

This Day in History... December 17, 1894

Birth of Arthur Fiedler

Famed American conductor Arthur Fiedler was born on December 17, 1894, in Boston, Massachusetts. Best known for his long leadership of the Boston Pops Orchestra, Fiedler transformed classical music from a formal concert hall tradition into an experience enjoyed by millions. Through radio broadcasts, recordings, and outdoor performances, he helped make orchestral music accessible, entertaining, and deeply popular in American culture.

Both of Fiedler's parents were musicians. His mother was a pianist and his father a violinist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. When his father retired, the family moved to Vienna and then Berlin, where Fiedler attended the Royal Academy of Music.

Fiedler became a musical scholar at a young age. He primarily trained as a violinist, but played multiple instruments. In 1915, he joined the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Fiedler found the Symphony "snobbish," however. He branched out to form his own mini-symphony, conducting its chamber music concerts for several years. Then, in 1930, he took over as the eighteenth conductor of the Boston Pops Orchestra.

A position that was a mere stepping-stone for most conductors became Fiedler's career. He was the acting conductor up until the day he died, a commitment that spanned half-a-century. Though already known for its popular and light classical repertoire, Fiedler's somewhat unconventional style and lightheartedness put a new twist on the Boston Pops. Concerts became less formal and the arrangements more modern – more popular.

Fiedler made many moves deemed controversial for a symphony. He was all for recording the music and selling it, and not just the classics. He also conducted recordings of show tunes, film scores, and even renditions of popular music like the Beatles. Over his career, record sales for the Pops topped \$50 million, helping to keep the orchestra in a good financial position. The Pops made more recordings than any other orchestra in the world under Fiedler's leadership.

Fiedler integrated the new with the old, performing with then modern musicians like Duke Ellington, the Carpenters, and Dizzy Gillespie. He appeared on television, both as conductor and as a spokesperson in commercials. He wove jokes and self-mocking antics into his performances. His lighthearted approach welcomed and entertained audiences of all tastes.

Ellington played and recorded with the Pops in July 1965.



Through it all, the maestro remained unfazed and untarnished by criticism. He was enormously popular with the public, and the Pops became synonymous with Fiedler himself. His 1976 Bicentennial concert in Boston drew some 400,000 fans in one of the largest classical concert gatherings in history! As one reporter put it, Fiedler wanted to be taken "as a genial, extroverted and vigorous exponent of populism in the realm of classical music."

During his career, Fiedler conducted several other orchestras. He conducted the San Francisco Pops Orchestra for 26 summers. Fiedler also conducted the opening ceremonies of Walt Disney World in 1971. He also received a number of awards over the years, including the University of Pennsylvania Glee Club Award of Merit and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Fiedler died on July 10, 1979. Five years later, an oversized bust of Fiedler was unveiled in Boston near a park that puts on a free concert series.



This stamp was part of the 1997 Conductors and Composers Issue.

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