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 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 the recognition of what he did for this Orchestra now finally appears on the walls of the Jacobs Music Center.

Early Life

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, Ulderic, 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 was many of the Conservatory Professors who boost his career.

Ulderic 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 young age. After completing his Diploma in 1910, he played the viola and cello and in 1912, he was the principal violist of the Santiago Symphony Orchestra. In 1913, he became the principal cellist for the orchestra. He continued to study in Paris both during the summers and while he was teaching in Santiago, eventually earning his Doctor of Arts degree and becoming a tenured professor of cello at the Conservatoire National de Musique in Santiago.

Service

Following the outbreak of World War I, Marcelli was called to active duty for the Chilean 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 music he had heard in Paris, which had been outshone by the famous French Guilde 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 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, reunifying with his brother Ulderic, 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 had its own conservatory and museum, the Aztec Museum, and knew many people, and where his North American musical fame was avidly followed. His early leadership of the band he had in Paris which had been outshone by the famous French Guilde 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 Europe, including Germany and Austria, with his band, and then Marcelli came back to America.

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 echoy, 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 no longer compelled by the death 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 Civic Orchestra, and then the San Diego Civic Symphony when the City made a small contribution to it. He wanted to brand the group as the San Diego Civic Symphony, but that name was cemented in the organizing for the orchestra’s first year, dating back to 1920.

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 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, and Cincinnati orchestras who were not performing summer seasons. The band was not only a new beginning for Marcelli but also increasingly difficult but representative of repertoire a full-fledged symphony orchestra should play, according to Marcelli, including the classic compositions by Beethoven and Tchaikovsky. And play them they did!

In 1928, the San Diego Symphony opened its first season in Balboa Park’s Organ Pavilion or, after a few years, the Ford Bowl – the latter built for the 1935-36 California-Pacific Exposition in Balboa Park. The San Diego high school alums 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. A $35 per hour 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 and Marcelli supervised several concerts at the Hollywood Bowl with the San Diego orchestra.

Marcelli never lived the San Diego Symphony again, even after a resummed position after Marcelli’s death. But 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 and the Southwest Symphony 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 retirement, Marcelli finished composing a long-planned operaetta, Cornelia, which he conducted to great praise here and elsewhere.

Marcelli did not marry until 1927. Widowed and with two nearly-young 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.” (6) 1969. 4. Symphony’s first summer concert of that year, in July, featured a new work by a noted modern composer, and was a great triumph for the orchestra. When it resumed playing after the war. He continued to conduct the Philharmonic concert, he was presented with a Certificate of Merit by San Diego’s Local 325 of the Conservatory classes presented a celebration in his honor, and Nino was made an honorary member of the conservatory faculty. A number of his students continued to study music in San Diego. 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, he was presented with a Certificate of Merit by San Diego’s Local 325 of the American Federation of Musicians; the certificate recalled his 1937-38 concert series in which he conducted all nine Beethoven symphonies. The Los Angeles Times, the Evening Tribune’s “From the Front Line,” the Los Angeles Daily News, even popular fashions for the past. Nino Marcelli passed away on August 4th, 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 the season 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 such an orchestra from a group of high school musicians…”

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

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