The North Carolina Symphony

Another Fifty Years?

by Bruce Siceloff

On Thursday, October 21, 1982, a few hours after they had stepped off their buses in Asheville, the 65 members of the North Carolina Symphony assembled for a rehearsal in Thomas Wolfe Auditorium. On the preceding two nights, they had performed Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in Durham and Chapel Hill. They were scheduled to drive on Friday morning to the Madison County town of Marshall to give an admission-free concert for schoolchildren, then back to Asheville that night for a third performance of Beethoven's Ninth.

The Symphony's brisk schedule allowed time for only one rehearsal Thursday night with the two choirs that were to sing Schiller's *Ode to Joy* in the final movement of Beethoven's choral symphony on Friday. The 100 members of the Asheville Choral Society and the Mars Hill College Oratorio Singers had spent weeks rehearsing separately, with their individual directors and piano accompaniment, a work written for 250 to 300 voices competing with the full-gale force of a symphony orchestra. Together they were fewer, younger, and less experienced than the Durham and Chapel Hill choirs with which the orchestra had performed earlier that week.

After the orchestra and combined chorus went through the work the first time, the doubts of musicians and singers on the stage were mirrored in the eyes of the Symphony's new conductor and artistic director, Gerhardt Zimmermann. The chorus—particularly its soprano section—was too weak to be heard above the orchestra. The final movement of Beethoven's Ninth, with the extreme ranges in its vocal passages, could not be rehearsed over and over without exhausting the singers. Zimmermann quickly had to get the most out of these 100 men and women he had just met. He launched an impromptu speech about Beethoven's message of joy and brotherhood struggling to assert itself over the tumult of the orchestra.

Bruce Siceloff is a reporter for The News and Observer *of Raleigh. All photos courtesy N.C. Symphony.*

"If you're obsessed with something and you keep saying it but nobody wants to listen to you, you do one of two things." Zimmermann began quietly, crisply, like the opening measures of *Ode to Joy*. "Either you stop saying it, or you keep saying it over and over and louder and louder. And you can get to be insane." Zimmermann paused, and then said his message over again. "Anyway, to be a musician you have to be a little crazy." Then, with a little smile, he added, "I am."

The maestro allowed a few seconds of appreciative giggles before raising his hand for silence and beginning another rehearsal. This time he got what he wanted from the chorus. "We sounded really dead the first time we went through it," recalls Cathy Kobel, a schoolteacher who sings in the Asheville Choral Society. "After he gave his piece, I was ready to go. You could tell he was all the way in it, and he expected you to be in it."

The following night, the rehearsal—and the Beethoven "insanity" speech—made the difference. Zimmermann's directing the orchestra to play down in a few spots to avoid overpowering the sopranos also helped. "I've worked with the North Carolina Symphony for about 12 years—of course this was the first time with Zimmermann—and it really was one of the more inspiring performances I have been a part of," says Dr. William D. Thomas, director of the Mars Hill College Oratorio Singers.

Gerhardt Zimmermann

Zimmermann's debut in Asheville was warmly received, as has been the rest of his first season with the Symphony. In the two years since it last had a permanent conductor, the Symphony had suffered a musicians' strike, an artistic and managerial quandary during which musicians and trustees could not agree on the hiring of a new conductor, and a financial crisis that forced the reduction of the 1980-81 season from 40 to 36 weeks and of the full-time orchestra from 73 in (1980-81) to its current 65 musicians.

In the spring of 1982, approaching its 50th anniversary, the Symphony was limping badly. Six months later, it had a renewed vigor, thanks as much to improved fiscal management—the first surplus in eight years and the start of a program to rebuild an endowment bled dry to pay for expansions during the 1970s—as to Zimmermann's unifying personal and artistic force. With its immediate financial and artistic future secure, the North Carolina Symphony can consider some of the questions whose answers will help determine how, or whether, it will pass another half century.

Can the North Carolina Symphony go on living as it has for 50 years, with its different missions and ambitions seemingly at cross purposes? While playing for North Carolina schoolchildren from Cherokee to Ocracoke and performing Beethoven's Ninth with local choirs rehearsed the night before the concert, can or should the Symphony also reach for artistic triumphs like its performances at Carnegie Hall in 1977, Kennedy Center in 1978, and Chicago's Orchestra Hall in 1978?

