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Symphony Orchestras: How Did We Get Here? Where Are We Going?

by

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Editor's Digest

Symphony Orchestras: How Did We Get Here? Where are We Heading?

The genesis of the following essay was a report that Fred Starr presented to the Knight Foundation in January 1997. The Institute received a copy of that report, and asked Starr to share his ideas with readers of Harmony.

During his career, Starr has served a number of American institutions, including Oberlin College and the Aspen Institute, as president of each. He is a devotee of symphonic music, a jazz musician, and a keen observer of the American music scene. His observations are worth a thoughtful read.

A Corporate-Philanthropic Model

Starr argues that American orchestra organizations have followed a corporate-philanthropic model since the founding of the New York Philharmonic in 1842. He suggests that this model was honed in the 1960s, particularly through a study of the performing arts conducted by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and initiatives funded by the Ford Foundation. Publication in 1966 of William J. Baumol and William G. Bowen's book Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma *fueled acceptance of the corporate-philanthropic model.*

But Starr thinks Baumol and Bowen were misguided and, in detail, explains why.

Initiatives for a New Model

In the April 1996 issue of Harmony, *we presented the Fleischmann-Lipman-Morris debate of the late 1980s. Was the symphony dead? The American Symphony Orchestra League concluded that orchestra organizations were a "culture of conflict." Starr suggests that there is hope, and explains the Knight Foundation's "Magic of Music" initiative, which assigns growing importance to the motivation of orchestra players, and to the organizational arrangements and less formal aspects of an orchestra's "culture."*

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In medicine, both diagnoses and prescriptions are in constant flux. To some extent these shifts reflect the ever changing list of diseases that afflict our species. No less, the changes reflect the evolution of our knowledge and the fashions of thought prevailing in the medical profession and in society at large. One year, we trace the cause of all our ills to diet, and the next year to the environment; for a while the scalpel is seen as the best treatment for cancers, but then we suddenly shy away from operations in favor of other therapies, or even homeopathy.

Similarly, the diagnoses and prescriptions that we devise for the American symphony orchestra are constantly changing. As in medicine, the shifts embody the evolving state of our knowledge, whether of economics, sociology, or the theory of organizations. But to an equal degree, they reveal the predispositions, both personal and collective, that we bring to the task at hand. The fact that both our knowledge and our biases are in constant flux should encourage us to gain perspective on how we have addressed the ills of symphony orchestras in the past, and how we should best do so in the future. That is the purpose of this essay.

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The American symphony orchestra traces its origins to the 18th century. Long before the establishment of the New York Philharmonic in 1842, various entrepreneurial or musician-led collaborative orchestras existed in New York, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Boston, and Charleston. But it was the Philharmonic model of a board-led professional ensemble with philanthropic support that eventually prevailed everywhere. Hence the tendency to equate the Philharmonic's founding with the establishment of the American orchestra as such. To this day, American orchestral organizations generally mirror the Philharmonic, and the evolution of the "industry" (a usage as revealing as it is common) has followed a single pattern which, based on the

New York model, might be called corporate-philanthropic. The key period in the recent evolution of that pattern was the 1960s.

The main thesis offered here is that the 1960s saw the full elaboration of an idea on how performing arts groups should be organized that has prevailed down to the present. It is worth noting that this ideal was not developed with the symphony orchestra specifically in mind, but for a generic "performing arts" entity. Until recently, orchestras have been subsumed under corporate or philanthropic models of organization that often fail to comprehend the idiosyncrasies of orchestral music and the realities of musicians' lives. Today, many question the relevance of the 1960s model. Some might even wonder if that model was ever appropriate, and whether it might in the long run have done as much harm as good.

Be that as it may, the present moment, for all its obvious difficulties, is surely a fertile one. Basic verities are being scrutinized and fundamentally new approaches considered. In the place of the old corporate-philanthropic model, a new ideal based on artistic, personal, and social considerations is gradually coming into being.

The 1960s Vision: Looking Back to the Future

The framework assumptions of our current dialogue on symphony orchestras were first systematized in the 1960s. The very language with which we discuss orchestral life was codified in that decade, and gained such widespread acceptance that we rarely pause to ask whether that vocabulary is appropriate or whether another one might be more useful.

