

Norman Fowler Leyden (1917-2014)

By Marilyn Shotola

A major figure in Oregon's musical life, Norman Leyden was director of the Oregon Symphony Orchestra Pops Series for over thirty years, often playing his clarinet as well as conducting. Originally hired as associate conductor of the orchestra, he initiated the Pops Series and was given the lifetime title of Laureate Associate Conductor in 2004.

Norman Fowler Leyden was born on October 17, 1917, in Springfield, Massachusetts, to James A. and Constance Leyden. He graduated from Yale University in 1938 and played clarinet in the New Haven Symphony. He joined the U.S. Army Air Force in 1941 and served for five years as a conductor, performer, and arranger, including performing in the Army Air Force show "Winged Victory" and arranging music for Glen Miller's Air Force Band in England and France. In 1942, he married Alice Curry Wells, a bassist and copyist, in Duval County, Florida.

After the end of World War II, Leyden worked as an arranger for the Tex Beneke reorganization of the Glen Miller Orchestra. Between 1956 and 1959, he was a freelance arranger in New York City and then a staff arranger for RCA Victor, arranging children's albums and musicals such as *Cinderella*, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, and *Peter Pan*. He conducted and arranged music for artists Mitch Miller, Gordon MacRae, Ezio Pinza, Sarah Vaughn, and Frank Sinatra, and was the musical director for television shows, including *the \$64,000 Question*, *the Arthur Godfrey Show*, and *the Jackie Gleason Show*.

While earning his master's (1965) and doctorate (1968) degrees in conducting from Columbia University, he taught at that university for several years. In 1968, he moved to Portland to lead the Portland Youth Philharmonic while its conductor, Jacob Avshalomov, was on sabbatical. During that time, he taught conducting at Portland State University.

Leyden joined the Oregon Symphony in 1970 as associate conductor, a post he held for twenty-nine years. He initiated the Oregon Symphony Pops Series, one of the most successful programs of its kind in the nation, and continued with the series until 2004. Over those three decades, the series attracted an audience of over a million people. With a deep knowledge of the styles and periods of popular music, Leyden liked to feature as many musicians of the orchestra as possible in his arrangements. He often played his clarinet as part of the show and practiced the instrument every day.

Leyden was also music director of the Seattle Symphony Pops for eighteen seasons and conductor of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra's Prairie Pops for eight seasons. After retiring from the Oregon Symphony at age eighty-seven, he continued as a guest conductor for orchestras around the country and performed clarinet with Thomas Lauderdale and Pink Martini, playing at concerts in Carnegie Hall and the Hollywood Bowl.

Leyden was awarded the Governor's Arts Award in 1991 and was inducted into the Oregon Music Hall of Fame in 2008. "Norman charmed standing-room-only audiences with his warmth and musicality," Oregon Symphony President Scott Showalter said upon Leyden's death on July 23, 2014. "His talents were revered far beyond our stage." Alice Leyden, his wife of sixty-nine years, died in 2011.

Sources

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