



Century Rolls

The Los Angeles Philharmonic turns 100 this season—with more than 50 commissioned world premieres, an expansion of its YOLA program for kids, and a daylong free festival from Walt Disney Concert Hall to Hollywood Bowl. Going well beyond pro forma celebrations, the LA Phil is using its centennial as an opportunity to focus not just on the past but on the future.

by Jim Farber

Had fate dealt a slightly different hand, we would now be celebrating the 120th anniversary of the Los Angeles *Symphony*. But fate did step in, in the form of William Andrews Clark Jr., the wealthy son of a Montana copper baron who found his way to Los Angeles. In 1919, less than satisfied with the ragtag nature of the Los Angeles Symphony, Clark decided to personally endow, to the tune of \$100,000, the creation of a new orchestra that could serve as a centerpiece for a city just beginning to spread its cultural wings.

At 3:15 p.m. on October 24, 1919, the Philharmonic Orchestra of Los Angeles played its premiere concert at Trinity Auditorium in downtown L.A. The program,

conducted by Walter Henry Rothwell (a former assistant to Gustav Mahler), opened with Dvorák's *Symphony No. 9* ("From the New World"). Following intermission, Rothwell and the orchestra performed Weber's *Overture to Oberon*; Liszt's symphonic poem *Les Preludes*, and Chabrier's *Rapsodie Espagna*. Higher in quality, better organized, and better marketed, the Los Angeles Philharmonic survived, while the Los Angeles Symphony soon went the way of the dinosaurs.

Today in L.A., you would be hard pressed not to know that the Los Angeles Philharmonic is the midst of its 100th celebratory season. Images of the orchestra's charismatic Venezuelan music director, Gustavo Dudamel, proclaim the event



On September 30, the LA Phil celebrated its 100th birthday by hosting a free festival, complete with food trucks, gamelan orchestras (inset), and more, on the eight-mile route between its two homes: Walt Disney Concert Hall and the Hollywood Bowl.

from street banners and bus placards. Not content to mark the big 100 with a commission or two, the LA Phil is attracting attention by commissioning more than 50 new works this season, beginning with its opening-night gala on September 27 at Walt Disney Concert Hall, which included Julia Adolphe's *Underneath the Sheen*. Adolphe's work was part of a decidedly upbeat program called "California Soul" that embraced the diverse musical landscape of L.A. and its relationship to the Los Angeles Philharmonic. There was music from the movies by Elmer Bernstein and former Los Angeles Philharmonic Music Director André Previn. There was a devilish nod

to Frank Zappa: a performance of his irreverently titled *G-Spot Tornado*, as well as The Doors' *LA Woman*. Composer John Adams, who has maintained longstanding ties with the orchestra, was represented by *Wild Nights*, the third Emily Dickinson poem from *Harmonium*, and *Sri Moonshine*, the rhapsodic second movement of *The Dharma at Big Sur*. And the concert all ended with a rambunctious rendition of the Beach Boys' "Good Vibrations," followed by an outdoor psychedelic light show that lit up the silver skin of the hall.

This fall, the orchestra's birthday gift to the city was an eight-mile-long free block party that stretched from downtown at Disney Hall to the Hollywood Bowl with strategically placed band stands and food trucks along the way. A gamelan orchestra performed on the sidewalk in front of a former department store as a Mexican fiesta parade passed by led by a giant puppet of Gustavo Dudamel. There was the sweet aroma of Korean barbecue, crisp vegan pizza, and hot wrapped papusas. It was a party that said in no uncertain terms that



Matthew Imaging

"There's no complacency here."—Simon Woods, CEO, Los Angeles Philharmonic

this orchestra wants to do things differently. As Chad Smith, the orchestra's chief operating officer, puts it, "We could have had a big party to celebrate the centenary that didn't mean anything, and then gone back to business as usual. That wasn't what we were interested in doing. We wanted to come out of this celebration inspired and changed by all the relationships we've established. We want this to be a moment when we pivot."

