



Once Upon a Time at Fairyland

By C.J. Hirschfield

An Oakland full harmonic life

I met Harold Lawrence through the Lake Merritt Breakfast Club and Oakland Rotary 3. He was a dapper gentleman with a voice like honey. I knew he operated a video production service, and he and his wife Mary were longtime supporters of Children's Fairyland.

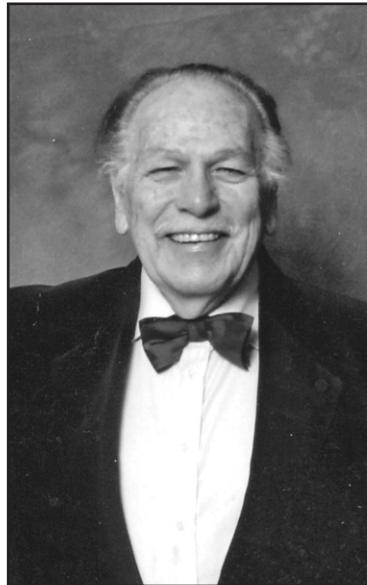
I had absolutely no clue that this low-key man was world renowned, and that he left glamorous lives in London and New York in favor of Oakland, where he put down deep roots and made contributions to our arts scene over three decades that are profound and lasting.

It was only at the celebration of Harold's life last week that I learned from people who adored him about his time at Mercury Records, the fact that he was the first American appointed General Manager of the London Symphony Orchestra, and about his management of the New York Philharmonic.

Harold joined Mercury Records as musical director in 1956, and over the next 11 years produced more than 350 Living Presence recordings, including performances by stars like Yehudi Menuhin and Maria Callas, under conductors Sir Neville Martin, Leonard Bernstein and Sir Colin Davis, among others.

Part of Mercury's "Golden Age," Harold's recordings of classical music are legendary among music aficionados and collectors for their unsurpassed technical and artistic excellence.

One reporter wrote "...the



Harold Lawrence.

physical act of recording music is an art form unto itself...Harold Lawrence, musical director for the classical division of Mercury Records, is an artist among artisans."

In 1967, Harold took the helm at the London Symphony Orchestra, luring Andre Previn back from jazz and into the Principal Conductor's podium. In 1973 he returned to his native New York to manage the world famous New York Philharmonic, later moving to manage the Buffalo Philharmonic where he worked with Michael Tilson Thomas.

But it was in 1977 that Edgar Kaiser persuaded Harold to come to Oakland as President and General Manager of the Oakland Symphony. Harold recruited a young, dynamic Calvin Simmons as Conductor and Musical Director; Simmons tragi-

cally drowned just as his career was taking off in 1982.

Harold's successful video production company later produced works for such clients as Bank of America, the Oakland Museum of California, and the Public Broadcasting System.

Harold and his love and partner Mary (famous news photographer Mary Morris) decided to settle in Oakland, and they played an important role in the Bay Area's cultural life for more than 30 years. Harold served on Oakland's Cultural Arts Commission, as a grant panelist for the California Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts and the Oakland Arts Council.

But it was the Oakland Youth Orchestra that Harold chose to support through his time on their board of directors, right up until his death. At the celebration of Harold's life, former and current members of the Orchestra played beautifully. Around the room sat the widest array of people; artists, musicians, elected officials, and all of us who appreciated the man whose quiet modesty belied his impressive past.

Having earned great acclaim in New York and London, why on earth did Harold choose to put down roots in Oakland? I can't claim to have the answer, but the flowers that bloomed from those roots can be seen all around this town.

Please consider making a contribution in Harold's memory to the Oakland Youth Orchestra at www.oyo.org

Many thanks to Libby Schaaf, whose program notes have been referenced here.

C.J. Hirschfield is Executive Director of Children's Fairyland, which is located next to Lake Merritt at 699 Bellevue Avenue, Oakland. For more information call 452-2259 or e-mail cj@fairyland.org.