

Thalia Symphony History and Background

Origins:

Founding: Thalia Symphony was founded in 1949. This makes it the second oldest community orchestra in metropolitan Seattle, second only to the Seattle Philharmonic Orchestra.

Name: The name Thalia (pronounced tha-LYE-uh) comes from the muses of ancient Greece. Thalia was one of the nine muses, and presided over comedy and lyric poetry. With this inspiration in mind, Thalia Allied Artists was founded in 1949, primarily to produce opera. The name was significant to them as it refers to the great variety of art involved in opera and shows loyalty to the Greco-Roman ideals of artistic excellence. The organization included an orchestra needed to support operatic productions, which they named Thalia Symphony.

Thalia Allied Artists:

Thalia's first season included Madame Butterfly and Englebert Humperdinck's short opera Hansel and Gretel. After that first season its leaders recognized that full opera productions exceeded their long-term capability, and they reduced their scope to production of the smaller musical theater pieces. Their other offerings ranged from chamber music, choral presentations, and symphonic music to youth and adult education. Their community workshops covered dramatics, poetry writing, music appreciation, singing—even folk dancing and puppetry. In time, Thalia Symphony became the centerpiece of Thalia Allied Artists' operations.

Thalia Symphony Music Directors:

- Mikael Scheremetiew, 1948-1977
 - Frances Walton, Associate Conductor, 1954-1977
- Dr. Stanley Chapple, 1977 - 1988
- Dr. Eric Hanson, 1988-2010

Mikael Scheremetiew: Thalia Symphony was extremely fortunate in the leadership of Mikael Scheremetiew, its founder and first music director from 1949 until his death in 1977. He was an excellent conductor and an innovator in several areas:

- He took chamber operas such as *Hansel and Gretel* and *Amahl and the Night Visitors* on tour across Washington state.
- KING Television aired *Granny's Magic Book*, a "song-play for children and adults," on June 5, 1953. This featured book and lyrics by Thalia's drama director and music by Scheremetiew.
- He appointed a woman, Frances Walton, as Associate Conductor in 1954. A woman on the podium was unheard of at the time.
- He performed new works from many composers including Gerald Kechley and George Frederick McKay.
- He routinely invited other conductors in the Northwest to rehearse and perform works with Thalia Symphony. Most concerts during his tenure would include one composition conducted by a guest conductor.

Frances Walton: Thalia Symphony has benefitted greatly by the active involvement of Frances Walton, a well-known, excellent amateur pianist and cellist and passionate supporter of music education. As Associate Conductor from 1954 to 1977, she conducted a broad range of symphonic music, including all the Brahms Symphonies. Beyond Thalia Symphony, she actively developed opportunities for young musicians to learn their craft. She launched Thalia Youth Symphonies in 1964, which survives as Bellevue Youth Symphony Orchestras (<http://byso.org/>), an extremely successful organization. She founded Olympic Music Camp, a summer program for students, which ran from 1964 through 1997. Frances also founded the Thalia Chamber Orchestra, since renamed Philharmonia Northwest (<http://www.philharmonianw.org>), to perform chamber-sized works. Frances Walton conducted this orchestra from its founding in 1972 until 1990.

Thalia Scheremetiew Library

At over 950 titles, the Thalia Scheremetiew library is one of the largest private music collections in the Pacific Northwest. The library was named for Mikael Scheremetiew in honor of his intense personal commitment and great foresight in building this collection.

He and other members of the orchestra routinely donated sets of music. He also had members of the orchestra contribute dues for this purpose.

Today the purchase or rental of orchestral music can run \$200 - \$900 per piece. The library has enabled Thalia Symphony to rehearse and perform an extremely wide range of music at huge cost savings.

Stanley Chapple: Stanley Chapple conducted Thalia Symphony from 1977 until 1985. One snippet from his long career is that in 1940, he served as the first director of the Tanglewood Institute. One of his students there happened to be Leonard Bernstein! In addition to conducting Thalia Symphony, he led the Musicians Emeritus Orchestra from 1971 to 1985. This group began as an outlet for retired musicians. Now a group for all ages, it has renamed itself the Seattle Festival Orchestra.

Eric Hanson: Dr. Eric Hanson has been Director of Instrumental Music at Seattle Pacific University since 1979, and Thalia has been privileged to have him at our helm from 1987 to 2010. He has conducted dozens of orchestras including the Denver Symphony. He is a frequent guest conductor of the Northwest Mahler Festival and has participated in a invitation-only conducting competition in the Czech Republic. Dr. Hanson's honors include the Boeing Award for Excellence, fellowships from the National Endowment for Humanities, Mu Phi Epsilon Music Professor of the Year (Beta Phi Chapter), and in 2009 he became an Oxford Round Table Scholar. He continues to be a popular lecturer for the Seattle Symphony. In 1994, Dr. Hanson negotiated an innovative arrangement in which Thalia Symphony became Orchestra in Residence at Seattle Pacific University. SPU students were able to earn college credit by playing in the orchestra, and were exposed to a larger, fuller orchestral experience than might otherwise have been available to them. SPU has provided generous support including rehearsal space, performance space, and publicity assistance. With Dr. Hanson's retirement from Thalia Symphony in June of 2010, it was agreed that the Orchestra in Residence status would end.

