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About the Cover

by

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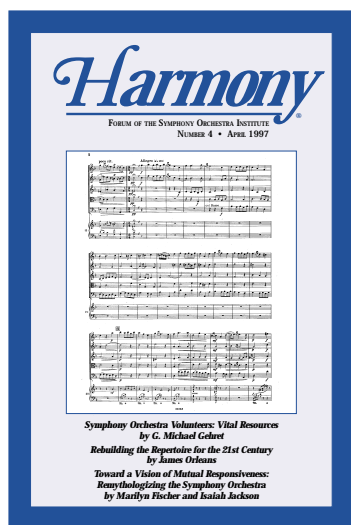
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About the cover



We cannot blame you if you did not recognize the music on our cover, a string overture by the 17th-century French composer, Jean-Baptiste Lully. Although he was enormously popular in his lifetime, today Lully is one of music history's forgotten composers. But every time conductors raise their batons and string players lift their bows, we all pay tribute to Lully's role as an influential orchestra builder and as the first great composer-conductor.

Italian by birth, Jean-Baptiste Lully was brought to Paris in 1646 to serve a cousin of King Louis XIV. Talented and ambitious, Lully was immediately accepted as a violinist in the king's orchestra and he quickly became its conductor. He eventually merged two

ensembles to form a single group that was considered the best orchestra of its time—a model for the modern orchestra. Today, Lully is recognized as the earliest of the composer-conductors—a tradition that reached its peak in the 19th century with Berlioz, Mendelssohn, and Wagner and which has continued into our own time with Mahler, Bernstein, and Boulez.

Lully was a demanding and sometimes temperamental leader—qualities that have often since been associated with the “cult” of the conductor. He insisted on fidelity to the notes on the page and he rehearsed until he achieved an impressive tightness of ensemble and rhythmic accuracy. A forceful disciplinarian—he insisted that his players all dress alike—Lully was the first orchestra director to impose uniform bowing on his string players, a practice unheard of at the time. This “first stroke of the bow” quickly became famous throughout Europe and was soon adopted elsewhere. (By the end of the 18th century, the practice was so standard that Mozart wrote home from Paris, clearly irritated by the fuss, “They all begin together, just as they do in other places.”)

Lully was also probably the first important conductor to use a baton—not the baton as we know it, but a long cane with which he struck the floor to give the beat—a practice that proved his undoing. In 1687, during the excitement of conducting, Lully accidentally stabbed his toe with the sharp point of the baton. He subsequently developed gangrene and died as a result of the infection. Fortunately, for the fate of conducting as a career, an improved baton gained favor in the 19th century, largely due to Ludwig Spohr, who tired of using his violin bow to beat time, switched first to a roll of paper, then finally settled on the short, non-hazardous stick conductors use today.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.