The Hollywood Bowl and the Democratization of Music

Kenneth H. Marcus

The Hollywood Bowl represented a dramatic change in the musical culture of Southern California. Los Angeles by the 1920s had become a burgeoning metropolis; the population had increased from about 11,000 in 1880 to almost one million by 1920: the fastest-growing city in the United States. Yet there were few venues for classical music concerts. Up to this time, theaters were the main places people might hear an orchestra; traveling orchestras had performed in Los Angeles theaters at least since the 1880s, and with the founding of the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 1919, the city had its own professional orchestra. There was a problem, however, with theaters and concert halls. They could be hot and stuffy, especially during the summer months; the location downtown was not always convenient, such as for those who lived in the suburbs; and the formal atmosphere of a theater might dissuade some people from attending, even those who had a genuine interest in listening to classical music. With such perfect weather conditions, why not have an open-air venue which took advantage of the climate? The Hollywood Bowl changed entirely the experience of listening to orchestral music by presenting that music outdoors. When it opened officially in 1922, it was one of the first open-air theaters for orchestral music in the world. In this article I would like to emphasize the role of community support of the arts as an essential component in the establishment of an outdoor theater for music.

Original Patrons

Several figures were responsible for the Bowl's development, each of whom lent his or her talents or funds for the realization of an arts center in Southern California. A pivotal figure was the community activist and musician, Artie Mason Carter (Koopal, 1972). Growing up in Missouri, she studied the piano at American conservatories, then accompanied her physician-husband to Vienna. There she studied under the renowned Polish pianist Theodor Leschetizky, whose pupils numbered such famous pianists as Ignaz Paderewski, Ossip Gabrilowitsch and Arthur Schnabel. Carter eventually arrived in Hollywood, where her husband began his practice, and soon became involved in community cultural events, especially singing groups. She rose to prominence as leader of the Hollywood Community Sing, a group founded in 1917 during the patriotic fervor of the First World War and which consisted of over one thousand members (Henken, 1997: 10). Carter's contributions to the Bowl were primarily two-fold: organization and enthusiasm. She had the ability to bring people together and to get them to support the idea of an outdoor theater for classical music.

A second influential figure in the Bowl's history was Charles E. Toberman, a businessman and real estate developer (what else in Los Angeles?). He was one of the region's foremost developers, responsible eventually for Grauman's Egyptian Theater (1922), Grauman's Chinese Theater (1927), and the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel (1927). Toberman had sought an area which might be like the Oberammergau, an outdoor theater in Germany for religious plays, and the region of the Bowl provided the perfect location (Jones, 1936: 18). He arranged the purchase of land for the site, the payment of the mortgage, and over the next thirty years sought to protect the area from further development. He donated land along the rim of the Bowl so that no buildings would be built near it, and when other developers were building Mulholland Drive nearby, Toberman even managed to re-negotiate the route so that traffic "would not be seen or heard from the Bowl" (Reese, 1997: 42).

Two primary contributors of funds were wealthy patrons of the arts, Christine Wetherill Stevenson and Marie Rankin Clarke. Mrs. Stevenson hailed originally from Philadelphia, where her husband had made a fortune in munitions, particularly during the First World War.
With this money and with her own personal wealth, Mrs. Stevenson sought to establish a permanent home for the seven arts of the theater: acting, music, dancing, painting, literature, sculpture, and architecture. She chose Southern California for her interests, in part because of the relative artistic freedom which the area offered, and she brought artists and musicians with her from the East Coast to take part in the venture. Similarly, Mrs. Clarke, whose husband Chauncey Clarke became wealthy from the discovery of oil, had contributed to a variety of philanthropic causes. She was strongly interested in improving the cultural offerings in Los Angeles. In all, Mrs. Stevenson and Mrs. Clarke gave $21,000 each towards the purchase of almost sixty acres of land, the site where the present Hollywood Bowl is located. Members of the Theatre Arts Alliance, founded by local businessmen, artists and Mrs. Stevenson (who was president) in 1919, contributed an additional $5500, for a total cost of $47,500 (Jones, 1936: 17; Northcutt, 1967: 40). The Alliance eventually repaid Mrs. Stevenson and Mrs. Clarke in full, including interest and expenses.