Just how did the ascendancy of the Los Angeles Philharmonic become "the salient event in American orchestral life in the past twenty-five years," as the *New Yorker's* Alex Ross put it in 2017, making it hip to go to hear symphonic music, in a city already full of hip people? New music is obviously one big key. Fifty new commissions in one season is a staggering amount of new music, almost a defiant declaration of the orchestra's forward-facing stance and sheer ambition. It's hard to think of another orchestra that would premiere an opera based on *The War of the Worlds*,



Otto Rothschild

The Los Angeles Philharmonic has been performing at the Hollywood Bowl during warm-weather months since 1921. Top, Otto Klemperer, the orchestra's music director from 1933 to 1939, leads a rehearsal at the Bowl.



“How could we re-imagine what the Philharmonic could be, rather than an orchestra that just played a subscription season?”—Deborah Borda, CEO, Los Angeles Philharmonic, 2000-17

written by the vanguard composer Annie Gosfield and staged by The Industry’s Yuval Sharon in multiple indoor and outdoor locations, hosted by actress Sigourney Weaver, and featuring decommissioned sirens from World War II. Or stage John Cage’s *Europeras 1 & 2* on a soundstage at Sony Studios, using old film props and costumes. Those are two recent examples, but new music is not actually new for this orchestra; it’s just that the size and scope of the latest commissions have made them hard to ignore. The orchestra’s robust “Green Umbrella” contemporary music series itself is an outgrowth of the orchestra’s earlier Philharmonic New Music Group, established in 1981. That dedication seems right in a city with a long, fertile history of new music, dating back to the city’s European emigrés, of whom Stravinsky and Schoenberg are just two of the best-known.

Then there’s Youth Orchestra Los Angeles (YOLA), Music Director Gustavo Dudamel’s signature initiative through which the LA Phil and community partners provide free instruments, intensive music training, and academic support to students from underserved neighborhoods, together with community partners. In 2019, YOLA is expanding with the



Craig T. Mathis and Greg Coust

Students in Youth Orchestra Los Angeles, the LA Phil’s signature music education program, better known as YOLA, during the orchestra’s opening weekend September 2018.

construction of its first campus: a \$14.5 million, 25,000-square-foot, Frank Gehry-designed space in an abandoned bank building in the city’s Inglewood neighborhood to house the program’s more than 1,200 students.

As Deborah Borda, the Philharmonic’s president and CEO from 1999 to 2017, said when we spoke recently, “Culture change is one thing that people don’t think about very much in terms of symphony orchestras, because they seem like such 18th- and 19th-century institutions. But we need to get people to think about how does culture change, and how do we affect that? The way we predict the future is to invent it.”

How this orchestra evolved from a regional footnote into a juggernaut—a trendsetter for what a symphony orchestra organization can be in the 21st century—is a fascinating history filled with significant turning points and key individuals, artists, and administrators that has mirrored L.A.’s emergence as a cultural force.

Bang the Drum

At 95, percussionist, conductor, and composer William (Bill) Kraft may well be the oldest surviving member of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. He auditioned for its then music director, Alfred Wallenstein, in 1954. “It didn’t go well at all,”



Music Director Gustavo Dudamel and architect Frank Gehry at the 2018 launch of the new 25,000-square-foot, Gehry-designed headquaters for Youth Orchestra Los Angeles, which will open in the city’s Inglewood neighborhood in 2020.

Kraft recalled in October, when we spoke in his Altadena hillside home with its array of exotic percussion instruments. “The principal percussionist, Benjamin Podinski, had it in for me from the start. There was no way he was going to hire me. After the audition my wife and I went across the street to the Biltmore Hotel to get drunk.”

In the end, it was a letter of recommendation from Kraft’s Columbia University timpani professor, Saul Goodman, that made the difference, and Kraft became a member of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.



Jim Farber

William Kraft, 95, was the Los Angeles Philharmonic's principal percussionist from 1955 to 1985, performing under music directors including Alfred Wallenstein, Eduard van Beinum, Zubin Mehta, and Carlo Maria Giulini.