The crystallizing moment occurred when John D. Rockefeller, architect Wallace K. Harrison, and other trustees of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund undertook a special study of the performing arts in America. The year—1965—was auspicious. The arts had experienced a sustained boom and the prevailing view was that good times would continue. Orchestras faced real problems that members of the Rockefeller panel acknowledged and sought to address. But no one doubted that workable solutions were readily at hand. After all, were not orchestras "the longest established, most widely dispersed, and most stable" of all America's performing arts organizations?[1]

The Beatles and Rolling Stones were already driving young audiences wild, and there were already hints of a poisonous cynicism about leadership that would eventually culminate in, and be vindicated by, Watergate. But the Rockefeller panel saw none of this (did any of us?), and assumed that the problems of orchestras, whatever they were, did not involve leadership. It had no problem relegating sole control of programming to the artistic director. It saw the technological changes that were already looming as purely benign from the standpoint of symphony orchestras, and it had no sense that the "culture" of concert life was in any way threatened. Least of all did the panel question what William Weber has called "the highly rationalized social controls that the new business elite exercised over lesser groups" in the concert hall.[2] In the panel's view, the only real problem was money.

"... the Rockefeller panel ... assumed that the problems of orchestras, whatever they were, did not involve leadership.... the only real problem was money.... [and it] offered a stunningly simple solution: extend the season."

In 1965, major orchestras covered about 52 percent of their costs through ticket sales. The panel was unwilling to consider raising ticket prices, and recommended instead that the shortfall be covered through grants from foundations, corporations, and the federal government. But this was not all. Several crippling strikes had just occurred over musicians' wages. The Rockefeller panel, ruing the fact that 20 percent of orchestral musicians in major cities had to teach on the side in order to make ends meet, offered a stunningly simple solution: extend the season. No one asked if the public was interested in supporting an extended season or if the add-on concerts might require greater variety in programming. No one calculated the "opportunity cost" of reduced teaching in the community by orchestral players. All this was waved aside with what today appears breathtaking naiveté. Suffice it to say that no one thought so then, this author not excepted.

The Rockefeller panel showed genuine sensitivity to many themes considered important today. Even if it did not equate audiences with ticket sales, it encouraged steps to expand the audience for classical concerts, pointing out that, "There are millions of Americans who have never seen a live professional performance or participated in a live performance of any kind."[3] The panel also suggested that orchestras could make gains by improving their operating efficiency which, as we shall see, was soon dismissed as heretical.

But the heart of the panel's recommendations was the extended season. In a passage that anticipates Robert Shaw's 1977 proposal for "an ideal 'Musical Arts Society' which would embrace all musical activities and all areas of performance," and Ernest Fleishmann's 1987 notion of a "community of musicians,"[4] the Rockefeller group suggested that the orchestra might transform itself into a "purveyor of musical services . . . a musical talent organization producing musicians for a variety of musical activities."[5] Such examples of breadth and imagination did much to soften the Rockefeller panel's otherwise hard focus on year-round employment as a cure-all for orchestras.

These same qualities were less in evidence in the influential volume *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma*, published the following year by two academic economists, William J. Baumol and William G. Bowen. While taking no stand on the lengthened season, the authors came out squarely for professionalization, and urged that it be extended to the orchestras' management. Orchestras, they argued, are businesses and should be managed as such. Having acknowledged this, Baumol and Bowen seemingly weakened their argument by posing what they claimed was the central dilemma of the economics of orchestras. Unlike manufacturers, who can match added costs with gains in productivity, an orchestra, they argued, must face ever mounting costs with inelastic productivity, thus creating a funding gap. Why should this be?

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In the view of these two economists, orchestras are constrained by their "technology." A set number of basses are needed to perform Brahms, and the composer's set tempos rule out any possible gains from "working" faster.[6] On this simple premise, Baumol and Bowen based an eloquent and effective plea for foundations and the federal government to fill the funding gap.

Their timing was perfect. A soaring stock market had lifted the endowments of many foundations, leaving them in good condition to respond. The Kennedy era had passed, but Camelot lived on in the growing readiness of Congress to support the arts. A new era appeared to be dawning.

