



HISTORY OF THE HOUSTON SYMPHONY

Founded in 1913 by the guiding hand of Miss Ima Hogg, the Grammy Award-winning Houston Symphony has played a central role in Houston's cultural and civic life for more than 100 years. It is now one of America's oldest performing arts organizations with a distinguished musical history. The orchestra has grown and matured under the direction of leaders such as Ernst Hoffmann (1936–47), Efrem Kurtz (1948–54), Ferenc Fricsay (1954), Leopold Stokowski (1955–61), Sir John Barbirolli (1961–67), André Previn (1967–69), Lawrence Foster (1971–78), Sergiu Comissiona (1979–88), Christoph Eschenbach (1988–99), and Hans Graf (2001–13). Andrés Orozco-Estrada began his role as the 15th Music Director and holder of the *Roy and Lillie Cullen Chair* of the Houston Symphony in September 2014 and will conclude his tenure at the end of the 2021–22 Season. On July 14, 2021, the Symphony announced the appointment of Music Director Designate Juraj Valčuha, who begins his tenure as Music Director at the start of the 2022–23 Season. Steven Reineke serves as Principal POPS Conductor, Robert Franz is Associate Conductor, Yue Bao is *Ting Tsung and Wei Fong Chao Foundation* Conducting Fellow, and Dr. Betsy Cook Weber directs the Houston Symphony Chorus.

The orchestra's inaugural performance was held at The Majestic Theater in downtown Houston on June 21, 1913. Two decades later, the Palace Theatre served as the location for six concerts in 1931–32. City Auditorium and the Houston Music Hall showcased Symphony performances from the late 1930s through the early 1960s. The orchestra's current home, Jones Hall for the Performing Arts, was dedicated October 2, 1966, with a special performance by the Houston Symphony under the baton of Sir John Barbirolli. In October 2016, a concert featuring the Houston Symphony, esteemed violinist Itzhak Perlman, and Music Director Andrés Orozco-Estrada celebrated the 50th anniversary of Jones Hall.

In 1937, the Houston Symphony began a series of special student matinee concerts coordinated with Houston Independent School District. By 1956, there were six pairs of concerts with an average attendance of 3,000. Toward the end of the 20th century, the Symphony was an annual destination for HISD's fifth grade students. Today, two types of concerts make up The Robbins Foundation Student Concert Series, serving students in grades 4–8 with hourlong concerts during the school day. This includes concerts for Upper Elementary and Middle School students. Collectively, they serve more than 33,000 students from across Greater Houston, with the goal of inspiring students to begin or further their involvement in music.

The orchestra came of age in the 1940s when Maestros Hoffmann and Kurtz began hiring highly talented professional musicians, many of whom remained with the orchestra for more than 30 years. Leopold Stokowski brought international recognition by commissioning new works and making recordings; and, in Sir John Barbirolli's years, the Symphony flourished under the influence of his lush romantic style.

Regional tours were common for the Symphony in the 1940s, especially wartime visits to military bases in Texas and Louisiana. In 1950, the orchestra embarked on its first national tour to 17 cities as far north as Chicago. Its Carnegie Hall debut occurred March 11, 1965, as part of the International Festival of Visiting Orchestras. To date, the Symphony has performed 16 times at the world-famous venue; the most recent performance was in May 2012 when the Houston Symphony kicked off the second annual Spring for Music Festival. The orchestra's first overseas trip occurred in June 1990 with an appearance in Japan at the Singapore Festival of Arts. Throughout the 1990s, the Houston Symphony toured Europe several times and returned to Japan. In October 2010, the orchestra

journeyed to the United Kingdom to perform *The Planets—An HD Odyssey* to sold-out crowds in a seven-city tour. In June 2012, the Houston Symphony became the first-ever American orchestra to perform at the Annual Festival of the World's Symphony Orchestras in Moscow, Russia, known as the highlight of the Moscow musical season.

In March 2018, Music Director Andrés Orozco-Estrada led the Houston Symphony on a four-country, eight-city tour through some of Europe's most prestigious concert halls and festivals. World-renowned violinist and three-time Grammy Award-winner Hilary Hahn joined the Houston Symphony for all performances. The high-profile tour, which featured concerts in Vienna, Brussels, Warsaw, Berlin, Hamburg, and Munich, was Orozco-Estrada's first international tour with the orchestra and the Houston Symphony's first major European tour in more than 20 years. This great achievement was made possible by more than 70 donors who contributed more than \$1.76 million for the tour, including 12 who traveled to Europe to support and celebrate the Symphony during the tour.

