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Origin of the Title and Evolution of the Duties of “Music Director”



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Origin of the Title and Evolution of the Duties of “Music Director”

In his essay on the uniqueness and commonality of American symphony orchestra organizations published in the inaugural issue of *Harmony*, Paul Judy acknowledged that he was not familiar with the origin of the title “music director,” nor with the duties associated with this title over time. He invited readers to provide some insight.

The following is excerpted from a letter we received from Robert F. Schmalz, Ph.D., Girard Professor of Music at the University of Southwestern Louisiana. We hope Dr. Schmalz will amplify his comments on a future occasion and that we will hear from others as well. –Editor

Perhaps I can shed a bit of light on the the title “music director.” It would appear to have originated in Germany and was initially intended to be purely honorary. This title was bestowed on three early occasions by Prussian rulers to conductors of Berlin’s Royal Orchestra—to Spontini in 1820; Meyerbeer in 1842; and Mendelssohn in 1843.

The first conductor in America to hold the title was Dr. Karl Muck, who served as conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1906-1908 and again from 1912-1917. In the interim, he was conductor of the Berlin Royal Orchestra, during which time the Kaiser, recognizing Muck’s eminence in the field, awarded him the title, “General Music Director.” Interestingly, Richard Strauss received that title at the same time.

However, what is much less clear is the answer to the question of when the title began to carry with it duties significantly different from those of a “mere” conductor.

Walter Damrosch referred to himself as “Music Director” of the New York Symphony prior to World War I. As with the German honors, it seems likely that the term was intended to convey a qualitative distinction, although here it seems to have been appropriated rather than bestowed! Toscanini, too, was briefly referred to as “General Music Director” of the New York Philharmonic in the early 1930s—the precise terminology used earlier as an honorific by the Germans! However, in neither case were clear distinctions made in the duties to be performed by Damrosch and Toscanini as “music directors” and Damrosch and Toscanini as “conductors.”

Upon Toscanini’s return to the United States in 1937, he was given the title of “Music Director” of the NBC Symphony, a radio orchestra which was created specifically for him. Here, finally, was a case in which practical distinctions between conductor and music director were implied. Those distinctions were apparently established by 1943, when The New York Philharmonic gave the title to Artur Rodzinski. This noted “trainer of orchestras” was expected to provide the organization with the strong leadership, which was missing after two years of guest conductors.

Howard Shanet’s book, *Philharmonic: A History of New York’s Orchestra*, provides the most cogent assessment that I have yet found for the modern (and seemingly American) use of this title. It is clear from Shanet’s discription that the Philharmonic tied to the title a rather specific set of responsibilities and expectations—not the least of which, in my opinion, was a desire for stability. To be sure, there remained some of the pure honor associated with the original, but we Americans tend to be a practical lot. We want something concrete for our money!