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About the Cover

by

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About the Cover



You may recognize the work on our cover, since it is one of the most popular pieces of orchestral music ever written. But long before the Lone Ranger helped Rossini's score ride to fame, the *William Tell* Overture played a role in one of the most spectacular orchestral happenings in American history—the June 1854 festival concerts held in New York's Crystal Palace, before sellout crowds of 20,000 spectators for each concert, and conducted by Louis Antoine Jullien.

French-born, London-bred Jullien was, by all accounts, a showman, a demagogue, a megalomaniac, a great eccentric (he wore white gloves when he conducted Beethoven, his god)—and the most popular conductor of the day. In 1853, after taking London by storm, Jullien decided to conquer the New World as well; in August he brought 25 of his orchestra members to the United States—New York papers heralded the arrival of “the distinguished knight of the baton”—and, augmenting his band with the best American musicians, he began a series of wildly popular concerts here.

Jullien was a press agent's dream. He conducted with a jeweled baton (handed to him on a silver tray) that was 22 inches long, made of maple, and entwined with two golden serpents, each sporting a diamond in its head. For his New York concerts, Jullien conducted, facing the audience, from the very center of the orchestra, where, with his fantastic gilt music stand and carved arm chair, decorated in gold, white, and crimson velvet, he could hardly fail to command attention.

But Jullien's showmanship obscured the significance of his intent, for he was, in fact, a serious musician. His rigorous, disciplined rehearsals brought impressive results (“The fiddles all bowed together,” one New York paper noted) and his programs always included one of the hard-core classics. Jullien believed that it was his mission to bring great music to the masses. In that sense, he was one of the first great popularizers—figures, who throughout the history of music,

from Liszt to Bernstein, have been regarded with suspicion. He gave American audiences their earliest glimpse of a new breed of charismatic, superstar conductor, and he was among the first conductors anywhere who could attract a huge following on the strength of his personality, regardless of the music he programmed. (Before Jullien, only opera stars commanded such attention in this country.)

After a hugely successful series of concerts in New York, Jullien and his musicians took their act on the road, playing to packed houses from Boston to New Orleans, and from Mobile to Baltimore (which they reached, at some peril, by crossing the ice-bound Susquehanna River). Jullien's repertory was a savvy mix of serious and light music—a startling, though obviously successful potpourri of everything from Beethoven symphonies and Mendelssohn overtures to the *Katy-did Polka* and *Prima Donna Waltz*.

For the grand finale of his New World tour, held in New York City in June 1854, Jullien organized the first of America's monster concerts—a "Grand Musical Congress," which involved some 1,500 players and 16 choral societies. (Rossini's overture began the second half of the June 15 concert, and opened the program the following night.) The highlight of an already extravagant enterprise was the *Fireman's Quadrille* that Jullien had composed especially for the occasion. The piece called for two military bands in addition to a full orchestra, and climaxed with the clanging of alarm bells as firemen rushed into the theater from all sides. (Jullien was reportedly thrilled when women screamed and fainted, nearly drowning out the music in their commotion.)

On June 28, less than two weeks after his triumphant New York farewell, Jullien returned to London flat broke, then quickly fled to Paris, where he was imprisoned and later institutionalized (he died in an asylum in 1860). By then, a young American, who had played first violin in Jullien's New York orchestra, was poised to make an indelible mark on the American orchestral scene, partly inspired by Jullien's vision and daring. His name was Theodore Thomas, and although he had been disgusted by Jullien's theatrics—Thomas later called him a charlatan—he nonetheless shared Jullien's conviction that great music was a necessity, not a luxury, that should be available to all people.

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