

The Madison Symphony Orchestra: An Organizational Timeline

Prepared for the MSO Board by J. Michael Allsen, August 2022

- 1920-25 Madison Music Committee founded in 1920. In 1925, this group reincorporated as the Madison Civic Music Association (MCMA), with a mission that included founding an orchestra in Madison. MCMA and its board will remain the umbrella organization for the Orchestra, Chorus, and (starting in the 1960s) Opera until 1994.
- 1926 MCMA hired **Dr. Sigfrid Prager** as its first Music Director, and established the Madison Civic Symphony. The orchestra, an almost entirely amateur group, began rehearsals in the fall, and gave its first concert on December 14, 1926.
- 1927 Founding of the Madison Civic Chorus, which gave its first concert on February 23, 1928.
- 1928-29 MCMA's Civic Symphony and Chorus came under the auspices of the Madison Vocational School (later Madison Area Technical College), which hired Prager as its Music Supervisor, and paid the majority of his salary. This support will be invaluable over the next eight decades, providing administrative and financial support, as well as office, library, and rehearsal spaces. The connection between the Vocational School will remain in place until 2007.
- 1932-38 MCMA sponsored a series of successful staged opera productions.
- 1940 MCMA began offering all of its concerts free to the public.
- 1948 MCMA hired **Walter Heermann** as its second Music Director. Dramatic expansion in the size and responsibilities of the MCMA board. MCMA joined the American Symphony Orchestra League.
- 1949 Establishment of an annual youth concert as a regular part of the Madison Civic Symphony's programming. MCMA joined ASCAP.
- 1950s-1964 There was a long series of incremental steps towards professionalizing the orchestra; by the 1964-65 season, all orchestra players were paid. Pay and professional standards in the orchestra continue to rise over the next six decades.
- 1953 After 15 seasons of concerts at the Masonic Temple Auditorium, MCMA moved its programs to the Central High School Auditorium (later renovated as MATC Auditorium), which will remain the orchestra's primary performance venue until 1980.
- 1954-68 From the beginning through the early 1960s, most of the administrative work of MCMA was carried on by volunteers, but this period saw the gradual growth of a professional, if still part-time staff.
- 1956 The Women's Committee (later Madison Symphony Orchestra League) was founded as an auxiliary organization: fundraising, volunteering, organizing social events, and assisting in the orchestra's educational programs—roles the MSOL continues to serve today.
- 1960 The orchestra gave its first Pops concert on April 30, 1960.
- 1961 MCMA hired **Roland Johnson** as its third Music Director. Among the changes instituted during his tenure was an expansion of the season, which grew from four regular concerts to five in his first season. By the 1970s, this had expanded to seven, with double programs (Saturday and Sunday matinee) in the 1000-seat Central High School Auditorium. In the 1980s, this expanded to eight, with single programs in the 2200-seat Oscar Mayer Theatre.
- 1962 Johnson and his wife Arline founded the Madison Civic Opera Workshop (later Madison Opera). This will become a third organization under the umbrella of MCMA, though it maintained a large degree of autonomy, with its own board, budget, and fundraising.

- 1966 The Madison Civic Symphony was formally renamed the Madison Symphony Orchestra.
- 1967-68 Most MCMA programs had been free to the public since 1940, but after a few years of incrementally ticketing some of its programs, all of MCMA's regular subscription series, special and Pops concerts, and its opera productions were now ticketed in this season; only youth and neighborhood concerts remain free.
- 1968 MCMA hired its first full-time Business Manager (John R. Reel). The full-time administrative staff will expand to two in 1972 with a Secretary (Jean Feige). In 2022, the MSO has four full- or part-time artistic staff members, and thirteen full- or part-time administrative staff members.
- 1980 Opening of the Madison Civic Center. The former Capitol Theater (built in 1928) was renovated as the central performance venue, the Oscar Mayer Theatre, which will remain the MSO's primary venue until 2004.
- 1983 The Madison Civic Chorus was formally renamed the Madison Symphony Chorus.
- 1993 The Madison Opera successfully commissioned and premiered a new grand opera, Daron Hagen's *Shining Brow*, on the life of Frank Lloyd Wright.
- 1994 After an international search, MCMA hired **John DeMain** as its fourth Music Director. There was also a thorough reorganization: MCMA was formally dissolved, and replaced by two new entities. Madison Symphony Orchestra Inc. retained the Orchestra and Chorus, and Madison Opera Inc. became an independent entity. To date, however, Madison Opera shares its Music Director with the MSO and the MSO remains the exclusive orchestra for its productions.
- 1994-04 Continued expansion of the MSO's season. At the close of Johnson's tenure, the MSO's eight subscription concerts regularly sold most of the 2200 seats in the Oscar Mayer. DeMain announced an ambitious plan to expand to eight double concerts, with Saturday evening and Sunday matinee performances of each program. This was accomplished incrementally by the 1997-98 season. When the orchestra moved into 2255-seat Overture Hall in 2004-05, the season expanded even more dramatically: to nine triple programs, adding a Friday evening performance. Though the ninth program fell victim to the financial recession of 2008, the MSO has retained a season of eight triple subscription programs.
- 2002 MSO moved its offices from the MATC Downtown facility, where it had been housed since the late 1920s to offices on Odana Road. In 2005, the offices moved again to their present location at 222 West Washington Avenue.
- 2004 Opening of the Overture Center for the Arts. The MSO moves into Overture Hall, designed by Cesar Pelli: one of the finest orchestral venues in the country.
- 2005 MSO begins a three-year process of formally separating from MATC.
- 2009 In an NLRB-overseen vote, MSO players elect to formally associate with the American Federation of Musicians. The AFM thereafter represented the players in contract negotiations.
- 2020-21 MSO concerts are suspended due the COVID-19 pandemic, though through a combination of federal money and response from donors, the MSO is able to continue paying its regular musicians during the shutdown. Concerts resume, cautiously but successfully, in the 2021-22 season.

Want to know more? Go to www.allsenmusic.com and click the "Madison Symphony History" link. This includes a four-chapter history of the orchestra to 2001, and a list of performances to 2001, historical recordings, and other historical material.