Location

Why choose this particular area in the Hollywood Hills for an outdoor theater? What enthralled many people from the beginning were the acoustics. In 1916, a group of actors and musicians presented Julius Caesar outdoors in nearby Beachwood Canyon, a natural amphitheater, to an audience of over 20,000 people (Jones, 1936: 9-10; Stricker, 1939). The production was such a success that it prompted the search for a similar locale for music concerts. The secretary of the Theatre Arts Alliance, H. Ellis Reed, and his father scoured the area for possible sights. One dale which they happened across, called “Daisy Dell” near Cahuenga Pass, had superb, natural acoustics—a great rarity indeed. It was said that if you spoke in the middle of the dale, it could be heard on the hilltop a quarter of a mile away. The local impresario Lynden Behymer and his daughter drove the famous German singer Ernestine Schumann-Heink to the area to try out the acoustics, and she was amazed. The violinist Leopold Godowsky, Jr., a member of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, performed a test with his Guarnerius violin. On another occasion, the conductor of the San Francisco Symphony, Alfred Hertz, who eventually led some of the first concerts at the Bowl, came to hear for himself. He, too, was astounded at the quality of sound (Henken, 1997: 4; Hoffman, 1977: 5; Jones, 1936: 28; Northcutt, 1967: 39).

A second reason for choosing the site was its actual location. It was only a half-mile from downtown Hollywood, within easy walking distance of most homes in the area. People long afterwards commented on the joy of walking up to the Bowl, while those with automobiles could find ample parking nearby. Here at last was a site which music lovers had sought, a place for people to sit comfortably outside, and hear music as if they were in a natural concert hall. Men could have a quiet smoke; children could frolic in the trees around the dale. There were no sirens or mosquitoes such as you would find in New York or Chicago, only the cool night air and open sky. The music critic for the New York Times, Olin Downes, remarked that the concerts ‘have a flavor different from any other concert known to me. The setting must be seen to be realized: the beauty of the hills; the noble lines of a natural amphitheatre which slopes and narrows down to the orchestral platform; the almost tropical sky, with its great stars . . .’ (Downes, 1924). In a word, the site was enchanting, and close enough for many people to come participate in the grand experience of outdoor concerts.

A third reason was the climate itself. Unlike the rest of the country, summers in Southern California are almost devoid of rainfall. In the Bowl’s entire history, only a handful of concerts have been canceled due to inclement weather. Many people had come to Southern California precisely for the weather: that wondrous bright sun, that blue sky, that downright Mediterranean atmosphere. People from the Midwest and East Coast, fed up with the harsh winds and
elements that had plagued them for years, sought out Southern California as a kind of refuge. Their Eden would be along the California coast, where they could live their lives in relative peace and harmony, with balmy skies, warm sunshine, and beautiful surroundings. The Bowl, then, was a refuge within a refuge. Called the "Hollywood Bowl" by the choral conductor Hugo Kirchofer because of its shape, it was an area which the whole family could enjoy (Jones, 1936: 31).

And families came. With the addition of wood benches around a large oak tree in the center of a sloping hill, listeners could look down and enjoy the music wafting up the hill. They may have come to hear music but the music came to them too, in rolls of sound that, by contemporary accounts, few if any man-made concert halls could match. Virtually the only disturbances in such natural surroundings were also natural, such as wind or crickets. At times, assistants had to get up into the trees to flush out any particularly annoying birds. But these were minor problems. The Bowl could offer what no other venue in the area could: fine music in the great outdoors for everyone.

**Democratization**

What purpose did the Hollywood Bowl have apart from just listening to music outdoors? The idea from the very beginning was to democratize music. Artie Mason Carter felt that people would happily come to listen to good music if they could relax, where children could play, and everyone could sit underneath the stars. Above all, ticket prices had to be low—the lowest price for years was only a quarter. Even today, the lowest ticket price for most concerts is still only $1, something unheard of in most concert halls. Community activists founded the Hollywood Bowl Association in 1924, which replaced the Theatre Arts Alliance. The Association subsequently oversaw the Bowl’s activities, and one of its primary goals was to make classical music affordable. It also organized plenty of concerts: four concerts per week for the entire summer season, which lasted from July through the end of August.

