

Joseph Wagner – The Most Undiscovered of America’s Composers

By [Peter Lawrence Alexander](#) / June 7, 2009

Nicholas Slonimsky called Joseph Wagner, “...the most undiscovered of American composers.” He even started a symphony orchestra that’s still performing today.



Joseph Wagner 1900 - 1974

Joseph Wagner wrote books on orchestration and band scoring that were ahead of their time. He started a symphony orchestra that’s still performing actively today. Two of his symphonies were conducted by the legendary Howard Hanson. But he died alone while watching the World Series. And today his music is rarely performed.

Said the *New York Times*, “Joseph Wagner’s Rhapsody for Piano, Clarinet and Strings reflected the impressionistic idiom. But it was written with a fine feeling for form, and with gusto.”

Joseph Wagner was both a composer and a conductor. Following his release from the U.S. Army after World War I, he graduated from New England Conservatory with honors, finishing four years in two. In 1923, the year of his graduation, he was appointed an Assistant Director of Music and Supervisor of Orchestras and Bands in the Boston Public School System. In 1924,

he founded the Boston Civic Symphony which he led for 18 years. This year, the Boston Civic Symphony celebrates its 85th Anniversary.

Five years later, in 1929, Joseph Wagner was appointed to the music faculty of Boston University where he taught orchestration and band scoring. For the next 30 years, Wagner observed students and their learning issues in these two subject areas. The result in 1959 and 1960 was the publication of *Orchestration: A Practical Handbook* and *Band Scoring*.

The '30s and '40s found Wagner making guest conducting appearances, conducting, and studying. From 1934 – 1935, Wagner was in Paris studying composition with Nadia Boulanger and conducting with Pierre Monteux and Felix Weingartner. During that time, he wrote a number of works including two ballets, *Dance Divertissement* and *Hudson River Legend*.

1945, as Wagner wrote in an autobiographical sketch, “was the highest peak of his works.” That year his *Symphony #2* debuted. Said the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, “...this new symphony, in spite of its Mahleresque length (35 minutes) has a great deal of meat in it — powerful pulsating use of instruments, skilled counterpoint, and an especially pleasant third movement. Restless drive and energy are its prime characteristics, and they hold the interest.”

That same year, Wagner was made Special Instructor at Hunter College and in 1946, became an Assistant Professor at Brooklyn College.

In 1947, Wagner left New York to become the Musical Director of the Duluth Symphony. For the next 12 years, Wagner wrote and conducted literally around the globe. But in 1959, thanks to a grant from California's Huntington Hartford Foundation, he moved to Los Angeles. In 1960, the Los Angeles Conservatory of Music appointed him head of the Theory Department.

Then in 1963, he was appointed Composer-in-Residence at Pepperdine University where he stayed for the next decade.

Dr. Wagner passed away suddenly on Saturday afternoon, October 12, 1974. An avid baseball fan, he rescheduled a private composition appointment after the World Series game had been completed. When his student arrived, the student could hear the television, but Dr. Wagner didn't respond to repeated knockings. Finding the landlord, the student asked him to open the door to Dr. Wagner's apartment. They found him sitting on a sofa – lifeless.

Cause of death was reportedly a ruptured aneurism on his artery. Dr. Wagner's remains were returned to Rhode Island where he was buried next to his parents in Pawtucket, Rhode Island.

In 1989 Alexander Publishing was granted permission to take over the publication of *Orchestration: A Practical Handbook* and for the 50th Anniversary Edition, re-titled it *Professional Orchestration: A Practical Handbook* and broke it down into three compact titles: *From Piano to Strings* (available now), with *From Piano to Woodwinds*, and *From Piano to Orchestra* forthcoming.

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