As the orchestra's principal percussionist from 1955 to 1985, he played for a succession of music directors that he developed definite feelings about. His favorites were maestros Eduard van Beinum (1956-59) and Carlo Maria Giulini (1978-84). "They were both wonderful conductors, consummate musicians, and the sweetest men," he recalls. Van Beinum died of a heart attack at age 57, but "If van Beinum had lived, he would have made the Los Angeles Philharmonic a world-class orchestra," says Kraft. He also has immense respect for Pierre Boulez, who had close ties with the orchestra and whose pinpoint perfect musical knowledge and minute hand gestures on the podium, Kraft said, "required total concentration."

Alfred Wallenstein, however, "was a terrible conductor with a terrible temper," says Kraft. "He would scream at the orchestra and he had this dreadful stare

that he would focus on you if you'd made a mistake in rehearsal, daring you to screw up. But he was really good at the social stuff." Dorothy Chandler—Mrs. Chandler of the *Los Angeles Times*, real estate, "forget-it-Jake-it's-Chinatown" Chandlers—loved him, says Kraft.

But it was the arrival of the 25-year-old firebrand from Bombay, Zubin Mehta, that Kraft says really set the orchestra ablaze. Mehta arrived as an assistant conductor in 1961 and held the post of music director from 1962 to 1978. "Zubin's arrival changed everything," Kraft says. "He was young and full of energy that was infectious. He wanted to play the big guns: Prokofiev 5 and *Ein Heldenleben* on the same program—from memory, no scores! That was impressive. He thought *Ein Heldenleben* had been written just for him. That's when the orchestra really began to gain respect. We weren't one of the Big 5, but we were 6 or 7. I was in heaven."

The Right Moves

A recurring theme at the Los Angeles Philharmonic over the years has been finding spaces suitable for its needs and ambitions. The most recent example is the groundbreaking this past April for YOLA's new \$14.5 million home; the goal of the building is to double the number of children who can be served by the YOLA program. In 1964, the orchestra, which since its second year of operation had been performing in an old, barn-like auditorium on the north side of downtown's Pershing Square, moved a few blocks northeast into its new home in the brand-new Music Center, the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion (same Mrs. Chandler) while it continued to spend its summers at the Hollywood Bowl, where it had been performing since 1921.

Zubin Mehta, the Los Angeles Philharmonic's music director from 1962 to 1978, leads the orchestra at the opening of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in 1964.



Otto Rothschild

Both venues were operated under the auspices of the County of Los Angeles. As a result, the orchestra was obligated to share the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion with annual visits by New York City Opera (Los Angeles would not have its own opera company until 1987), the Joffrey Ballet, and numerous rentals of the hall including for several years the Academy Awards ceremony.

The move to the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion coincided with a remarkable period of growth for the orchestra, spearheaded



In 1964, the LA Phil moved to the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in the brand-new Music Center, its home until 2003. Above, namesake Dorothy Chandler backstage at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion with Jascha Heifetz.

by the visionary, famously strong-willed managing director, Ernest Fleischmann. During Fleischmann's 30-year tenure, he hired Zubin Mehta, coaxed Carlo Maria Giulini to come to Los Angeles and introduced Pierre Boulez as well as a pair of up-and-coming kids—Michael Tilson Thomas and Simon Rattle—as principal guest conductors. But it was Fleischmann's hiring of a young Finnish phenomenon named Esa-Pekka Salonen as music director that would establish the bridge that has brought the orchestra to where we think of it today as a champion of music by living composers, and an increasingly active player in the city's cultural sphere. Salonen served as music director from 1992 to 2009, during which the development, construction, and inauguration of the Walt Disney Concert Hall would take