At the time of the Bowl’s opening, the idea of democratizing music was relatively new. The movement of Progressivism in the early twentieth century upheld the notion of improving the morals and virtues of the mass of the people through social reform. Several of Carter’s colleagues had been social and political activists who were steadfast in their goal of improving the moral climate of the city. Women such as E.J. “Grandma” Wakeman, Mrs. Leiland Atherton Irish, Harriet Clay Penman, Gertrude Ross, and Carrie Jacobs Bond were strongly active in the Bowl’s early years and took part in fundraising drives. What better way to appeal to people than through music? By bringing classical music to the public, perhaps those same listeners would join in the spirit of improvement, of bettering the self—and the soul—through musical sustenance (Henken, 1997: 13).

It is not too much to say that some saw the hope of uplifting the city’s morals through music as a kind of religious calling. Local writer Perley Poore Sheehan wrote in the opening pages of a Hollywood Bowl program of 1925:

> It is like a sort of new Nativity. Here is a Prototype. Here has been born a Guide and a Comforter—a Savior to the nations. It is a prophecy of that day when not communities merely but the powers shall do as we do here: confer together not of scourgings but of gifts; when the sons and daughters of these shall mingle joyfully, in harmony; and once more the starry night will resound—as it well may here and now: “... and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.”
Even more staid writers, such as the *New York Times* critic Olin Downes, sensed this zeal to the movement and to the experience of attending concerts at the Bowl. He traveled to Southern California to see for himself, and came away astounded by its impact on listeners. “The orchestra places at the disposal of an immense public — probably, on the whole, the largest public that gathers for any series of orchestral concerts in the world — the entire orchestral repertory; not only this, the concerts dispense almost entirely with the soloist element; they favor the cause of creative art and encourage native composers, many of whom will be given special hearings this season; they cost a quarter of a dollar a seat and end the season with a profit.” As a New Yorker, he then pays the Bowl the supreme compliment: “These concerts are self-supporting through the enormous number of tickets which can be sold and the immense audience accommodated for each concert, and they maintain a quality of program of which the average would not be amiss with a subscription orchestral concert audience in New York in the Winter season.” Downes concludes with a ringing affirmation of what the community activists were attempting to accomplish: “it is no wonder that thousands upon thousands attend the four concerts given on as many evenings each week and that these people listen in a quiet and under a spell not known to audiences of concert halls, and that they learn . . . without lectures or technical guide-books or analyses, to love and to worship music” (Downes, 1924).

To be sure, the performance of music out-of-doors was not new in America. The conductor Theodore Thomas created in 1865 a summer series in Central Park Garden in New York which lasted for eight years. Bandleader Patrick Gilmore organized a huge “Peace Jubilee” in 1872 in Boston, with a chorus and hundreds of musicians; Johann Strauss came to America for the only time to conduct the work. Chicago held opera in its Ravinia Park. An outdoor concert took place in 1918 at the Lewisohn Stadium in New York to raise funds during wartime, which proved to be so popular that a series of open air concerts was still taking place there in 1925 (Northcutt, 1967: 47). Each of these events suggests the viability of performing orchestral music outdoors to large and appreciative audiences.

If we go back even further, we can see the strong prevalence of brass bands throughout the country (Hazan and Hazen, 1987). During the nineteenth century, many towns or cities had a brass band that played during the summer and on special occasions. It tended to be a local band, whose members did not necessarily have music as a profession. The organization of civic music groups and orchestras has a long history and can be traced back at least as far as the early seventeenth century in Germany and Switzerland, where citizens formed amateur ensembles for the pure joy of playing together. Yet one vital aspect was missing from many of these ensembles: the assurance of quality. Many musicians did not even own their own instruments, but rented or borrowed them from the local chapter or bandleader. There are enough records of complaints by the citizenry, of that “infernal din” or “squawking” by musicians who could not always control the sounds that came out of their instruments.

