

Recorded Thoughts on the Portland Youth Philharmonic

Known as the Portland Junior Symphony until 1978
Drawn from *Music is Where You Make It / II* (1979), Jacob Avshalomov



Aaron Copland, after conducting the 40th Anniversary Concert, February 1964 (picture left):
“What an orchestra!”
“What an organization!”
“What a lesson for us all!” (pg 2)



Logo by Doug Lynch

Jacques Barzun commented in a letter on the group’s 35th anniversary, “...the Portland Junior Symphony commands our respect: it requires discipline and has imparted it to thousands of talented youths; it produces contemporary works and does not baby its audience; and in the person of its conductor, the composer Jacob Avshalomov, it has shown that out of a small army of disciplined amateurs comes the creative mind.” (pg 15)

As long-time friends of the Orchestra know, its pre-history began in Burns Oregon in 1912 where Mary V. Dodge, a Boston-trained violinist, formed a group of children that came to be known as the Sagebrush Symphony (picture right). As early as 1915 it had toured Eastern Oregon and a year later played at the State Fair in Salem. When Mrs. Dodge and her husband moved to Portland she continued her devoted work with a new group that gathered around her own pupils. They rehearsed in the old Irvington School, and just about the time the ensemble had grown to the point where a real conductor



was needed, Jacques Gershkovitch and his wife arrived in the city. A graduate of the St. Petersburg Imperial Conservatory; he had been conducting in Tokyo when the earthquake caused them to leave Japan, in the hopes of finding a post with some professional orchestra in America.



When Gershkovitch (picture left) was asked in 1924 to take over Mrs. Dodge’s group, even though he considered it an interim assignment, he promptly set the tone of serious work and authentic repertoire; almost without knowing it, he established a tradition. With his first concert in February 1925, the Portland Junior Symphony’s history truly began.

The civic-minded citizens who gathered round to support that activity stated their purposes early and clearly:

“to encourage appreciation and performance of great orchestral music; present public concerts in yearly series; discover and develop talent in children; stress values in good character, and endeavor to create a cultural and educational asset to the community through greater love of music.” (pg 16)

Conductor Jacob Avshalomov comments, “I have always felt there to be a relationship between the success of the Orchestra and the size of the city. It is large enough to have a good pool of talent, but not so large that it has many civic centers. Here artistic endeavors all focus on one main center, so there is a healthy concentration of energy and patronage on the primary organizations.

“The 220 players in our two orchestras come from over ninety different schools and colleges. About twenty percent of the young musicians are in grade school, sixty-five percent are in high school and thirteen percent are in college.” (pg 21)



Conductor Avshalomov rehearsing the Portland Junior Symphony at the Theater Royal in Parma on 1970 tour



“The Thursday and Saturday rehearsals are the heart of the Orchestra’s work. It is here that matters of style and interpretation are studied, and the players’ attention is focused on every detail—of articulation, accent and other punctuation. They are taught to probe each phrase for its meaning, and are guided toward its proper expression on their instrument. The Conductor’s function at these rehearsals is primarily that of teacher; and the lessons learned have a continuing application far beyond the music at hand.” (pg 35) **Photo left – Orchestra in 1928**

“Expressions of three faiths were presented at a concert in 1963—Bach’s cantata *Christ Lag in Todesbanden*, Bruckner’s *Te Deum* and Bernstein’s *Jeremiah* symphony. At the dress rehearsal a Protestant minister, a Catholic priest and a Rabbi spoke to the chorus and Orchestra on the meaning of the text of those works within their respective liturgies. In a professional situation time can seldom be taken to make such a presentation, but where students are involved it can be fitted in, and provides a wonderful heightening of the experience.” (pg 59)

From a review March 24, 1970 in *La Nazione* Florence titled *Un commovente esempio dai giovani di Portland—A moving example given by the young players of Portland*: “An orchestra composed of boys and girls between 12 and 22 years of age (but the average is 15 to 16) is already an exceptional achievement. The fact that in this country of ours – a country of musicians, saints, navigators, poets, etc. etc. – a great symphonic ensemble made up of non-professionals can give full-fledged concerts, is something that fills one, first with amazement and then with unconditional admiration and wonder... Most of them will not make music their profession, and yet they will be able to play an instrument well no matter what their future profession will be, whether a milkman, engineer or a physics professor.



Recording session at BBC Studio A, London – 1970 tour

“The guidance of Jacob Avshalomov has above all the merit of having made the huge ensemble compact and flexible at the same time. He conducted with extreme clarity.” (pg 87)

“In 1954 [Ernest] Bloch and I both received the New York Music Critics Award – he for his *Concerto Grosso No. 2*, and I for *Tom o’ Bedlam*... When we moved to Portland in summer 1954, my family and I were driving along the coast, and on impulse decided to stop at Agate Beach to see if I could have a word with the Master. We found him in the garden at his house, and as he approached the gate to let us in he peered at me and said, ‘Ah, did we not please the critics together this spring?’... He predicted that I would have success in working with the Portland Junior Symphony; he had known and admired Jacques Gershkovitch, my predecessor. As we left he gave me a piece of advice: don’t compose while driving, it’s distracting and dangerous.” (pg 99)

“Jacques Gershkovitch, and surely Mary V. Dodge, hoped that the junior symphony idea would spread, and it has. There are now over three hundred such groups in the country.” (pg 133)

“At this juncture the Portland Junior Symphony Association has bestowed a new name on its esteemed Orchestra – the Portland Youth Philharmonic. This more befits the age group of its players (twelve to twenty-two), its repertoire and performance standards – in short its stature... In this period when the arts are so readily available and so often leveled for mass consumption, we must keep sanctuaries where our youth can learn to address themselves to the highest manifestations of the human spirit. This is demanding exercise; and to fully experience the rewarding exaltation requires seriousness, devotion and a good working method.” (page 135)



**A program in the *Discovering Oregon Originals* series, February 2004
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