40th Anniversary of Stephens Auditorium Brings Back Good Memories
By Dick McCoy, long-time school orchestra instructor in Ames, member of the Des Moines Symphony, and charter member of the Ames International Orchestra Festival Association

The Ames International Orchestra Festival Association (AIOfA) and the Iowa State Center are to be commended for the 40 years-worth of world-renown orchestras that they have successfully brought to Ames. The upcoming international concerts of the Jerusalem Symphony (Nov. 9) and the Australian Chamber (May 1) are the most recent additions to the international list, as Stephens Auditorium celebrates its 40th Anniversary this season.

These upcoming orchestras awaken many memories of the great orchestras and great personalities that have arrived in Ames because of this annual festival tradition. My first memory relating to the festival occurred sometime in the mid 1950’s. I was home on the farm listening to WHO radio while eating dinner, and the feature story on the Iowa news was that Dr. James Hilton, president of Iowa State College, announced his intention of building the finest auditorium/concert hall in the Midwest on the Iowa State campus. Even as a teenager I found the prospect very exciting.

Over the next several years I kept my eye out for signs of progress on the auditorium project, but any concert I attended in Ames was either in the “old” men’s gym or in the armory. Now the idea of hearing the Broadway cast of “Funny Girl” or the Pittsburgh, St. Louis or Minneapolis Symphonies in the armory might seem quaint or worse, at the time it was that venue or none.

After college I left Iowa for a few years. Upon moving to Ames in 1968, I was mesmerized by the construction of the new auditorium---part of President Hilton’s “dream”. As I watched the construction my excitement grew right along with the building. And what a building it turned out to be! Today we are used to fine concert halls such as Hancher Auditorium in Iowa City, the Des Moines Civic Center and the other impressive buildings that comprise the Iowa State Center, but at that time it stood all alone on that hill, tall and majestic in real splendor. In my eyes it was one of a kind (and still is.)

Even before the building was finished, Dr. Alvin Edgar, conductor of the Iowa State University Orchestra (who was known for his enthusiasm and sometimes grandiose ideas) had a great idea up his sleeve. He ran an announcement in the Ames Tribune asking anyone interested in forming a group to bring world-class musical groups to the new Stephens Auditorium to join him in a meeting in the lobby of the hall at a certain time and date. My interest was piqued and, as I recall, twenty-eight of us answered the call. As carpet layers worked around us, Dr. Edgar announced his rather grandiose plans for what would become the Ames International Orchestra Festival.

I can’t speak for the others, but I was over-whelmed by his vision: world class orchestras of the first rank coming to spend an entire week and giving five concerts! In Ames!

In the course of several meetings, a group was established, by-laws adopted, committees formed and planning started. Imagine our shock, excitement (and nervousness) when Dr. Edgar announced he had a surprise for us. The opening series of concerts would be given by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra yet that fall! Suddenly the reality of the situation became very vivid for us. These people would have to be housed, entertained and, well, “hosted” for a week. What an assignment! I was on the periphery of the group but I still have admiration for the work the committees did. The
whole “Old” Holiday Inn (on Duff) was booked for a week to house the one hundred-nine orchestra personnel and staff, dozens of bicycles were collected for exercise and recreation, dozens of breakfasts, lunches and dinners were given by community members and coordinated by the committee to entertain individual orchestra members, and busses were charted for farm tours, the Amana Colonies and other point of interest. The whole community joined in to make the “New Yorkers” feel welcome. Even some fraternities and sororities hosted events—including a famous baseball game during which the conductor of the orchestra, Seiji Ozawa, sprained his back sliding in to second base!

Adding to the publicity and “hoopla” surrounding the event, it was revealed that the orchestra had been scheduled to play three concerts in Los Angeles during the time they were in Ames. Dr. Edgar had somehow stolen them from Los Angeles! I never found out how he accomplished that feat. Many of us on the committee came to realize that we may have occasionally underestimated Dr. Edgar and his organizational abilities.

As to be expected, the opening evening of the New York Philharmonic did not disappoint. The two concerts (5:00 and 7:30pm) were sold out and, along with a tornado that touched down west of town, provided a very exciting evening. Maestro Ozawa, however, had to conduct from a stool because of his back pain! In fact, the whole week was a great success and the orchestra voted unanimously to return to Ames should they be invited. They loved Ames, Iowa, and the beautiful fresh air—even though we who lived here were alarmed that a blanket of smog had drifted up the rivers from St. Louis resulting in the worst air quality anyone in Ames could remember!

The New York concerts were followed the next year by the Boston Symphony, then the Philadelphia Orchestra and many other fine orchestras. As a musician it was been very exciting year after year to hear the world’s finest orchestras, often with the finest conductors. I will personally never forget spending three evenings with Eugene Ormandy or five evenings with Roger Scott, principal bass of the Philadelphia, or hosting Thomas Martin, principal bass of the London Symphony for dinner in our home.

Who could forget the many wonderful performances, including one in which the Boston Symphony members rose to their feet cheering Zino Franciscotti at the conclusion of his Beethoven Violin Concerto or the Consertgebow performance of a Mahler Symphony. The stature of the visiting orchestras and the reputation of the festival is such that the Winnipeg Symphony members charted a bus and after an evening concert, got on the bus, and rode straight to Ames to hear the Vienna Symphony, then got back on the bus for another all-night, all-day ride back to Winnipeg and played a concert that night.

All of these memories and many more add to the appreciation and suspense as we anticipate our next chance to hear the very finest of orchestra music, right here in Ames! Join me for an evening of great music and memories in the making on November 9 as we welcome the Jerusalem Symphony to town.