Making “Good Music”

The Oregon Symphony and Music Director
Jacques Singer, 1962–1971

Show me an orchestra that likes its conductor and I’ll show you a lousy orchestra.
— Goddard Lieberson

A conductor is exactly that, do you know what I mean? Like a conductor of electricity. He does not originate the electricity of the music, but that current must pass through him.
— Jacques Singer

WRAPPED IN A LONG CAMEL-HAIR COAT, Jacques Singer arrived for his first rehearsal with the Portland Symphony Orchestra looking to one musician every inch the New Yorker. It was February 1962, and Singer was serving as guest conductor. Tall and craggy, Singer had a habit of raking his hands through his curly black hair when he was excited or frustrated. Some of the performers were dubious of his ability to lead an orchestra. “He looked so wild,” recalls clarinetist Cheri Ann Egbers. “I thought, ‘This is the conductor?’” Singer’s first Portland performance, however, was a success. “Never has the orchestra been more responsive to a baton,” wrote music editor Martin Clark of the Portland Oregon Journal. The orchestra, conductor, and soloist received “a tremendous ovation.” Two months later, in April 1962, the Portland Symphony’s governing organization, the Portland Symphony Society, chose Singer as the organization’s next permanent conductor and music director.

Jacques Singer, who Oregonians came to know for his exciting conducting style and gregarious nature, helped bring patrons together in efforts to raise the orchestra’s status. His efforts made the Portland Symphony well-known throughout the Pacific Northwest and improved its standing in the ranks of American orchestras. Although not the sole architect of changes in the 1960s, Singer’s presence as a leader and community figure drew attention — and much-needed funds — to the organization. His volatile temperament, however, led many musicians under his baton to call him difficult, even abusive. Many challenged his conducting skills and musicianship, while others supported him in a controversy that divided the organization. Ultimately, Singer’s problems at the podium led to his highly publicized dismissal, a decision that placed the Oregon Symphony at the center of civic debate.

The Portland Symphony Orchestra, forerunner of the Oregon Symphony, gave its first concert under that name on October 30, 1896. Orchestras and
amateur musical societies had previously performed in Portland under various names, and they continued to do so after the Portland Symphony’s 1896 debut. In 1911, the Portland Symphony Society reorganized on a more permanent basis, rotating conducting duties among five musicians. By 1918, audience interest had grown to the point that local business leaders convinced the Portland Symphony Society to choose a permanent director, and the symphony appointed a talented local musician named Carl Denton.¹

By the 1920s, Oregon was home to enough ensembles that International Musician, the journal of the American Federation of Musicians of the United States and Canada, dubbed it “the Athens of the West.”² That statewide interest in music was a boon to the Portland Symphony, helping boost box-office receipts and making it possible to hire more musicians. Because of that interest, the Portland Symphony’s first music director, Carl Denton, saw increases in ticket sales and was able to add to the number of orchestra musicians during his 1918–1925 tenure. His successor, Willem van Hoogstraten (1925–1938), conducted the orchestra in performances that were broadcast nationally on the radio and commanded attention from musicians and the public alike. The Great Depression, however, ushered in nearly thirty years of financial instability. In 1938, the Portland Symphony board voted to suspend operations due to lack of funds; van Hoogstraten left, and the musicians joined smaller groups and a Works Progress Administration (WPA) orchestra. It was not until 1947, when the Portland Symphony Society reorganized after the hardships of World War II and gained financial support from audience members and the musicians’ union, that the Portland Symphony Orchestra was able to perform again.³

The Portland Symphony Orchestra’s second music director and conductor, Willem van Hoogstraten — pictured at center with the orchestra during the 1925–1926 season — served from 1925 to 1938.

During the fifteen years from that reorganization to Jacques Singer’s arrival, the Portland Symphony faced two challenges: lack of stable funding and a subsequent lack of continuity in programming and leadership.¹ Oregon audiences acclaimed performances led by Werner Jansen (1947–1949), James Sample (1949–1953), Theodore Bloomfield (1955–1959), and Piero Bellugi (1959–1961), but all of those directors left their posts after only a few seasons, mainly because the orchestra lacked solid financial backing. “The symphony lacks patrons of great wealth,” a Portland City Club report noted, “and has no appreciable endowment income,” a situation fairly common among United States orchestras of the time, which made the Portland Symphony’s annual fundraising drives its “lifeblood.” Like most mid–twentieth-century American orchestras, the Portland Symphony generated approximately half its budget from annual fundraising drives and the rest from ticket sales, making its survival dependent on community interest.⁴

The symphony’s financial troubles affected musicians directly. At the time, most North American orchestras paid their players per service — that is, per two- and-a-half-hour block of rehearsal or performance time. Because symphony seasons were shorter in the 1950s and 1960s than they are today, many as brief as twenty weeks, few musicians could earn a living wage from their orchestra jobs alone. Many held other jobs to make ends meet. Payroll is an orchestra’s largest expense, and limiting performances allowed ensembles to continue operating, effectively subsidized by the low wages of their employees.¹ In the mid–twentieth century, American orchestral musicians began protesting the low wages and relatively little power they wielded in comparison with the music directors, boards of directors, and management staff who led orchestra organizations. Unlike their European colleagues, some of whom were organized in collectives with the power to hire or fire conductors, American musicians had little job security and were subject to music directors who could determine employment.¹ The desire for better working conditions prompted delegates from a handful of North American orchestras to found the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians (ICSOM) in 1962. Though the Oregon Symphony members would not join ICSOM until the early 1970s, at least some of them were aware of its existence and its potential impact on the power balance between players and administration. Fred Sautter, former Oregon Symphony principal trumpet, who joined the organization in 1968, remembers that “ICSOM seemed to represent those concerns of symphonic musicians which I had experienced having been resolved” in the Philharmonic State Orchestra of Hamburg, where he had formerly played. He and other musicians played a role in the Oregon Symphony Orchestra’s joining ICSOM in 1971.⁵

¹ OHQ vol. 109, no. 1
² Long, Oregon Symphony and Jacques Singer, 1962–1971
The 1960s were also a time of change for orchestra management and administration. Orchestras were bidding for funds from new sources, including grants from the Ford Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, which was founded in 1965. The Portland Symphony sought grant funding to pursue the same goals as its counterparts nationwide: extending the performance season, increasing the orchestra’s size, and offering sufficient wages to attract and retain outstanding performers. It also needed a conductor who would stay on the podium. Even its immediate past music director and conductor, Piero Bellugi, who led the Portland Symphony in the 1959–1960 and 1960–1961 seasons, refused to return for a scheduled guest performance in the spring of 1962, claiming the programs offered insufficient scope for his talents.

