



The Cleveland Orchestra Story: "Second to None"

By Donald Rosenberg

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"One of the very best books ever written about a symphony orchestra." — Tim Page, 1997 recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism for his writings on music for the Washington Post.

How did a late-blooming midwestern orchestra rise amid gritty Big Industry to become a titan in the world of Big Art? This groundbreaking book tells the complete story of the people and events that shaped the Cleveland Orchestra into a classical music legend.

It's a story of indomitable founders like iron-willed impresario Adella Prentiss Hughes (the first woman to manage a symphony orchestra) and shrewd, wealthy patrons like industrialist John L. Severance. Of dedicated musicians and driven conductors—like colorful Artur Rodzinski (who packed a loaded pistol during every performance) and authoritarian genius George Szell, who drilled into his orchestra the awesome precision for which it is still renowned (and who even told his players how to dress and the cleaning ladies at Severance Hall what brand of toilet paper to stock).

These musicians, maestros, managers, and patrons fought relentlessly to earn and maintain a reputation for near-perfect performance—in a true virtuoso performance.

Donald Rosenberg taps the most authoritative sources and tells a complex, sweeping success story in very human terms, with an eye for its telling details and a feel for its true drama. Told with plenty of anecdotes and intriguing behind-the-scenes details.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Among America's great symphonic institutions, the Cleveland Orchestra is not only one of the best, but one of the youngest. Founded by the formidable impresario Adella Prentiss Hughes in collaboration with the city's industrial and political leaders, it made its public debut in 1918. This book tells the story of the Cleveland's rise from modest beginnings to a position of undisputed preeminence among international orchestras.

Its first guide and mentor was the Russian-born violinist and conductor Nikolai Sokoloff. His contribution to its growth and expansion has been overshadowed by the great, often colorful maestros who succeeded him: Artur Rodzinsky, Erich Leinsdorf, Lorin Maazel, and, currently, Christoph von Dohnányi. However, it was the imposing, authoritarian George Szell who, in his 24-year tenure, left the strongest imprint on the orchestra, developing its matchless technical perfection, transparency, and balance, and forging it into "his instrument" as a world-class group.

Donald Rosenberg follows the orchestra's triumphs and tribulations--musical, personal, financial--in a rehearsal-by-rehearsal, concert-by-concert, recording-by-recording, dollar-by-dollar account, listing every program, every conductor, every soloist, in exhaustive, frequently exhausting detail. He describes the behind-the-scenes squabbles and intrigues; the conductors' strengths, weaknesses, and idiosyncrasies; the hiring and firing of players; the incessant labor conflicts between musicians and management, and, sadly, between musicians and their own union. Abundant quotes from both local and, later, worldwide newspaper reviews and commentaries reveal the extraordinary influence of the press on internal and public policy, which Rosenberg, himself the music critic of a Cleveland newspaper, casually takes for granted; his own opinions and preferences come through clearly, if obliquely. His writing is lively and informative, though it occasionally lapses into repetition and even contradiction.

The book includes copious notes, the orchestra's discography, the premieres it has performed, and--best of all--the names of its members through the years. So many of them have gone on to making successful careers as soloists, chamber musicians, orchestral leaders, and prestigious teachers that the list induces constant shocks of recognition: proof that the Cleveland Orchestra, though rooted in the seemingly inhospitable soil of a Midwestern industrial city, has always attracted and nurtured outstanding musical talent. --*Edith Eisler*

Review

Manages to be both crammed full of facts and a good, fast-paced read . . . it's about as comprehensive—and entertaining—a history of a great musical organization you're likely to encounter. (T.J Medrek *The Boston Herald* 2000-09-29)

A meticulously researched, in-depth, eloquently told account, and quite possibly the finest of its kind ever written, at least in English . . . A gripping story that the reader, once engaged, can put aside only with the greatest difficulty . . . Fascinating anecdotes, quips, stories, facts and events are found on nearly every page . . . Will fascinate not only Cleveland Orchestra fans but anyone interested in how a great orchestra is created and how it operates on a daily basis. (Robert Markow *Schwann Opus Magazine* 2001-06-01)

A fascinating history of the tangled but sometimes fruitful relationship between politics and the arts in

America—a story written with admiration, respect and affection, but also with a candor and detail . . . Highly detailed and informative, but written with ease and authority and dramatic immediacy . . . A frank, detailed account of how an important performing company operates in a large American city. (David critic *The Plain Dealer* 2000-10-08)

[A] fascinating and carefully researched history. (Richard Dyer *Boston Globe Online* (*boston.com*) 2000-10-01)

Absorbing. (Alex Ross *The New Yorker* 2000-10-09)

Much more than a history of one of the finest U.S. orchestras . . . Donald Rosenberg has written a fascinating account of music, musicians, politics, unbridled egos, and business that engages the reader like a good mystery novel . . . thoroughly researched, well documented, and very well written. (Timothy J. McGee *Library Journal* 2000-11-15)

It is ambitious, but Mr. Rosenberg, an engaging and often eloquent writer, succeeds in making this a human story. The result is a readable, colorful and fascinating chronicle that is an indispensable addition to any orchestra lover's library. (Janelle Gelfand *Cincinnati Enquirer* 2001-02-04)