Can the Symphony continue to lean heavily on state funds in a time when government and corporate arts funding are waning across the nation? One of only four state symphonies in the nation, the N.C. Symphony relies on the state for 60 percent of its budget while paying only 22 percent of its bills with ticket sales and contract performances. No other regional or state symphony in the country receives more than 10 percent of its budget from state funds, and none has a smaller "earned-revenue" percentage than does the N.C. Symphony (see sidebar on page 64). The questions above cannot be answered in an article or even in a year's worth of study committees, but they should be considered as one looks at the current structure of the Symphony.

Who Runs the Symphony—And How?

From its inception in 1932, to its first state funding in 1943, to its growth in the 1960s and 1970s, the North Carolina Symphony has evolved into a unique institution. Below is a summary of its structure, finances, educational program, relationship to other North Carolina

orchestras, and marketing efforts.

Structure. The North Carolina Symphony Society, Inc., a private nonprofit organization established in 1932, governs the Symphony. Run by a 42-member Board of Trustees, 4 of whom are appointed by the governor, the Society hires and pays the conductor and musicians with private and public funds. The Symphony has received state funding since 1943, primarily for its admission-free performances for schoolchildren. Today, five administrative staff are on the state payroll, technically part of the N.C. Department of Cultural Resources. This department requests the Symphony funds from the legislature and then monitors the spending of these funds. Despite having many characteristics of a state agency—60 percent of its budget from state funds, administrative staff paid out of the Department of Cultural Resources base budget, a legislative mandate to operate in a certain fashion (the educational concerts)—both Symphony and Cultural Resources officials say the Symphony is not a state agency.

"I don't think a bureaucrat in state government ought to be making the decisions about what the orchestra plays. I think that should be determined by the artistic director of the orchestra," Sara Hodgkins, secretary of Cultural Resources, said in an interview. "I am glad that their [Symphony Society] board runs the Symphony instead of the Department of Cultural Resources."

The backbone of the Symphony for years has been its network of 34 local chapters whose volunteer members "present" local Symphony concerts—selling tickets and seeking local underwriting for individual concerts. The chapters also have conducted general fundraising, but that responsibility was transferred last year to a new statewide group, the Friends of the N.C. Symphony. The fundraising "friends" are to be located across the state, even where there are no Symphony chapters.

Finances. For the North Carolina Symphony, as for cultural institutions across the nation, the big grants, big spending, and big deficits of the 1970s have given way to recession, retrenchment, and reappraised ambitions. In

How the North Carolina Symphony Ranks Nationally

The American Symphony Orchestra League, a national membership association, ranks North Carolina the 32nd largest symphony in the country and places it far above any other symphony in the country by percent of its budget from state funds. In 1980-81, 60 percent of the North Carolina Symphony's revenues came from state funds. "No other major or regional symphony in the country received more than 25 percent of its budget from state funds in 1980-81," says Robert Olmsted, director of research for the American Symphony Orchestra League.

While the association will not release the exact percentage of each symphony's budget coming from state funds, Olmsted did explain that "of the major and regional symphonies in the South, the percentage of state funds ranges from less than 1 percent to about 10 percent." Of the three other symphonies in the country designated as "state" symphonies—Alabama, New Jersey, and Utah—none receives more than 10 percent of its budget from state funds.

The orchestra league classifies a symphony *according to its annual income* over two consecutive seasons. The classifications, with income ranges for 1980-81 in parentheses, are: major (over $2.5 million), regional ($750,000 to $2.5 million), metropolitan ($200,000 to $750,000), urban ($75,000 to $200,000), and community (below $75,000). The listing below contains all symphonies in the South in the major and regional categories and all symphonies in North Carolina in the metropolitan and urban categories, according to orchestra incomes in the 1980-81 season. The American Symphony Orchestra League (633 E. St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20004) provided this information. Miller Sigmon, music and dance coordinator for the N.C. Arts Council (Raleigh, N.C. 27611) confirmed the budget figures for the symphonies in the state.

