



How Sweet the Sound

The San Diego Symphony's rocky, century-long road to the top. **By Charlene Baldrige**

The San Diego Symphony might not have remembered its 100th birthday were it not for Melvin G. Goldzband, a retired clinical psychologist and longtime symphony archivist, who wrote the 2007 book *San Diego Symphony, from Overture to Encore*.

It's likely that Goldzband would not have written the book if the *Union-Tribune's* then-critic-at-large, Welton Jones, hadn't phoned during the orchestra's 1996 bankruptcy with news that symphony records, abandoned at the shuttered Copley Symphony Hall, had been taken to the San Diego Historical Society. "You're retired now. You need something to do," said Jones, who arranged access for Goldzband, who archived the materials and became so fascinated that he dedicated three years of his life to writing "an honest to god" history of the orchestra. Goldzband exposes a few skeletons in his book, a jolly read in which the author states that a group of musicians calling themselves the San Diego Symphony Orchestra produced their first concert Dec. 6, 1910, in the ballroom of the then-brand-new U.S. Grant Hotel. Though it existed in fits and starts for many years, the San Diego Symphony is the oldest symphony orchestra in California.

Violinist John Stubbs, who is music director of California Ballet and organizer of the Luscious Noise concerts at Anthology, became a San Diego Symphony member in 1977. He discussed the four most recent

conductors and what each brought to the orchestra.

"David Atherton (1980-1987) brought an incredible sense of discipline," Stubbs said. "His attention to detail made us really sit up and notice. I think we were a little bit intimidated by him, not in a bad way, but more afraid of him. Under Joav Talmi (1987-1996), we just had fun playing. He brought about a new kind of sound and a free, macho, fearless feeling. The contrast made for an incredible ensemble."

Because of the bankruptcy, during which the orchestra was not playing and many players left, Jung-Ho Pak (artistic director, 1998-2002) was the best possible choice as far as being the orchestra's public face when it reemerged and the administration reorganized itself.

"Now we have Jahja Ling," said Stubbs, "who's been so helpful getting us back on our feet. He's

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Acclaimed pianist Lang Lang performs with SDS this centennial season

brought an amazing tradition to San Diego from one of the world-class orchestras (the Cleveland). He's got a very good sound in his ear. He wants the right things and the right people. This is the best group of musicians we've ever had. The quality is unbelievable."

When Ling arrived as music director designate seven seasons ago, he began auditioning for 25 vacant positions. "They included concertmaster, principal bass, principal viola, principal cello, principal flute, bassoon, oboe, percussion members and section members," he said. "Now I have hired over 44 members."

Ling believes he lost only five. "And those went to the best orchestras in the world, the Chicago, the Cleveland, Boston, St. Louis and Cincinnati. It's not only a move up for them but a move up to very prestigious positions. They played a few years with us, and they got to the top of the world."

Ling believes every artist has a different strength and a different potential and that the newer hires are each unique in their own way. "They are not less than the people who left; some are probably even better, and we don't yet realize it because they're just starting."

Ling does a lot of guest conducting around the world—last year nine cities in Asia, in London and numerous cities in the U.S. He said that each time he returns, he is awestruck by his own orchestra.

"Our challenge is not so much artistic. Our challenge is to make people realize that if you want a major orchestra in this major city, you must support it." Ling's dreams—"things we must do when the centennial is finished"—include touring nationally and internationally, television broadcasts and more recordings.

"The Jacobses (Qualcomm founder Irwin and his wife Joan) have done incredible kindness and generosity to us by providing the endowment, but that alone is not enough unless everybody participates in our future."

Irwin Jacobs was born in Massachusetts and Joan in New York City. They lived for 10 years in Boston, where Irwin got his master's and doctorate from MIT where he taught for seven years. "When we came to San Diego (in 1966)" said Mr. Jacobs, "we very quickly became involved with the symphony.

“When you go to Symphony Hall, the overall experience should be a positive one, but we also have to be concerned that the musicians realize we think a great deal of them, and that they have very good quarters to work from.”

In addition to their 2002 gifts and bequests (a \$50 million gift to the endowment fund in increments of \$5 million per year for 10 years; and a \$50 million gift for operating revenues to be dispensed at \$5 million per year for 10 years), the Jacobses provided a new stage floor, a shell and a piano lift, all of which enhance the hall and its acoustics.

According to Executive Director Edward “Ward” Gill, the San Diego Symphony joined the top tier of the League of American Orchestras, which is based on stability, excellence and budget.

Despite all its travails, San Diego Symphony has progressed from an embarrassing tentative style of playing when this Chicago native arrived in 1962 to its current extraordinary excellence and stability.

All that remains is to fulfill Ling’s dreams and assure the future and the relevance of San Diego Symphony in people’s lives—and to do all that despite a challenging economy. That’s Gill’s job. He says the orchestra has recorded a surplus for the 12th year in a row and ticket sales are up 50 percent over eight years ago.

“In the opera and symphony worlds, we have an awful business plan,” Gill said. “The revenues that

come in and the expenses we incur would make an MBA or a top for-profit executive say, ‘This is a bad venture.’ [Only 36 percent of the total budget comes from ticket sales.] I could not agree more. We do it out of the conviction that we have a mandate to nurture the soul. Unless people love the product and feel a connection, they won’t attend and give the money we need to survive.”

“The challenges are out there,” he admits, “and on the positive side it makes us hungrier and more creative. We are more relevant and present than ever. I call us ubiquitous. The symphony is the orchestra for the opera here. Due to a grant from the Parker Foundation, we’ve expanded our music education from 25,000 [students served each year] a few years ago up to 47,000 today. We present young people’s concerts; our musicians go out to the schools.”

The centennial season opens at Copley Symphony Hall Oct. 8-10 with concerts featuring the world’s preeminent flautist Sir James Galway, who performs Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s Concerto No. 2 for Flute and Orchestra. An Oct. 16 program of four Charlie Chaplin silents accompanied by Symphony Hall’s newly refurbished organ kicks off a Winter Pops subscription series that also includes *One Singular Sensation* with Resident Pops Conductor Marvin Hamlisch Nov. 12-13; *Holiday Pops* with Broadway star Brian Stokes

Mitchell Dec. 17-18; *Judy Garland in Concert* Jan. 21-22; *The Great American Songbook* with amazing vocalist Jane Monheit Feb. 18-19; Silent Film Night with *Peter Pan* March 25-26; and The Temptations April 15-16. In addition to the Family Festival, Jacobs Masterworks and a new Chamber Music Series, the season also includes Nuvi Mehta’s educational series *Symphony Exposed*, which adds theatrical context to Camille Saint-Saens’ “Organ” Symphony, Richard Strauss’ *A Hero’s Life*, John Corigliano’s Percussion Concerto, and Beethoven’s mighty Fifth Symphony. Each *Exposed* affords subscribers access to a free after-party at Sè San Diego Hotel.

Guest artists helping celebrate the centennial include the acclaimed cellist Yo-Yo Ma (the centennial gala, Friday, Dec. 3 at the Balboa Theatre with festivities at the U.S. Grant Hotel) and legendary pianists Emmanuel Ax (Jan. 7-9) and Garrick Ohlsson (Nov. 5-7). Renowned Chinese pianist Lang Lang plays concertos by Beethoven, Schumann and Tchaikovsky over three consecutive nights in January. For tickets and information, call 619.235.0804 or see sandiegosymphony.com.

And if you see Goldzband, the historian, at any of these concerts, say hello. He’s gathering information to include in a book about the second hundred years. Watch your step, though: He’s known as the man who knows where all the skeletons are.