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Hermann Dossenbach and the Rochester Orchestra

By Vincent A. Lenti

Preface

The story of the Rochester Orchestra and its conductor, Hermann Dossenbach, has been admirably told by Ernestine Klinzing in her articles "The Making of an Orchestra"¹ and "Music in Rochester: A Century of Musical Progress: 1825-1925"² and has been recounted by other local authors in their writings concerning the history of the city of Rochester. In attempting to deal with the subject in a somewhat more comprehensive manner, I have been motivated by a desire to give proper credit to Dossenbach, a remarkable man who paved the way for the establishment of orchestral music as part of the cultural life of Rochester.

Rochester is particularly fortunate for a city of its size in being able to boast of significant cultural institutions. Among these is the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, currently under the able direction of Maestro David Zinman, which is a highly respected ensemble by any standards. It is fairly safe to assume that the establishment of our Philharmonic and the support which it receives from the music lovers of our com-

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munity could not have been so readily achieved without the prior efforts of those who cultivated among the citizens of the area a taste for orchestral music. Of those who laid the groundwork in this field, none deserve more credit than Hermann Dossenbach, whose story we propose to relate.

In compiling material for this study, I am particularly grateful to Hermann Dossenbach's daughter, Hazel Smith. At the young age of eighty-eight she has been most helpful to me by supplying clear and vivid recollections of her father's work. Her willingness to speak with me and to answer a multitude of questions has been greatly appreciated.

I should also express my appreciation to the Rochester Historical Society for providing me with an opportunity to do this research and to read my paper for its members at one of their annual meetings. It is my sincere hope that my efforts will make at least a small contribution to our understanding and appreciation of our city and of the cultural achievements of one of its adopted sons.

The Quest for Culture, 1852-1900

On February 5, 1900 the best of Rochester society gathered mid-afternoon at Powers Hall. It was a typical upstate winter day: snow earlier in the morning followed by gradual clearing. The morning papers had headlined the most important international problem of the time, the Boer War. Rochesterians had read that General Sir Redvers Buller was advancing to Ladysmith to relieve the British garrison there. The paper also carried the latest news of the devastating St. Louis fire, with losses reported at one to two million dollars.

But on that gray and cold February afternoon, such events were probably far from the minds of those who were gathering at Powers Hall in response to the following news announcement:

Mr. Hermann Dossenbach has arranged a series of three afternoon concerts to be given at Powers Hotel. The first concert will be given next Monday afternoon at 3 o'clock and the other two on the first Mondays of March and April respectively. Mr. Dossenbach's reputation as a musician and director is well known. His orchestra numbers thirty and he promises an adequate interpretation of carefully selected and attractive programmes.³

The Orchestra's conductor was one of four musically gifted sons of Matthias Dossenbach, who had come from Germany in the mid-1800's and originally settled in Niagara Falls. The eldest son, Otto, had attracted the attention of Henri Appy, who persuaded the Dossenbach family to move to Rochester so that the boy could study with him. Unfortunately, his career as a musician was prematurely ended because of illness, but his three brothers all continued to utilize their considerable talents for the enrichment of musical life in Rochester. Hermann eventually became a violin teacher in Rochester, and had a dance orchestra which was very popular with Rochester society of the time. He also had a string quartet which played for fifteen years at the home of George Eastman, and provided string chamber music on a regular basis at Lake Avenue Baptist Church.

But the orchestra was Dossenbach's life-long ambition, and the opening concert at Powers Hall must have seemed like the fulfillment of a dream. With only thirty players, however, Dossenbach's orchestra was hardly an orchestra in the generally accepted sense of the term. It was, more properly, a chamber orchestra, and a small one at that. The program for the concert consisted of some popular classics such as the opening movement of the Schubert Unfinished Symphony, and some lighter music by composers such as Delibes and Strauss.

However, Rochester seemed most delighted by the entire affair. Newspapers the following morning expressed widespread enthusiasm for Dossenbach's initiative:

Rochester was a bit metropolitan yesterday afternoon. Society turned out in goodly numbers, in its best afternoon frock and frock coat, to attend the Dossenbach orchestral concert given at 3 o'clock at Powers Hall.

... there can be only the most pronounced praise.