The board lost no time in securing Bellugi’s replacement. Jacques Singer had been one of several guest conductors in the 1961–1962 season and had received the most enthusiastic acclaim from audience members, who were asked to vote for their favorites. Oregon Symphony musician Alan Pierce notes that many orchestra members also supported Singer’s hire, including some who later lobbied for his dismissal. Some of the players went to management and pleaded with them to hire Jacques Singer, Pierce recalls. “They got their wish, and later wanted him removed.” Like other symphonies across the nation, the Portland Symphony was facing a “customer slump,” caused in part by the burgeoning record industry that made living rooms more convenient than concert halls. The board hired Singer, a conductor who had a reputation for creating excitement and raising sales, because they hoped he would draw audiences back to Portland’s Municipal Auditorium.

It worked. By the end of the decade, audiences had increased in Portland and gathered to hear the symphony in towns across the Pacific Northwest. Although the Portland Symphony Society’s board of directors, the society itself (dedicated patrons and volunteers), and musicians who were willing to travel were partly responsible for increased attendance, the changes were also due to Singer’s vocal advocacy for the symphony. Newspaper interviews portrayed him as an ebullient champion of what he called “good music.” As he explained to a local reporter, “There is no ‘old’ music or ‘new.’ There was only the good and the bad,” music that takes the listener “out of himself and give[s] him something beautiful to think back on when he goes about his own work.”

Singer had toured extensively as a guest conductor by the time he arrived in Portland as permanent conductor and music director in August 1962. Critics in Buenos Aires, Argentina, had called Singer “a miracle worker” for his reorganization of that city’s symphony orchestra, which culminated in wildly acclaimed performances at the city’s beloved opera house. Singer had a history of revitalizing regional and national orchestras, and anyone familiar with his career could reasonably have hoped he would do the same in Oregon. “They say that Jacques Singer doesn’t just play music when he goes to a new city,” noted the local paper, “he sells and promotes the product with great fire and enthusiasm.”

Orchestra conductors are also instrumental musicians, and Singer was a violinist, a prodigy who had made his debut at New York’s Town Hall at age fourteen. He was born in Przemysl, Poland, to symphony conductor Meyer Singer and his wife Rachela “Rose” Bach. The Singers emigrated to the United States in 1921 and settled in Jersey City. Singer received one of the best musical educations then available. He won a scholarship to the recently founded Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia in 1925 and attended The Juilliard School from 1927 to 1930. Singer studied with some of the greatest violinists of the day, including Carl Flesch, Paul Kochanski, and Leopold Auer. While at Juilliard, he joined the Philadelphia Orchestra under Leopold Stokowski, who likely had an influence on Singer’s podium style. Both men engaged in the practices, not uncommon at that time, of conducting without score or baton, making didactic comments to the audience during performances, and occasionally halting performances if a disturbance occurred. Stokowski encouraged symphony musicians to conduct rehearsals and, by 1936, Singer was conducting the Philadelphia Orchestra’s new, popular youth symphony. Just twenty-six years old, he was hailed in the music pages of the New York Times as a conductor to watch.

True to that critic’s prediction, Singer’s time directing Philadelphia’s youth symphony was short. In 1937, he began conducting the newly reorganized Dallas Symphony Orchestra. Audiences showed up in droves, and the New York Times reported that the symphony’s budget was “more than twice as large” as in any previous season. With his success in Dallas, Singer
established a pattern for the rest of his career. Hired by a languishing regional orchestra, he helped generate excitement with his forceful personality and dynamic podium style, and ticket sales increased. In the spring of 1939, the Dallas Symphony offered two youth concerts that sold out immediately. One of the performances coincided with the matinee opening of Walt Disney’s Snow White, but prospective audience members had to be turned away at the door. In just four seasons (1938–1942), subscriptions tripled. Then World War II took the conductor away from Dallas.

By the beginning of 1942–1943 season, most Dallas Symphony musicians had enlisted in the armed forces. Singer also enlisted, and his superiors quickly tapped him to lead Army bands. In three years of service, he earned as many battle stars in the Pacific and conducted the first music on Corregidor after Allied liberation, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” The response of his fellow soldiers to such works fired Singer with enthusiasm. He dreamed of an All-Veterans Symphony Orchestra that would tour every state, taking music “to the people in the little towns, in the faraway places.” An “All-Veteran Symphony Orchestra” did organize, giving at least one concert at Hunter College in March 1947, but Singer had accepted a new post as director of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra (VSO) in Vancouver, British Columbia, by that time.

Singer’s 1947–1951 Vancouver tenure began with promise and ended in financial disarray. The season before Singer arrived, the group had given just twelve performances; in 1947–1948, there were fifty-two, and in March 1948, the Canadian weekly Saturday Night called the Vancouver Symphony “the orchestra of the year.” The VSO had careful management, active auxiliaries, and highly competent musicians, and reports in the Canadian press credited Singer with galvanizing all those forces. He created a program to educate the public and support contemporary composers, and he organized the Symposium of Canadian Contemporary Music, which brought artists from across Canada to Vancouver in the spring of 1950. By the end of his whirlwind second season, Singer was urging city leaders to build a concert hall, saying, “a city remains indistinguishable from a large village unless it has an auditorium.” The symphony’s board of directors, however, noted that the VSO was running a deficit (not uncommon for orchestras then or now) and proposed a shortened 1950–1951 season. In an open letter published in local papers, Singer vigorously opposed the plan, urging Vancouverites to throw their support behind “good music,” ever his rallying cry, and contending that the VSO’s $19,000 deficit was “smaller than that of any city on the North American continent maintaining a major orchestra.” When the board did not back down, Singer resigned and organized a rival orchestra, the British Columbia Philharmonic.