Major Symphonies (Over $2.5 million)

Thirty-one symphonies in the country ranked as major. The Boston Symphony Orchestra was the largest; the San Antonio Symphony Orchestra was the smallest. Three symphonies in the South ranked as major: the Dallas, Houston, and Atlanta symphonies. (In 1979-80, revenues to North Carolina Symphony did exceed $2.5 million, but the revenues dropped below that cutoff in 1980-81).

Regional Symphonies ($750,000-$2.5 million)

The North Carolina Symphony was the largest of this group, which totaled 32 in 1980-81. The Charlotte Symphony also ranked as regional. Nine other southern symphonies fell in this category: the Alabama, Florida, Florida Gulf Coast, Fort Worth, Louisville, Jacksonville, Memphis, Nashville, and Richmond symphonies.

Other North Carolina Symphonies

Three North Carolina symphonies fell into the metropolitan category ($200,000 to $750,000) in 1980-81: the Greensboro Symphony, the Winston-Salem Symphony, and the Eastern Philharmonic Orchestra (affiliated with the Eastern Music Festival in Greensboro). Three also ranked as urban ($75,000 to $200,000): the Asheville Symphony, the Piedmont Chamber Orchestra (affiliated with the N.C. School of the Arts in Winston-Salem), and the Western Piedmont Symphony in Hickory. Thirteen other symphonies in the state were considered community, says Sigmon, including the Charlotte Summer Pops, Fayetteville, Hendersonville, Salisbury, and UNC-Wilmington/Community orchestras.

1974 the Symphony had 67 full-time musicians, a 31-week season, an annual budget of $900,000, and an operating surplus—its last until 1982—of $85,000. By 1978 it had grown to 73 players, stretched to a 40-week season, and more than doubled its budget to $2.1 million. Through the 1970s, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) increased its support steadily, its annual grant swelling to over $84,000 in 1979 and supplemented by a challenge grant of $300,000 in 1980. Meanwhile funding from the legislature increased nearly tenfold, from $152,000 in 1970 to $1,236,000 in 1980. In 1980, when the Symphony budget peaked at $2.62 million, tickets and other earned revenue covered only 13 percent of expenses, compared to 26 percent in 1974. And the "unearned" revenues—NEA grants, state funds, private donations, and corporate gifts—were not covering the difference. Deficits ran high, nearly half a million dollars in 1979 ($486,000).

In 1966, the Symphony had established an endowment, using a $1 million grant from the Ford Foundation, matched with $750,000 raised elsewhere. By 1981, just 15 years later, the Symphony trustees had spent the entire *endowment principal* to pay the bills. With a $209,000 deficit in 1981—and the endowment gone—they cut the office staff, reduced the orchestra from 73 to its present 65 musicians, and shortened the season from 40 to its present 36 weeks.

The General Assembly came to the rescue as well, raising its appropriation to $1.33 million in 1981-82. For 1982-83, the legislature kept the base budget appropriation at $1.33 million and added a "challenge-grant" appropriation of $570,000, to be distributed only if the Symphony raises $1.7 million (three times the $570,000) in private funds. If the Symphony raises the full $1.7 million (which may apply to operating expenses or endowment), state funds for 1982-83 will total almost $1.9 million ($1.33 million base plus $570,000 challenge). This was the first time the legislature had ever included the "matching-grant condition" on any portion of its appropriation. Most of the state money pays for the Symphony's extensive educational program, which grew during the 1970s even more rapidly than the Symphony's adult concert calendar.

The Symphony's 1982-83 budget of $2.37 million depends upon increased ticket sales and other earned income to pay for 22 percent of expenses. Private and corporate contributions are budgeted to cover another 20 percent. State and federal money accounts for the remaining 58 percent. Dr. Thomas H. McGuire, Symphony executive director since 1981, attributes the low rate of earned income to its admission-free educational programs funded by state grants.

Excluding these programs, he estimates the Symphony raises about 40 percent of its budget through ticket sales, contract concert fees, and other earned income. The Symphony has set a goal of 35 percent earned income by 1985. McGuire says it will schedule more performances in college towns, where ticket sales are usually strong, and will ask more corporations to underwrite contract performances in order to meet that goal.