For all the volume's strengths, *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma* is seriously flawed both as diagnosis and prescription. Since this study's general approach and leading recommendations were to become deeply knit into the orchestral field, it is worth pausing to consider these issues in some depth.

First, orchestras can improve their productivity. If a conductor wastes rehearsal time, he or she is reducing productivity. If ticket sales cover half the budget, and half the seats are empty, the potential "productivity" of the concert is reduced by a quarter, no matter how brilliant the performance. True, the authors glance in passing at the empty seats, and even note the fact that audiences for both theater and ballet were growing faster than for orchestral concerts. But they draw no conclusions from this evidence other than to call for more external support.

Second, Baumol and Bowen equate all sources of income. Perhaps this is appropriate in strict accounting terms but it causes serious distortions in the management of orchestras. Suppose that $1,000 from ticket sales is equated with the same amount from a foundation or corporate grant, or from the National Endowment for the Arts. All money, after all, is equal. It follows that administrators should focus their attention on whatever sources of funds yield the largest amounts with the least expenditure in time and money. And since the IRS rewards larger donors with greater tax deductibility, it could even be said that the private grants deserve the most administrative attention since their donors have greater inducement to make them. Under any circumstances, the income from ticket sales, and hence audiences, receive a diminished level of attention from trustees and administrators who are guided by such reasoning.

> *"What city will fail to acknowledge the importance of its orchestra as an institution in the face of strong and enthusiastic audiences?"*

But the argument itself is flawed. A larger audience (especially if it is enthusiastic about the performance) can be a recruiting field for volunteers, whose time should appear on the budget, but usually does not. The expanded audience may also draw in heretofore unknown individual donors whose support may eventually extend over many years. And it is certain to exert a positive influence on local public opinion and, by extension, government. What city will fail to acknowledge the importance of its orchestra as an institution in the face of strong and enthusiastic audiences? Such recognition can also translate into practical benefits in the form of direct and indirect subsidies. But *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma* ignored all this, and by doing so helped divert the attention of orchestral boards and managers from individual audience members to institutional donors, and from the concert hall to the development office.

This crucial shift was hastened by the further assumption that the performing arts and culture are above all "social goods" and that "society" should therefore be prepared to pay for them. Never mind that Cicero, in his famous speech *Pro Arcia*, in which the ideal of the humanities was set forth for the first time, stressed that the role of the arts is to civilize, console, uplift, and soothe the individual, and that Cicero was deeply skeptical of civic bombast masquerading under the name of art.

The notion that music is primarily a social good contains several subthemes that merit our attention. A strong element in the foundation world holds that the greater a nonprofit group's dependence on salable output, the less its ability to concentrate on charitable activities, and hence the lower its "community benefit index" (read: worthiness of foundation support).[7] By such reasoning, an orchestra organization that sells tickets to its concerts is deemed less worthy of philanthropic support than one that gives tickets away. Never mind that the act of a ticket purchase might imply to the purchaser that the concert (or rock concert, lecture, or education) possesses value, in a way that the free event (or rock concert, lecture, or education) does not. All this is lost on the professional funder, who sees the arts as a kind of "blackstrap molasses" to be administered to the public for its improvement, and who takes large ticket sales as evidence of the artistic director's aversion to risk, and hence of his or her unworthiness of support.

Also implicit in the assumption that music is mainly a social good is a strong dose of pre-Vietnam-era nationalism. Was this not the era when culture and the arts were being mobilized by the White House for Cold War competition, and when Van Cliburn's triumph in Moscow was taken as proof that the American system was second to none in the production of culture as well as of automobiles? Who could doubt that it was the task of philanthropy, corporations, and the federal government to assure that the United States would not bow before any other country as a Kulturstaat?

Even though the lifetime earnings of Americans who receive higher education are vastly greater than those who do not, Baumol and Bowen viewed universities, too, as primarily social goods. Consequently, in the 1960s they favored a pricing system for both concerts and universities based on "justice" (for whom?), even though their own research indicated considerable price elasticity in the performing arts, and the experience of major universities demonstrated that many Americans were prepared to pay a lot more for elite education. And they applied the same model to universities to explain why "productivity" cannot increase and, hence, why costs inevitably rise faster than inflation. Eventually, of course, the universities began pricing to market, at least for the rich. Finally, when yearly tuition at elite universities reached $30,000, the public rebelled. Soon legislatures and trustees, brushing aside arguments about the "inevitability of costs rising faster than the price index," began demanding greater efficiency and productivity. A parallel development was to occur in the orchestral world, and for the same reason. Trustees began refusing to pay for unutilized services and for expensive recording contracts that promised little offsetting income.

