

Hungarian-born conductor left his mark on the Tucson Symphony Orchestra.

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Memories of a musical life flood the mind of Fred Balazs.

The longest serving music director of the Tucson Symphony Orchestra, who led the group from 1953-1966, presided over a time of great change, within the orchestra, in Tucson and in the world. Balazs would preside over TSO's transition from a University of Arizona- dominated orchestra to a true community arts group, and see its level of professionalism rise exponentially. He tackled musical landmarks of great ambition and streamed through Tucson soloists of not just musical but truly historical importance.

It's fitting that as it opened its 75th anniversary Diamond Jubilee Season last month, TSO invited its former music director back to start the concert with the Star-Spangled Banner.

He was born in Hungary in 1920 and at the age of 5 1/2 he beat out a couple of hundred other kids to earn a spot at the prestigious Academy of Music, where Béla Bartok, Ernst Von Dohnányi and Zoltán Kodály were faculty members. At 16 he won the Remenyi Prize, and a year later was the youngest concertmaster in the history of the Budapest Symphony.

But with war clouds looming, Balazs took his chance to come to America, boarding the overloaded last ship out of Bordeaux, France, and sailed for New York before the Nazis' invasion.

"It was very moving to wake up at dawn, coming slowly, slowly from behind the Statue of Liberty with the sun coming up slowly over the skyscrapers," Balazs recalls. "It was a very emotional experience."

He was in America at last. But his things were at the bottom of the sea.

"We had a big trunk that was shipped separately as freight and the Atlantic was full of U-boats and these freight ships were picked off one by one," he says. "I never saw any of my clothes or gifts that I had brought over, salamis and hand-made embroideries – stuff like that. The only thing I had is the clothes I've got on, my violin and my umbrellas and \$2.21, but the \$2 went for tips for the stewards on the boat."

The young violinist and conductor performed a series of violin and piano concerts with Dohnányi before a guest conducting gig in Wichita Falls, Texas, earned him his first music director's post. He served there for four years before coming to the attention of Dean John Crowder at the University of Arizona. Despite mishaps of travel, Balazs landed the post of music director in Tucson, inheriting a rag-tag bunch in need of some discipline.

“Here I was, first rehearsal,” he recalls. “7 o’clock in the evening. 7:30 comes, people start filtering in. Not a soul there at 7 o’clock. The violins and the clarinets started, yak, yak, yak, yak. Chit-chat. I was just standing there watching. Half of the orchestra members was not there for the rehearsals. Baby-sitting problems. Who knows what.”

That would end. In just three years he would transform the orchestra into a group capable of great things. He cobbled together a choir of 250 members, which met in the basement of a church weekly for a year, to mount the first U.S. production of Liszt’s oratorio “Christus,” establishing the pattern of presenting a large work for choir and orchestra every year. He staged scenes from Mussorgsky’s opera “Boris Gudunov,” rocking what is now Centennial Hall with recorded bells of the Kremlin in its coronation scene.

“If you give people 100 percent of a challenge they come 200 percent,” he says. “If you give them a 50 percent challenge, they come 50 percent.”

It was a very different age when Frederic Balazs led the Tucson Symphony Orchestra.

Tucson was considerably smaller. There was a sense of camaraderie among the players and Balazs that frequently manifested itself in post-concert barbecues and gatherings. Everyone knew each other well, on and off the concert stage.

The distance between guest artists and orchestra members was considerably narrower too. After playing a concert with TSO, Benny Goodman got some of the better jazz players from the orchestra to stick around and jam with him for another hour, to the delight of the crowd. Goodman later arrived at the house of then-principal-clarinetist James Glasgow with a six-pack, ready to jam into the wee hours of the morning. Conductor Leopold Stokowski, like many of the guest artists, stayed with the Balazs family. Balazs arrived home one day to find the venerable maestro on all fours, providing a “monster” for the Balazs kids to climb on as he growled his way from room to room.

When film composer Miklós Rózsa was in town for the orchestra to play music from his “Ben Hur” score, Balazs took his fellow Hungarian out to Little Abner’s Steak House, where they took up fiddles and played cowboy songs and bluegrass with the house band.

In the 14 years of Balazs’ leadership, both Tucson and the world would change. Sputnik would lead to manned space flight, President Kennedy would be assassinated and America’s racial inequalities would demand attention.

And while he’d be the last to claim any part in Tucson’s transformation in racial attitudes, his record shows otherwise. He twice booked African- American singer Marian Anderson, invited African-American composer William Grant Still to conduct the orchestra, and gave another then-rising star of the African-American composing world – Tucson-born Ulysses S. Kay – the chance to lead his hometown orchestra in a program of his works. The latter event made Time magazine.

Balazs recalls the huge storm that engulfed Tucson the night Anderson first sang with the orchestra. It took over half an hour to get two miles and traffic was jammed around the hall. He thought no one would turn out. But they ended up turning away more than 1,000 people.

“I forgot to conduct,” Balazs says. “I look at this big mouth opening up with the tonsils wiggling. That beautiful velvet tone coming out. She did that Brahms with the men’s choir and the spirituals. That ‘itsy, bitsy baby.’” As a member of the American Composers Alliance, he was always on the prowl for new works. On a trip to its New York library, he ran across the music of Kay, whom he later learned was originally from Tucson. He invited the young African-American conductor to lead TSO in his orchestral score “Of New Horizons.”

One of Balazs’ best “fiddlers,” a southern-born player, protested having to play with a black conductor. Balazs insisted that he **WOULD** play with Kay. And in the end, that player and Kay struck up a friendship that endured the rest of their lives.

Balazs was ready to sign another three-year contract in 1966 when an offer he couldn’t refuse came up: to be the director for orchestral and opera programs at the Cincinnati Conservatory. He worked there for four years, followed by work mainly as a composer since that time. He now makes his home in San Luis Obispo, Calif.

But his time in Tucson still lights up his face.

“What wonderful memories,” he says.