



## NINO MARCELLI (1880-1967) “FATHER” OF THE RESTORED SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY

Make no mistake: **NINO MARCELLI** is one of the most important figures in the San Diego Symphony’s history, and the recognition of what he did for this Orchestra now finally appears on the walls of the Jacobs Music Center.



In the midst of a very busy and productive fall / winter season at the Jacobs Music Center, let’s hit the pause button for a moment and consider: how did we get here? Who played the vital roles decades ago to bring our San Diego Symphony Orchestra to its current state of success and artistic integrity? Looking back, there is one figure that towers over most others, though he’s someone who is probably unknown to most of today’s concertgoers, Symphony staff and board, even musicians. But make no mistake: **NINO MARCELLI** is one of the most important figures in the San Diego Symphony’s history, and 50 years after his death in 1967 the recognition of what he did for this Orchestra, though overdue, now appears on the walls of the Jacobs Music Center. We’re pleased to memorialize Marcelli, and to celebrate his achievements. Honestly, we should have done so long before.

Philip M. Klauber, a constant, devoted backer of the San Diego Symphony for decades and its President for two years, rightfully honored Nino Marcelli as the orchestra’s “father” by ordering the adjacent plaque shortly before Klauber’s death in 2008 at age 98. The mounting of his and the Orchestra’s tribute to Marcelli commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the conductor’s passing. The San Diego Symphony was founded in 1910, nearly two decades before Marcelli came to San Diego, but it had been disbanded by America’s entering World War One. Following that conflagration, a subsequent severe economic depression prevented its renewal and reorganization. Extraordinarily creative and charismatic, it took a man like Nino Marcelli to re-create symphonic music here.

Born in Rome in 1890, Marcelli was the eleventh of twelve children, and at only a few weeks old he was taken with the rest of the family to Santiago, Chile. His father, a shoe manufacturer as well as an amateur musician, became the supplier of shoes to the Chilean Army. Christened in Chile as Juan, the baby was always called by his pet-name, “Nino,” and he himself preferred that throughout his life. A music-loving child, he became a cellist, and as a very young pre-adolescent he eventually followed his older brother, Ulderico, also a cellist, into the National Conservatory in Santiago. Nino was not only blessed with musical precocity, he was especially noted for his youthful charm and ability to win influential friends, a trait that seemingly lasted throughout his life. Along with his obvious exceptional talent, it led many of the Conservatory *Profesori* to boost his career.

Ulderico eventually moved to San Francisco where the conductor, Alfred Hertz, hired him for the San Francisco Symphony and Opera Orchestra, but Nino remained in Santiago and became a teacher at the Conservatory at a very early age. At 20, he took over a class of 33 in theory and harmony. Conducting seemed to be an inevitable next step, and he created a considerable sensation in Chile when, at 23, he conducted a weekly series of orchestral concerts in which he led, in turn, all nine of the Beethoven symphonies. The Italian composer of *Cavalleria rusticana*, Pietro Mascagni, then visiting the Santiago Conservatory, urged Nino to come to Italy for further training. Nino left for Italy soon after his Beethoven concerts, and led a touring opera company. When the company began touring America in 1915, however, he stayed in New York where he soon became a successful, prized conductor of operettas by Sigmund Romberg and others. D. W. Griffith selected Nino to conduct the pit orchestra accompanying his film huge success, *The Birth of a Nation*. After his New York success, Griffith sent him to Chicago to train a pit orchestra for his film there, but then America entered WWI.

Nino had become an American citizen and so enlisted in the American army. He had lost no patriotism for his birthplace, Italy, however, which was then being beaten

badly by the Austrians. He had convinced a number of his Italian pit musicians to enlist with him in the American Army and help beat back the Austrians. They all joined together! His own exceptional musicianship was recognized early by the Army, and after basic training he was sent to France where he organized a band for his unit. When General Pershing inspected his unit, he selected Nino to conduct the 100-piece Headquarters Band in Paris.

A music-loving general, Pershing spoke of being ashamed of the band he had in Paris which had been outshone by the famous French *Garde militaire*. Marcelli added some of his own former Chicago musicians to the band and worked hard with them to improve it. Pershing was so proud that after the armistice he had Marcelli tour through Europe, including Germany and Austria, with his band, and then Marcelli came back to America.

Upon his discharge, Nino joined the San Francisco Symphony cello section, reuniting with his brother Ulderico, but he hated that city’s dampness. In 1920 he accepted an offer from a drier climate, a few hundred miles to the south. The job was to succeed B. O. Lacey, who had conducted the San Diego High School Orchestra since 1903. At the time, SDHS was the only high school in San Diego. **By the end of his first year in San Diego, Marcelli had increased the size of the orchestra to 65; he worked hard training the students, who seemed to take to their new instructor/conductor. At the end of his first season with them, Marcelli took the orchestra to downtown San Diego where, in the Spreckels Theater, they gave a very highly acclaimed performance. A couple of years later, he brought the orchestra to Los Angeles, where the music critics were very enthusiastic about the students’ musicianship.**