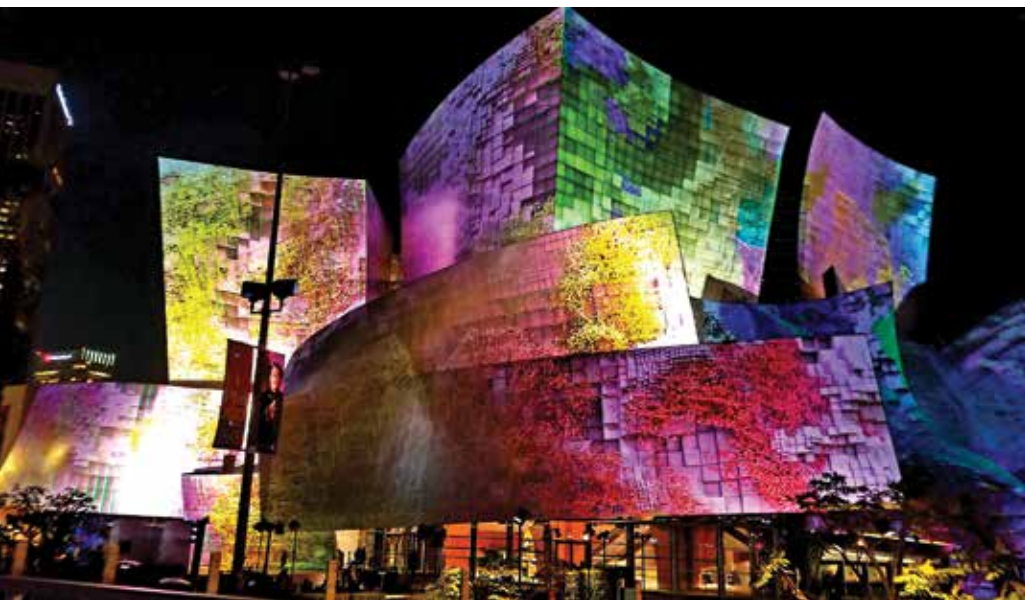
Federico Zignani

In 1987, Lillian Disney, the widow of Walt Disney, made a \$50 million gift to the Los Angeles Philharmonic. The Walt Disney Concert Hall, pictured above under construction in 2002, was designed by Frank Gehry and opened in 2003.



Betty Freeman

Ernest Fleischmann, the Los Angeles Philharmonic's executive director for three decades beginning in 1969, at Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.



Jim Fichter

For a week at the beginning of the LA Phil's centennial season, the exterior of its home, Walt Disney Concert Hall, was lit up with patterns created by artist Refik Anadol using images, audio, and videos from the LA Phil's archives.

place. Together, Fleischmann and Salonen started rethinking the role of this orchestra in this city.

It all began on May 13, 1987 with an announcement that hit Los Angeles like a cultural earthquake. Lillian Disney, the widow of Walt Disney, offered a gift of \$50 million toward the construction of a new concert hall that would bear her husband's name. Architect Frank Gehry (not nearly as famous then as he is today) won the competition to design the build-

ing. But the road to Walt Disney Concert Hall was plagued with economic setbacks and fundraising shortfalls. In the end, sixteen years would separate Lillian Disney's gift and the first notes played in the hall. More than once it appeared the project was dead, its only legacy a very expensive parking structure. During those dark days I remember asking a workman on the site if he thought they'd ever finish it. "Sure they will," he replied optimistically. "They only need eighty million dollars!" He

was right. A task force led by developer/philanthropist Eli Broad and former Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan set the final phase in motion. It was at this point that Deborah Borda arrived from her post at the helm of the New York Philharmonic to become the new CEO of the LA Phil.

"There is a wonderful atmosphere at the Los Angeles Philharmonic where there is no question that cannot be asked, where the creative process is wide open. It's a distinctly California atmosphere," says Borda. "But when I first arrived in L.A. that atmosphere did not exist the way it does now. The company was experiencing a great deal of financial stress and was in a state of transition. There was a lack of vision and leadership." Ernest Fleischmann had left the organization in 1998 and a Dutchman named Wilhelm Weinbergen was appointed general manager, a disastrous tenure that ended in less than two years. His replacement in 2000 was Deborah Borda. "One of the reasons I decided to come to Los Angeles," she says, "was my conviction, though not a certainty, that Disney Hall was going to be completed." But when she arrived, she says, "There were so many things hanging in the balance: Would the hall be built? If it was built, how would it be realized? How would we fill it? How could we re-imagine what the Philharmonic could be, rather than an orchestra that just played a subscription season?"