... The quality and volume of tone, the shading and precision of attack, showed the orchestra and its conductor to be in perfect sympathy, such as comes from frequent rehearsing.⁴

Despite such praise and enthusiasm, the concert might be viewed as an insignificant local event had it not been for the fact that it represented the beginnings of something which was later to develop into Rochester's first professional orchestra. But this was not the city's first exposure to locally produced orchestral music.

Perhaps the earliest orchestral ensemble in Rochester was a group of instrumentalists who, together with a chorus of one hundred voices, constituted "The Harmonic." Organized in 1852, it gave local performances of such masterpieces as Haydn's Creation and Handel's Messiah.

The first group organized for purely orchestral purposes appeared in 1865 with the founding of the Rochester Philharmonic Society (not to be confused with the present Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra). Conducted by John Kalbfleisch, it held rehearsals in the music store of Cook and Martin on State Street. Kalbfleisch soon relinquished the baton to Henri Appy, and rehearsals were transferred to the Academy of Music located on the upper floor of the newly constructed Rochester Savings Bank.

Appy was a man of most respectable talents. He had been violinist to the King of Holland, and had originally come to this country with Jenny Lind, appearing in many of her concerts. He settled in Rochester in 1866, and figured prominently in Rochester musical circles until his death in 1903. His Philharmonic Society grew in numbers until there were about fifty musicians. Originally limiting itself to "public rehearsals," the orchestra eventually began to give concerts in Corinthian Hall. The Society enjoyed a good number of years of success until the concerts were abandoned due to a variety of problems for which there were no apparent solutions.

The 1880's witnessed the establishment and brief existence of the Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Albert Sartori. Sartori also conducted the Maennerchor, and has often been described as a man of genius and consummate ability. But the Symphony apparently needed more than Sartori's reputed genius, as it ceased operations after only two or three concerts.

The Dossenbach Orchestra began perhaps no less hesitantly than Appy's Philharmonic or Sartori's Symphony. And yet it was destined to enjoy two full decades of ever-increasing success before retiring from the scene in favor of the new Eastman Theatre Orchestra. The difference which led to its success is perhaps explained by understanding the

prominence and affluence which Rochester had attained by the turn of the century. Such affluence brought both the desire and the means of pursuing such things as cultural enjoyment, and it is apparent that many prominent and wealthy Rochesterians were committed to the idea of supporting Mr. Dossenbach and his symphonic ambitions for the Flower City.

A brief glance at the patronesses of the Dossenbach Orchestra would serve to illustrate this point. One of the original patronesses was Mrs. Hiram W. Sibley, whose father-in-law had served for seventeen years as the founding President of Western Union, and whose husband was to establish the Sibley Music Library in 1904. Her sister-in-law, Mrs. James Sibley Watson, was also an enthusiastic and important supporter of the orchestra. She is chiefly remembered today for her gift of the Memorial Art Gallery, given to the University of Rochester in memory of her son, James G. Averell. She was consistently a supporter of Hermann Dossenbach, and has been described as his "benefactor." Dossenbach had taught her son violin, and was also a close personal friend of his.

Another patroness was Mrs. Edward Mulligan, wife of a prominent local physician. She was a leading force in the musical life of the city, and her sudden death in the early 1920's was a shocking event to Rochesterians. Others who came to be associated with the Dossenbach Orchestra included Mrs. William C. Barry, whose father-in-law had been a founder of the enormously successful Ellwanger and Barry Nurseries, and Mrs. Carl Lomb, whose husband was a cousin of Henry Lomb, co-founder of Bausch and Lomb, the world-famous optical company. Besides these were also the Allens, Brewsters, Cunninghams, Gorslines, Hubbells, and others who represented the most socially prominent and wealthiest of Rochester in 1900. Finally, there was Mrs. George W. Eastman, whose son not surprisingly figures rather prominently in our story of the Rochester Orchestra and its conductor, Hermann Dossenbach.

The Dossenbach Orchestra, 1900-1911

The successful opening concert of the Dossenbach Orchestra was followed by two similar affairs in March and April. Again, the programs tended to feature lighter music suitable, we may assume, for the elegant women of Rochester society who were in attendance.