In January of 1983, Zimmermann told the Symphony Society Board of Trustees, "We need more bodies—in both the orchestra and the audience." Zimmermann says the Symphony needs to add about 10 musicians to achieve the size orchestra necessary, especially in the string section, for a full repertoire. The Symphony appears to be moving slowly to expand, though, despite the surplus funds.

"The fact that we were not operating with a balanced budget indicates we may have been too large," says McGuire. With its new bottom-line consciousness, the Symphony is trying not only for balanced budgets but for surpluses that will provide cushions for bad years, he says.

Reaching for long-term security, the Symphony has begun a drive to establish a new endowment—one where its principal would be legally protected against cash raids like the one that depleted the last endowment. Symphony officials had said they would set a goal of $5 million to $7 million and kick off the endowment drive in late 1982, but McGuire says this was being delayed possibly until spring 1983 until after contributions have been elicited from all the Symphony's 42 trustees. "We have a really healthy start," McGuire says, refusing, however, to add how much has been raised.

Education. During the 1982-83 season, the full North Carolina Symphony and various combinations of its musicians will give about 230 admission-free performances for children, according to Jackson Parkhurst, education director and assistant conductor: 40 by the full

65-person Symphony, 40 by its 40-piece chamber orchestra, and 150 by string trios and woodwind and brass quintets.

"On a given day we can do 16 different performances, and sometimes we do. I'm on the national education committee of the American Symphony Orchestra League, and to my knowledge we are the only symphony that has small ensembles that go out into the hinterlands to play to kids," Parkhurst says. "This season we've already sent our string trio to Knotts Island. We've gone to Ocracoke, and we'll go back. Other orchestras I talk to are amazed we can do this, but we have a lot of very enthusiastic musicians."

The children get a potpourri of catchy classics (Bizet's *Carmen*, for example), pop and patriotic music assembled with humor, information, and group participation. Students and teachers are prepped for the performances with books prepared by the Symphony and circulated in advance. The programs reach about 150,000 children a year, says Parkhurst. The full symphony plays to full auditoriums of students in grades four through six, and the ensembles play for up to 250 students, kindergarten to grade six. Programs may reach older students in the future, says Parkhurst.

"I would say over 50 percent of the citizens of North Carolina have gone to see the North Carolina Symphony. I wish they would all come back to see us when they've grown up. I despair on dark, rainy nights that we haven't been successful at making music lovers out of all of them. There's a magic formula there somewhere, and I hope before I die I can discover it," Parkhurst says.

Relationship to other Symphonies. In addition to the North Carolina Symphony, seven other orchestras in the state have budgets over $75,000, and thus rank as regional, metropolitan, or urban, according to the classifications of the American Symphony Orchestra League (see sidebar). These orchestras are large enough to feel competitive with the North Carolina Symphony—especially those in

Charlotte, Greensboro, and Winston-Salem—and in some cases to keep it from playing in their cities.

"The reason they don't play Winston-Salem and they don't play Charlotte is because the strong local symphonies don't want them to come in. And this isn't really right," says Miller Sigmon, music and dance coordinator for the N.C. Arts Council.

This year the Symphony has no concerts scheduled in Charlotte, one in Winston-Salem (a joint performance with the Winston-Salem Symphony), and none in Hickory. In 1982, McKinney Silver and Rockett, a Raleigh-based advertising agency, undertook a major marketing analysis for the Symphony and found these three communities to have good potential audiences. Their residents pay taxes to support the Symphony, but they all have community symphonies.

"They've played Charlotte several times, but they've never been particularly successful. And the largest city in the state should be a good market for the North Carolina Symphony," Sigmon says. The Symphony does poorly in cities like Charlotte where it has no local chapter unless it gets someone else, such as a local college, to sponsor its performance.

"I think the people of Winston-Salem should be able to hear the North Carolina Symphony here if they want to," says Alan W. Cooper, manager of the Winston-Salem Symphony. "But I would object to the North Carolina Symphony establishing a chapter here, which would take volunteers away from us. I don't think the city of Winston-Salem could support two series of symphonic music."

