

MUSIC DIRECTORS

Theodore Thomas

Born October 11, 1835, Esens, East Friesland.

Died January 4, 1905, Chicago, Illinois.

FOUNDER AND MUSIC DIRECTOR (1891-1905)



Theodore Thomas, the son of a town Stadtpfeifer (a bandleader who also arranged music for state occasions), showed interest in the violin at an early age. By the time he was ten years old, he was practically the breadwinner of the family, performing at weddings, balls, and even in taverns. But in 1845, Johann Thomas and his family, convinced there was a better life for a respected musician in America, packed their belongings and made the six-week journey to New York.

Young Theodore soon became a regular member of several pit orchestras, including the Park, the Bowery, and the Niblo. By the time he was fifteen years old, he set off on his own, touring the United States as a violin recitalist. Thomas was not only the performer, but also the manager, ticket seller, and press agent as well.

Thomas returned to New York in 1850 and began to study conducting with Karl Eckert and Louis Julien. At the age of nineteen he was invited to play with the Philharmonic Society's orchestra and later joined forces with American pianist William Mason to form the Mason-Thomas concerts. This venture lasted nearly thirteen years until he founded the Theodore Thomas Orchestra in 1862.

In 1864, Thomas began presenting a series of summer concerts with his orchestra, first in New York, then in Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Saint Louis, Milwaukee, and eventually Chicago. The orchestra toured regularly and received consistent critical and popular acclaim, despite persistent financial setbacks. (Thomas and his orchestra arrived in Chicago on October 9, 1871, to begin a new concert series when they learned that large parts of the city, including the Crosby Opera House where the concerts were booked, had been destroyed by a fire the night before.) Following additional setbacks, he finally disbanded the orchestra in 1888.

Thomas always received an enthusiastic welcome in Chicago. In 1889, Charles Norman Fay, a Chicago businessman and devoted supporter of the Theodore Thomas Orchestra, encountered Thomas in New York and inquired, "Would you come to Chicago if we gave you a permanent orchestra?" Thomas's legendary reply was, "I would go to hell if they gave me a permanent orchestra."

On December 17, 1890, the first meeting for incorporation of the Orchestral Association, organized by Fay, was held at the Chicago Club. Less than one year later on October 16 and 17, 1891, the first concerts of the Chicago Orchestra, led by Theodore Thomas, were given at the Auditorium Theatre. The concert included Wagner's *Faust Overture*, Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto with Rafael Joseffy as soloist, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, and Dvořák's *Husitská Overture*.

During his tenure, Thomas introduced several new works to Chicago audiences, including the United States premieres of works by Bruckner, Dvořák, Elgar, Glazunov, Grieg, Massenet, Smetana, Tchaikovsky, and his friend Richard Strauss. (Upon Thomas's invitation, Strauss became the Orchestra's first guest conductor, appearing in April 1904 with his wife Pauline as soprano soloist.)



Thomas and the Chicago Orchestra at the Auditorium Theatre in November 1897.

Thomas was never completely satisfied with the Auditorium Theatre as a performance space; it was far too cavernous for an orchestra, and it was nearly impossible to sell over 3,000 tickets for individual concerts. He fully realized his dream of a permanent home for his orchestra in 1904, when Orchestra Hall, designed by Chicago architect Daniel H. Burnham, was completed. Thomas led the dedicatory concert on December 14.

Tragically, Thomas was only to lead two weeks of subscription concerts in the new hall. He had contracted influenza during rehearsals for the dedicatory concert but continued to work with his customary vigor. Theodore Thomas conducted his beloved Chicago Orchestra for the last time on Christmas Eve, 1904; the program included his orchestration of Wagner's song *Träume*. He died of pneumonia on January 4, 1905.

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220 South Michigan Avenue
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