

Saving America's Symphonies

In his recent book, *High Brow/Low Brow*, historian Lawrence Levine notes that "in the 19th century, especially in the first half, Americans, in addition to whatever specific cultures they were part of, shared a public culture less hierarchically organized, less fragmented than their descendants were to experience a century later." Performances that were once accessible to broad popular audiences—whether the tragedies of Shakespeare or the symphonies of Mozart—have become exclusively the entertainment of the elite. But snobbery has its price. Today, many local American symphony orchestras face extinction. To survive, argues Frederick Starr, they must abandon the stuffy decorum introduced by puritanical culture-custodians. Only by getting rid of "a wall of grim convention and self-conscious rituals" will classically based music regain "its rightful place in our national life."

by S. Frederick Starr

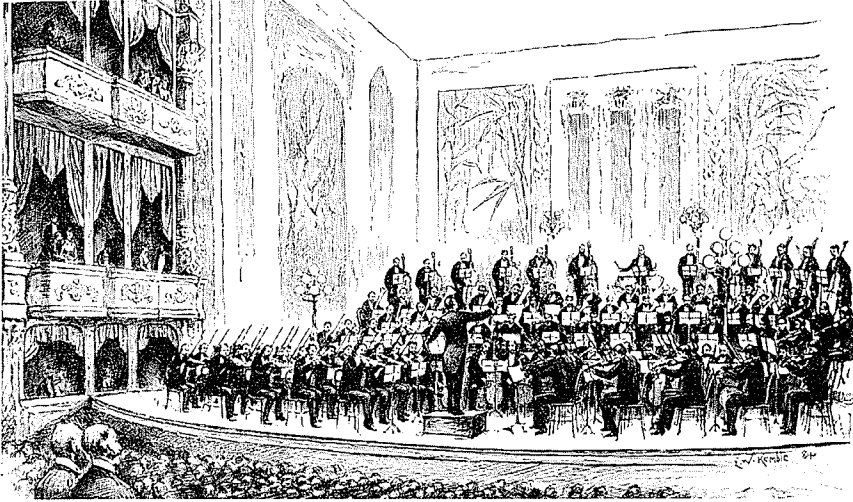
A pessimist might suggest that Franz Joseph Haydn wrote the main theme for this year's orchestral season in his *Farewell Symphony*, in which, one by one, the musicians depart the stage. In a wave of depressingly authentic performances, orchestras in Oakland, Kansas City, Detroit, New Orleans, Nashville, and San Diego have variously cut back seasons, suspended operations temporarily, or gone out of business.

According to Louis Harris's recent poll, the audience is also beginning to leave the hall, causing the first year of declining attendance after 15 years of growth. The audience still remaining in the hall is aging and, surveys tell us, drawn mainly from the ranks of affluent

professionals and business people, with few of the young of any background.

Finances reflect the grim situation at the box office. Our leading orchestras' combined deficit from operations has trebled in a decade, the bottom-line deficit now pushing \$15 million annually. By projecting a few years into the future, we can foresee deficits on a scale that would have sent Haydn back into his father's business of farming, and Prince Esterhazy back to his solo *baryton*, the now-extinct instrument that lured Esterhazy into music in the first place.

More than a few pessimists have declared the orchestra to be a moribund museum. Gunther Schuller, observing the human impact of the decline of or-



A concert at the Academy of Music in New York City in 1884 epitomizes the culture-reformers' ideal: "serious" music wedded to "correct" deportment.

chestras on their members, reported to a Berkshire Music Center audience in 1979 that a "cancer of apathy" and a "loss of spiritual identification with music" afflicts orchestral musicians themselves. In an attempt to reverse these trends, we have gone through a full cycle of prescriptions, cures, and nostrums.

The age-old remedy was to pep up programs with superstar soloists. Touring virtuosi doubtless added interest to performances, as they have since Paganini's day, but they failed to check the problem. Trustees next turned to a breed of energetic and well-coiffed conductors to impart a sense of jet-set dynamism to the enterprise. But the supply of conductor-superstars proved limited, and many aspirants lacked even a rudimentary command of English. These conductors also discovered the possibility of serving two cities at once, a kind of musical polygamy that denies both employers the kind of commitment needed to create anything substantial and lasting. About the same time, trustees and

managers began urging artistic directors to mine the pop repertoire, in the hope that orchestral adaptations of Willie Nelson favorites would somehow compete successfully with Willie Nelson originals, and also lead audiences on to Bartók and Mahler. But our fickle public continued to prefer the wailing sound of the originals to the Montevani-like copies.

