

*Harmony*TM

FORUM OF THE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA INSTITUTE

NUMBER 4 • APRIL 1997

Rebuilding the Repertoire for the 21st Century

by

James Orleans



To subscribe to *Harmony* or provide support to the Institute, contact:

Symphony Orchestra Institute

1618 Orrington Avenue, Suite 318

Evanston, IL 60201

Tel: 847.475.5001 Fax: 847.475.2460

e-mail: information@soi.org

www.soi.org

Rebuilding the Repertoire for the 21st Century

American orchestras' failure to perform significant 20th-century works with great frequency has created an enormous "black hole" in the repertoire of new music. This bold statement is the major thesis of the essay which follows.

To buttress his contention, James Orleans, a bassist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, undertook an intriguing and substantial review of his own orchestra's performance history since the 1920s. Readers will learn that earlier in the century, new works were programmed regularly, season after season. Orleans concludes that this is no longer true.

Understanding the Barriers

He then explores the barriers which have diminished the acceptance of more contemporary programming. He acknowledges that the blame must be shared by many: conductors, players, conservatories, the entertainment industry, and others. He suggests that today's music directors do not have the same level of commitment to new works as did their predecessors.

Involving Musicians

Arguing that musicians know a great deal about music, and that many musicians know a great deal about new music, Orleans says "it is time for musicians . . . to cast off the shroud of victimization and find ways to become more actively involved and taken seriously by decision makers." It is his belief that involving musicians in artistic decision making is one road to greater workplace satisfaction.

Suggestions

Following the programming review and analysis, Orleans turns his attention to a long and thoughtful list of activities which orchestras, and especially musicians, might undertake to prepare for the next century. He entreats against a "quick fix" and again encourages all who treasure the art form of symphonic music to make substantial contributions toward rebuilding the repertoire.

Editor's Note: This letter expands on an article by the author appearing in Counterpoint, Newsletter of the Musicians of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Vol. 3, No. 1.

Rebuilding the Repertoire for the 21st Century

Hardly a day goes by when one doesn't hear or read something about the predicament of symphony orchestras: subscription sales are dwindling; public support for the arts is waning; the repertoire has stagnated; the audience is graying; recording companies are withdrawing from the standard classics en masse. That we find ourselves in such a predicament should really come as no surprise to us. The same thing happens when one crop is harvested from the same soil for too many years. We are now faced with the daunting task of building new audiences, apparently out of thin air and we can't attract them with the music—tired, pretentious, and elitist are some of the favored adjectives used to describe it—we've been playing for a hundred years. Our unwillingness to cultivate a new repertoire of music to meet the cultural changes of the last few decades has placed us in this Catch-22. Clearly there are major problems with the way we have "planned" for the future of the art form.

*"It is the pursuit of
the sublime that
makes our work as
musicians worth
doing at the highest
level..."*

The notion that we must cater to popular tastes in order to survive, promulgated by the infamous Americanizing Report and other criticisms of the symphony orchestra, has been widely accepted as gospel by many in leadership positions. I have serious disagreements with the direction of this particular bandwagon because it totally disregards the urgent need for an artistically responsible revitalization of the symphonic repertoire.

Robert Freeman mentioned this in his article "On the Future of America's Orchestras," in the last issue of *Harmony*: "The repertoire must continue to grow, producing new works of passion and imagination that move contemporary American audiences."¹ So far, the creative programming energy that should be directed at this task is being spent producing "events" with appeal to youth, diversity, and popular tastes as their catalyst. Galas, Three-Tenor-type extravaganzas, jazz artists playing classical concerti, and all manner of celebrity-focused events are finding their way onto the concert stage. Many feel that there is enough room in a 52-week schedule for these types of affairs. But when you see how few truly exceptional and revelatory performances actually occur in a

performing lifetime, you don't want a single such opportunity taken away, which is exactly what these market-researched presentations do. It is the pursuit of the sublime that makes our work as musicians worth doing at the highest level, not the pursuit of the lowest common denominator. Our audiences have always come to us expecting considerably more than that.

The Myth of Shrinking Audiences

What does it mean that the audience is aging? Hasn't the audience for classical music always consisted predominantly of older individuals? Indeed, profiles of audiences in New York and Los Angeles over past years have shown that half the subscribers were more than 55 years of age, with 44 percent of the Los Angeles subscribers more than 65 years of age.² In a recent article, Henry Fogel, president of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, said, "The last time we did a major marketing survey 5 years ago . . . we found the median age of our subscribers is 55, which is exactly what it was 30 years before."³ Consequently, older members of the audience want to hear Beethoven, Mozart, and Brahms and have traditionally been subscribers, while the younger ones do not feel the same connection to the classical composers and are not buying subscriptions, preferring to pick and choose their concert nights.