Reviews of the new group’s first concerts were mixed. One program featured Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, which Singer conducted without a score. Victoria Symphony Orchestra Conductor Hans Gruber complained that the orchestra was unprepared, the chorus was incompetent, and “some of the orchestra even stopped playing at intervals.” The Vancouver Sun’s music critic, however, described the performance as “precise, glowing, alive.” To Gruber’s critique that “it was a crime to go before an audience in such an unprepared state,” Singer replied, “it is the privilege of every man to make an ass of himself. Gruber has abused that privilege.”

During the following two years, Singer conducted for Broadway shows and other performances in New York. In 1953, he visited Israel as guest conductor of the Haifa Symphony Orchestra, Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, and Jerusalem Radio Orchestra. During the 1950s, he also conducted in Buenos Aires, Caracas, Seville, Guatemala City, Lima, and North American cities including Rochester, New York, and Indianapolis, Indiana. In June 1954, Singer began directing the Corpus Christi Symphony in Corpus Christi, Texas, where he and his family lived until they arrived in Portland in August 1962. Singer’s wife, pianist Leslie Wright Singer, participated as a performer in symphony and community events. The younger of the Singers’ four children also took part in Portland symphony activities, carrying flowers to soloists after performances and performing with the Portland Symphonette, a chamber orchestra that the symphony developed in the late 1960s to tour local schools.

The Portland Symphony Society’s board of directors had hired Jacques Singer as the orchestra’s conductor and music director in April 1962. The board was the executive branch of the Portland Symphony Society, a larger,
voluntary organization of supporters who handled various duties ranging from raising funds to producing programs. As music director, Singer was responsible not only for leading performances but also for shaping the orchestra’s artistic direction, including choosing music for each season’s programs and taking part in hiring and firing musicians. The bargaining that preceded Singer’s 1962 hire was portrayed by Oregon newspapers as shrouded in secrecy. The board of directors apparently offered sufficient incentive to gain Singer’s unconditional release from a three-year contract he had recently signed with the symphony in Corpus Christi. On Singer’s move to Portland, one Texas music critic commented, “Singer has a volatile personality and there will be problems. But your orchestra will never sound better.”

Portland audiences greeted Singer’s first season with enthusiasm. “We played some of the best concerts the orchestra ever played,” remembers tubaist John Richards, who played with the Oregon Symphony from 1947 to 1999. “When we took our bows, we wanted to cheer too because the performance had been so exciting.” Oregon Journal music editor Martin Clark proclaimed, “a new musical era is at hand for Portland.” The first steps in the symphony’s expansion were an increase in the number of regularly scheduled performances from twenty-two to forty-eight and, because several works were played at each performance, a corresponding rise in the number of compositions played. Singer announced that the orchestra would perform all nine Beethoven symphonies by 1965, evidence that the leaderless days were over and that, as Oregonian noted, “Mr. Singer . . . will be with us for some time.” In his first season, 1962–1963, the Portland Symphony played forty-seven works — more than all but one other orchestra of its size in the United States. Attendance also grew, albeit modestly at first, from 39,530 to 42,600; and the budget increased from $228,000 in 1962–1963 to $290,000 in 1964–1965. There was also a notable increase in musician salaries during the 1960s. After a 22 percent decrease during the period from 1952 to 1962, salaries increased 63 percent from 1962 to 1972.

Some of the increase in audiences occurred outside Portland. “There’s no reason why the Portland Symphony shouldn’t be the state’s orchestra,” said Singer. “I would like to see it playing the year around in concerts and in music festivals all over the state.” In March 1963, Pacific University in Tacoma, Washington, invited the Portland Symphony to perform, prompting the Oregonian to note, “the local symphony is, indeed, a regional rather than a local institution.” The 1963–1964 season opened with an October tour of Pendleton, Hood River, Bend, Roseburg, Medford, and Coos Bay — funded by the host communities — with concerts in Salem, Tacoma, Eugene, and Longview planned during the regular season. The conductor who dreamed of touring the United States with an All-Veterans Orchestra was not content to keep the Portland Symphony at home. “We visited twenty-one places regularly that we don’t go now,” recalls Richards. The season-opening tour of 1963–1964 was an important step toward a year-round orchestra with full-time musicians. “This accelerated activity brings much nearer the time when the Portland orchestra will be the full-time occupation of all its musicians,” wrote Oregonian editor Herbert Lundy, “and good music, ‘live,’ will be a full-time opportunity for the hundreds of thousands of persons residing within range of the orchestra’s travels.”

In the 1964–1965 season, violinist Nathan Milstein, cellist Zara Nelsova, and comedian Jack Benny all performed with the Portland Symphony. While hiring one famous artist is a tried-and-true way to sell tickets to a single concert, booking several stars boosts sales for season tickets. In the 1950s and 1960s, many classical performers — Artur Rubinstein, Van Cliburn, Andres Segovia — were household names, known to wider audi-
ences than, for example, violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter or pianist Lang Lang today. 47 Benny’s appearance was the result of networking by board members; although Singer was the community figure, when additional attractions were needed, the board took on the responsibility of providing them.