A parallel round of therapy was applied to the management of orchestras. Early on, it was thought that government would pick up the tab. When that dream faded, hope was placed in the gurus of marketing. Entrepreneurial hotshots introduced terms like "discounting" and "packaging" into board discussions, to the accompaniment of rising eyebrows *furioso*. Yet another new band of doctors then appeared on the scene, hard-headed businessmen who, constituting 90 percent of many boards, declared that the orchestra's main problem was poor management. For nearly three centuries the term "bottom line" had referred to low G on the bass staff.

Suddenly it meant responding remorselessly to the fact that costs were rising 15 times faster than ticket receipts.

Common sense tells us that a colorful conductor, popular soloists, and genuinely accessible programs are bound to build audiences. And that federal support, better marketing, and stricter accounting will help the balance sheet. To some degree they do, and they should all be pursued. Yet all these measures together have failed to turn around the situation. Nor will they alone succeed, for the malaise runs much deeper.

"Aha," you say, "we're about to hear that classical music's day has passed, that most Americans today have little taste for 'serious' music—in short that those who declared the symphony orchestra to be a dead museum are right."

Looking Back

Quite the contrary. I would like to suggest that Americans all too rarely get an opportunity simply to take pleasure in classical music. Instead, they are separated from it by a wall of grim conventions and self-conscious rituals having nothing to do with the music itself. This wall isolates the music from its natural audience and prevents classically based music from taking its rightful place in our national life. It also contributes significantly to the malaise of orchestras, both financial and spiritual.

To defend this seemingly outlandish proposition, I ask you to permit me a historical digression, and also some observations drawn from my life as a jazz musician and as a frequent attender of concerts at America's oldest conserva-

tory of music, at Oberlin.

Most 19th-century European orchestras were linked to opera houses. American orchestras, however, developed separately from the beginning. Several peculiarly American obstacles had to be surmounted before they could flourish.

The first great challenge was to assemble enough good musicians to create a truly professional ensemble. The hero of this crucial battle was the irrepressible German-born conductor Theodore Thomas, who by his death in 1905 had established and nurtured a number of this country's greatest orchestras.

Order in the Hall

The second great battle, far more difficult than the first, was to form an audience willing to sit quietly through an entire concert. This was no simple matter, for outgoing, restless Yankees were accustomed to throwing themselves into events on the stage, cheering and hissing in response to the performance, and generally coming and going as they pleased. Back in the 19th century, the Metropolitan Opera House accommodated these national eccentricities with its relaxed atmosphere, made still more so by the fact that booze was allowed in the boxes, as at the Astrodome today.

Drinking—even quiet drinking—was banned at orchestral concerts, but no rule could keep Americans from responding animatedly to events on stage. Thus, we read of "talking and buzzing" throughout a New York concert in 1875, with poor Maestro Thomas issuing a "scathing rebuke . . . to those ill-bred and ignorant people" making the noise.

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The Yankee audience was not easily tamed. Far into the 20th century, reports appeared that Stokowski, Monteux, and even Koussevitzky had to rap like schoolmasters for order in the hall.

The "hero" (if we may call him that) of this battle to tame the naturally bump-tious American audience was John Sullivan Dwight, a crusty ex-minister who, from the 1830s to '60s, was this country's chief apostle of "serious" music and of "correct" deportment in its presence. Dwight hailed from Boston, a city where waltzing was taboo until the 1850s. He equated deadly earnestness with goodness. He was immune to playfulness and frivolity and struggled to make the German classics an instrument for vaccinating the whole population against those baleful traits. Few outdid Dwight in what Alexis de Tocqueville called "this astonishing American gravity." With Dwight's help, concertgoing in America ceased to be a source of pleasure and delight. Instead, it was transformed into the secular equivalent of the Puritan worship service: long, serious, utterly predictable, and ever so good for your soul.