Absorbing reading, not merely a reference piece. Nor is it a lazy view of the subject from the rear of the balcony . . . Irresistible, tremendously informative and a just plain good read. And yes, it should be in the library of every lover of symphonic music and certainly every collector of books on music. Period! (B.L.C *New Music Connoisseur* 2001-03-28)

A tour de force and will be the standard for many years. Rosenberg never loses sight of the human element in the orchestra's history . . . It is long, but it is a wonderful read. (Wil Hoffman *The Weekly Villager* 2001-03-23)

A gripping, complex, sweeping, highly recommended story of true drama and high achievement . . . "Must" reading for anyone who has admired this American music institution as well as the men and women who made it possible. (*Midwest Book Review* 2001-03-01)

Although [t]his history weighs in at an impressive 550 pages, it never seems overlong. This is mainly because of the many larger-than-life characters that crowd the pages, and the skillful way in which Rosenberg balances all the myriad factors that have determined the growth of one of America's finest orchestras . . . Rosenberg writes in an easy, readable style. It is the best kind of American critical writing: clear and to the point. His account is well structured and finely edited. (David Patmore *International Record Review* 2001-03-01)

It is a story well worth the telling and he tells it well . . . The story of what can happen to an orchestra when a community decides it wants a winner. (*The Toronto Star* 2001-03-03)

Portrays fascinating details in a balanced account . . . This book is a must for music lovers. Before reading this work, I never realized the struggles, frustrations, infighting and financial worries of the courageous men and women who made this orchestra happen and develop into what it is today. (Eva Richter *Music Clubs Magazine, National Federation of Music Clubs* 2001-04-01)

From the Inside Flap

The Cleveland Orchestra is one of the three greatest orchestras in the world—by the near-unanimous acclaim

of audiences, critics, and musicians around the globe. At that rare level, it's impossible to rank them further. It can simply be said: They are the best at what they do. What makes the Cleveland Orchestra's achievement even more remarkable is that this late-blooming ensemble (they were among the last major symphony orchestras formed in the U.S.) grew and thrived in a small-market, Midwestern city, far from the traditional cultural centers of Europe and this country's east and west coasts. Amid the gritty surroundings of Big Industry, the Cleveland Orchestra swiftly rose to become a titan in the world of Big Art. Few symphony orchestras have ever earned such a towering reputation. Fewer still have held on to it for so long. And none has defended it so relentlessly as the Cleveland Orchestra. In this book, the first on the Cleveland Orchestra in more than 30 years, music historian and critic Donald Rosenberg tells the whole story of the people and events that shaped this classical music legend. Formed through sheer force of will by impresario Adella Prentiss Hughes (the first woman to manage a symphony orchestra) and with the fostering wealth and guidance of such local industrialists as John L. Severance, the young Cleveland Orchestra promptly made clear that it intended to do big things. Under the batons of its first two conductors, the formidable Nikolai Sokoloff and the colorful Artur Rodzinski (who packed a loaded pistol during performances for good luck), Cleveland quickly built a roster of expert musicians and a reputation as one of the best orchestras in America. Then, genius arrived. Authoritarian George Szell—The Master Builder—forged the awesome precision for which Cleveland is still renowned. With Szell on the podium, his ensemble was considered peerless. (Off the podium Szell was no less imposing: he told his players how to dress and even dictated to the cleaning ladies at Severance Hall what brand of toilet paper to stock.) The instrument he honed razor sharp for 24 years outlived Szell, but the Szell legacy continues to nip at the heels of those who follow. Lorin Maazel, with no less of a musical mind but a much more flamboyant style, clashed with the orchestra's tradition (though he would also provide a valuable mellowing influence). Christoph von Dohnányi, smooth, patrician, driven, embraced that tradition and refined it, adding adventurous musical range. And, still, anyone who takes the helm of the Cleveland Orchestra—*even for one night*—is challenged to deliver on Szell's oft-quoted promise to keep the ensemble "Second to none." For its many successes the Cleveland Orchestra has fought on many fronts. It is, after all, an organization influenced by artists and accountants, politicians and pundits, ghosts and grace. And it is an institution obsessed with an impossibly lofty goal: perfection. In pursuit of the unattainable, they have faced the inevitable: frustration, dissension, human failings, extraordinary expense. Like any business, this orchestra has had its perpetual daily concerns, too—labor-union unrest and employee turnover, budget deficits, recessions, leadership miscues, logistical headaches, clashing egos . . . How the musicians, maestros, managers, and patrons have risen, repeatedly, to meet these challenges, and then continued to set a standard for excellence rarely matched by arts organizations of any kind—that is the story of a true virtuoso performance. Donald Rosenberg recounts this complex, sweeping success story in very human terms, with a feel for its true drama and an eye for telling detail.

Donald Rosenberg is the classical music critic for The Plain Dealer and vice president of the Music Critics Association of North America. He was formerly music and dance critic of the Akron Beacon Journal and The Pittsburgh Press. His writing has appeared in Symphony Magazine, Opera News, Opera (London), Musical America, and other publications. An accomplished French horn player, he has performed at the Aspen and Marlboro music festivals. He is a graduate of the Mannes College of Music (Bachelor of Music degree) and the Yale School of Music (Master of Music and Master of Musical Arts degrees). He was born in New York City and lives in Shaker Heights, Ohio.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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