Civic pride, belief in the power of “good music” to educate and elevate audiences, and desire to attract business leaders to Oregon compelled the Portland Symphony Society to work toward developing a major orchestra. 48 Major orchestras of the time were financially defined by a budget of $500,000 or more and by the number of orchestra members who received weekly salaries instead of being paid per service. By comparison, the Seattle Symphony was considered major with its $500,000 budget and eighty-three musicians receiving weekly salaries. Portland employed approximately eighty musicians and, in the 1964–1965 season, placed two on weekly contracts — the first in the organization’s history. 49

The most sweeping changes in the early- and mid-1960s were to the symphony’s venue and its financial status. In the May and November elections of 1964, Portland voters first rejected and then, after a vigorous citizens’ campaign, passed a $4 million bond measure to remodel the city’s performance hall, the Municipal Auditorium (later Civic, now Keller Auditorium). The city began work on a design that civic leaders lauded for its modern convenience and open plan. The original building, which one Portland reporter dubbed the “Odditorium,” had an ancient and dangerous electrical switchboard and lacked rehearsal rooms. The hall’s capacity was reduced when it re-opened in 1968, seating just over 3,000 patrons instead of 5,500, but compensations included modern conveniences such as drinking fountains and elevators. 50

During the auditorium remodel, the symphony temporarily moved across the Willamette River. From 1965–1967, the Oriental Theatre at Southeast Belmont and Grand streets served as the symphony’s home. The 1927 movie house made a memorable concert hall, its walls adorned with life-size friezes of elephants and apes. A Tuesday night concert series had been established at the Oriental Theatre during the 1963–1964 season, but it drew different patrons than the more established, Monday night concert series held downtown. 51 Some patrons of the Monday night series were willing to forego attendance altogether when it meant crossing town, potentially crippling the growing symphony, which expected to derive two-thirds of its $300,000 budget from ticket sales. Four hundred new subscribers, however, helped defray the loss. Oregon Journal columnist Doug Baker assessed the symphony as it began the 1965–1966 season, noting it had “an assured contract with Maestro Jacques Singer who, despite his temperamental flamboyance, is generally regarded as a conductor who can continue to develop the symphony’s potential”; a “firm” contract between the musicians’ union and the symphony; a new business manager, Robert “Robbie” Thomsen, who was liked by both union members and the board; and a “broader-based” orchestra that included Joyce Ann Johnson, the first woman to serve as principal trumpet, and William Brent, assistant principal cellist and the symphony’s first African American musician. 52 Despite the defection of some patrons, the symphony was still growing, with the modern performance hall the most visible symbol of that growth.

Adding youth concerts was another aspect of the symphony’s growth, one in which both the symphony society’s auxiliaries and Singer played key roles. During 1965 and 1964, the symphony had begun playing in local schools, each of which paid fifty dollars for the performance. During the 1965–1966 season, youth concerts were held in the Oriental Theatre and, beginning in 1966, the symphony traveled to schools throughout Oregon and Washington, aided by $100 million appropriated by the federal government to bring artists and musicians to public schools. In early 1967, a formal youth series was instituted in Portland’s Civic Auditorium. Tickets cost fifty cents — “about half the cost of a hamburger and a coke at [Yaw’s] ‘The Top Notch,’ a popular hangout — and the Parent Teacher Association offered scholarships to students who could not afford the two-dollar fee for four concerts. 53 As for the maestro, “youth [was] his favorite audience,” recalls Oregon Symphony bass player William Ofstad. “He didn’t water it down for the kids. We played pieces which today would not be considered music for children, and he explained the pieces.” Singer had to “order them [students] to leave” so ushers could prepare for the next group. 54 During ensuing years, the symphony’s Music for Youth concerts became a fixture of Oregon cultural life. By the early 1970s, the Oregon Symphonette, a group of thirty-eight orchestra musicians, drew on National Endowment for the Arts funds to tour schools in the Portland area and gave Christmas concerts in Portland neighborhoods. 55

By far the most important milestone of the symphony’s development in the 1960s was a $1.25 million grant awarded by the Ford Foundation in 1966. 56 The criteria for awards included an ensemble’s recent achievements...
and long-range plans. In late 1965, Portland Symphony Society president Dr. Frederick Bentley and symphony manager Robbie Thomsen had met with foundation representatives to present the Portland Symphony’s plans to extend the symphony season, to expand the group’s touring capacity, and to increase the number of musicians in the orchestra and the number on weekly contracts. Ford Foundation grants allowed many orchestras to extend their performance seasons, in turn providing musicians with something closer to full-time employment.18 In what 1966 Symphony Society president Marion Vester called “an impressive vote of confidence in our musicians and conductor, Jacques Singer,” the Portland Symphony received a two-part grant: $250,000 to be paid over a five-year period and $1 million that had to be matched to remain in the organization’s coffers. The $250,000 portion of the grant would support the symphony during the intensive fundraising necessary to match the $1 million endowment.19

The Oregonian’s music critic, Hilmar Grondahl, called the award “the biggest news since reactivation of the orchestra in 1947” and noted that “an endowment fund is a truly stabilizing fact of life in an orchestra’s orderly existence. It is what can prevail against the agonizing hand-to-mouth existence that results when the Society must face each season with a maintenance fund drive.”20 Prior to receiving the Ford Foundation grant, the symphony realized approximately $2,500 annually from its $66,000 endowment. The interest from $2 million would mean much more income. As Vester said, the Ford grant “gives to Portland and the State of Oregon a golden opportunity to build the orchestra into one of major symphony status . . . A full orchestra, ensemble groups, quartets, quintets and summer ‘Pops’ will become a reality. A musical fate long dreamed of but not within our abilities until now.”21 According to Bentley, developing the symphony into a major regional attraction was a matter of civic duty: “In our expanding state, where business firms are increasingly concerned for the quality of life available to their staffs, we must have a secure and progressive Symphony Orchestra. To reflect its expansion and mission of serving the entire state, where business firms are increasingly concerned for the quality of life available to their staffs, we must have a secure and progressive Symphony Orchestra. To reflect its expansion and mission of serving the entire state, and to encourage support from patrons outside the Portland area, the board renamed the orchestra the Oregon Symphony in 1967.

