



Oratorio Society of New York

A HISTORY

The Oratorio Society of New York, currently under the leadership of its 11th music director Kent Tritle, was founded in 1873 by Leopold Damrosch, making it New York City's second oldest cultural organization. Damrosch led the Society in its first concert on December 3, 1873 at Knabe Hall on Fifth Avenue and 39th Street. One year later, on Christmas night, the Society began what has become an unbroken tradition of annual performances of Handel's *Messiah*.

The Early Years/A Permanent Home: At first, the Society moved from hall to hall, having no particular home. Then in 1884, Andrew Carnegie joined the Society's board of directors, serving as president from 1884 to 1919. During his first year as president, either at the suggestion of his wife, Louise Whitfield Carnegie, a longtime Society subscriber, or of Walter Damrosch, who had taken over as the Society's conductor after his father's death in 1885, Carnegie announced his intention to support the Society's fund to build a "Music Hall" as a permanent home. He engaged fellow board member and architect William Burnet Tuthill as designer, and in May 1891 Carnegie Hall opened to the public.

During the Hall's five-day inaugural festival, the Society performed under the batons of Walter Damrosch and Pytor Ilyitch Tchaikovsky. Carnegie Hall has become the Society's artistic home; it has performed there every season except 1960, when demolition of the Hall seemed imminent. In 1923, the Society participated in the Hall's first choral radio broadcast, and it has appeared in many of the Hall's milestone events, including the 1955 "Save Carnegie Hall" concert and the Hall's 85th anniversary "Concert of the Century," which was recorded live and won a Grammy Award.

Musical Milestones: A key mission of the Society has been to present new music and first performances to New York audiences. In its first quarter-century alone, the Society gave U.S. premieres of choral masterworks and operas in concert like Liszt's *Christus* (1876-77); Brahms' *Ein Deutsches Requiem* (1877); Berlioz' *Le damnation du Faust, Roméo et Juliette* (1882) and *Te Deum* (1891); Wagner's *Parsifal* at the Metropolitan Opera House in the first performance outside Bayreuth (1886); Tchaikovsky's *Legend* and *Pater noster* (1891) and Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila* (1892).

In later years, the Society gave the U.S. premiere of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* in 1908, the first complete U.S. performance of Bach's Mass in B minor in 1927, and the U.S. premiere of Dvořák's *St. Ludmilla* in 1993. In 1917, the Society made American history when it gave the world premiere of the government-commissioned, standardized version of "The Star-Spangled Banner," which became the national anthem in 1931. In recent decades The Society has presented numerous additional world, US and New York premieres; its latest was the local premiere of Paul Moravec's *The Blizzard Voices*, which was postponed from November 2012 to March 2013 due to the closure of 57th Street caused by the superstorm Sandy.

In addition to Tchaikovsky, the Society has been led by such esteemed composer/conductors as Edward Elgar in his *The Kingdom* (1908), Virgil Thomson in his *Missal pro defunct* in (1962), Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein in an 80th birthday tribute to Copland in 1980, and Sir Roger Norrington in Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* in 2014 with the Orchestra of St. Luke's in honor of his 80th birthday.

Among the esteemed singers who have performed with the Society, in 1977, Sir Peter Pears gave his only US performance as the Evangelist in Bach's St. John's Passion. In 1988, Dame Janet Baker gave her farewell U.S. performance with the Society in the title role of Gluck's *Oreo end Eurydice*. In 2005, contralto Ewe Poodle repeated the role in Gluck's French version of the opera.

A Musical Citizen and Ambassador: Throughout its history, the Society has participated in New York City civic events. In 1912, it performed in benefit for the families and survivors of the Titanic disaster; 90 years later, it has participated in several September 11 commemorations. More celebratory events include the

1939 World's Fair, the 1976 U.S. bicentennial celebration, Macy's July 4 fireworks displays and Rockefeller Center Christmas tree lightings. In return, the City has given the Society numerous awards. On its 100th anniversary the Society was presented with the Handel medallion, New York City's highest cultural award. For its 125th anniversary Mayor Rudolph Giuliani declared May 7, 1998 "Oratorio Society of New York Day," calling the group "one of the most treasured institutions of our city's musical life."

In 1982, the Society, under the leadership of Lyndon Woodside, who served as the Society's music director from 1973 until his death in 2005, made its long-awaited European debut at a UNICEF benefit concert in Munich. Two years later, it sang Britten's *War Requiem* at Coventry Cathedral to celebrate 40 years of peace in Western Europe. Since then, the Society has performed in Europe, Asia, and Latin and South America. In 2003, the Society received international recognition when it was awarded the UNESCO Commemorative Medal for four concerts it gave in Costa Rica to benefit of the Friends of Coco Island Foundation.

In 2007, music director Kent Tritle and associate conductor David Rosenmeyer, who were both named to their posts in 2005, led the Society in appearances at Budapest's Palace of Arts and the annual Miskolc Opera Festival. In 2011 they took the Society to Rome for its International Festival of Sacred Music and Art, with concerts in the Basilicas of St. Peter, St. Maria Maggiore and St. John Lateran. Recent international appearances include Mexico City, São Paulo, Leipzig and Halle.

Serving the Next Generation: In addition to its performances, the Society is dedicated to furthering the choral and vocal art forms. In 1977, under Dr. Woodside's guidance, the Society inaugurated a solo competition that is designed to encourage the art of oratorio singing and give young singers an opportunity to advance their careers. Now named the Lyndon Woodside Oratorio-Solo Competition, and still the only major solo competition in the world devoted to oratorio singing, the competition has drawn more than 4,000 singers, and more than 100 prizes have been bestowed. Among those winners who now have major careers are Lauren Flanagan, Michelle DeYoung, Michael Schade and Eric Owen.

The Solo Competition is only one example of the Society's commitment to the next generation's involvement in choral music. In the tradition of Frank Damrosch (the founder's son) who introduced music education in New York City's public schools, the Society sponsors a high school teaching program that includes free tickets to its concerts. It also donates tickets to High 5, which in turn sells them to teens for \$5. Another innovation is the Choral Scholars program which provides financial support and coaching experience to young professionals who work with the chorus on a weekly basis.

The Society's website is www.oratoriosocietyofny.org