Cultural Insecurity

In his widely read journal, Dwight railed against all composers whose music did not fit his notions of moral uplift, particularly Rossini, Berlioz, and their Italian and French compatriots. He saved his deadliest venom for his own compatriot, Louis Moreau Gottschalk, the New Orleans-born virtuoso and composer who dazzled Chopin in Paris during the 1840s with his lush and brooding evocations of the American tropics. Gottschalk's music was thoroughly Latin, filled with Caribbean warmth, if not Catholic decadence. This was precisely Gottschalk's great sin in Dwight's eyes. Dwight helped destroy Gottschalk's career.

There you have it. The symbiosis of classical music: puritanical and turgid earnestness and ritualized performance. The only missing ingredient was social

insecurity, and this, too, Dwight dished up in bucketfuls. As Alexis de Tocqueville noted in *Democracy in America*, Americans "imagine that to appear dignified they must remain solemn." The philosopher George Santayana referred to our "cultural insecurity." The worst thing was to appear undignified or provincial, which amounted to the same thing. No wonder Dwight boasted that his purge of classical music would be "the very best symptom of our ceasing to be provincial in art."

Cheering Mozart

It is not surprising that socially insecure Americans submitted to this hectoring from the critics' corner and from the conductors, who were like Bismarckian autocrats in the puritanical concert hall. The musicians put up with all this nonsense because they somehow believed it would raise the dignity of their art. Cultural pretension and cultural insecurity thus combined to make a newly affluent public accept a very un-American strait-jacket in culture.

The great irony of the situation is that what Dwight strove mightily to achieve had little in common with the environment in which much of the greatest European music was created and enjoyed. True, there were composers, such as Schumann, who demanded attentive submission from their audiences and who did not care if the strictness of their regimen emptied the hall. But this was scarcely Mozart's stance when he wrote a glorious group of wind octets with no deeper purpose than to provide *Unterhaltungsmusik* for Viennese couples strolling about and sipping wine. Nor was it Mozart's attitude when he reported to his father that he had placed many passages in his D-major ("Paris") Symphony for no other purpose than to delight the public. In his debut concert in 1800, even the dour Beethoven was pleased to include arias, symphonies, an overture, and even improvisations based



Symphony concerts were not always dignified occasions. Conductors and musicians once did everything in their power to engage their audiences. Here, 19th-century French composer Hector Berlioz conducts a concert à mitraille (with cannon).

on themes called up from the audience. This is the same Beethoven who gladly accepted from his patron a collection of popular songs issued by the Russian tsar's propaganda ministry and wove them into the magisterial *Razumovsky Quartets* (Opus 59).

The audiences for which the classical masterpieces were composed had nothing in common with Dwight's Americans, cowed into stultifying passivity. The great orchestra of the Elector of Mannheim literally lifted the audience to its feet when it performed its renowned crescendos. I can find no evidence that such demonstrativeness hurt the music. Parisians cheered with gusto at the passages Mozart had included for their pleasure in the D-major Symphony, and the composer bragged about their hearty response in a letter to his father.

A self-conscious American highbrow, accustomed to equating all shows of enthusiasm with vulgarity, must squirm with discomfort by reports such as the following, on the mood at the premier of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* in

Dresden in 1843. Berlioz wrote that:

The ordinary public simply let itself be carried along by the current of the music, and it applauded the March to the Scaffold and the Witches' Sabbath more warmly than the other three movements.

The audience applauding between movements? Crude provincialism! Low-brow vulgarity! Yet, as a jazz musician, I realize that there was something in that hall in Dresden that orchestral musicians today experience only rarely, if ever: namely, the warm engagement of an unself-conscious audience with the music and the musicians who make it. Such engagement vastly stimulates and inspires musicians, who in turn further reward and uplift the audience.

Can this occur with a program of classical music written a century or more ago? Of course it can. I invite you to any campus for a concert by a student ensemble or touring orchestra. I can assure you that at Oberlin you will hear

cheers, clapping, and the stamping of feet, even boos and hisses from time to time. You will also experience rapt attention and a kind of electric excitement that links performers and audience.

