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Meet the man behind celebrations to mark the 100-year anniversary of the Gustav Mahler concert in Syracuse

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Dick Case / Post-Standard columnist



Dennis Nett/The Post-Standard, file photo, 2005

Hamilton Armstrong, shown here with Rembrandt etchings at Munson Williams Proctor Museum of Art in Utica in 2005, helped organize a commemoration next week of the 1910 Gustav Mahler concert held in Syracuse.

Hamilton Armstrong calls it "the greatest event, ever, in Syracuse."

He's talking about the 1910 performance of Gustav Mahler conducting the New York Philharmonic Orchestra at Wieting Opera House on Clinton Square. The famous composer and conductor brought the Philharmonic to Syracuse as part of a "Tour of America."

That was Dec. 9, 1910, 100 years ago next week.

Hamilton, who is a member of a founding family of the town of Manlius, is credited with starting, and adding finishing touches, to a commemoration of the Mahler concert that spins out here next week.

"It's been pretty much a one-man show for

Hamilton," according to Gregg A. Tripoli, executive director of the Onondaga Historical Association (OHA), one of the event sponsors.

"He's done the whole thing with his telephone," Gregg explained.

Hamilton is 85 and blind. He's been hospitalized recently.

The "whole thing" includes dedication of a stone bench in Clinton Square on Dec. 9 and a centennial concert recreating Mahler's 1910 program on WCNY-FM, Syracuse's classical music radio station, 91.3. The fourth Wieting Opera House opened in 1897 and was torn down in 1930.

The bench is dedicated at 12:30 p.m. The FM broadcast begins at 1 p.m. hosted by



Henry Fogel, a founder of WONO, Syracuse's earlier classical station. He currently serves as CEO of the American Symphony Orchestra League. Bill Baker of WCNY will service as master of ceremonies for the bench dedication.

Other participants include Syracuse's Parks and Recreation Department, the State Historic Preservation office and Lutz Monument Co., which donated engraving of the bench.

Hamilton Armstrong admits to being a long-time fan of Gustav Mahler. He said he was flabbergasted "way, way back" when he discovered mention of the composer's Syracuse concert in a four-volume biography.

"I asked myself, 'Does anybody know about that?'" he explained in a phone interview this week. "It has to be the greatest event ever, in Syracuse. I've been poking at the idea of a commemoration more than 10 years."

Among other things.

Hamilton, who lives on family land next to Green Lakes State Park, has a reputation as a community gadfly. He is a familiar among spectators at Manlius town board meetings. In fact, he said he asked that members of the board be invited to the Clinton Square program "so they can refuse to attend."

He's also a regular writer of letters to the editor, especially on topics related to environmental issues. He sometimes signs letters "Ol' Burdock," referring to himself as that "abominable weed." Or "someone who does absurd things."

He once told a Post-Standard reporter "The atmosphere of government is 'You can't change it.' That's sad, because you can change it."

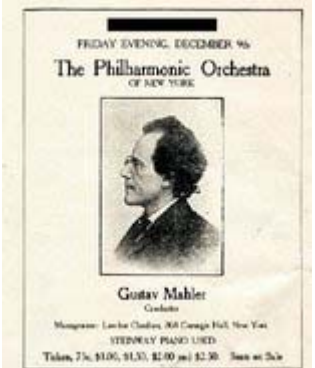
He was part of the failed effort to wrest the White Lake wilderness in Dewitt from Scott Congel, son of mall-master Bob Congel. He also championed preservation of Green Lakes, even though Gov. Franklin Roosevelt had used eminent domain to take part of the Collin family farm for the park. It once numbered about 1,500 acres.

Hamilton's also a collector of art. He donated some of his Rembrandt sketches to the Munson-Williams-Proctor Museum of Art in Utica, following an exhibit of the works. He says he's still collecting Rembrandt materials, "which is quite a challenge for a man who can't see."

He insisted he plans to attend the dedication program in Clinton Square next week, despite his physical condition. "I will show up in an ambulance on a stretcher," he explained. "I will attend bodily."



Gustav Mahler conducted the New York Philharmonic Orchestra at Wieting Opera House on Clinton Square on Dec. 9, 1910.



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A concert program from New York Philharmonic performance, conducted by Gustav Mahler, at Syracuse's Wieting Opera House in 1910.

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The Post-Standard review of Gustav Mahler concert 100 years ago

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