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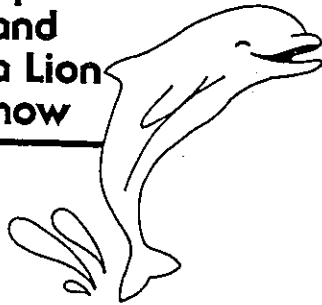
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**Golden moments
 are recalled by
 silver anniversary**

By Joan Boram
 special writer

GORDON STAPLES HAD heard Durwood (Woody) V. Varner, the first chancellor of Oakland University, talk about a music festival at Meadow Brook several years before it came into being. "The entire orchestra was very excited about the project," said Staples, who recently retired as DSO concertmaster. Staples was reminiscing about the early days of the Meadow Brook Music Festival, currently celebrating its 25th season. "In those days, being a member of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra wasn't a full-time job. We used to play at Belle Isle for a couple of weeks, and at the Fairgrounds for a few weeks in the summer, but it was no means a full schedule," he said. "I was so enthusiastic about the project when it finally got started in 1964 that I used to drive out and watch it being built."

GROUND BREAKING FOR THE festival began Feb. 29, 1964. Beginning July 23, the first season ran until Aug. 15. Concerts were given on Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings. Prices were: \$3 for reserved seats, \$2 for unreserved, and \$1 for general admission. There was a discount for season tickets.

"From the beginning," said Oliver Green, DSO clarinetist, "then-conductor Sixten Ehrling had a hard and fast rule: No composition could be performed at Meadow Brook that the DSO had performed the previous season or would perform during the next one."

"He canceled his European engagements for that summer to launch the festival, and he insisted that subscription-series quality be maintained. There were three or four full rehearsals for each performance. In contrast, for the Fairgrounds concerts, there was just one rehearsal for three concerts of semiclassical music," Green said.

"Three or four rehearsals may sound like a lot," Green said, "but don't forget that in many instances, the DSO musicians were playing unfamiliar pieces. Since Ehrling thought people probably wouldn't come to hear the same pieces they could hear in the regular concert season, he often selected pieces that the orchestra had never played before."

"It was sometimes a tough, strange repertoire that season, but the performances were good, fresh, spontaneous," Green said.

"Ehrling was a master programmer. Everything always fit in beautifully. The programs were always well balanced. The audiences were wonderful, very excited. They knew they were involved in an adventure and the enthusiasm was contagious."

ASK ANYONE INVOLVED in the festival and he will tell you that the festival performances are hardly ever rained out. This is not the same as saying that it doesn't rain. It's just that the audiences don't give up. They come dressed for the rain and, of course, many seats are sheltered from the elements.

"When it's cold," Staples said, "the woodwinds go down and the strings go up. Humidity is the worst. And, if it's raining really hard, orchestra members can't hear the music. On the whole, though, we've been lucky. I think only one concert has been rained out."

(In 1967, guest pianist Van Cliburn's concert was canceled because of damage caused by the high winds that accompany a tornado, but he wasn't rained out.)

Staples agrees that the acoustics "are marvelous for an outdoor facility; they rate with the best indoor halls."

RAIN WAS PREDICTED FOR opening night. There is a story that "Woody" Varner had his secretary check the weather forecast every half hour the day before the performance to see if the odds had improved.

Staples, acting concertmaster at the time, and cellist Italo Babin played the Brahms double concerto at that first concert at Meadow Brook.

As it happened, it was a beautiful, clear evening, and, just like in the movies, a full moon appeared over the horizon just as the first notes of Wagner's "Der Meistersinger" overture sounded.

As the concert ended with Sibelius' Second Symphony, 2,500 people sprang to their feet and cheered. They're still cheering.