What Carter and her colleagues could offer was precisely this notion of quality. As the summer home for the recently-founded Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Bowl represented from the beginning a grand opportunity to hear fine music. No more sitting in cramped halls with cigar smoke overhead; this venue offered the public the quiet of an outdoor evening and beautiful sounds from a professional ensemble. Carter had established early on a rapport with the orchestra. She had led the Hollywood Community Chorus, and joined with the Los Angeles Philharmonic during the second Easter service at the Bowl in 1921 (Jones, 1936: 32). Carter and her colleagues supported the notion that the Bowl should become the summer venue for the orchestra. Many people joined her in the now-legendary fund drives she organized to make the concerts a reality; one of these true believers was the original patron of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the philanthropist William Andrews Clark, Jr. By joining forces together
in what was essentially a community effort, thousands of people could hear orchestral music under the stars. Thus the Bowl became the site of a regular series of fine concerts, performed by excellent musicians, all at little cost to the listener.

Attending concerts at the Bowl represented a kind of music education for the public, particularly for children. Young listeners were early, and vital, participants in the Bowl’s history. Hundreds of children took part each year in the Easter Service, one of the first major events of the Bowl. A concert in the Bowl’s first season, titled “Concert for Young People,” took place on a Sunday afternoon. It consisted of music to delight children of all ages, with works by Mozart, Schubert and Mendelssohn. Another concert in 1924, titled “Young Artists’ Night,” allowed young musicians to display their skills in a concert of Mozart, Bach, Tchaikovsky and Rubinstein. In Los Angeles public schools, administrators introduced classes which taught children about music, through listening to melodies and singing songs. To learn music in the classroom was thus an essential part of their education, because the songs which they sang as children might stay with them for the rest of their lives. Carter, who had been involved in leading a Children’s Chorus in Hollywood before she became involved with the Bowl, was keenly aware of this civic duty and arranged a variety of ways to interest children: to invite them to concerts, to perform concerts at school, and even to involve children in fundraising.

The Bowl was for everyone, listeners and participants alike. In 1925, an Arapahoe Indian musical event took place. Two years later, the Bowl played host for an entire week to an inter-tribal ceremonal, featuring fifty-two Indian tribes of the Southwest. In 1926, a 400-member African American choir gave a concert, followed later by a Latin American ballet troupe. The Bowl also became a favorite site, at least until 1940, for American dance and ballet, hosting the likes of Isadora Duncan, Agnes de Mille, and Ernest Belcher (Henken, 1997: 10-11; Prevots, 1997: 47-48). In short, it represented the diversity of the city’s population as well as the variety of cultural forms which the city could offer.

Repertoire

What then, exactly, were audiences listening to? The repertoire of the Bowl concerts had much in common with that which predominated in other concert halls in America, but it also had some decided innovations as well. The first concert, which took place on July 11, 1922, provided a taste of things to come: Wagner’s Overture to the opera Rienzi; the Andante cantabile movement from Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 5; and several of Brahms’s Hungarian Dances. The musicians then proceeded with Grieg’s Suite No. 1 from Peer Gynt; Fritz Kreisler’s Liebesleid and Liebestreu; and the program closed with Rossini’s Overture to William Tell (Henken, 1997: 12). The conductor who led the first concerts proved to be an excellent choice. Alfred Hertz, conductor of the San Francisco Symphony, came down to launch a series titled “Hollywood Bowl Summer Popular Concerts,” with the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra of 85 musicians. It was an extraordinary success.

As we might tell from the opening program, opera was much in demand. It is perhaps curious that Wagner remained in vogue, since the First World War had led to a dislike of many German composers, especially Wagner. Nonetheless, his works figure prominently in the Bowl’s early years, as do the works of other German composers. There is one dichotomy, however, in this love for opera. Relatively few companies performed opera in Los Angeles theaters or concert halls, compared to cities on the East Coast, such as Boston or New York. Lynden Behymer discovered early on that there were (as there still are) high costs of production in staging opera. As a result, little opera took place, although many people attended the precious few performances. During the period 1935 to 1944, while there were only twenty-one performances of fifteen different operas, about 300,000 people attended — an impressive figure, and one which suggests a strong, local interest in opera at least up until
the Second World War. Yet while opera productions were scarce, opera singers were more common. Soloists such as Ernestine Schumann-Heink from Germany and Amelita Galli-Curci from Italy attracted audiences in the thousands. One concert by Galli-Curci in 1924 attracted almost 22,000 people, which brought in receipts of almost $26,000. The record, however, goes to Lily Pons: 26,410 people came to hear her sing in 1936. As much a testament to opera as it is to the singer, it remains the largest attendance in the history of the Bowl (Northcutt, 1962: 15).

