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# **MUSIC FOR A CITY, MUSIC FOR THE WORLD**

**100 YEARS WITH THE SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY**

**LARRY ROTHE**

Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony Music for a  
City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony

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To the artists and listeners, onstage and offstage, whose love of music is the heart of the San Francisco Symphony.

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## [INTRODUCTION](#)

It started with the end of a world. The earthquake of 1906 destroyed one San Francisco and

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gave birth to another, also to a new orchestra—aimed at revitalizing the city’s cultural life. Packed into that simple statement of ambition *Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony* is a century-long story.

That story is a tale of transformation and evolution, about how people who understood music’s power began with an idea, then shaped it into a cultural institution. Today we call the San Francisco Symphony *great*. That reputation was not conferred at birth. Such enterprises are always works in progress. *Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony* We tend to see the progress thus far—the path that has led to this point a hundred years later—as a constant trajectory, proceeding at a single speed, the target in sight and the movement sure. Closer examination always reveals starts and stops, periods of relative stasis and exhilarating times of rapid acceleration. Closer examination reveals the dramas that emerge as obstacles are recognized and surmounted.

This story of the San Francisco Symphony is such an examination. *Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony* As anyone who has climbed a trail to the summit knows, some parts of the ground are easier to cover than others. History is about stubborn movement forward, the different velocities that press against the wall of a future that is yielding in some places and resistant in others.

Symphony history is populated by men and women and the music they loved and continue to love. Some of the characters *Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony* are outmatched by circumstances. Others wrestle circumstances to the floor. Some are simply well-intentioned. Others are visionary. Because music never exists apart from the larger and smaller universes in which it is born, this is also a story of an organization whose own history is *Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony* interwoven with the histories of city, state, country, *Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony* world. And while every orchestra in the United States can tell its own saga of public support, in San Francisco, the city’s music lovers have been *Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony* crucial to the Symphony’s very existence.

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Music, for its listeners, is something that exists not on the page, but in performance. Every performance is a transformation, too, one that brings music to life and to our lives. This alchemy, when the score becomes sound, demands powers of imagination and execution that seek to match the music's stature. Those who make music have no choice *but* to strive for greatness. Over the course of a century, the San Francisco Symphony has defined itself as an ensemble equal to those demands—more equal to them at some times than at others, although the mission has always been to bring music, and all that music means, to those hungry for it and to those for whom a first taste might lead to a second. Music is a gift for everyone, not just for select provinces of society. From the start, the Symphony made performances affordable and widely available. And as technologies developed, new audiences Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony were reached in new ways. All this is part of the story, and part of the continuing story.

For the story continues, and whoever documents the Symphony's bicentenary will have a richer tale to tell. I tell of the San Francisco Symphony's birth, struggles, and achievements beginning with pre-earthquake San Francisco, to the orchestra's first performance in 1911, and through its first hundred years. I have Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony attempted to be objective but not dispassionate, have tried not to overlook drama where it exists nor create drama where it is absent. For helping me tell this story I am indebted to many, beginning with the musicians of the San Francisco Symphony (current and former), specifically (in alphabetical order): Alexander Barantschik, Chris Bogios, Charles Burrell, Stuart Canin, Don Carroll, Don Ehrlich, Jorja Fleezanis, Detlev Olshausen, Stephen Paulson, Scott Pingel, Paul Renzi, Peter Shelton, Robin Sutherland, and Jack Van Geem. For taking time from all-but-impossible schedules to speak with me, I thank the Symphony's current music director, Michael Tilson Thomas, and his two immediate predecessors, Herbert Blomstedt and Edo de Waart. Symphony President John D. Goldman and Executive Director Brent Assink supported this project from conception to completion. Among board members (current and former) who Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony shared recollections were Ava Jean Brumbaum, Katherine Buchanan, Ellen Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony Magnin Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony Newman, and Genelle Relfe. I am grateful also to Joseph A. Scafidi, who joined the Symphony as jack-of-all-trades in 1939 and left as executive director in 1978, and to former executive director Peter Pastreich, who served Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony in that post for twenty years. Both offered their reminiscences with wonderful generosity and candor; in addition, Pastreich made valuable suggestions on the manuscript. Director of Marketing, Communications and External Affairs Nan Keeton provided the experience, expertise, and direction that helped transform the project from idea into finished product. Along with Brent Assink, she also offered invaluable input on the manuscript, as did these other insightful readers: Caroline Colburn, Scott Foglesong, John Goldman, Gregg Gleasner, Polly Ikonen, John Kieser, Ellen Magnin Newman, and Oliver Theil. Kathy Brown, Katherine