The following year (1901) the orchestra presented its "second season," consisting once again of three programs. Dossenbach had been able to augment his group to forty players, and gamely tried performing movements of Beethoven's Fifth and Sixth Symphonies. The press was certainly not ecstatic over the results, but nonetheless appreciated his efforts at bringing music to the people of the city:

Rochester is so badly off in the way of orchestral music that the city should be deeply grateful to any musician who has the courage to try to galvanize existing forces into something like efficiency.⁵

The concerts in the spring of 1901 had been moved to the Baker Theatre, but in 1902 the Dossenbach Orchestra was back at Powers Hall for its series of three Monday afternoon musicales. The following year, however, the concerts were held at the Lyceum Theatre, where they occurred for the next eight years. Convention Hall was subsequently used for some of the seasons, although the Lyceum was the most frequent location during the orchestra's existence.

By the fourth season (1903), Dossenbach's Orchestra boasted of fifty members, and was attempting such repertoire as the Tchaikowsky "Pathetique" Symphony and the Beethoven "Eroica." The lack of local brass and woodwind players raised the necessity of "importing musicians" to supplement local talent. The Tchaikowsky performance, for example, depended upon the presence of a "Mr. Fritsche," a horn player from New York. Apparently, the french horn parts were normally played by cornet players covering their instruments with their hats to approximate the mellowness of the french horn tone. Importing needed instrumentalists was certainly preferable to such practices, and would continue for some time. As the Rochester *Herald* commented:

The necessity for performers of especial virtuosity...has been satisfied by importing men from New York, Buffalo, and other cities. . . . It has been said that this scheme induces an artificial condition of things, and to a degree this is true. But it is plainly essential until the permanent establishment of an orchestra for concert work in this city shall develop home talent of requisite skill.⁶

The fifth season (1904) brought a significant change in that the pattern of three Monday afternoon concerts gave way to four Monday evening concerts. The opening program drew lavish praise from Rush Rhees, who was President of the University of Rochester and fast becoming one of Dossenbach's most ardent supporters:

Will you give me the privilege of expressing to you my warm appreciation of the work of your orchestra at your concert on January 18? I may frankly say that I was surprised at the smoothness and vigor of your renderings; and greatly delighted, though not surprised, by the sensitiveness of your interpretations.⁷

The orchestra continued to improve as the years went on principally, we may assume, because of the dedication of Hermann Dossenbach and his many supporters. By the 1905 season the orchestra numbered over sixty players, twice its original size, and the following year the season was extended to six concerts. Dossenbach never appeared to have a tendency to treat his ensemble as a "chamber orchestra" in terms of the repertoire he chose for concerts. Rather, his programs continued to include large-scale works which might normally be associated with equally large-scale professional orchestras. Such ambitious undertakings inevitably led to some local criticism, such as the *Post-Express* review of the March 6, 1905 concert:

... if he is to successfully undertake such works as the Siegfried Death and Funeral March, he must have more than the three or four incomplete rehearsals which, at present, are the only preparations his men receive. ... Hitherto, the orchestra have attended rehearsals unpaid, giving up their Sunday afternoons willingly. If they are to live up to the standards Mr. Dossenbach prescribes, they must devote more time to practice. . . .⁸

Despite such occasional criticism, the Dossenbach Orchestra had most assuredly come a long way since that first "musicale" at Powers Hall. That transition was undoubtedly not an easy one, either in terms of developing the orchestra's

playing ability or in terms of developing listening sensitivity on the part of the local Rochester audience. Cultivating the musical taste of his audience seems to have been Dossenbach's more difficult challenge, if we are to believe the local *Post-Express* staff writer who wrote:

One faction wants to be amused, distracted, entertained; the other side regards music as a form of education. Between them Hermann Dossenbach might be likened to . . . the policeman, whose life is not a happy one.⁹

Since the beginning of the orchestra's existence, Dossenbach had included soloists, at least for the majority of the programs. Most of them were singers, presumably local talent. The first pianist to perform with the orchestra was Madeline French Sanford, who played the First Concerto of Mendelssohn in the spring of 1902. Two years later, William Cary Sutherland made his first appearance with the orchestra, performing the Beethoven Fourth Concerto. Sutherland was probably the best of the local pianistic talent at the time, and subsequently appeared with Dossenbach in performances of the Schumann, Saint Saens Second, and Tchaikowsky Concertos. For his performance of the Tchaikowsky, poor Sutherland was rather ill-treated by one of the local critics:

. . . Mr. Sutherland leads our band of Rochester pianists. But he needs an experience to shake him out of his self-consciousness. If he would participate in a South American revolution, it would be a god-send to him.¹⁰

The orchestra's twelfth season (1910-1911) marked the first appearance of perhaps a more significant talent, John Adams Warner. Warner was the son of Rochester architect, J. Foster Warner, and had studied piano in Europe as well as attending Harvard University. His talent was most definitely of the highest caliber, and he may have shocked quite a few of his friends and acquaintances when he joined the newly formed State Police in 1917. Six years later he became Superintendent, and in 1927 married Governor Al Smith's daughter, Emily. Throughout his career as a law-enforcement officer, he never abandoned his piano playing which had so thrilled Rochester audiences in his younger years.

