

Program Summary (20 February 2014)

At 8:20 pm, President Byrnes introduced George Barnstone, who organized the introduction of guests. Our speaker, Carl Cunningham, was introduced by Dr. Don Looser. (Dr. Looser is vice-president emeritus of Houston Baptist University, and author of *An Act of Providence*, which is a history of HBU's first 50 years.)

Carl Cunningham is the retired fine arts critic for the *Houston Post*, a position he held for 30 years until the Post folded in 1995. Carl arrived in Houston when Jones Hall opened in 1966. Carl was affiliated with the University of St. Thomas for nearly 20 years. Carl's degree was from Notre Dame. Carl is co-author of two books on the Houston Symphony. The title of this evening's talk was **The Houston Symphony: Celebrating a Century**. The membership warmly welcomed the speaker. This is the 663rd meeting of the Houston Philosophical Society.

Carl began by explaining that he wrote about half of the book, together with colleagues Terry Brown and Ginny Garrett. Terry and Ginny assembled an impressive collection of stories and pictures as part of the Symphony's history.

The first symphony director was Julien Blitz from 1913-1916. Julien had moved to the warm climate of Houston several years earlier. The symphony resulted from a friendship of Blitz and Ima Hogg. The venue was the Majestic Theater, which is now part of the Houston Chronicle building downtown. Blitz resigned when the orchestra was not able to expand beyond the 34 members. The orchestra disbanded at the end of WWI, and only started up again in 1931.

The first distinguished conductor was Ernst Hoffmann, who came to Houston from Boston in 1936 and stayed in the position for a dozen years. He built up the orchestra, adding pops and youth programs. He brought the symphony to the radio, and toured Texas and Louisiana locations. Hugh Cullen was the source of funds during the decade. Two decades later, Gus Wortham took up this role.

Sir John Barbirolli and Christoph Eschenbach were probably the most beloved conductors of the symphony during the 1960's and 1990's. Andre Previn was hired in the model of Leonard Bernstein. But he was a young man in a hurry, and only lasted three seasons, as his schedule conflicted with his new affiliation with the London Symphony. Previn returned to Houston only twice, including a performance in 2009 of his opera at Wortham Hall.

The symphony has had its ups and downs, including a 4.5 month work stoppage in 1976. In 2014, the symphony welcomed its fifteenth conductor, Andrés Orozco-Estrada. Carl is quite optimistic that this new chapter will be a great success.

Carl wrapped up his remarks at 9:40 with an invitation to ask questions. The audience warmly thanked the speaker.

After another round of applause, and the meeting adjourned at 9:40 p.m.

David W. Scott



Recording Secretary