The newly christened Oregon Symphony expanded further with the 1968 arrival of Portland Junior Symphony conductor Norman Leyden and the establishment of a popular music, or “pops,” series.22 The talent for which Oregonians came to know Leyden best was arranging popular music for orchestra, band, and voice. During World War II, Leyden had played under Captain Glenn Miller, the famous swing band leader, and he later worked as an arranger for singers and bandleaders including Mitch Miller, Frank Sinatra, and Sarah Vaughan. Leyden joined the Oregon Symphony and the music department at Portland State University and agreed to lead a three-concert series called “Portland Pops” for the 1970–1971 season. The concerts sold out immediately, and Leyden made them a fixture that is still popular today.23

With a new hall, $50,000 in annual Ford Foundation support, and a monymaking pops series, the Oregon Symphony was distinctly better off in 1970 than it had been a decade before. In the fall of 1970, amicable negotiations between the players’ union and the symphony board resulted in the organization’s first two-year contract with the musicians’ union, which promised wage increases at the beginning of each of the following two seasons and funding for ten additional musicians. Thirty players were placed on weekly contracts, and those without contracts were playing more often and earning almost ten dollars more per service than they had a few years previously.24 As the 1970s began, the symphony seemed poised for another decade of growth with Jacques Singer at its head. A 1969 marketing survey had found that more than 25 percent of non-symphony patrons recognized a photograph of the conductor, illustrating, as violinist Mary Ann Coggins Kaza notes, that “Singer was ‘Mr. Music.’ ”25 To an increasing number of symphony musicians, however, he was also a chief source of the organization’s problems.

As early as eighteen months after Jacques Singer’s arrival in August 1962, there were rumors that his volatile temperament was taxing musicians’ energy and patience. In February 1964, Oregon Journal columnist Doug Baker wrote of “a growing feel of resentment against the conductor, occasioned by the maestro’s flashes of temper both during concerts and rehearsals” but also noted that “it is almost unanimous opinion that he has done a fine job with the Portland Symphony.” Some players supported Singer, including principal string bass player Herman Jobelmann, a longtime member of the orchestra. Prompted by Baker’s February column, Jobelmann wrote, “Mr. Singer . . . does lose his temper at times. Most all conductors seemingly ‘pick’ on sections and [!] or individuals, sometimes unmercifully. The big thing to
remember is what they are trying to accomplish, and that is to make great music.” He concluded, “The Portland Symphony is now in better shape than it has been for a long time, both musically and financially. Let’s hope . . . that the members of the orchestra themselves realize that a little temperament never hurt anyone.”

Many of the musicians who played with Singer agree that his manner could have caused resentment. Egbers recalls that players who did not know their parts at rehearsal time were “called out and yelled at.” His style at rehearsals could be intimidating, as Kaza remembers: “He was unforgiving with wrong notes. If he felt you weren’t getting it, he would come down from the podium, march up to you, and holler, ‘Play!’ Sometimes you feared for your career.” Egbers notes that taking offense was counterproductive: “If you let it go, there would be no problem. If you remembered and spoke about it, you would get in trouble.”

Trumpet player Ron Modell, who served on the faculty of Northern Illinois University with Singer in the late 1970s, says, “As principal trumpet in the Dallas Symphony (1960–1969), I had heard stories about the maestro’s temperament and the fact that it could be difficult to play for him.” He notes, however, that Maestro Singer came from the time of conductors’ dictatorship. If Reiner or Szell or Toscanini said one plus one equaled three, then it was three, or you would not be back the next season. Some of the conductors from that period could be very brutal on the musicians, but . . . if you came prepared, on time, and played your part, chances are you would not be bothered. There were always enough musicians who didn’t take care of business the conductors could pick on.”

Some musicians accepted Singer’s brusque style, while others resented it strongly. William Ofstad came directly from the New England Conservatory of Music when he joined the Oregon Symphony’s bass section in 1968. He recalls being singled out at his first rehearsal: “The maestro called out, ‘Hey, you! That was not very good.’ And it wasn’t.” Bass trombonist Alan Pierce recalls, “[Singer’s] personality was a lot like my dad’s. He wanted to be the boss; he didn’t like to be challenged.” Older musicians were less willing to put up with a dictatorial style. Ofstad remembers one occasion when Singer was unhappy with a passage and had the bass musicians play their parts in turn so he could identify the problem. The most senior member of the bass section felt the exercise was demeaning; “when his turn came, he said ‘No, Maestro,’ put down his music and walked out.” James Eoff recalls that his father, Oregon Symphony violinist James “Jimmy” Eoff, quit the symphony because he had another job in music and found working under Singer too stressful. Singer’s podium style was apparently different from his everyday manner. “On the podium, he became a tyrant,” says Kaza. “Off the podium,” she continued he had a good sense of humor, he was well-educated, and he was very compassionate. If a player was sick, he would call, not to ask why they had missed rehearsal but to see how they were. Because he didn’t drive, I drove him around town a lot, and he was very thoughtful; he always bought me a little gift for my birthday.”

In the later years of Singer’s tenure, rumors of trouble threatened to taint the symphony’s public image. The 1969 marketing survey included a questionnaire mailed to all eighty-three orchestra musicians. Members returned their surveys anonymously, and the response rate was 77 percent. The anonymous comments reflected divisions not only between the conductor and musicians but also within the body of the orchestra. Some players described Singer as a good musician, though temperamental, who “was always striving and pushing orchestra members to perform at their best.” Others described him as a poor conductor who blamed musicians for his
own mistakes and was unnecessarily harsh. Specific comments included: “Exceptional musician,” “Knows the Romantic period very well in regard to style and phrasing,” “Lacks good conducting techniques,” “Does not know how to treat all musicians with dignity, hence probably does not get best performance from many players,” and “Repertoire limited.” The survey firm concluded that “there [was] an acute rapport problem between the conductor and musicians” and that “conductor evaluations by audience and orchestra are diametrically opposite.” Sixty percent of audience members who evaluated the maestro rated Singer “excellent,” with another 28 percent assessing him as “very good.”