With the assistance of such people as John Adams Warner, the Dossenbach Orchestra continued to present ever more satisfying concerts to the music lovers of Rochester. As the orchestra continued to improve, the local press was generally encouraging in its praise:

Hermann Dossenbach is showing fine discrimination in the making of the programmes for his orchestra concerts . . .¹¹

Mr. Dossenbach gains steadily in authority and the effect is increasingly felt in the playing of his orchestra.¹²

Occasionally, however, there were reminders that in some respects the orchestra still faced severe problems in trying itself on a firm professional basis:

As matters stand, the Dossenbach Orchestra can hardly improve. The men are competent; it is, in fact, a good orchestra potentially; but the best results can only be obtained if there are ten rehearsals where there are only four, and if the New York men, who now run down for the last rehearsal, work here with the rest. That condition may seem to spell the death of orchestral music in Rochester as far as local endeavor is concerned.¹³

One problem which existed, at least in the minds of some people, was the relationship of the Dossenbach Orchestra to Ludwig Schenck's Rochester Symphony, a group of amateurs and students who performed free concerts in the city. In actuality, the two groups served different purposes in the musical life of Rochester. To dispel the belief that they were somehow in competition with one another, the Musical Council of Rochester issued the following statement:

The Musical Council, consisting of representatives of the major musical organizations and the music lovers of Rochester, recognizes with satisfaction the place which the Symphony Orchestra has made for itself in our city's life. The orchestra offers to amateurs an opportunity for serious and most valuable study of the standard orchestral works. It provides to large numbers of our people and particularly to the pupils of our schools an opportunity to hear the best music without expense. As an amateur orchestra, it fills a different place, complementary to that which Mr. Dossenbach's orchestra has made for itself.

For Hermann Dossenbach, the years which saw the development of his orchestra from its humble beginnings on that February day in 1900 to a level of genuine achievement must have been very gratifying. He applied himself diligently to his

task, even making two visits to Europe in order to hear the great orchestras and observe the great conductors of the day.

Nonetheless, by the twelfth season (1910-1911), it was apparent that the orchestral situation in Rochester had reached a level at which something new had to be attempted. Forces began to move to re-structure the situation and to provide Dossenbach with a valuable educational opportunity. His friends and supporters offered him an opportunity for a year's sabbatical leave so that he could go to Europe for a period of intensive study.

Interlude: The European Sabbatical, 1911-1912

Dossenbach left for Europe on the liner *President Lincoln*, accompanied by his wife and three children. University of Rochester President Rush Rhees had provided a letter to the American Ambassador in Berlin to prepare for his extended period of study there:

Mr. Hermann Dossenbach of Rochester has been sent from Rochester to Germany for a year of special study in music. He has been sent by a group of friends of music in the city who believe that such a year will be of advantage to him, and believing this have contributed to meet the expenses incident upon this undertaking.¹⁴

Rhees also had the responsibility of informing Dossenbach of the financial arrangements which had been made on his behalf:

I hand to you herewith a memorandum of the deposit to your credit at the Merchants Bank of \$4500 to be applied on the expenses of your contemplated trip to Germany.

I have noticed an indication on your part to regard me as unduly responsible for this consummation in which I most heartily rejoice, but the responsibility is not mine. I have simply acted as an agent for warm friends of yours who have expressed to me great pleasure in being able to contribute towards a cause which they believe promises much alike for you and for the interests of music in the city.