In San Diego, Marcelli’s success with the high school orchestra was marked by the \$300,000 construction of a hall in the high school where it could play. The Russ Auditorium seated 2500 and, although quite echoey, was a great tribute to the orchestra’s prowess and was for years the only reasonably serviceable concert hall in town. His high school musicians began to complain after graduating that they were exasperated by the dearth of performance opportunities in town during summer months. Those heartfelt complaints inspired Marcelli to organize a summer orchestra in the 1920s, first calling it the San Diego Philharmonic Orchestra, and then later the San Diego Civic Symphony when the City made a small contribution to it. He wanted to brand the group as the San Diego Symphony Orchestra, but that name was cemented in the original organization’s old charter, dating back to 1910. **Finally, Nino contacted Buren Schryock, the original San Diego Symphony’s pre-World War I music director. When requested, he forthwith gave Marcelli the original, still valid state charter.**

And so, in 1927 San Diego finally had an official, chartered “San Diego Symphony Orchestra,” a direct descendant of the 1910 orchestra. This, however, also meant that more funds would be needed – the new name demanded increased professionalism. Some of the former students were hired in, but meanwhile Marcelli had also contacted musicians in the New York, St. Louis, Chicago and Cincinnati orchestras who were not performing summer seasons. The “new name” also called for programming that was increasingly difficult but representative of repertoire a full-fledged symphony orchestra should play, according to Marcelli, including complete symphonies by Beethoven and Tchaikovsky. And play them they did!

Beginning in 1931, summer seasons of seven or eight concerts were planned annually (but barely paid for by ticket receipts despite good crowds) at either the Spreckels Organ Pavilion or, after a few years, the Ford Bowl – the

latter built for the 1935-36 California-Pacific Exposition in Balboa Park. The mainly high school alumni as well as the imported musicians were paid cooperatively, directly from what was gained from the admission charges, plus a subsequent supplement provided by Henry Ford himself during the two years of the Exposition. In 1936 another small supplement was paid by the Columbia Broadcasting System. **That new radio network broadcast all the Exposition’s orchestral concerts nationwide that summer.** The Los Angeles Philharmonic also swapped several concerts at the Hollywood Bowl with the San Diego orchestra.

Internal political rivalries and troubles, however, affected the San Diego Symphony and its beloved conductor before and during the extended season planned for the 1937 summer. Power struggles involving backers and a couple of local, idle WPA orchestras caused Marcelli, a San Diego idol, not to return for the following season. All of this followed the season finale of the 1937 summer season when, without either asking or notifying Marcelli, a power-tripping board member (whose husband was a general) ordered two squads of soldiers to march down the two aisles of the Ford Bowl holding *lit smoke bombs*. The general and his wife thought that they would add a touch of increased reality to the programmed *1812 Overture!* The audience and the orchestra began coughing terribly, and the enraged Marcelli stopped the performance – he walked off and never returned. Guest conductors and then Nicolai Sokoloff led the San Diego Symphony through the 1941 season. Then came Pearl Harbor...and the Navy’s subsequent closure of Balboa Park to the public.

Marcelli never led the San Diego Symphony again, even after it resumed playing after the war. He continued conducting the San Diego High School Orchestra, however, always with considerable success, until retiring in 1948. After leaving teaching, Marcelli continued working with training orchestras in northern California and Washington State, and he published his *Methods* for cello and string bass. He had also become Master of his San Diego Masonic Lodge. After retiring, Marcelli finished composing a long-planned operetta, *Carmelita*, which he conducted to great praise here and elsewhere.

Marcelli did not marry until 1927. Widowed and with two nearly-grown children, Adelaide Burns Vogel had come to San Diego in 1922 and established a reputation of considerable competency at the Luce Forward law firm. She was always supportive of Marcelli, who never had children of his own. Following her death in 1948, Nino Marcelli adjusted his life yet again and returned to Chile, where he had family and knew many people, and where his North American musical fame was avidly followed. His early leadership of the concert series in which he conducted all nine Beethoven symphonies was still remembered there, as well as his notable successes in the USA. On June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1949, a group of ex-Conservatory classmates presented a celebration in his honor, and Nino was made an honorary member of the conservatory faculty, as well as the recipient of a certificate of merit. After a year of intense friendship with new and old friends, and despite all the rewards, Nino began to miss San Diego; he returned in 1950, renting a Bankers’ Hill apartment.

During the early 1950’s, he was asked by Dr. Leslie Hodge to guest conduct a concert by a short-lived winter orchestra of the time, the San Diego Philharmonic, of which Dr. Hodge was music director. The orchestra included musicians familiar to Marcelli. Before raising the baton to conduct the Philharmonic concert, he was presented with a Certificate of Merit by San Diego’s Local 325 of the American Federation of Musicians; the certificate recalled his “...nonpareil service to San Diego’s musical life during three decades...” **The Evening Tribune’s music critic, Bruno David Ussher, referred to him as “San Diego’s first musical citizen” in his review of that concert.** But Marcelli was never asked to conduct the San Diego Symphony again, although he continually received honors and awards from national music organizations for his past work.

Nino Marcelli passed away on August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1967, and was interred at Cypress View Mausoleum after Masonic services. His obituary in the *San Diego Union* recalled the San Diego Symphony’s first summer concert of that year, in July, during which Marcelli was honored for having re-founded the contemporary San Diego Symphony Orchestra; the article noted that Marcelli “...was probably the only man in the world to build a full-fledged symphony orchestra from a group of high school musicians...”

But, of course, they were *his* high school kids. ■

– Melvin G. Goldzband, MD, Archivist  
San Diego Symphony Orchestra