Finally, it is no accident that this entire economic argument was offered without reference to the quality of the product, the "producers'" ability to produce it, or the public's interest in buying it. The arts, after all, were a "Good Thing" and the musicians' motivation was not in question. The Baumol-Bowen volume devotes more space to analyzing the "non-ticket costs" of concert attendance, including baby-sitters and restaurants, than it does to the nature or quality of the musical "product," or the attendee's experience in the hall. It was assumed that these concerns were the exclusive domain of the musical director. It is relevant to note that in the same years, the board of General Motors blithely relegated full responsibility for the design and production of GM cars to the divisional presidents and chief engineers, and with similar consequences.

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The Pipers Pay

Together, the report of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund panel and the Baumol-Bowen volume defined American thinking about symphony orchestras and provided a blueprint for action. Initially, the results were encouraging. Thanks in good measure to the advocacy of these authors, the Ford Foundation committed substantial funds to the creation of orchestral endowments that could provide permanent support as the orchestras shifted to yearlong contracts for musicians. Later, Ford returned with more large grants to enable major orchestras to achieve "stabilization" by building cash reserves. And in the same buoyant mood, the consulting firm of McKinsey & Company reviewed orchestral life in 1972 and found that all problems would be solved if the federal government were only to cover 25 percent of orchestral budgets. The subsequent eightfold increase in public support for the arts seemed to confirm that anything was possible.

The benefits of this outpouring of support were enormous, at least in the short term. At the same time, they were accompanied by unanticipated consequences in the area of the "culture" of orchestral management that became liabilities in the longer term. Who could have foretold that the lengthened seasons would be inaugurated just as the whirlwind of cultural change hit in the late 1960s, as urban riots would drive concert-going audiences to far suburbs, or as foundations and even the federal government would begin to redirect resources to domestic social issues and away from the arts? Who, finally, could have anticipated that the effort to build orchestral endowments and generally to "stabilize" budgets with non-ticket income would occur just as a major setback was about to hit Wall Street? The consequence of these changes was something wholly unanticipated by the writers of the 1960s, namely, a reduction of ticket income per concert just as alternative sources of support were waning. Few had expected orchestral productivity to rise, but no one seems to have anticipated that it might fall. Yet in terms of economics this is precisely what happened.

> *". . . by the 1980s half-empty halls were all too common, even for many major orchestras. It was apparent that lengthened seasons had far outstripped the public's demand for concerts . . ."*

The total number of attendees continued to rise, if at a slower rate. But by the 1980s, half-empty halls were all too common, even for many major orchestras. It was apparent that lengthened seasons had far outstripped the public's demand for concerts, at least in the form they were being offered. Thomas W. Morris of The Cleveland Orchestra was one of many to begin speaking of bored audiences.[8] As early as 1980, Gunther Schuller observed that orchestral players had also grown bored with the repetitive, unimaginative, and artistically cynical programming with which music directors had filled the extended seasons.

The initial response of orchestras to these grave problems was at once mechanistic and fumbling. Boards were determined to apply what they considered to be sound management principles to the messy world of music. Like directors at General Motors in these same years, many rushed to the conclusion that it was the marketing department that had let them down. Rather than look at the product, rather than examine it clinically in terms of both quantity and quality, they simply brought in new leadership and expanded budgets for advertising and promotion. The few who considered the "product" looked no further than the artistic directors, whom they promoted and paid as "stars" in the hope that they could turn the situation around. Instead, the peripatetic but often mediocre directors responded by entering into commitments to several orchestras at once, thus assuring that none would get their full attention.