The introduction of “Theme Nights” proved to be an excellent way of bringing in audiences. Under the baton of Alfred Hertz and guest-conductor Boris Dunev, a Russian Program took place on July 25, 1922, with works from Tchaikovsky, Rubinstein, Borodin, and Ippolitov-Ivanov. That followed with a Wagner Program three evenings later, with the Prelude from Lohengrin, the Overtures of Rienzi and Tannhäuser; the Prelude and Love and Death from Tristan und Isolde; and the Prelude from the Meistersinger. Virtually every year, Wagner Nights became a staple of the Bowl’s offerings; particularly notable was conductor Fritz Reiner’s arrival in 1925 to conduct a lengthy Wagner Program. There was even a “Pasadena Program,” featuring soloists and composers from that fine city, as well as a “University of California Night.” Bowl promoters sought every possible way to lure people to come hear music under the stars, and to emphasize that it was a community venture for the entire county of Los Angeles.

Despite the emphasis on German and Italian works, English music was by no means absent. A visit by Sir Henry Wood was significant; he had launched the Promenade concerts of London in 1885, and was devoted to presenting new works by British composers. During a week-long engagement in July 1925, he conducted Gustav Holst’s The Planets, Vaughan Williams’s A London Symphony, Ethel M. Smyth’s On the Cliffs of Cornwall, and music from Rutland Boughton’s opera, The Immortal Hour. He concluded with a Suite by Henry Purcell, consisting of music which Wood had arranged in a kind of medley of the great composer’s works. Other English composers and musicians, such as Arthur Bliss, also performed at the Bowl. During the two-year period in which Bliss lived in California, he came to the Bowl to conduct his work, the Finale from A Colour Symphony.

What of American music? A number of works by American composers had premiers on the West Coast. The premier in Los Angeles of an orchestral suite by a well-known writer on music, Deems Taylor, titled Through the Looking-Glass, took place during the final week of the 1924 season. The following year, the director of the Eastman School of Music, Howard Hanson, conducted one of his works for its first performance on the West Coast, the Nordic Symphony. In 1928, the West Coast premier of Aaron Copland’s Concerto for Piano and Orchestra took place (Henken, 1997: 17). The local composer Charles Wakefield Cadman, who had been a supporter of the Bowl from its earliest days, also had several of his works performed there, including one dedicated to the Hollywood Bowl itself. Occasions such as these helped to establish the theater’s importance as a venue for American music.

Conclusion

The impact of the Hollywood Bowl went far beyond the borders of Los Angeles. It is said that the greatest compliment is emulation, and that is precisely what happened: a flourishing of outdoor concert halls throughout America. By the 1930s it was clear that the Bowl was an exceptional institution, and similar arenas began appearing in other cities as well. Chicago’s Grant Park Lake Michigan was the site for a Bowl in 1931; Milwaukee built a Music Shell in 1934; Denver built a Red Rocks amphitheater in 1939; and Boston, home of the Boston Pops, built the Hatch Shell in the Esplanade park in 1940. By all accounts, the idea of listening to classical music outdoors was here to stay.
Ultimately, the history of the early years of the Hollywood Bowl illustrates strong community support for the arts. It was the local community, led by community activists, that launched the first concerts. None of the early concerts was government-funded, either by local or federal funds; all of the money came from ticket sales and donations by patrons. Early on, the concerts reflected the diversity of the population in Los Angeles, as well as a forum for ballet and dance. For the idea from the start was no less than the democratization of music. Presented within the comfortable environment of an outdoor theater, the primary goal was for fine music to become more familiar to ever-growing numbers of people, who could then pass on this music appreciation to their own children. In short, the Hollywood Bowl provided music for the millions, underneath millions of stars.

References

Primary Sources


Hollywood Bowl Summer Concert Programs, 1922-1927, Hollywood Bowl Archives.

Permanent Exhibit, Hollywood Bowl Museum.

Secondary Sources