The discord that developed between Singer and the Oregon Symphony’s musicians stemmed from Singer’s bombastic personality on the podium and his conducting style. Like many conductors of his time, Singer had been trained as a soloist rather than as a conductor. Former Oregon Symphony concertmaster Hugh Ewart suggests that Singer was “not quite prepared” for the multifaceted role he played. As a violinist, Singer’s musicianship was never in doubt. John Richards remembers that, early in the maestro’s tenure, Singer held out his hand for the concertmaster’s violin to demonstrate a passage. “He tucked it under his chin and played four or five bars to show what he wanted. The rest of the string section sat openmouthed at how well he could play.”

Singer could conduct stunning performances of pieces he knew well. “When he was good, he was very, very good,” says Ewart. “When he knew a piece well, he could inspire,” but when the music was less familiar, and especially when Singer conducted without a score, he could err. “He was a chance-taker,” says Ofstad. “He conducted by the seat of his pants sometimes. If he thought he could take a faster tempo, make things more exciting, he would go for it, and sometimes he would lose control of the orchestra.”

One Oregon Symphony musician reported incidents of missed timing, as when Singer apparently cued a percussionist too early, interrupting a solo violin passage by Isaac Stern. On another occasion, Singer omitted two of the three soft chords that end the third movement of Tchaikovsky’s Serenade for Strings. Sweeping straight into the crashing chords opening the fourth movement, he left the orchestra scrambling to catch up. “I leave off two chords,” the maestro reportedly grumbled later, “and the stupid orchestra won’t follow me.” Poor eyesight probably contributed to Singer’s conducting problems. Pierce notes that Singer did not see well, and Kaza recalls that, because he refused to wear glasses, he sometimes had trouble recognizing musicians who sat in the back rows.

Despite internal conflicts, the new 3,000-seat Civic Auditorium was frequently full on concert nights, and the Portland Pops series continued to sell out. Singer praised the “constantly increasing capabilities” of the orchestra and the “ever-increasing interest” of the public. He continued, “early in my time here we would not have considered performing the Mahler Fifth Symphony . . . nor some of the contemporary works . . . [but] there are few scores we would hesitate to tackle at the present level.”

Singer’s contract was set to expire at the end of the 1970–1971 season, and the board renewed it in the spring of 1970 on the recommendation of a special committee it had appointed to study the symphony’s progress. The maestro’s new contract made him conductor and music director through the spring of 1973. He spent the summer of 1970 jetting to assignments around the world, including London’s Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, where he had conducted in 1962 and would be invited to conduct again in the spring of 1972.

Those votes of confidence at home and abroad did nothing, however, to allay the disquiet of Oregon Symphony musicians. Matters came to a head at the beginning of the 1971–1972 season, when concertmaster Hugh Ewart’s contract expired and Oregon Symphony management offered him a position among the first violins — a decision in which Singer, as music director, would have played a major role. Ewart declined, seeking recourse through the musicians’ union, American Federation of Musicians (AFM) Local 99, and a contract that specified he could not be fired from his posi-
A rift between an orchestra’s conductor and concertmaster is a serious breach. The concertmaster mediates, musically and otherwise, between the conductor and musicians, so the proposed demotion and Ewart’s resistance had the potential to throw the orchestra into chaos.\(^\text{79}\) Oregon Symphony’s non-renewal of Ewart’s contract as concertmaster was also controversial because Singer and the board planned to hire a more virtuoso concertmaster from outside the local area — and from outside the union local, whose rules held that “imported” players should be considered only if there were no appropriate local candidates.\(^\text{79}\)

Ewart had served as concertmaster since 1949. A Juilliard-trained violinist, he had toured the United States and Canada early in his career under the direction of Dimitri Mitropoulos. He was popular with concertgoers, and Singer’s ninth season with the Oregon Symphony was off to a poor start when, shortly after being denied a new contract, Ewart refused to stand when the maestro walked on stage. Since musicians traditionally follow the concertmaster’s lead in acknowledging the conductor, Ewart committed the entire orchestra to a gesture of protest. As one local newspaper editor noted in response to the incident, “rising at the conductor’s entrance doesn’t necessarily affirm that you love the guy, but it does imply that you respect the position he holds relative to the orchestra.”\(^\text{79}\)

The next night, patrons who had organized in support of Ewart booed when Singer came on stage. The booing was promptly drowned in applause, but such open disapprobation suggests that anger and frustration had spread beyond the rehearsal stage. Stickers reading “Drop Jacques!” appeared around Portland State University, where the symphony sometimes rehearsed, and rumors flew that a petition was being circulated for the conductor’s dismissal.\(^\text{79}\)

Perhaps hoping to secure his position, Singer asked the Symphony Society board in the fall of 1971 to confirm that a new contract would be forthcoming when the current one expired in April 1973. The board appointed another review committee, which produced majority and minority opinions; both supported renewal but they differed in the length of time they recommended for Singer’s new contract. Thirty-two of the Oregon Symphony’s non-renewal of Ewart’s contract as concertmaster was offered a group of board members or the obliging family dog. Despite frustrating many musicians, Singer was attractive to the public. Key for an orchestra in dire need of financial backing, he was an “excellent social mixer” who was photographed viewing patrons’ art collections or pretending to conduct a group of board members or the obliging family dog.\(^\text{79}\)

In a flurry of letters, Oregonians debated the orchestra’s quality, critiqued Singer’s musicianship, and argued for and against his reinstatement. Douglas L. Butler, music director at the First Unitarian Church in downtown Portland, wrote that he had “canceled [his] season subscriptions for musical reasons only,” citing “repeatedly confusing and tasteless renderings” of the standard repertoire “due to an uninspiring conductor.” Audience member Susan Evon remarked that the “quality of symphonic performance has . . . risen from abysmal to mediocre, under Jacques Singer’s tenure,” faulting “Singer’s personality or musicianship or both.”\(^\text{79}\)