"Hasn't the audience for classical music always consisted predominantly of older individuals?"

Our leaders would have us believe that the logical course of action based on this scenario is to dilute the art in order to convince the younger (less sophisticated?) crowd to subscribe. It may be true that they have had less musical education and exposure to serious music than their parents, but let's not make the assumption that they will never be able to appreciate the best the art has to offer. Perhaps subscribing, as the most important way to sell tickets, is dying out and we need to substantially modify our marketing strategies to address the industry wide increase in single ticket sales.

"...instead of resorting to popularization, the wiser move would be to dedicate this next decade to a careful, artistically responsible revitalization of the symphonic repertoire..."

Of course the audience is aging; so is the general population. It is not insignificant that the baby-boomers are turning 50 this year at the rate of almost 10,000 a day and will continue to do so for some time. Couldn't it be that they are poised to make the move to symphonic music in the next five to ten years? It is pretty clear to me that people not raised with serious music tend to turn to it only after their careers, family lives, and finances have stabilized and their hearts and minds are ready for its greater intricacies, subtleties, and deeper emotional and intellectual rewards. The youngish urban professionals we are presumably reaching out to with the new "diversified"

programming have simply not yet arrived at the point in their lives at which they are ready for symphonic music. So, instead of resorting to popularization, the wiser move would be to dedicate this next decade to a careful, artistically responsible revitalization of the symphonic repertoire, in preparation for the next wave of those seeking music of substance.

Building a Repertoire of Contemporary Music

I have been an avid proponent of 20th-century music since I began my orchestral career 15 years ago. Sadly, most of the contemporary music I grew to love years before I became a professional has never appeared on my music stand. Integrating the remarkable works of this century into the catalogue of symphonic classics has been a long-standing concern of mine, but now I see it as perhaps *the* most important task facing the leaders of American symphony orchestras. The most recent spate of press lamenting the state of our affairs is what finally sent me searching for a concrete way to go about this expansion of the repertoire.

I began by looking through the performance histories of 20th-century works introduced since the 1920s by my own orchestra, the Boston Symphony Orchestra (BSO). Among Pierre Monteux, Serge Koussevitsky, and Charles Munch, a large number of now well-known works were introduced to the BSO's repertoire. Koussevitsky, the orchestra's music director from 1924 to 1949, was well known as a champion of new music. What I wanted to find out was precisely how that commitment manifested itself in his programming. The records clearly indicate that under Koussevitsky's directorship there was a concerted effort to bring important new works into the orchestra's regular repertoire. For instance, Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler*, which was first conducted by Richard Burgin (the orchestra's long-time concertmaster and assistant conductor) in 1934, received repeat performances in 1936, 1940, 1944, and 1947-1948. Monteux (music director from 1919-1924) returned to conduct it in 1951-1952 and 1958. After Monteux introduced Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite* in 1919 it was taken up by Koussevitsky in 1925, 1926-1927, 1928, 1929, 1931, 1935, and 1939. *Petrouchka* (also introduced by Monteux, in 1920) got the same treatment by Koussevitsky with repeats in 1925, 1926, 1927, 1928, 1929, 1930, 1932, 1933, 1934, 1941 (Burgin), 1942, and 1945! Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony (introduced in 1939) was given repeat performances in 1940, 1941, 1943, 1944-1945, and 1948 (between Burgin and Koussevitsky), with Burgin continuing the trend in 1952-1953, 1956-1957, 1961, and 1966-1967. A number of other pieces were championed under his guiding hand, all of them, at the time, new and unfamiliar to audiences and players alike.

Charles Munch also saw the importance of extensive repeated programming. Munch (music director from 1949-1962) gave the United States premiere of Honegger's Second Symphony for Strings (one of the masterpieces of the string orchestra repertoire) in 1946 with the BSO. Koussevitsky repeated it in 1947 and 1948. When Munch returned as music director he programmed it again in four seasons within eight years (1952, 1953, 1956, 1960, returning with it again

in 1963, 1966, and 1971). Between the two conductors, this averaged out to once every two and a half years—for 25 years! This is unheard of today. Honegger's Fifth Symphony (also an American premiere) received repeats averaging once every 18 months in the last 11 seasons of Munch's tenure.

In contrast to this practice, none of the works introduced to the BSO in the past 25 years have been given similar attention. In fact there have been repeat performances of only a small handful of post-World War II pieces of music and only a slightly larger handful of post-World War I pieces. In the past two and a half decades, the BSO introduced thirteen works by a single active composer, some of them given their United States and world premieres. Commendable, but not one has been programmed again. None of the many wonderful Tippett works introduced by Colin Davis (as principal guest conductor) has been taken up since its initial BSO performance (the 2nd Symphony being one of the 20th-century masterworks that should have joined the repertoire by now).