By the time Walt Disney Concert Hall

opened, on Oct. 24, 2003, the new order, led by Borda and Esa-Pekka Salonen, was firmly in place. In addition to a full symphony season, the Disney Hall schedule would include new series devoted to jazz and world music; a chamber music series and an adventurous program of contemporary music called The Green Umbrella,



Matthew Imaging

“We could have had a big party to celebrate the centenary, and then gone back to business as usual. That wasn’t what we were interested in. We wanted to come out of this celebration inspired and changed.”—Chad Smith, chief operating officer, Los Angeles Philharmonic

which was an outgrowth of the Philharmonic New Music Group that had been founded in 1981—by none other than Bill Kraft.

Teach Your Children Well

Under Borda’s leadership the orchestra created YOLA, a program inspired by the Venezuelan music education program El Sistema, founded in 1975 by José Antonio Abreu. Its star graduate was a young, bushy-haired conductor with real flare,



In 2016, the Los Angeles Philharmonic performed Debussy’s 1902 opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* in a semi-staging by David Edwards that featured singers from the Los Angeles Master Chorale, white mannequins in dramatic lighting, and narration by Kate Burton. Former music director Esa-Pekka Salonen conducted.

Gustavo Dudamel, whom Borda was actively recruiting to become Salonen’s replacement as music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. “When we first proposed establishing YOLA, and that was before Gustavo made the decision to sign with us,” Borda says, “there was tremendous pushback. The board said it was too expensive. There was a recession, we needed to be financially conservative. Today YOLA is an icon for musical education in the country for its involvement in the community. And we did get Gustavo!” The orchestra’s celebratory free concert when Dudamel arrived as music director, *Bienvenido Gustavo*, took place on October 3, 2009 at the Hollywood Bowl. In a city with a significant Latin American population, the use of Spanish to introduce the Venezuelan music director and on other materials did not go unnoticed.

Borda also hired Chad Smith, a young man she’d formerly worked with at the New York Philharmonic to fill the post of associate artistic administrator. A native of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, Smith, now 46, had earned a B.A. in European history from Tufts University, as well as B.M. and M.M. degrees in vocal performance from the New England Conservatory. He joined the LA Phil in 2002 and was responsible for planning the orchestra’s Green Umbrella new-music series (with then composer in residence Steven Stucky) and assigned to program the classical summer season at the Hollywood Bowl. Since then, Smith—he’s now the

orchestra’s chief operating officer—has overseen the programming of Green Umbrella, conceived festivals devoted to the music of Iceland and Mexico, launched an annual twelve-hour marathon of new music that brings together presenters from all over the city, helped navigate the growth of YOLA, and was instrumental in the planning for the 100th-anniversary gala, street fair, and orchestra season. (In 2020, Smith will also become artistic director of Ojai Music Festival, while continuing his LA Phil job.)

“We want to develop a really strong profile that represents more than a series of isolated events,” says Smith. “We have to look at this 400 years of repertory and project onto it a three-dimensional model that envisions multiple audiences perceiving it in multiple ways. We’ve found that young people are incredibly adventurous in their musical listening and their cultural curiosity. But we don’t always make it easy for young and new audiences to come and experience what we do, whether it’s price barriers or a perception of how they might be expected to react. It affects the way we look at marketing; are we using the right vehicles to get our message out? We have to create opportunities where people from diverse backgrounds and economic means feel welcome. We have to constantly ask questions like: How would an outsider see that? What questions would they ask? How can we use the amazing platform of the Los Angeles Philharmonic as a place where we can celebrate diversity?”



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Into the Woods Era

Englishman Simon Woods, a former conductor and record company producer who most recently served as president and CEO of the Seattle Symphony from May 2011 to January 2018, is completing his first year as the CEO of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. When we spoke recently, I asked him about the diverse skill set he brings to the job. “The big lesson for me was not so much conducting, but my ten years as a record producer working with artists in the studio and on the road from the late 1980s to the late 1990s,” he says. “I had the chance to work with some of the world’s finest conductors, orchestras, and soloists. If I learned one thing in that period of time, it was that great artists need the right conditions to produce the greatest work. I’ve always seen myself in the role of a facilitator.”