Thanks to the presence of so alive an audience, we have truly live music, full of the tension of the moment, utterly unpredictable, at times infuriating but at other times inspired to a rare degree. And let me state unequivocally that most of those same young men and women are also keen and knowledgeable fans of rock music.

A Puritan Pall

The same capacity for enthusiasm over classical music shown by our students can be found in the general public. Stanley Kubrick exploited this fact when he used the slow movement from Schubert's Trio Opus 100 in his film *Barry Lyndon*, a segment from Richard Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* in his *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and sections of Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth Symphonies in *Clockwork Orange*. All led to waves of record sales, as did the appearance of the slow movement from Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21 in the Swedish film *Elvira Madigan*.

One of America's now-aging avant-garde composers once denounced attending live concerts as a "peculiar and prehistoric form of self-abuse." I'm sure that for Milton Babbitt it is. Younger audiences don't see it that way, nor do the majority of older listeners. I'll take a live if imperfect performance any day to the mood of lifeless curatorship that prevails wherever the spirit of John Sullivan Dwight still holds sway. Having experienced live music of any type—whether jazz, rock, Schubert songs, gamelans, or a symphonic orchestra—one cannot help feeling stifled by the desiccated atmosphere created by our highbrows' insistence on dead perfection.

Well and good, you say. Granting for the moment that classical music in

America has long been smothered by a pall of puritan earnestness, can anything really be done about it? Is it really possible to transform the relation of audience and musician when the music in question is so remote from the rhythms and melodies that surround us in our daily lives? There are obvious limits to what can be done. Yet, I can think of at least four measures that, together, would do much to enliven and, hence, render financially more viable the moribund format of our concert life.

First, we should open up the repertoire. By this I do not mean that we should turn all performances into Pops concerts. Rather, we should mine the entire repertoire and boldly juxtapose unlikely works: long and short; accessible and abstruse; old and new; serious and frivolous. We should also mix, in one program, works for large orchestras and small ensembles, vocal and instrumental. We might even lift the old taboo against performing only sections of works that the audience may not wish to swallow in toto. Such programming is quite compatible with the highest musical standards, and would quickly dispel the tedious predictability now stifling our concert halls. It would also lift the musicians out of their rut.

The Salad-Bar Approach

Besides pulling classical music back to its more vital roots, such programming would accord well with American tastes today. For years art museums would hang a single painting on eggshell white walls, as if commanding us to venerate it. Today, innovative museums are reverting to the centuries-old practice of placing many contrasting works together on a single wall (often painted a rich color) so that the viewer can muse from one to another in a more personal way. Something like this occurs also in the realm of gastronomy, where diners concoct meals at the salad bars and juxtapose unlikely courses on the plate.

Second, we should open the orchestra to the public. The modern symphony orchestra is the most complex instrument of music ever devised, bringing together a formidable array of talent. Yet in most concert halls only the conductor and a few first violinists and cellists are visible, the latter in profile. Local society lionizes the highly paid itinerant conductor, while at the same time ignoring the musicians who actually make the music or, worse, treating them as cogs in a machine.

Talk About It

Why not instead seat the orchestra so its members are all in view, and then showcase the players, instead of treating them like hired help? The feat of a flautist playing the last movement of Prokofiev's *Classical* Symphony or a horn player doing the solo in Tchaikovsky's Fifth is no less astounding than a half-back taking a quick hand-off and weaving behind blockers to score a touchdown.

Americans are quite accustomed to appreciating individual talents as they contribute to team efforts in sports. Why should we not be given the pleasure of doing the same for our local orchestra? Besides, it would greatly enhance the loyalty and commitment of musicians to their city and its orchestra, and would eventually foster the creation of a truly local sound.

Third, we should not hesitate to talk about the music. Some years ago the jazz band of which I am a part, the Louisiana Repertory Jazz Ensemble, was asked to give the Doubleday Lecture at the Smithsonian. The sponsors expected a straight concert. We gave them a lecture/concert, followed by a dance. The music we performed that evening predated the living memory of just about everyone in the hall. But by talking about it first, we enabled our listeners to enter into the music and its world. When we later invited the large audience to dance, they threw themselves into it with abandon, erasing the temporal gap between

their day and Jelly Roll Morton's.