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Cummins, Marie Dalby, and Jeanette Yu—my colleagues in the Symphony’s Publications Department—ensured seamless department operations throughout the year in which I focused my concentration on *Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony* this book. Music critic and writer Allan Ulrich conducted oral history interviews with former concertmaster Stuart Canin and violist Detlev Olshausen. Jason Gibbs of the San Francisco Public Library provided access to the library’s rich collection of Alfred Hertz materials. Leta Miller of the University of California at Santa Cruz is probably the world’s leading authority on Hertz and generously made her own original research available. Symphony Archivist Joe Evans and his associate, Kelly Chatain, have been crucial to this project from the start. Joe was a never-ending source of guidance, stimulation, knowledge, and moral support; he and Kelly also spent hours assembling the many images, with which the book’s designer, Cinthia Wen, and her associate, Ed Ng, have illustrated the Symphony’s history. My editor at Chronicle Books, Micaela Heekin, was tough, thorough, and inspiring; she possesses an editor’s most essential asset, the rare power to *Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony* be at once firm and unobtrusive. I am grateful also to Jeff Campbell, an extraordinarily scrupulous copy editor. Finally, I thank my wife, Karen Borst-Rothe, for the tough love with which she reviewed each chapter as it emerged and reemerged, and for the reassurance and good humor with which she bolstered me throughout.

No writer can produce a history such as this alone, but every writer knows that the final job of creating a felicitous and accurate account belongs only to one person. And so, having offered thanks to those who have helped along the way, I take sole responsibility for any infelicities or inaccuracies in what follows.

*1 The Palace Hotel and Lotta’s Fountain in the years before the earthquake. Built in 1875, the largest hotel in the West welcomed such visitors as Alfred Hertz and Enrico Caruso.*

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## I. PRELIMINARIES: ON CIVILIZATION'S FRONTIER

In April 1905, the conductor of New York's Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony Metropolitan Opera, happy to have arrived in San Francisco with the company's touring ensemble, reflected on the trials of a crosscountry journey. From his suite in the Palace Hotel on lower Market Street, he wrote to an East Coast associate telling what he had encountered once he had left New York civilization. In Cincinnati, a bellboy greeted his complaint Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony about poor service with an invective against "this damned opera company." In Minneapolis, the hotel restaurant shut its doors by nine in the evening. In Kansas City, a municipal ordinance forbade sale of mineral water on Sundays. A neighborhood church there offered a special twenty-five-cent "Parsifal Dinner" in honor of the opera the Met had presented in a local auditorium, a place whose fifteen-thousand-seat vastness defeated even an orchestra of Wagnerian size, and where a shouting spectator interrupted the performance, demanding a refund because he could not see the stage. In San Francisco, the maestro concluded, "[everything is more Bohemian](#) and a good deal like Paris."

When he wrote Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony those words, Alfred Hertz had no clue that, ten years later, San Francisco would be his home. The city in 1905 did not even host a permanent orchestra. Yet symphonic music had long flourished in San Francisco, as had opera and song. Almost from the start, it was a city of music-makers. And although a professional orchestra of San Francisco's own seemed to elude music lovers intent on creating one, the "more bohemian" San Francisco of 1905 was a cultured place and clearly a relief, a haven after the distances Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony Hertz had spanned on his way west from New York. From the window of his train compartment on the Santa Fe line he marveled at prairie fires that lit the evening clouds. As the engine labored across New Mexico and Arizona, wide-spaced territories not Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony destined to become states for another seven years, he gazed out at reservations corralling those who until recently had enjoyed unhindered passage over the plains and deserts. Geronimo was still alive. The massacre at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, was only fifteen years in the past. When Hertz arrived in San Francisco, he Music for a City Music for the World: 100 Years with the San Francisco Symphony was back in a cosmopolitan world, a world that reminded him of Paris.

## **Music For A City Music For The World 100 Years With The San Francisco Symphony**

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