

Blossom Festival 50th Anniversary: Reasons to celebrate (Part III)

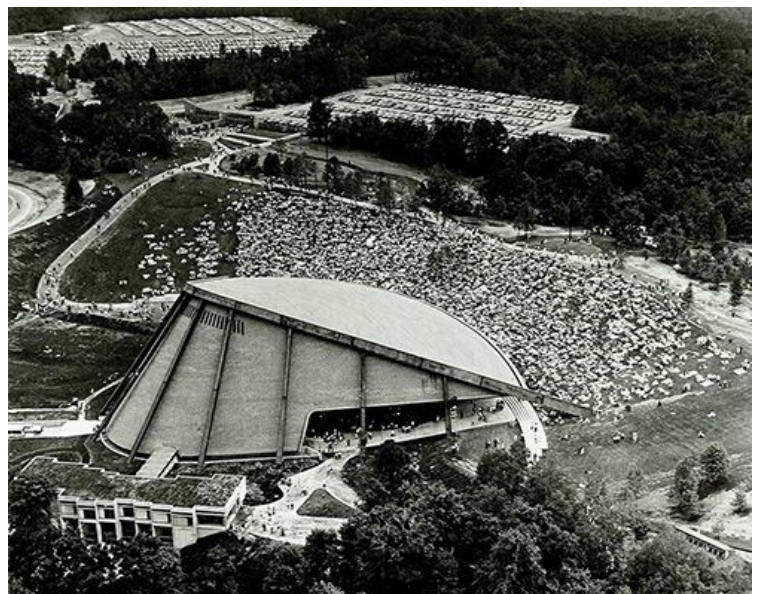
by Alice Koeninger



As we celebrate its 50th anniversary, it's fun to look back on highlights from Blossom Music Center's illustrious list of performances. In its inaugural season in 1968, Vladimir Ashkenazy made his first appearance with The Cleveland Orchestra as a pianist. The newly-formed Blossom Festival Chorus performed *Carmina Burana* on August 25, to great acclaim.

This year, they will perform that same work on the same date, exactly 50 years later.

Blossom's second year brought performances by such artists as Alicia de Larrocha, Victor Borge, José Feliciano, Duke Ellington, Maria Alba, Hank Thompson, Dionne Warwick, André Kostelanetz with Marian Anderson, and Peter Nero. The first Fourth of July concert also took place in 1969, conducted by Meredith Willson, composer of *The Music Man*. That same year saw the official record for the largest crowd ever at Blossom: 24,364 people came out to hear Blood, Sweat & Tears. That record



was “unofficially” broken in 1973 when Pink Floyd attracted an estimated 32,000 people to Blossom’s green slopes.

Leonard Bernstein conducted Mahler’s Second Symphony — his only appearance with The Cleveland Orchestra — in 1970. While governor of Georgia, Jimmy Carter visited Blossom in 1974 as the guest of Ohio governor John Gilligan. In 1984, Big Bird made a guest appearance, and in 1985, Christoph von Dohnányi presented a fully-staged production of *The Magic Flute*. Other Blossom standouts have included Ella Fitzgerald, Itzhak Perlman, Leonard Rose, Roberta Peters, Van Cliburn, and pianist Leonard Pennario, in his debut with The Orchestra.



The new millennium brought big changes for Blossom. Jahja Ling, who revealed his love for the Music Center in an *Akron Beacon Journal* [interview](#), was named Festival Director in 1999, to begin in the summer of 2000. In December 2001, the Musical Arts Association announced the Blossom Redevelopment Project, the first major improvement project for the Center in its 34 years. The Design Team included Peter van Dijk, the original architect, and



the Project was finished in 2003, with a re-opening concert on July 5 conducted by Franz Welser-Möst.

In 2009, Blossom made headlines when Congress approved a partial purchase of 635 undeveloped acres, transferring the land to the Cuyahoga County National Park in an agreement that involved the Musical Arts Association, the National Park Service, and the Trust for Public Land. This sale was completed in 2011, conserving a total of 578 acres of land.



Though Blossom is officially the summer home of The Cleveland Orchestra, its concerts are not exclusively classical. In fact, Blossom's reputation as a great party venue as well as a concert venue has contributed to its infamous status in the Midwest as a musical epicenter. People can relax and mingle with fellow fans on the lawn, instead of standing packed

together in a sweaty crowd. People come back not just because of the music but because they can truly enjoy it without distractions.

From its beginning, Blossom has played host to a variety of musical styles. The "Pops" concerts, as they were first called, happened on Sundays, and were changed to the "Sunday Early Evening Concerts" in the early '80s. They then became the "Blossom Popular Classics Concerts" in the mid '80s, around 1984. In 1990, daily operations and management of special attractions was



turned over to MCA concerts, and later to Live Nation.

The Beach Boys, Bob Dylan, Billy Squier, Billy Idol, Cher, Chicago, Depeche Mode, Donna Summer, Earth Wind and Fire, Eric Clapton, Elton John, The Four Tops, James Taylor, Kool & the Gang, Neil Diamond, Pat Benatar, Paul Simon, Ravi Shankar, Chance the Rapper, Alice Cooper, Janis Joplin (below) Toby Keith, Aretha Franklin, Jimmy Buffett, and Radiohead have all played at Blossom. The list goes on and on — find it [here](#).



Blossom's versatility is important to its history and its legacy. Not only is it the summer home for one of the nation's most respected orchestras, it brings music of all genres to a unique outdoor venue in Northeast Ohio, attracting thousands of fans locally and nationally. Whenever an artist steps onstage, they become part of a tradition of talented people who have brought vibrance and excitement to the natural beauty in the Cuyahoga valley. The area truly has a reason to be proud.

Now if only they could fix the traffic problem.

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Third, fourth, and fifth photos courtesy of The Cleveland Orchestra Archives.

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