This can be done with classical music as well, by the judicious use of the spoken word. The conductor or a musician might introduce each work with a few sentences. Musicologists or knowledgeable enthusiasts, of an age and style likely to reach target audiences, might be added to the staff, as has already been done at two or three orchestras.

Obviously, it won't do to beat the audience over the head with erudition or to indulge in what Virgil Thomson dubbed "the music appreciation racket." But we should welcome the genial low-key communicator who can enliven those moments at a concert now given over to deathly harrumphing or silence.

Harmony Needed

Fourth, and most important, we should examine every aspect of the orchestra's public and internal life to identify and remove elements of repressiveness. Why, for example, do we begin concerts at 8:00 P.M., rather than, say, 6:00 P.M.? Presumably it is to prevent people from arriving with too much good food in their bellies, or from being able to go out afterward while restaurants are still open. This, at any rate, is the effect, and Dwight would have loved it. Why, again, do we insist on two- or two-and-a-half-hour concerts, rather than shorter or longer ones? And why are most of our symphony orchestras tied to just one hall, when they could be moving among many venues, including *al fresco* ones, in order to bring fine music to their audiences?

Finally, would it really hurt to allow the violist to take a bow after the movement in which he solos? Opera singers and ballet dancers do it all the time, and without destroying the continuity of the work. And if this is allowed, will I then be permitted to applaud between movements? What was acceptable to Berlioz is acceptable to me. And who knows, it might help destroy the somnolent-atmo-

sphere in the concert hall, make concert-going less intimidating, and even attract some of those younger people who regularly pay \$30 a ticket to attend rock concerts but wouldn't show their face for one of yours.

Most efforts to save our orchestras have concentrated on only one area, be it audience development, the cultivation of links with industry, or cost containment. What I am calling for requires changes in every element of the orchestra's life, including conductor, musicians, trustees, management, and audience. Nor would this reform stop at simply changing each element in isolation. Rather, the idea is to bring each element into a closer, more sustained relation to the others. This is no easy task. Is it possible?

It is no simple matter to turn around an unprofitable company, an eroded school system, or a weakened hospital. But it happens all the time. As with industries, so with orchestras; any effort at renewal that concentrates on only one element—be it repertoire, musicians, education, or "bottom line" management—is doomed to fail. If all aspects can be addressed together, and all interested parties enlisted in a single effort, success should follow.

The collective nature of the process bears emphasis. When the American Symphony Orchestra League first met in Chicago in 1942, conductors and musicians were in attendance, along with trustees. They should be invited back in order to participate in a new type of decision-making. Trustees cannot and should not keep musicians out of the action, any more than management or musicians should try to keep trustees at arm's length, as often happens. There is no place for aloof trusteeship, even if it is nominally "businesslike." Nor is there room for authoritarian personalities in

the lives of successful orchestras, whether they be managers, conductors, musicians' representatives, or trustees.

By no means are boards currently constituted so as to be able to carry out a revitalization program of the sort I have described here. Most are too old, too dominated by corporate CEOs, and too little disposed to get to know either those who make the music or those who, in the future, will listen to it.

But this too can change. The symphony orchestra is a young institution in this country. Most of our orchestras were founded within living memory, with only a handful antedating World War I. Theodore Thomas and John Sullivan Dwight proved that orchestras can indeed be redirected and reshaped. It is past time for us to do so once more.

This said, the suspicion persists, even among the most committed of us, that the symphony orchestra has had it. Maybe our culture has changed too much for it to be possible to preserve orchestras as living institutions.

If this is so, you'd better tell our young people. Oberlin and other leading conservatories are inundated with applications from young men and women who have decided to devote their lives to performing and teaching the supposedly dead and irrelevant musical classics. Campus audiences today respond to committed performances with the passion of fresh discovery. The mass public, young and old, pays out tens of millions for tickets to a film on Mozart.

Surely, then, there exist solid grounds for optimism, and certainly enough to sustain a commitment to classical music and labors in its behalf. Our task, very simply, is to *love* the music, to *enjoy* the music, and to remove whatever impediments prevent our fellow Americans from doing so.