Not surprisingly given his background as a record producer, Woods indeed oversaw many new recordings at the Seattle Symphony, of which John Luther Adams’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Become Ocean* is probably the best known. He



Robert Torres

Music Director Gustavo Dudamel conducts the Los Angeles Philharmonic at Walt Disney Concert Hall.

also oversaw a shift from, as he once put it, “thinking about the work that we do to thinking about the impact we make.” He created programs through which the orchestra supported the city’s many people who are either homeless or in transitional housing, through teaching residencies, artistic partnerships, and free ticket programs. And he is credited with increasing the orchestra’s donations and ticket sales and broadening the orchestra’s board membership. Prior to his time in Seattle, he also served as chief executive of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, president and CEO of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, and the Philadelphia Orchestra’s vice president of artistic planning and operations. In L.A., he says, it’s too early to assess his progress or his plans for the orchestra’s future, but he does say that recording is going to play a much more significant part than it has over the past few years at the LA Phil.

“We’ll have quite a bit of news coming out soon on the recording front,” Woods said. “As to the recording industry itself, I think we’re in a transitional period right now. Basically CD is dead. Downloading is dead. It’s all about streaming, and the good news is that streaming revenue is up.” Also in the offing, says Woods, is an increased relationship between the LA Philharmonic and the film industry. “We’re developing an interconnected relationship with the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences. Last season we had a concert that featured all the Oscar-nominated scores. This year we



Simon Fowler

Susanna Mälkki is the Los Angeles Philharmonic’s principal guest conductor.

will actually be playing at the Oscars with Gustavo Dudamel conducting. And we’re going to have a featured spot on the program.”

Looking ahead, Woods also sees an ever-increasing need for orchestras to embrace technology. “If your goal is to reach more people, then the next question is how you use technology and social media to do that,” he said. “It’s going to be fundamental to widening our audience. At the same time we have to preserve our musical heritage. We can never dumb down programming in order to appeal to new audiences.” In Woods’s view, “The Los Angeles Philharmonic is the most adventurous, forward-looking organization in America in terms of its artistic planning, and as the most active commissioner of new music in the world. There’s no complacency here, a tendency to be



Mathew Imaging

Camille Avellano has been a member of the Los Angeles Philharmonic's violin section since 1981.

self-satisfied with who they are based on their reputation. Changing demographics over the next decade will force us to think differently about the work we do. Tradition is something you build on for the future. Or it can be something that encumbers you.”

A Family of 120 Musicians

When the musicians of a symphony orchestra perform, it's very easy to see them as a totally harmonious group of Olympians. The truth is, the Los Angeles Philharmonic is a 120-member family that lives and work in exceedingly close proximity for years as a time. First violinist Camille Avellano “was a backstage brat” at orchestras, she says. “My father was the principal bassist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and my mother was a cellist. I signed my contract with the Los Angeles Philharmonic on my 24th birthday. That was 37 years ago.” She arrived in L.A. straight from a job at the Rochester Philharmonic. “At the time I first auditioned for Maestro Giulini,” she says, “he encouraged young players to gain experience at smaller orchestras before joining the Phil. Now the skill level is so staggeringly high that we often accept new players right out of college. They're the equivalent of super-athletes. I've been on the audition committee for five years, and

our auditioning process is brutal. You basically have six minutes to show us you're better than everybody else.”

And as to being a family? “We are a family. And we do spend a lot of time together. We get dysfunctional now and then,” she concedes. “But on the whole we're a pretty happy band. I think it's the weather.” **S**

JIM FARBER has been a music critic and arts feature writer Los Angeles since 1982. He is the Los Angeles correspondent for *San Francisco Classical Voice* (sfcv.org). He previously served as associate producer of *Critic at Large* and co-producer of the PBS special “An Hour with Pink Floyd” at San Francisco's KQED public television station, and has received five Los Angeles Press Club awards for feature writing and criticism.



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