The contributors who have so generously cooperated and whose gifts I have deposited to your credit at the Merchants Bank are the following: Mr. George Eastman, Mr. Hiram W. Sibley, Mrs. James S. Watson, Mrs. W.S. Kimball, Mr. F.B. Mitchell, Mrs. E.R. Willard, Miss Grace Curtice, Mrs. Ralph R. Fitch, Mr. and Mrs. Granger A. Hollister, Mr. J. Sherlock Andrews, Mrs. W.S. Ely, Mrs. Edward Mulligan.¹⁵

The European sabbatical was a time of concentrated and rewarding study. During nine months in Berlin, Dossenbach

attended, according to reports, a total of 217 concerts, including performances of the Koenigliche Kapelle conducted by Richard Strauss, the Philharmonic conducted by Nikisch, and the Bluthner Orchestra conducted by Hausseger.

During his absence from Rochester, however, plans were being made for the forthcoming orchestra season, and he was kept informed by Rush Rhees as these plans developed. By April 1912 much had been accomplished as evidenced by the following letter from Rush Rhees:

The Lyceum Theatre has been engaged for your concerts for the following dates: November 18th, December 16th, January 13th, February 10th, March 10th, April 7th. Each of these days is Monday and as you will see they are four weeks apart. I think that the weeks which you indicated as undesirable have also been avoided.

A movement has begun to secure subscriptions to guarantee the concerts for next year and the plan under consideration is that outlined by you to me, in accordance with which you would be in a position to pay each of your musicians \$20.00 for each concert with the rehearsals incident thereto.

We have retained the dates at the theater at this time in order to secure them and also to enable you to communicate with your New York men. We have had to agree to pay \$225 a night for the theater. If the plans at present in mind are carried through, as we hope they will be, your undertaking will have a backing that it has not heretofore received, and we hope that it will be crowned with a success which will justify the labor which you yourself put into the work, and the interest with which your friends support it.¹⁶

While his friends and supporters worked in Rochester on his behalf, Dossenbach continued to take full advantage of the opportunity which had been provided him. Following the extended stay in Berlin, he went to Dresden to hear a production of Wagner's Ring Cycle, and also visited Nuremberg and Rothenburg. From Rothenburg the family went to Munich and to see the Oberammergau Passion Play, and then to Switzerland for "side excursions" in the Alps. This was followed by visits to Bonn, Cologne, Alsace-Lorraine, Brussels, and Holland, and then a few days in England before returning to the United States.

Upon his return in August 1912, the Dossenbach Orchestra was re-organized as the new Rochester Orchestra. Dossenbach was appointed conductor, with Rush Rhees serving as

President, Mrs. E.R. Willard as Vice-President, Mary Durand Mulligan as Treasurer, and Walter Hubbell as Secretary. The 1912-1913 Season of the re-organized orchestra was to prove an exciting one, both for the Rochester public and for the orchestra's able conductor.

The Rochester Orchestra, 1912-1919

With the backing of a \$15,000 orchestra fund to "insure against loss," the Rochester Orchestra began its existence with a performance at the Lyceum Theatre on Monday evening, November 18, 1912. In noting the occasion of this inaugural concert of the newly re-organized orchestra, one local correspondent wrote:

In the presence of the most brilliant audience that has gathered to do homage to a programme of music in a long time, the Rochester Orchestra was made an actuality last night at the Lyceum Theatre and began a career, which it is sincerely hoped, will become an integral part of our city.¹⁷

Prior to this opening concert, Rush Rhees paid the following public tribute to Hermann Dossenbach:

There is not in Rochester a man more wholly devoted to doing a thing without regard to any financial return than Hermann Dossenbach has been in regard to his orchestra. For twelve years that man has given the best of his energies and thought, without receiving a penny of compensation. Many have thought because the orchestra was known as the Dossenbach orchestra, that there was a splendid "rake off" for Hermann, but the only "rake off" that Hermann got was what he took out of his own pocket to pay off "deficiencies."

In addition to the orchestra, Dossenbach now undertook a new venture. In the fall of 1913, he joined Norwegian pianist Alf Klingenberg in opening a school of music on Prince Street across from the University of Rochester campus. Joined the following year by Oscar Gareissen, a teacher of voice, the school came to be known as the D.K.G. Institute of Musical Art (after the surname initials of its directors), and began providing quality musical instruction to the people of Rochester. Its position as an educational institution was further enhanced in 1915 when it absorbed the work of the older Rochester Conservatory.

