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SSO one in a string of orchestras to grace stages in Syracuse in the last 120 years

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The Syracuse Symphony Orchestra performs last month at the Civic Center in Syracuse.

And so, the blame game goes on.

Syracuse Symphony Orchestra is no more. It blew itself up in its 50th season. The board of trustees declared bankruptcy.

Is it the fault of the board, the players, the audience, the economy?

Pick a villain.

Does the past offer instruction? Not much, except that history is littered with attempts to start a serious music organization in Syracuse. There were many fits and starts. The organization that just imploded seems to have been the most serious and longest lasting.

Susan W. Larson wrote a study of symphony orchestras in Syracuse that's in the archives of the Onondaga Historical Association. She says (in 1970) that the present orchestra "is by no means the first and only Syracuse Symphony to have existed in Syracuse, New York." The study goes back to 1848, but Pamela Priest, the association's archivist, says "there wasn't an orchestra as long ago as 1848."

Larson says "no symphony orchestra existed in Syracuse before 1890." From 1892 to 1906, she writes, "several orchestras were formed under the name of Syracuse Symphony Orchestra." All seemed connected in one way or another to Syracuse University, which has been a consistent source of support for Syracuse's musicians.

Linda Kaiser ends up being the unofficial biographer of "Syracuse Symphonies" in her new book about Melville Clark, the harpist who founded Clark Music Co. Linda devotes an entire chapter in the Clark biography, "Pulling Strings," to the orchestra founded by the entrepreneur in 1921. Clark financed the first concerts, the musicians volunteered their services and E.F. Albee donated the use of Keith's theater.

The orchestra lasted until the 1931-32 season, even playing out-of-town concerts in Watertown. Linda writes that the Great Depression interrupted the flow of funds and "internal disputes among SSO board members" contributed to the

downfall. It "just sort of petered out," she explained.

"There remained a group of Syracuse citizens who would not be denied a local symphony," according to Kaiser. She records the Civic Symphony Orchestra, Syracuse Federal Symphony (supported by FDR's Works Progress Administration), Syracuse Civic University Symphony, Syracuse Philharmonic Orchestra (i.e. "the people's symphony"), the Onondaga Symphony and in 1949, another "Syracuse Symphony Orchestra."

The new SSO was founded as an outgrowth of the Onondaga Symphony, Kaiser writes. She credits a fellow harpist (Linda is one, too), the late Carolyn Hopkins, with setting the group in motion, with help from a grant by the Gifford Foundation.

I talked to Linda about her book the other day. She said one issue: "I was never able to explore stems from the purchase of the Victor Herbert music library" by Melville Clark in 1924. She described Victor Herbert, who lived at Lake Placid at the time, as a great supporter of Clark's orchestra. "No one at the SSO knew much about what they owned," she explained.

About William Gibson

David Feldman, dramatist and Onondaga Community College retiree, sent me a note about William Gibson, author of the current Syracuse Stage show, "Miracle Worker." Bill Gibson was David's writing teacher at Brandeis University and they remained friends until Gibson died in 2008. David recalls that two Gibson plays premiered at Syracuse Stage: "Butterfingers Angel" in 1974 and "Handy Dandy" in 1984.

David says the Gibsons lived in Syracuse in the 1940s when his wife, Margaret, did graduate work in psychology at SU. They lived on James Street and Bill made extra money playing "honkey-tonk piano at local jazz joints."

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