The search for a new conductor for the Fall 2010 – Spring 2011 is currently underway. More detail on this is available in the Openings page in our website.

Repertoire:

Thalia Symphony has primarily performed tonal music from the mid-19th century to the present. We tend to draw on works that call for a modern "full size" orchestra, complete with full brass and large string sound. Works of the 17th, 18th, and late 20th century also come up, just not as frequently. A list of our concert programs for over two decades is available on the website.

Noteworthy Performances:

While many orchestras premiere newly written works, Thalia Symphony also has premiered works of historical significance that had been hidden from the world. Soon after Edvard Grieg wrote his Symphony in C minor in 1864, he impetuously withdrew it. It stayed tucked away in a library until finally in 1981 it was revived in Bergen, Norway. Only a handful of American orchestras had performed prior to Thalia Symphony's Pacific Northwest premiere of the piece on March 30, 2008.

In 1997 Thalia Symphony performed the American premiere of Edvard Tubin's Violin Concerto. This extremely important Estonian composer had escaped to Sweden, thus avoiding certain death, when the Soviet troops invaded the Baltics in 1944. We discovered the music after an intensive four-country search.

In 1990 Thalia Symphony was the second American orchestra to perform Hans Rott's Symphony in E Major. Rott was a student of Bruckner and college associate of Mahler who never gained public acceptance in his lifetime. Rott took his symphony to Brahms in 1880 only to receive a heavy-handed rebuke. Shortly after that, Rott fell into paranoid delusions. He was committed to an insane asylum and died there of tuberculosis at the age of 25. Mahler saw Rott's death as an inestimable loss to music. Since hitting the world stage in 1989, Rott's symphony has been in a feature article in the New York Times, and its CDs have remained a top seller for their publisher.

In May 2009, Thalia was pleased to present Li Bo, Mongolian master of the Morin Khuur (or horsehead fiddle) who performed his composition "Tale of Matou Qin." His virtuosity was truly breathtaking. Povilas Stravinsky, grandson of Igor Stravinsky, performed a Bach piano concerto with us in January 2006. April 9, 2010 will mark the 12th time pianist George Fiore has been a soloist with Thalia Symphony.

Locations:

Performance Venues: Current performances are at **First Free Methodist Church** (3200 3rd Ave W, adjacent to the Seattle Pacific University campus). In recent years this beautiful space had a full acoustic tune up. Orchestra Seattle performs there as well.

Early on the orchestra performed at Evergreen College in Olympia, at the University of Vancouver in British Columbia, and summer concerts outdoors at the Rhododendron Preserve in Bremerton. The orchestra has also performed at

- Shorecrest Performing Arts Center in Shoreline
- Rainier Beach Performing Arts Center in Seattle
- Northshore Performing Arts Center in Bothell
- First Presbyterian Church (downtown Seattle)

Rehearsal Venues: Thalia Symphony has called several places "home" during its lifetime:

- Plymouth Congregational Church basement, downtown Seattle
- Diocesan House, Episcopal Diocese of Olympia, on Capitol Hill in Seattle
- Piggott Auditorium at Seattle University
- Shoreline Community College
- Seattle Central Community College
- Seattle Pacific University

Thalia Symphony Today

Mission: To inspire, enrich, and educate musicians and the community at large through the performance of outstanding symphonic music.

Governance: Thalia Symphony is run by a Board of Directors populated by a combination of orchestra musicians and non-orchestra members. The Music Director sits on the board. The board manages all non-musical aspects of the orchestra (e.g., insurance, corporate registration, promotion, finance, fund-raising, etc.).

The Board also commissions a Repertoire Committee of musicians each February to be a resource for the Music Director in the coming season. The Music Director works with the Repertoire Committee to make final program decisions. This approach works well to recognize the valuable contributions of our unpaid musicians and aims to ensure that programs include music that is rewarding to all sections of the orchestra.

Finances: Thalia is basically a volunteer organization. Our sources of income are ticket sales and donations from businesses and individual supporters. Orchestra members are not required to donate. Our expenses are for the Music Director, marketing costs, section leaders, an occasional auxiliary instrumentalist, and rehearsal and performance venues. Unlike some semi-professional orchestras, Thalia Symphony seldom has needed to pay musicians other than string section leaders. This volunteer *Ars gratia Artis* basis presents some challenges in musician recruitment, but has also afforded us a degree of financial flexibility that professional or semi-professional orchestras lack.

Future for Thalia Symphony:

Thalia Symphony faces significant challenges over the next year or two. In addition to securing a new Conductor/Music Director, it will be ending its association with Seattle Pacific University. It will need to contract new performance and rehearsal spaces. To replace the SPU students the orchestra will need to recruit roughly twenty new players to fill specific openings. The Board of Directors is committed to retaining the current non-student ("community") members and is working to find new connections with student players, to develop a stronger financial base, and increase our audience. These needs present challenges but also provide us with the opportunity to redefine Thalia Symphony.

Submitted by:

Jim Russell, Thalia Symphony President

Shelley Reiss, Thalia Symphony Vice-president

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