Other boards figured that the problem lay in fund raising, and therefore expanded development offices in order to churn out ever more applications to fickle funders whose attentions had long since turned elsewhere. Many turned away from seasoned older managers who could work with musical directors as respected colleagues and brought in tough "bottom-line men" (or women) who were prepared to slash back expenditures and whip recalcitrant musicians into line, whatever the consequences.[9]

Even though every one of these "take charge" measures was defended in terms of the latest fads in management theory, it is hard to discern any real strategy behind this fog of severe and even brutal tactical maneuvers. To the extent that any broader notions were involved, they consisted of a combination of corporate thinking from the era of downsizing and 1960s foundation thinking on arts organizations, which paid attention to everything but the art. In short, they consisted of ever larger doses of the old corporate-philanthropic nostrums that had helped get symphony orchestras into trouble in the first place.

The reckoning was not long in coming. By the late 1980s, the orchestral world faced a general crisis. The ticket-buying public had grown older and its numbers had peaked; a new generation approached adulthood with no exposure to music in the schools and no habit of concert-going; regular seasons contracted; pop stars were engaged as part of a pathetic and demeaning effort to court new audiences; deficits soared; endowments were consumed, and salaries frozen. A few well-managed organizations weathered the storm, but several of the weaker ones fell into bankruptcy. A mood of surliness and confrontation settled like an evil cloud over many orchestras and the organizations that sustained them. Contract negotiations often turned into exchanges of recriminations between management and musicians. Strikes or the threat of strikes, once comparatively rare in the orchestral world, reemerged as regular tools at the bargaining table. Many orchestras could no longer cope.

As the general crisis deepened, debate arose over the nature and very existence of symphony orchestras in America. Ernest Fleishmann declared in 1987 that:

> The symphony orchestra as we know it is dead. . . . Symphony concerts have become dull and predictable: musicians and audiences are suffering from repetitive routines and formula-type programming. There is an acute shortage of conductors who not only know their scores inside out but are inspiring leaders, and there is just as great a shortage of administrators who possess artistic vision and imagination as well as fiscal responsibility and sharp negotiating skills.[10]

Donald Henehan of *The New York Times* spoke of orchestras "splintering"[11] and even Samuel Lipman, an ardent defender of orchestras as he had known them, referred to a state of "creative exhaustion."[12] Could there be more eloquent testimony to the fact that something was seriously amiss?

From Darkness to Knight

Amidst this mood of general crisis there was no lack of diagnoses of the problem and prescriptions for the orchestras' recovery. In 1992, the American Symphony Orchestra League impaneled a 143-member national task force to study the problem. The resulting report, issued in 1993, was widely criticized for what many considered its condescending and "politically correct" recommendations regarding special programming to lure to the concert hall African-Americans and other minority groups. Largely ignored in the ensuing debate were the report's practical and eminently sound suggestions on how to improve the relationship of musicians to the institutional orchestra, and how to revitalize the concert-going experience itself.[13] These in turn flowed from the report's solid acknowledgment that "the musician's desire and ability to find expression through music is what brings the art form to life."[14]

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However obvious this may seem, this acknowledgment represents a quantum leap beyond the mind set that informed the major diagnoses of the l960s, which approached the orchestra mainly as a set of budgetary and managerial concerns, and addressed practically every issue except the audience's experience in the concert hall and the human beings who actually make the music.

I offered a similar argument for the absolute centrality of what takes place between performer and audience in the concert hall in a keynote address before the American Symphony Orchestra League at its 1988 convention in Chicago.[15] In this case the argument was extended to suggest that the repressiveness that turns younger audiences away from the typical American symphony orchestra concert has little in common either with what the broader culture expects today or what in fact took place in concert halls during the eras of Mozart, Beethoven, and Berlioz.

To be sure, there are important differences among the various diagnoses and prescriptions put forward over the past decade and a half. What unites Fleischmann, Morris, Shaw, Schuller, the American Symphony Orchestra League, and me with many others, however, is a common emphasis not on the financial and corporate sides of orchestral life, but on the music, the musicians, the

The "Magic of Music" Initiative

In 1993, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation began "The Magic of Music" initiative which was born in the belief that the connection between orchestra and audience needed strengthening. Fred Starr has chaired the initiative's advisory committee from the beginning.

"The Magic of Music" encourages outside-the-box thinking, and insists that all orchestra stakeholders be involved in the projects. This includes the music director, a member of the orchestra, a board member, and the executive director. In 1995, eight orchestras received planning grants to explore new ways to innovate. Subsequently, five of these orchestras—the Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra, the New World Symphony, the Oregon Symphony, The Philadelphia Orchestra, and The San Antonio Symphony—were awarded implementation grants to move their explorations forward.

