

Michigan Every Day

By Patrick Sullivan and Carole Eberly

Oct. 2, 1919
Orchestra Hall opens in Detroit

It took just four months and 23 days to build Orchestra Hall, home of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. Workers speedily constructed the building because the orchestra's recently-appointed music director, Russian pianist Ossip Gabrilowitsch, insisted that the orchestra have a suitable home. The hall was completed on Oct. 2, 1919, and the first concert at the Woodward Ave. venue was held later in the month.

Under Gabrilowitsch, the Detroit Symphony saw a golden age for two decades as the world's most famous musicians, composers and conductors made Detroit a stop on their tours. The Great Depression brought trouble for the orchestra and it moved to the Masonic temple Theater in 1939 to save money. Orchestra Hall reopened two years later as the Paradise Theatre and the venue became a magnet for the country's most famous jazz musicians such as Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Count Basie and Duke Ellington. In the 10 years of its existence, the Paradise rivaled the Apollo Theater in Harlem. Like so many old buildings in Detroit, the theater fell into disrepair. After the Paradise closed in 1951, the building rotted away and by 1970 the acuity planned to demolish Orchestra Hall. However, a group of citizens emerged to lead a fight to save the theater. Led by orchestra bassoonist Paul Ganson, the group marched near the theater and held sidewalk performances that managed to turn away the wrecking ball.

The building was added to the National Register of Historic Sites in 1971. Restoration of the building took place for another two decades. Millions of dollars were raised as the decorative plasterwork was replaced, the theater's original box seating was restored, and a new stage and lighting were added.

As restrooms and backstage facilities were modernized the original paintings were replaced to restore the grandeur of the theater's golden age. The Detroit Symphony Orchestra moved back into its historic home in 1989 as restoration continued. The hall celebrated the completion of another wave of restoration in 2003