Cooper and other community symphony officials have complained that state funding for symphonies is inequitable. The N.C. Arts Council has taken a step toward correcting that, by distributing funds to the community symphonies—$40,000 to each in 1982-83. Miller and Cooper say McGuire has done more than his Symphony predecessors to improve relations with community orchestras.

Marketing. While the Symphony does not perform in Charlotte and some other communities where it could expect to draw strong audiences, its statewide mission sends it into many towns where it cannot expect to generate great ticket sales. The 1982-83 schedule includes performances in such small communities as Enfield, Fort Caswell, Jefferson, Lincolnton, Oxford, and Raeford. The Symphony does not try to program a concert to suit the anticipated tastes of a community, McGuire says, but it does solicit feedback from its chapters regarding works and composers that may or may not be popular locally.

Reaching for broader and broader public tastes, the Symphony is making pop concerts an increasingly important part of its repertoire. Raleigh audiences this year have seen the Symphony with both jazz clarinetist Benny Goodman and the country-rock Super Grit Cowboy Band. "We want to make the North Carolina Symphony available to everyone, not just the Beethoven-lovers," Zimmermann explains. By relying on its chapter network and programming with a broad-based appeal, McGuire hopes the percent of the Symphony's budget from ticket sales can increase.

The Baton on the Upbeat

Disaffected by the free-spending policies of the 1970s, a prominent North Carolina Symphony trustee dropped off the board for several years. But her fiscally conservative point of view has since come to the fore at the Symphony, along with the woman herself. Since Nancy Bryan Faircloth returned to the board and took over as chairman in 1981, she has steered the Symphony through retrenchment and fiscal rebuilding. "You've just got to run it like a business," Faircloth says. "It may be inartistic to say that, but if you don't, you're going to get in trouble at some point."

Having weathered its recent financial crises, the Symphony is looking up again. "The only thing we would say 'no' to is doing anything we can't afford," explains Faircloth. "We've pulled back to what we feel we can sustain.... We still need about half a million dollars in contributions a year, in addition to the endowment. We're trying to evaluate how much we can expect in annual contributions," Faircloth says.

The financial stability seems to be in tune with the artistic upbeat as well. "We're at a point where we're just about to begin another of those quantum leaps artistically. The individual orchestra members," says Faircloth, "have a tremendous sense of excitement. Mr. Zimmermann is not only a very exciting conductor on the podium, but he's a great teacher and a great inspirer of individual musicians to reach inside themselves for the best they're capable of."

Orchestra members, for their part, seem optimistic, giving much of the credit for the new plateau to Faircloth. "The board understands now what an endowment is for, and that's Nancy Faircloth's doing," says violinist Pat Banko, chairman of the orchestra committee. "She's been integrally involved in running the Symphony for the past year, and she understands they need a good working staff down there."

Zimmermann's charisma and artistic leadership have also been critical factors in turning the orchestra around. "Artistically, musically, things have never been this good," says violinist Jan Gayer Hall, a 10-year veteran at the Symphony. "I've never felt as good about playing in the orchestra as I do now. I have to give the credit to Gerhardt Zimmermann. He manages to conduct everybody in the orchestra all the time. If I have a question about how to play something and I look up, he's telling me. In one concert recently I remember looking up during one of the lush, slow passages, and the way he was conducting, you couldn't help but do what he wanted."

If the North Carolina Symphony is to last another 50 years, it has to combine sound fiscal and artistic leadership with dedicated and talented musicians. That magical combination seems as difficult to sustain as do the high "A's" the sopranos must hold in the final, thundering movement of Beethoven's Ninth. And when the sopranos come down from "on high," they have to catch their breath and go back up again. Similarly, the Symphony has had to regroup after the stunning performances at Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

"Things were getting real bad a few years ago, when we started looking for a successor to John Gosling [the conductor who resigned in 1980]," says Banko. "The musicians' strike was bad. Then we settled the strike. Then they [the Board of Trustees] canceled part of the contract to shorten the season. When all that heavy stuff is happening, that's what's on your mind. Beethoven is not on your mind. Even when you play it, it's hard to keep concentrating.

"In the last few years, I think many of us have forgotten why we're in this business," Banko says. "I think, with Zimmermann here, we finally remember what it was that attracted us to music." □