Additional Grants Awarded

In early 1997, the "Magic of Music" initiative awarded four additional planning grants. Recipients included The Colorado Symphony of Denver, the Kansas City Symphony, the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra of New Orleans, and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. These four will use their grants to plan and test ideas for creating greater excitement for concert goers, and strengthening connections between musicians and audiences.

The Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra was awarded an implementation grant to support and expand its Community Partnership Program. For more than two years, Saint Louis musicians have exchanged contractual rehearsal and performance hours for time spent connecting with the community in nontraditional venues.

In assessing the "Magic of Music" Initiative, Starr observes that in both planning and implementation, projects are addressed "in the spirit of laboratory experiments so that successes might be more readily replicated and failures more deeply understood." He further comments, "All of the orchestras which have received grants share the common goal of testing the relationship between the concert hall experience and the broad-based community support that is essential to an orchestra's survival. The goal is not improvement, but transformation."

audience, and the organizational and psychological factors that can enhance the relations among them.

Just as these polemics were reaching fortissimo, the board and officers of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation of Miami, Florida, resolved to enter the fray. Fresh from a successful sally into the dangerous minefield of intercollegiate athletics, and with many years of experience with the performing arts, this foundation resolved not simply to repeat the past. It did not deny that stabilization funds, infrastructure reforms, new methods of marketing, and improved fund-raising techniques serve valid goals, and that the initiatives of other foundations in these areas had been useful. But in light of the current discussion, the Knight Foundation concluded that these concerns did not seem to get to the heart of the matter, which is what goes on in the concert hall and how the audience receives it.

With this perception in mind, Creed Black, the foundation's president, named an advisory committee chaired by the present author and including persons who had distinguished themselves in diverse areas of artistic life who, while deeply loyal to the classical orchestra tradition, were open to fresh approaches. This group recommended that the foundation provide something akin to "venture capital" so that orchestras could undertake experiments involving higher risk (and proportionately higher potential gain) than they would normally take with their regular resources. It recommended further that the foundation provide planning grants to enable all key elements of an orchestral organization—musicians, trustees, artistic director, and executive director—to sit down together and combine their ideas into a single proposal that everyone would stand behind.

> *". . . the [Knight] initiative represented an investment in the gradually emerging new model of symphony orchestra life, one grounded not so much on corporate or even philanthropic ideas but on artistic, personal, and social considerations."*

Above all, the "Magic of Music" initiative, as it came to be called, urged participating orchestras to take whatever measures were necessary in order to revitalize the relation between performers and audiences in the hall. Instead of the language of accounting or manufacturing, the program guide featured such affective phrases as "gleaming eyes," "edge of their seats," and "transcendent concert experience." This did not mean that the initiative lacked practicality. At a time when it was painfully evident that neither foundations, corporations, nor the federal government were about to increase their subvention to orchestras, the prospect of attracting large and enthusiastic paying audiences without artistic compromise held immense appeal. In contrast to the programs of the 1960s, this one respected the fact that audiences who leave the hall aglow with the love of fine music and grateful to their orchestra for providing it are most likely to translate their experience into volunteer work in the orchestra's behalf and into urgently needed donations. Hence, the initiative represented an investment in the gradually emerging new model of symphony orchestra life, one grounded not so much on corporate or even philanthropic ideas but on artistic, personal, and social considerations.

Musicians: Heard But (Offstage) Not Seen

What ingredients are essential for creating "gleaming eyes" in the concert hall, for bringing symphony orchestra audiences to the edge of their seats, and for fostering "transcendental musical experiences" among concert goers of all ages and backgrounds? It would be nice to think that this core issue preoccupies music directors, orchestra managers, musicians, and even trustees as they engage conductors, hire and deploy musicians, plan and promote programs, build their organizations, and raise the necessary funds to support them. Unfortunately, for all too many orchestras this issue never gets raised, let alone considered in depth. After decades of focusing on everything except the music, the question has assumed the awkward character of sex in the Victorian age: essential to the civilization but far beyond the pale of frank discourse.

