in the morning and in the afternoon." Solomon would announce rehearsal breaks with a one-word command: "Soup!" That was because soup was among the items available in a vending machine nearby.

Robert Goodlett, assistant principal double bassist of the ISO, is likely to exceed Pacini's half-century of service. He told me that the facetious riddle among members under Solomon ran like this: "What's the difference between a rehearsal and a concert? The clothes you're wearing."

Berns, who for years also occupied the administrative position of personnel manager, told me that in Solomon's later years, he was sick and tired and lacked the dynamism that had established his career in the Thirties and Forties. Family problems and illness shadowed the final part of his time here. He announced his intention to retire in 1973, and after finishing his tenure in the spring of 1975, he never returned to the Clowes Hall podium.

A three-month work stoppage almost sank the orchestra in 1971-72, after the expiration of a five-year contract, which had smoothed over the effect of the first strike ever in 1966. The ISO was kicked out of Clowes and musicians were not allowed to run a picket line on the Butler University campus and had to move across Sunset Avenue to do so.

Solomon stayed outside the tense negotiations, which is customary for conductors. Mayor Richard Lugar was instrumental in bridging the gulf and getting the two sides to a new contract, after the previous five-year contract, the orchestra's longest, had expired. Solomon had steady

board support beyond the time he was effective with the musicians and able to improve the orchestra artistically, according to the veteran percussionist I interviewed.

The time Solomon occupied here paralleled several crucial hallmarks in American orchestra development; crucially, the establishment of secure endowments. That was generated here by a Ford Foundation matching grant of more than \$2 million, with the Lilly Endowment providing the bulk of the matching requirement. That led to pressures for longer seasons and better pay for musicians. With inevitably rising employee expectations, labor-management difficulties arose as well.

The need of a suitable home had been met by Clowes Hall, though the ISO wasn't solely in charge. Clowes holds a sentimental place in the memories of older music-lovers to this day. But as had become clear after decades at the Murat Theatre, not controlling your place of business, especially when you approach year-round operation, is a burden that carries the stigma of disrespect.

The renovation of the Circle Theatre, a 1916 landmark movie theater extensively adapted for symphonic purposes by 1984, with added office space and dressing rooms adjacent and facing Washington Street, would finally complete that picture. That was supported by funds from a donor couple, honored by a name change to Hilbert Circle Theatre. The burden of not being fully at home can, with luck, be cast off after an American cultural institution's early adulthood. In the case of the ISO, that bracketed the pivotal tenure of Izler Solomon, rounding off the formative S-curve of its music-director honor roll.