Oregon Symphony musician Margaret Moore described Singer as “an ineffective musical director and conductor” with an “appalling lack of conducting technique” and an “infuriating need to blame the orchestra when it subsequently falters.” Singer’s supporters replied passionately in his defense. Concertgoers Arvid and Shirley Orbeck pointed to “the acclamation of the happy majority buying tickets, giving ovations, [and] swelling once-empty houses,” and Wanda Hoggan protested that “until dissension impaired performance, our orchestra developed and vastly improved. I recall nights of enthusiastic appreciation when applause crescendoed into unquestioning acclaim.”\(^\text{79}\)

Oregon Symphony musicians who played under Singer attest that his stick technique could be erratic at times. John Richards and other musicians describe what they called the “circle beat”: “He would be conducting, beating time, and when he got lost his arm would simply move in a circle. If the score called for an accelerando, the circles would get faster.” Occasionally, the maestro lost his place in the score, once halting a performance in Roseburg, Oregon, of Igor Stravinsky’s Petrouchka. Egbers suspects Singer had the composer’s The Rite of Spring, which the symphony performed more frequently, in mind. “Eight or ten bars in, he got lost,” she remembers. “And we just stopped. We stopped, he started us again from the beginning, and then we were fine.”\(^\text{79}\)

Despite frustrating many musicians, Singer was attractive to the public. Key for an orchestra in dire need of financial backing, he was an “excellent social mixer” who was photographed viewing patrons’ art collections or pretending to conduct a group of board members or the obliging family dog.\(^\text{79}\) He was a prominent member of the community, with a wife and family who participated in orchestra events and performed with the symphony. Singer provided what the symphony had needed — a constant, visible presence that raised public awareness. Longtime Oregon Symphony members Richards and Ewart agreed that Singer brought the orchestra to a level where it could make money, which led to developments such as season expansion, tours, and an increased number of musicians.\(^\text{79}\) Ultimately, however, his limitations as an administrator and conductor caused an irreparable rift with musicians.
In late 1971, the longest run of any Oregon Symphony music director since the 1930s was all but over.

Along with the volley of opinion in local papers and concert-hall demonstrations against the maestro, the end of 1971 brought the conclusion of a highly successful campaign to match the Ford Foundation grant awarded five years before. The Oregon Symphony was the only group of its size in the nation to raise more than the required $1 million — $1,070,000. The Oregon Symphony seasons of 1971–1972 and 1972–1973, however, were two of the most tumultuous in the organization’s history. The orchestra was once more without a music director and would soon lack a manager, and the organization was involved in bitter labor and personnel disputes, including those involving concertmaster Ewart and associate conductor Leyden. Martin Clark, music editor for the Oregon Journal, called the period from December 1971 through the beginning of the 1973–1974 season a “three-ring circus . . . without benefit of comic relief from clowns.”

In 1972, the symphony lost pops conductor Norman Leyden, who started an independent pops series. Mindful of Leyden’s value to the organization, James P. Rogers — now head of the symphony’s board — and the Oregon Symphony’s newly hired manager, David Hyssop, moved quickly to bring him back into the fold. Five Oregon Symphony pops concerts were planned for 1973–1974, and Leyden was tapped to help continue the symphony’s expansion by leading tours and youth concerts. In January 1974, the board appointed Leyden associate conductor. The labor dispute was also speedily resolved. What had only been a decade before — youth concerts, regular tours, and a pops series — were flourishing sufficiently to need a leader. In May 1973, Michael Foxman, a twenty-six-year-old violinist from Los Angeles, was hired as concertmaster, with Ewart named as associate concertmaster.

The Oregon Symphony remained a metropolitan orchestra through the 1970s, and became full-time, attaining major orchestra status, in the early 1980s. In 1984, the group moved into Portland’s Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, a venue primarily dedicated to the symphony where musicians could rehearse on the stage where they performed. Singer never again served as permanent director of an orchestra. Though he remained on the Oregon Symphony’s payroll through April 1973, the symphony board bought out the remainder of his contract and released him from conducting in the 1972–1973 season. With his wife and two younger children, he returned to New York. In the late 1970s, Singer conducted concerts for the Naumburg series in Central Park; and, from 1977 to 1980, he taught conducting at Northern Illinois University (NIU) in DeKalb, Illinois, where Leslie Wright Singer served on the piano faculty.

Some of the same musicians who had challenged Singer’s ability to lead the Oregon Symphony supported his application for the post at NIU. Former Oregon Symphony principal trumpet Fred Sautter notes, “he was, after all, a fine musician, a great human being, and had much to share.”

Ron Modell, who was Singer’s colleague at NIU, says that Singer’s “batteries were re-energized by the spirit and enthusiasm he was able to generate. . . . He found late in life an excitement and energy with the NIU Philharmonic.”

But that fruitful second career was short. In August 1980, Singer died of cancer in Manhattan.

In Singer, the Oregon Symphony acquired a music director who was enthusiastic about music, the city, the state, and the musical education of citizens. The growth he helped to generate created more change. By 1971, the musicians of the expanded Oregon Symphony had joined ICSOM and, with their colleagues across the nation, were exchanging conductor evaluations and demanding more collaboration with management, board members, and music directors on employment and musical matters. The Oregon Symphony, like many of its counterparts nationwide, was on surer financial footing than before, with the capacity to withstand continued expansion. No longer struggling, it was less dependent on a single charismatic leader.

“Singer brought an excitement to playing with the symphony that no one else has ever brought, before or since,” John Richards recalls. “He had a magic about him. He wasn’t perfect, and every concert wasn’t perfect, but there was an immense excitement to those performances and everyone felt it.”

