

Bellflower Symphony Orchestra Association

History provided by the Symphony Orchestra

In June of 1965 the Bellflower Symphony Orchestra was formed by Dr. Charlotte Stevenson, Coordinator of Music for the Bellflower School District. She solicited the services of talented amateur instrumentalists and members of the school staff to serve as orchestra members. A small amount of financial aid was given by the Bellflower Cultural Arts Council. Four concerts were given during the 1965-66 school year under the leadership of conductors Larry Lowder and Keith Nelson. Following the summer vacation, rehearsals were held but attendance jeopardized the organization.

Early in 1968, Geza Szabo, a resident of Lakewood, became interested in trying to form a symphony made of amateur musicians. The first concert, under Szabo's direction was held at Mayfair High School Auditorium on the evening of June 21, 1968. The orchestra was composed of high school and college students along with community adult musicians.

During these formative months Dr. Ralph Burnight and Richard Hastings became very interested in trying to form a Bellflower symphony orchestra with a strong support organization to be led by Gesa Szabo, a finely trained European conductor. Thus over the fall and winter of 1968-69 with the help of the Bellflower Cultural Arts Council, the Bellflower Symphony Association was formed. The Bellflower Symphony Orchestra presented its first concert at Cerritos College on September 14, 1968. Quoting from the original program: "The Bellflower Symphony Orchestra is one of the few entirely non-professional orchestras created in the greater Los Angeles area. Its members are college students, teachers, young people, and old people. All make their living by some other means than music." In January of 1969 the Bellflower City Council voted to support the orchestra. The new board of directors wrote by-laws and formed a corporation.

Symphonic repertoire, opera excerpts, library chamber music, and outdoor pops concerts were given during the course of the next ten years under the able baton of Gesa Szabo. During the summer of 1979 Joseph R. Taylor, principal cellist was appointed as Associate Conductor at the request of Gesa Szabo.

In the years that followed the Bellflower Symphony presented concerts at Simms Park, Thompson Park, Caruthers Park, and Cerritos College. Upon the completion of the city hall with an auditorium in 1983, the Bellflower Symphony finally found a home base for its programs. In 1985 the auditorium was named after William Bristol, a dedicated businessman and board member.

Following the death of Gesa Szabo in 1991 the board elected to make Joseph R. Taylor its conductor and musical director. Mr. Taylor has revitalized the organization's emphasis on youth by founding the Bellflower Young Artist Concerto Competition in 1990 which has been extremely successful for the past 15 years.

MUSICAL DIRECTORS/ CONDUCTORS

Gesa Szabo was born in Budapest, Hungary where he received degrees in both music and engineering. He and his family escaped as the Communist took over his country and eventually arrived in Bellflower. He organized the Bellflower Symphony in 1968 and worked unceasingly with the group until his death in 1991.

Joseph R. Taylor was born in Los Angeles, grew up in Compton under the musical hands of Thomas V. Mistretta (violinist) and Octave Bonomo(trumpet/horn), and completed his BMed at East Texas State University. He finished credential work at Long Beach State University and other institutions of higher learning. He served as principal cellist in Bellflower while playing violin, viola, and cello in other orchestras. He started out as Associate Conductor in 1979 and took the helm as Conductor of the Bellflower Symphony in 1991

Mr. Taylor has taught instrumental music language arts and mathematics in middle schools with the Compton and Los Angeles Unified School Districts for thirty years. He is a free-lance musician and is involved with the Palos Verdes Peninsula Symphony as principal violist; concertmaster of the Knox Presbyterian Church Chamber Orchestra; and a member of the Original Angeles String Quartet. For the past twenty-nine years he has served as string and chamber music coach at the Wildwood Music Camps and is a highly recognized string pedagogue and clinician in the Los Angeles/Orange County areas. His noted string teachers have been Dr. Ulrich Bauman, Sidney J. Bruce, Hyman Gold(cello), Victor Sazer(cello), Harold J. Motter(viola), Abraham Weiss(viola), Frederick Fikas(violin) and Mischa Lefkowitz(violin).