But the orchestra was most certainly Dossenbach's first love. The ever strengthening financial situation permitted him to engage very notable soloists for the concerts. These included American violinist Efrem Zimbalest, the great Fritz Kreisler, Russian piano virtuoso Josef Hofmann, soprano Alma Gluck, and many others. The presence in Rochester of these world-famous musicians did much to enhance the image and prestige of the Rochester Orchestra. For example, Kreisler's performance of the Tchaikowsky Concerto in December 1913 brought the following press comment:

Last night's concert at the Lyceum belongs in the annals of the most notable events in the history of music in this city. Those who have followed the programs of our orchestra in its widening field of influence and those who have made possible its association with such supreme artists as Mr. Kreisler must have experienced a thrill that did not alone come from the quality of performance. It seemed as if the fruition of years of effort and planning was at hand. The orchestra itself rose nobly to the occasion, the audience was carried completely out of itself, and Mr. Kreisler responded with a dignity and graciousness that showed he quite evidently understood how much the concert meant to those who were present.¹⁸

But no soloist was received with greater enthusiasm than a young violinist by the name of David Hochstein. Born in Rochester in the year 1892, he developed into unquestionably the finest native-born talent in Rochester history. After completing his local music studies with Alois Trnka, a gifted Bohemian violinist, he pursued further studies in Vienna with Sevcik and in St. Petersburg with Leopold Auer (who is remembered today as the teacher of such talent as Jascha Heifetz and Mischa Elman). A brief and brilliant career was cut short on the battlefields of World War I when Hochstein was killed in the battle of Meuse-Argonne in 1918, an incomprehensible tragedy for music and for the history of our city.

Dossenbach must have been familiar with Hochstein's talent at an early age since Dossenbach's daughter, Hazel, was a classmate of his at East High School. When he encountered the young violinist in 1912 at the Ettenheimer home, he offered Hochstein an opportunity to perform a concerto with the Rochester Orchestra. Hochstein had to decline because of other commitments, but he wrote Dossenbach a year later to express his availability at that time:

Last year, when I had the pleasure of making your acquaintance at Mrs. Ettenheimer's home, you were kind enuf [sic] to invite me to appear as soloist in one of the symphony concerts under your direction. As my plans were to keep me in Europe for the season, I regretted not being able to accept.

I am now arranging for several concerts in America beginning January 1914, and wish to know if an engagement as soloist with the Rochester Orchestra is possible in either February or March.¹⁹

This letter eventually resulted in Hochstein's appearance with the orchestra in December 1914, when he performed the Bruch "Fantasia on Scottish Folk Melodies." To say that the evening was a triumph for the young Rochesterian would certainly be an understatement:

His bowing and fingering were above criticism . . . his technique of a high order . . .

Mr. Hochstein was received with greater enthusiasm than any other solo artist who has appeared with the orchestra this season.

. . . it is hard to see why any one should prefer Mischa Elman to David Hochstein. They are both young, they both have a remarkable technique; but the foreigner has all the eccentricities and mannerisms of the typical European musician, while the Rochester boy is absolutely simple, modest, free from affectation and self-conceit.²⁰

Hochstein played again with the orchestra in January of 1916, performing the Tchaikowsky Concerto. His third and last appearance with Hermann Dossenbach occurred in December of 1917, when he gave a thrilling performance of the Mendelssohn Concerto. Already in the army, he appeared in uniform and received many tributes including the following remarks from one of the local music critics:

Hochstein's place among the master violinists of the day is unquestioned now. In Rochester, his former home, he is held in a jealous regard that places him at least on a par with the greatest in his field, not excepting Kreisler, Elman or Kubelik.²¹

Within a year Hochstein was dead, and Rochester had forever lost its gifted native son.

About the same time as Hochstein's last appearance with the Rochester Orchestra, events began to take place which would significantly alter the local musical scene. George Eastman decided to become involved in a grand manner. Where others had contributed hundreds or even thousands of dollars to cultural causes, Mr. Eastman embarked on a project which

would involve millions. This decision moved him to the forefront with regard to the influence which he could bring to bear. Eastman explained his plans in an interview published by the *New York Times*:

I am interested in music personally, and I am led thereby, merely to want to share my pleasure with others. For a great many years I have been connected with musical organizations in Rochester. I have helped to support a symphony orchestra. Recurrently, we have faced the fact that which was needed was a body of trained listeners quite as much as a body of competent performers. It is fairly easy to employ skillful musicians. It is impossible to buy an appreciation of music. Yet, without appreciation, without a presence of a large body of people who understand music and who get joy out of it, any attempt to develop the musical resources of any city is doomed to failure. Because, in Rochester, we realize this, we have undertaken a scheme for building musical capacity on a large scale from childhood.²²

Eastman's plan commenced with the purchase of the D.K.G. Institute in 1918 for a price of \$28,000. He then presented the school to the University of Rochester, and began making plans for the construction of a new school and an adjoining theater. When his plans were announced, it was apparent to everyone that the school and theater would be the finest which money could provide. Eastman envisioned his new theater as a place for the showing of motion pictures in addition to being a concert hall. He was convinced that a motion picture theater was the most practical and popular means of presenting good music to the people of Rochester.