In 1986, the Symphony commissioned more than 20 fanfares from American composers to commemorate Texas' sesquicentennial. Unfortunately, in 2001, the fanfare scores—along with the majority of the contents in the Symphony's music library—were destroyed in devastating floods caused by Tropical Storm Allison. Since 2001, the library's holdings have returned to more than 2,300 catalogued items, including scores, sheet music, and reference materials. In August 2018, Hurricane Harvey forced the cancellation of 18 concerts, including Opening Night, cutting significantly into both ticket sales and donations. Over the course of the 2017-18 season, Houston Symphony donors generously contributed \$3.6 million to Harvey Recovery, ensuring the organization could continue providing outstanding music as well as education and community programs.

After suspending concert activities in March 2020 and cancelling the remainder of 2019-20 events due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Symphony resumed activities in May 2020, opening the 2020-21 Season on schedule in September 2020 with small audiences of 150, which the Symphony gradually increased to 450 audience members per performance. Due to the financial impact of the canceled 2019-20 Season events, plus the reduction of sales capacity due to audience social distancing in 2020-21, the Symphony cut expenses, reducing planned spending from \$36.2 million in 2019-20 to \$22.7 million in 2020-21. The Education and Community Engagement team continued to fulfill its mission through creative and virtual means throughout this period. The Symphony successfully completed a full season with in-person audiences and weekly livestreams of each performance making it one of the only orchestras in the world to attain this achievement during the pandemic.

The Houston Symphony has recorded under various prestigious labels, including Naxos, Koch International Classics, Telarc, RCA Red Seal, and Virgin Classics. Most recently, the Houston Symphony and Andrés recorded the last four symphonies of Dvořák on the Dutch recording label Pentatone. Additional recordings under the Dutch label include a Music of the Americas disc (featuring Gershwin's *An American in Paris*, Revueltas' *Sensemaya*, Piazzolla's *Tangazo*, and Bernstein's Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*) and *Haydn—The Creation*. The *Music of the Americas* and *Haydn—The Creation* recordings were released February 2018 and April 2018 respectively. In 2017, the Houston Symphony was awarded an ECHO Klassik award for the live recording of Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* under the direction of former Music Director Hans Graf. The orchestra earned its first Grammy nomination and Grammy Award at the 60th annual ceremony for the same recording in the Best Opera Recording category in 2018. The Symphony's commitment to new music and continually expanding the symphonic repertoire saw the world premiere in 2019-2020 of a Houston Symphony commission from former Composer-in-Residence Jimmy López Bellido, in the third and final year of his residency. López's Symphony No. 2, *Ad Astra* (December 2019), took its inspiration from a subject near and dear to Houston's heart: the space program and humankind's exploration of the stars, and the PENTATONE recording of *Ad Astra* and López Bellido's *Aurora* (also premiered by the Houston Symphony) is scheduled for an early 2022 release.

In the 2015–16 season, the orchestra launched its Community-Embedded Musician initiative, hiring musicians who are integrated in Houston schools, neighborhoods, and healthcare settings as teaching artists and performers, while also performing with the orchestra. Enhancing the impact of the orchestra's growing education and community engagement activities, the Community-Embedded Musicians offer nearly 400 community-based interactions each year, both individually and through small ensembles.

Through its signature Music & Wellness initiative, the Symphony partners with Houston Methodist, Periwinkle Arts in Medicine Program at Texas Children's Cancer and Hematology Centers, Purple Songs Can Fly, and The University of Texas MD Anderson Children's Cancer Center to provide musician interactions with over 500 patients and caregivers, including bedside visits, group performances and opportunities to write and record their own songs.

The Houston Symphony offers many free concerts each summer, including several Neighborhood Concerts throughout the Houston area each June, reaching thousands of Houstonians. The orchestra can be heard on select June weekends during the Summer Symphony Nights at Miller Outdoor Theatre, in addition to the annual July 4 "Star-Spangled Salute" celebration. Another free performance is Fiesta Sinfónica at Jones Hall, an annual concert celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month. Additionally, the ENGINE Community Connections program broadens musical contact with Houston's diverse population by providing nearly 200 opportunities for members of the orchestra to perform or provide instructional coaching in close, personal settings.

Today, the Houston Symphony's musicians perform approximately 170 concerts annually, making it the most active performing arts organization in Houston. The season, which starts in September and runs through May, includes 18 weeks of classical concerts, nine weeks of POPS concerts, three weekends of family programs, a number of special performances including holiday concerts each December, School Concerts, and free summer performances at Miller Outdoor Theatre and The Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion in The Woodlands.