Happily, this may now be changing. Beginning with the "death of the orchestra" debate in the late 1980s, and with mounting intensity thereafter, the actual concert experience has moved from the periphery to somewhere near the center of attention. Diverse forces have propelled this development.

First, the realization came that orchestras could die from shrinking and indifferent audiences as well as from lack of money. When corporate donors purchase blocks of seats which then sit empty, it implies that the musical product cannot even be given away. Second, most of the obvious remedies to the problem of declining and aloof audiences have been applied by at least one or two orchestras. But after every attention-grabbing fad in programming has been tried and failed, after concerts have been moved to suburban malls or wherever potential audiences are thought to be lurking, after every blow-dried celebrity conductor has come and gone, and after special repertoires designed to appeal to nonstandard audiences have drawn only the old familiar crowd, it is time to look elsewhere. Third, broader national currents of thought on corporate management have also shifted to new channels. The "bottom line" leaders of the late 1980s, with their slash-and-burn methods of cost reduction and their often brutal styles of reengineering and restructuring, are fast becoming anachronisms. After all, you can cut a position only once! Clearly, something further is needed.

These questions have preoccupied the advisory committee for the Knight Foundation's "Magic of Music" initiative. And as reports from the first planning grants came in, it was clear that the orchestral organizations, too, were increasingly concerned with such matters. Both seemed to have experienced a kind of epiphany, the stunned recognition that all efforts to transform the concert hall experience would be blocked until they could remove the various

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organizational and psychological impediments that prevented members of the orchestra family from working together on behalf of common artistic and institutional goals.

Thus, meeting almost as a seminar over three years, the advisory group has looked with increasing concern at the motivation of the orchestral musicians themselves. How can the bored and alienated players described by Schuller, Fleischmann, Morris, and others be expected to create performances that will inspire, provoke, and deeply move audiences today?

Another group to pose the question of orchestral musicians' motivation and incentives was the panel that produced the American Symphony Orchestra League's volume *Americanizing the American Orchestra: A Task Force Report*. An insightful, but regrettably neglected, chapter of the final report analyzed the relationship of musicians and orchestral organizations and found a "culture of conflict."

Still another person to ponder this issue is Paul Judy, a life trustee and former president of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. As he set up the Symphony Orchestra Institute, he asked if it might not be beneficial to apply some of the newer thinking on corporate management to orchestral organizations. The vertically organized businesses of the past, with their "command and obey" hierarchies and sharp divisions of responsibilities, have not proven effective in today's more competitive world. If you want employees to apply their full creative resources to achieving the goals of the organization they must be "brought into the kitchen"—they must be empowered in ways they have not been in the past.

In the end, it is the musicians who make the music we hear, just as it is the skilled workers in Detroit who construct the cars we drive. But the musicians must not only play with precise timing and exact pitch what the composer wrote and the conductor calls for. They must also perform with conviction and even passion, qualities that distinguish the creation of art from the assembly of automobiles. When these qualities are absent, the performance is flat and lifeless. No illustrious name, no giant in-house monitors, no preconcert program can save it. When they are present, even the least educated member of the audience senses they are there, and responds accordingly, with conviction and passion.

Viewed from this perspective, the modern American symphony orchestra is a textbook example of how not to incentivize employees.[16] In spite of decades of study in renowned conservatories and alone, musicians' judgments are rarely sought in rehearsals. Most know the tastes of the local audience far better than does the musical director, yet their views are rarely solicited as programming decisions are made. As to all the other decisions crucial to the successful fulfillment of the orchestra's mission, they are generally relegated to an increasingly remote "management" and to an invisible but all-powerful board of trustees. Only in the area of auditions are American orchestral musicians regularly brought into the inner circle of decision making.

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The causes of this situation are not difficult to find. Managers and union negotiators, in their periodic combat over the contract, flail at one another in a ritual that all but excludes the men and women most affected by the outcome. Day-to-day decisions are taken "on high," and announced to the players as fait accompli. Over the years, most players come to accept this as an inevitable curse of their choice of career. Their conservatory training did little to prepare them for a larger role, which they would avoid under any circumstances as it might involve undue risk. Is it any surprise that orchestral musicians sometimes engage in behavior that is counterproductive, self-destructive and, yes, infantile? The victim in such cases is not only the musician, but also the committed and passionate performance.

