Symphony looks at 50

BY ANNE PRICE
Advocate arts critic

Half a century ago, four women who played as a string quartet for their own pleasure became the nucleus of the string section of the fledgling Baton Rouge Civic Symphony Orchestra. A few hundred curious residents heard the 60-member group play three concerts in Baton Rouge High School auditorium.

Today, the nationally known Baton Rouge Symphony orchestra launches a gala anniversary season with eight Masterworks concerts, an appearance at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C., a four-concert pops series and special events celebrating 50 continuous years of making music.

The season will also bring six guest conductors to the

Emile Cooper took the helm of the Baton Rouge Symphony in 1951.

Continued on Page 4
program as a search for a new permanent music director and conductor follows last season's resignation of James Paul after a 15-year tenure.

"It's exciting. It's fun to begin the season with guest conductors as prospects for the permanent position as music director and conductor," said Robert A. Hawthorne Jr., president of the symphony board of directors.

"It will create a lot of excitement," he continued. "I think it's going to be to our advantage, add another element to the season. The audience will be able to give input and it will be a real plus!"

Plans for the season have been making for two to three years, Hawthorne said, expressing gratitude to the community, to musicians of the orchestra, corporate sponsors and city-parish government for their support.

"This orchestra is really blessed to have great community support," he said. Hawthorne touched on the element that has kept the symphony alive and well through hard economic times. It was established to provide music for the people, and broad-based community backing has kept it going from its minimal first season to an ambitious 50th, with multiple concerts and a $2 million budget. Another major factor is the high quality and dedication of symphony musicians, he said.

"The musicians have had outstanding talent and commitment to the success of the symphony through the years," he said. "They have been a big boost to the ability of the orchestra because they understand its importance to the community."

It was musicians who spurred the development of the orchestra, the members of that first string quartet, Bobby Lorin, Sylvia Weiss, Joan Ramsey and Mary Ann Sue Ralph Welch, who dreamed of having a symphony. Actual organization is credited to violinist Bobby Lorin and her husband, Dr. Cecil Lorin, who gave both

James Yeastad led the symphony from 1976 until he retired from LSU and James Paul took over.

Peter Paul Fuchs, professor of conducting at LSU, began his stint as conductor in 1960. At left is his wife, Esissa Fuchs.
personal commitment and financial support to the new organization. David Forrester stepped to the podium for the initial 1948-49 season, which also included a landmark chamber recital series. Sponsored by the orchestra, the series brought world class soloists, violinist Mischa Elman and pianist Amparo Iturbi, to Baton Rouge, the first of dozens of internationally famous musicians to join the symphony for concert appearances.

Successive seasons saw a series of conductors, including Carver Blanchard, Orlando Barera, Alfredo Antonini and Richard Korn, each of whom moved on after one or two seasons.

In 1951, a period of more musical stability began with the appointment of Emile Cooper, retired conductor of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra in New York, as music director and conductor. He was the first of four major musical figures who have led the symphony to its present high degree of excellence. Illness forced Cooper's retirement in 1960, and Peter Paul Fuchs, professor of conducting at LSU, came into the picture. He stepped in to conduct the opening concert in 1960, and continued as conductor until his retirement from LSU in spring 1976.

James Yestadt, also an LSU music professor and conductor of the LSU Symphony, became conductor in 1976. When he retired from LSU James Paul, assistant conductor of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, was contracted as music director and conductor in 1981.

During his tenure, dozens of the nation's finest musicians have appeared as guest soloists with the symphony.

As the city grew, the orchestra grew, expanding the seasons, improving the musical level and gaining wider community support. The Baton Rouge Symphony Auxiliary (now the Symphony League) was formed in 1980. The Louisiana Youth Orchestra was formed in the 1970s and the Baton Rouge Choral Society, organized by Victor Klimash, performed with the symphony and is now the Baton Rouge Symphony Chorus, conducted by Kenneth Fulton.

The symphony has faced many challenges through the years, but broad-based community support and a few dedicated backers helped weather the storms.

During the 1950s and 1960s, financial support was shaky and concert attendance dropped, but community leaders, including attorneys Victor Sashie and Jules Landry, who served as board pres-

dents and were also major financial supporters, kept the orchestra going. Musicians also cooperated, and volunteers stepped in to manage the daily business of the symphony.

When Louisiana suffered the recession of the oil collapse, the orchestra, along with other major Baton Rouge arts organizations, maintained its widespread community support, and has expanded its concert schedules and special services to the present level.

The half century of music is filled with memories, anecdotes and special events. There are those who remember that Maestro Cooper died in Roosevelt Hospital in New York on the very night that Fuchs conducted his second concert in November 1960.

The orchestra's concert site moved to the new Lee High School auditorium, and then to the LSU Union auditorium when that facility opened in 1964. And the symphony moved to its present, permanent home in the Centroplex Theater for the Performing Arts during the 1979-80 season.

Yestadt developed several seasons of pops concerts in the Centroplex Arena in the early 1980s, with such guests as Jimmy Davis and Chet Atkins. These concerts stirred public interest that led to the present pops four-concert series plus five outdoor concerts at Hemingbough in the spring.

In 1988, Paul conducted an acclaimed concert in Carnegie Hall in New York City, with pianist Abbey Simon as guest soloist. Simon has also appeared as one of many internationally known artists performing on the Masterworks series during recent years.

As the orchestra grew, the board contracted its first full-time assistant conductor, Timothy Bergman, who conducts pops concerts, and will conduct two of the coming season's Masterworks concerts.

A Young Patrons organization was created in 1988, offering special opportunities to young people who want to be a part of the symphony's programs.

The symphony has expanded its public service efforts, with a core orchestra of full-time musicians who tour the schools, giving demonstrations and workshops for youngsters. Youth concerts in the