The Rochester Orchestra fell victim to the grandeur of Eastman's project because it was felt that the new theater would need a new orchestra. In fact, it would need two orchestras: a smaller, fifty member ensemble for the showing of movies, and a larger, ninety member symphony. Sometime during the planning stages the decision was reached that Dossenbach was not the man to conduct the new symphony. Arthur Alexander, a young musician from Michigan, was to be brought in as conductor of the symphony, and Dossenbach would be offered the smaller movie orchestra. On Valentine's Day 1919, Eastman was able to write to Rush Rhees as follows:

Mr. Cutler and Mr. Dossenbach called upon me. . . . I told them I had some plans affecting the musical situation here that were not quite

ready to disclose. . . . The next day I had Mr. Todd down to the office. . . and talked with him about the plan, which is to devote the music hall to motion pictures six days in the week, putting all of the profits into the music hall orchestra; to offer Mr. Dossenbach the leadership of that orchestra, with the understanding that he could not in any event become the leader of the big orchestra.

. . . That very night Mrs. Mulligan had a heart to heart talk with Mr. Dossenbach and was very much surprised to find that when he learned that the underwriting committee would go on with the old orchestra another year. . . he was perfectly satisfied.²³

Despite assurances that the Rochester Orchestra would continue for another year, it was soon announced that this was not to be the case:

Concerts by the Rochester Orchestra will be discontinued in order to allow its leader, Hermann Dossenbach, to devote all of his time to plans for the symphony orchestra that will play in the projected Music Hall, the gift of George Eastman, for the moving pictures. This announcement was made last night by Dr. Rush Rhees, president of the orchestra.

When the new music hall is opened, Mr. Dossenbach will have an orchestra of 50 or 60 pieces. The music furnished, it is intended, will be the best in any moving picture theater in the country, and Mr. Dossenbach will devote his time from now on to visiting the larger theaters of the country and studying the musical side of the moving picture enterprise.²⁴

To have been excluded from the new symphony must have been a devastating disappointment to Hermann Dossenbach.²⁵ The final concert of the Rochester Orchestra took place at Convention Hall on March 17, 1919. Three months later Dossenbach wrote George Todd to inform him that he would not accept the position of conductor of the movie orchestra:

After carefully considering our many conversations relating to the moving picture theatre to be erected by Mr. George Eastman, I have decided not to accept the position of conductor of the orchestra in that theatre.²⁶

After twenty years, Hermann Dossenbach was relinquishing his baton.

Epilogue

At a distance of six decades, it is difficult to assess the reasons why Hermann Dossenbach was denied the opportunity to lead the new symphony orchestra. He had not only prepared the

way for symphonic music in Rochester, but had done so with the encouragement and support of the city's leadership.

The man selected in his place, Arthur Alexander, was certainly a questionable choice. He was primarily a singer and pianist, and his only conducting experience seems to have been a brief period with the Seattle Philharmonic Society. Whatever his credentials as a musician may have been, his background as a conductor was certainly negligible when compared with Dossenbach's.

Alexander arrived in Rochester when the theater was still under construction, and was made responsible for the concerts at George Eastman's home. The Eastman Theatre finally opened in the fall of 1922, but it was not until March 28, 1923 that the new Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra gave its first performance under Alexander's leadership with Alf Klingenberg as soloist in the Grieg Piano Concerto. Ironically, it was not only Alexander's first Philharmonic concert; it was also his last. Nine days earlier George Eastman had written him:

... I had come to the conclusion before ... your resignation came up that I would not renew your contract ...²⁷

From the beginning it appears that Alexander had incurred the displeasure of the millionaire philanthropist who was in absolute control of the local musical situation. As early as February 1920 Eastman had written him:

I have been thinking about our conversation the other night and have come to the conclusion that it is hopeless for us to try to have business relations. ... I am very much dissatisfied with the attitude you take and have taken as to your relations to the music enterprise at my house. ... I enclose my check for \$2,500.00 which is payment in full of all of my obligations to you up to the end of the current season.²⁸

Whatever the difficulties between the two men were, they finally culminated with Alexander's dismissal in 1922 during an incident vividly described by Eastman's organist, Harold Gleason:

In 1922 Mr. Eastman instantly dismissed Arthur Alexander. ... Arthur, in addition to being in charge of Mr. Eastman's music and teaching voice at the Eastman, was conductor of the Eastman Theatre Orchestra and was to conduct the new Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra. He and Mr. Eastman were talking about the programs in the theatre. Mr. Eastman suggested that it would be a good idea to

have Samuel L. Rothafel, managing director of the Roxy Theatre, come from New York to "see how we are doing." Arthur disagreed and a heated argument developed. Finally Arthur said, "If 'Roxy' comes here, I quit." Without raising his voice Mr. Eastman replied, "I accept your resignation, Arthur."²⁹

In the fall of 1923, Eugene Goossens arrived as the new conductor, and the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra finally got off to a successful and promising start. Dossenbach could only view these events from the side-lines, of course. After the Rochester Orchestra had disbanded, he entered the ice business with his son-in-law, and the years which followed demonstrated that his business acumen was at least the equal of his musical ability. Then in 1924 his brother Theodore died. Theodore had been the conductor of the park band, and Hermann was offered the position in his place. He gratefully seized the opportunity to conduct again, and was associated with the park band for many years.

Dossenbach's orchestral work during the first two decades of the century cannot be too fully appreciated. He had gradually developed the personnel for a symphony orchestra in Rochester, and, more important perhaps, he developed a taste and desire for orchestral music among the people of Rochester. Without his labors, the establishment of the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra would have been a much more difficult task.



Hermann Dossenbach

Notes

1. Ernestine Klinzing, "The Making of an Orchestra," **University of Rochester Library Bulletin**, 22 (Winter 1966-67), 27-35.
2. Klinzing, "Music in Rochester: A Century of Musical Progress: 1825-1925," **Rochester History**, 29 (January 1967), 1-24.
3. Unidentified newspaper clippings, Dossenbach Scrapbooks, Local History Division, Rochester Public Library.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. **Rochester Herald**, February 10, 1903.
7. Letter from Rush Rhees, January 28, 1904, previously quoted in Klinzing, "Music in Rochester . . .," 11.
8. **Rochester Post-Express**, March 7, 1905.
9. **Post-Express**, undated clipping.
10. Unidentified newspaper clipping dated December 20, 1910, Dossenbach Scrapbooks.
11. **Herald**, February 8, 1910.
12. **Post-Express**, February 8, 1910.
13. Unidentified newspaper clipping, Dossenbach Scrapbooks.
14. Letter from Rush Rhees, July 10, 1911.
15. Letter from Rush Rhees, July 10, 1911, previously quoted in Klinzing, "Music in Rochester . . .," 13.
16. Letter from Rush Rhees, April 12, 1912.
17. Unidentified newspaper clipping dated November 19, 1912, Dossenbach Scrapbooks.
18. Unidentified newspaper clipping dated December 23, 1913, Dossenbach Scrapbooks.
19. Letter from David Hochstein, July 19, 1913.
20. Unidentified newspaper clippings, Dossenbach Scrapbooks.
21. **Herald**, December 18, 1917.
22. "Philanthropy Under a Bushel," March 21, 1920.
23. Letter from George Eastman, February 14, 1919.
24. Unidentified newspaper clipping, Dossenbach Scrapbooks.
25. An indication of Dossenbach's feelings can perhaps be seen in his scrapbooks which were meticulously kept. Each program was carefully pasted in, along with numerous newsclippings for each concert. However, material pertaining to the fifth concert of the season (which coincided in time with the announcement of the new theater orchestra) was simply inserted in the back of the final volume. No copy of the last program was included at all.
26. Letter from Hermann Dossenbach, June 21, 1919.
27. Letter from George Eastman, March 19, 1923.
28. Letter from George Eastman, February 12, 1920.
29. Harold Gleason, "Please Play My Funeral March," **University of Rochester Library Bulletin**, 26 (Spring 1971), 119.