Such considerations have led the Knight Foundation, in its "Magic of Music" initiative, to assign growing importance to the motivation of orchestra players (and conductors) and to the organizational arrangements and less formal aspects of the orchestra's "culture" that affect it. This is done without having at hand some favored outcome, but in the same spirit of exploration and "laboratory research" that has informed the initiative from the outset. It recognizes that many of the world's great orchestras are constituted quite differently from American orchestras. It takes note of the fact that even among American orchestras there now exist a variety of organizational types, some of which may be gaining useful experience that might some day be applied more widely. And it also is cognizant of the extent to which this entire issue is of recent vintage. America's musical history, as we have noted, is rich with musician-run ensembles, entrepreneurially based orchestras, conductor-organized groups, and other variants that seem nonstandard only from the perspective of our own era. Is any of this experience, both here and abroad, relevant to the current crisis of the American symphony orchestra?

None of this represents a change in the Knight Foundation's original focus, which remains on the interaction of musicians, music, and audience in the concert hall. True, it acknowledges that a broader range of issues have the potential to influence that relationship for the better. This has the laudable effect of drawing into the discussion factors that agitate increasing numbers of the most thoughtful men and women who are concerned about the fate of orchestral music in this country.

The history of America's symphony orchestras since World War II is studded with grand achievements in cities large and small. It is also an organic history, with change occurring slowly and in an evolutionary way, rather than through great leaps and discontinuities. The ideas of the 1960s remain relevant today. Endowments are still important, as are year-round employment, stabilization funds, cash reserves, and grants from foundations, corporations, and governments at all levels. Eventually, the present inquiry into the concert hall experience and the motivation of the thousands of men and women who actually make the music should yield solutions that can be widely and beneficially applied. If and when that occurs, some future historian will be justified in concluding that the current debate over the death and renewal of the American orchestra, and all of the activities to which it has given rise, has served a noble cause.

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Notes

[1] Rockefeller Brothers Fund. 1965. *The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects*. New York: McGraw-Hill Company: 21.

[2] Weber, William. 1975. *Music and the Middle Class*. New York: Holmes & Meier: 120.

[3] *The Performing Arts*: 5-6.

[4] Shaw, Robert. 1977. The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra: Retrospects and Prospects. *The Atlanta Historical Society Bulletin* XXI (2). Cited in *Harmony* 2 (April 1996); and Ernest Fleischmann. 1987. The Orchestra is Dead. Long Live the Community of Musicians. An address at the commencement exercises of the Cleveland Institute of Music. May 16.

[5] *The Performing Arts*: 22.

[6] Baumol, William J., and William G. Bowen. 1966. *The Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma*. New York: The Twentieth Century Fund.

[7] Weisbrod, Burton A. *The Non-Profit Economy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 77, ff.

[8] Morris, Thomas W. 1989. Prescription for Survival. *Symphony* 40 (2): 28.

[9] For a competent and dispassionate review of these responses see *The Financial Condition of the Symphony Orchestras, Part I: The Orchestra Industry.* 1992. The Wolf Organization, Inc. for the American Symphony Orchestra League: A1-A22.

[10] The Orchestra is Dead. See also Samuel Lipman, Is the Symphony Orchestra Dead? 1987. *The New Criterion*, September: 1-7; and Ernest Fleischmann and Samuel Lipman, Is the Symphony Orchestra Dead? An exchange. 1987. *The New Criterion*, December: 38-41.

[11] Henehan, Donal. 1987. Our Orchestras are Splintering. *The New York Times*, September 13: 35-36.

[12] Is the Symphony Orchestra Dead?

[13] American Symphony Orchestra League. 1993. Americanizing the American Orchestra: A Task Force Report. Washington, D.C.: ASOL: Chapters 3 and 4.

[14] Americanizing the American Orchestra: 67.

[15] Starr, S. Frederick. 1988. Why I Applaud Between Movements. *Symphony* 39 (5/6): 10.

[16] Levine, Seymour, and Robert Levine. 1996. Why They're Not Smiling: Stress and Discontent in the Orchestral Workplace. *Harmony* 2 (April 1996): 15-25.