When the Portland Symphony Orchestra became the Oregon Symphony in 1967, music director and conductor Jacques Singer was an important part of the change. Though the group had grown steadily since its founding in 1896, it was no coincidence that the move from local to metropolitan orchestra occurred under this ambitious, highly visible leader who played...
an important role in changes from climbing ticket sales to a major remodel of Portland’s municipal auditorium. From a period of dedicated musical efforts, but stagnant growth, the Oregon Symphony had become the state’s orchestra. By the early 1970s, it was a focus of Portland’s civic development and an attraction and educational opportunity for other Oregon communities. Even the controversy of Singer’s later years sparked growth in the form of increased public discussion about the symphony’s future. If Singer eventually served as a lightning rod for criticism, his presence also sparked dialogue about both the nature of good music and the symphony as a cultural institution.

NOTES

The author thanks the Oregon Symphony musicians and administrative personnel who provided information on the Singer years, including Cheri Ann Egbers, Hugh Ewart, Mary Ann Coggins Kaza, Ruth Matinbo-Wald, Patricia Messick, Ralph Nelson, William (Bill) Ofstadt, Sherrill Osborn, John K. Richards, Alan Pierce, and Fred Sautter. Thanks also to Kenneth Shirk, secretary of American Federation of Musicians Local 99, and to Jacques Singer’s former university colleagues, Ron Modell of Northern Illinois University and Jonny Barlow of St. John Island Community College. Joanne Seitter of Curtis Institute of Music, Meredith Gordon of The Juilliard School, and the staff of the Multnomah County Central Library in Portland, Oregon, provided invaluable assistance, as did Claudia Messier of the Vancouver Public Library in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, and the staff of the Oregon Historical Society Research Library.


3. ‘‘Music in Oregon,’’ International Musician (June 1954), 8–18.

4. See Susan G. Butruille, ‘‘Willem Van Hoogstraten: Man of Elegance and Style,’’ in Oregon Symphony, 12; and Susan G. Butruille, ‘‘The Ups and Downs of the Portland Symphony during the 1930s through 1950s,’’ in Oregon Symphony, 18.

5. Butruille, ‘‘The Ups and Downs,’’ 18. Though the orchestra had no music director in the 1933–1934 and 1934–1935 seasons, a number of world-class conductors filled the podium during this time, including Dimitri Mitropoulos and Igor Stravinsky. See ‘‘Music in Oregon.’’


10. See Ayer, More than Meets the Ear, 86–96.


17. ‘‘Jacques Singer Fiery Musician, Promoter,’’ Oregonian, April 12, 1962.


24. Bill Cunningham, ‘‘Vets Symphony Singer’s Dream,’’ Boston Herald, November 7,
Jacques Singer and the Oregon Symphony, onstage at Civic Auditorium in about 1968

three sons, became a violinist and violin dealer, while his twin sister Lori became a cellist, winning the Bergen Philharmonic competition in 1969. Both Lori Singer and her older brother Marc became film and television actors, while the eldest, Claude, became a writer. See Hilmar Grondahl, "Musical Summer School Draws Portland Youngsters," Oregonian, September 21, 1969.

32. The Portland Symphony Society's newsletter for patrons, Symphony Notes (Portland, Ore.: Portland Symphony Orchestra), provides a good overview of the symphony's basic organizational structure at the time. The OSO is structured somewhat differently today; see http://www.oregon symphony.org/about/ for details (accessed January 21, 2008).


36. "Dr. Jacques Singer Inks Music Pact,' Oregonian, August 5, 1964. See "Comparative Growth in Orchestra Annual Salaries, 1952–2001,' from the records of the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians (ICSM). The survey was published in the ICSM newsletter Senza Sardina in March 2001 and is reprinted in Ayer, More Than Meets the Ear, Appendix I.


38. Herbert Lundy, "Symphony Base Wide,' Oregonian, October 20, 1965; and Richards, discussion.


41. Lundy, "A Major Asset.'


46. B.J. Noles, ‘School Youths Respond to of Singer at this time, see the November 13, 1950, Vancouver Sun, which photographed the maestro, his wife, and sons Claude and Marc on their departure for New York.


30. See New York Times, April 5, 1953, which describes guest engagements in the Middle East. For more on Singer’s time in Israel and some commentary on its musical scene in the early 1950s, see New York Times, May 11, 1953, and May 17, 1953. Although the latter two articles refer to his “help[ing] train” and “reorganiz[ing]” the Haifa Symphony, available materials do not reveal how long Singer stayed in Haifa or precisely what he did there. See Robert Lindley, “Fifty Years of Teatro Colon," New York Times, June 3, 1958.

Singer also guest conducted in Mexico City, Havana, Lisbon, and Toronto. His appointment as music director of the Corpus Christi Symphony was announced in the June 20, 1954, New York Times.


See also "Symphony May Travel," Oregonian, June 6, 1965; and "Symphony is Musical Treat for Portland Area Students," Oregonian, November 19, 1964.

42. Noles, "School Youths Respond." Also William Ofstad in discussion with the author, April 2007. Interview notes in the author’s possession. The series was supported by a National Endowment for the Arts grant and funds from the Fred Meyer Charitable Trust (now Meyer Memorial Trust).


61. E-mail message to author.

62. Ofstad, discussion; and Kaza, discussion.

63. "E-mail message to author.

66. "E-mail message to author.

67. E-mail message to author.


71. See John Wendeborn, "Symphony Society, Local Musicians Union in Controversy," Oregonian, December 26, 1971. In accordance with the OSO contract, Ewart had been notified a year previously that his contract as concertmaster would not be renewed but that he would be offered a contract as first violinist instead.


77. Richards, discussion; and Egbars, discussion. See also musician comments in The Oregon Symphony: Its Market.


79. Ewart, discussion; and Richards, discussion. Also Pierce, discussion; and Kaza, discussion.


90. "Leyden to Aid Tour," Oregonian, April 1, 1973. Leyden, who arrived in 1968 to conduct the Portland Junior Symphony while director Jacob Avshalomov was on sabbatical, had founded and directed the Westchester Youth Symphony and taught at Columbia University.