In the case of commissioned works, the comparisons are equally striking. Koussevitsky gave Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* (premiered by the BSO in 1930) repeat performances in 1931, 1932, 1936, 1939, 1942, and 1947. *Concert Music for Strings and Brass* by Paul Hindemith (premiered in 1931) received repeats by Koussevitsky in 1932, 1934, 1938, and 1940. Of the 16 or more commissions premiered in the past two decades only two works (both in 1980-1981) have had repeat performances: Roger Sessions' *Concerto for Orchestra* (repeated once in 1988), and Bernstein's *Divertimento* (repeated in 1988 with Bernstein conducting, and in 1995). Dutilleux's Second Symphony (a 1955 BSO commission and a work widely performed in Europe) only recently received its first BSO performance in more than 25 years. That Bartok's *Concerto for Orchestra* is considered a signature piece of the BSO is due, in some part, to the fact that Leinsdorf (music director from 1962-69) replayed it in 1961, 1962, 1963, 1965, 1968, and 1970. The repeat performance of commissioned works by the BSO has virtually come to a halt in the past quarter-century. None has received more than one repeat performance under the baton of recent music directors.

This is how important new works entered the repertoire. This is how the repertoire was built. There is really no other way it can be built. Few conductors working today understand this. No wonder today's audiences are estranged from even the finest new works of the 20th century. Our orchestras no longer give them enough opportunities nor reasons to become acquainted with them. Today's new music programming consists mostly of short colorful concert openers (to fill the "requirement") with "world premiere" status needed to justify the appearance of the rare major work.

"No wonder today's audiences are estranged from even the finest new works of the 20th century. Our orchestras no longer give them enough opportunities nor reasons to become acquainted with them."

It is not merely the isolated performance of a new work that fulfills our responsibility to the repertoire, for that alone smacks of tokenism and reinforces in our audience the idea that new music is an aberration not worthy of their, nor our, continued attention—disposable music. It is the continued championing of those new works of great merit that will truly build the repertoire of the 21st-century symphony orchestra. Visionary conductors such as Koussevitsky and Munch began the hard work of expanding the repertoire and all but a few of today's conductors have completely ignored their efforts. One notable exception is Pierre Boulez. Talking about 20th-century music, he recently said, "Pieces have to be repeated and repeated and repeated, not only for the audiences but also for the musicians . . . because when the music is performed so many times and the musicians are at ease with it, a kind of confidence is established between the audience, the musicians and the composer."⁴ It is the inattention to this crucial task, whatever the reasons, that is primarily why we are in such a predicament with audiences and recording companies.

"It is the continued championing of those new works of great merit that will truly build the repertoire of the 21st-century symphony orchestra."

"Koussevitsky didn't wait for posterity to make choices for him. He saw himself as having a hand in it."

Koussevitsky didn't wait for posterity to make choices for him. He saw himself as having a hand in it. There has to be a way to regain this sense of enthusiastic responsibility to the repertoire or, I fear, we are lost to the popularization movement. If each of the world's musical directors was to step up to the podium with just a few major post-World War II pieces and unapologetically announce, "These are works that I cherish. I want my orchestra and my audience to learn them and come to love them as I do," and then proceed to program them every other season for at

least 10 years, our worries about a healthier future for the repertoire would recede. I am unwilling to accept that the repertoire cannot be addressed this way simply because of the precedence of international conducting careers.

The absentee music director has been lamented and called into the discussion of the symphony's woes for years, yet it appears to have been completely accepted by orchestra managements with little more than a shrug of the shoulders. Administrators have given up on the ideal of the Koussevitskian music director because they feel they have no influence over their world-renowned celebrity conductors. So they have uniformly taken steps to fill the void by hiring artistic administrators. At least 17 of the top United States orchestras presently employ full-time artistic administrators. The responsibilities actually taken on by the music director appear to have diminished considerably while the perception of his ultimate authority has remained unchanged. This is a definite hindrance to repertoire building, but not an insurmountable one.

Barriers to Reinvigorating the Repertoire

Certainly there are barriers to the acceptance of more contemporary programming for the symphony orchestra. The explosion of complex compositional trends in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s alienated many listeners and players from *virtually all* 20th-century music. This rejection of the new styles and languages and the cessation of frequent performances of historically significant 20th-century works combined to create the unfortunate perception of an enormous black hole in the repertoire out of which “acceptable” new music has yet to emerge.

Although there were many fine works containing passages of great beauty and excitement written in the newer styles and techniques (by Henze, Maxwell-Davies, Lutoslawski, Gerhard, and, yes, Stravinsky, to name a few), most symphony audiences were not ready or willing to make the leap in listening that was required of them, nor were they eager to engage in the sifting process. And few on the podium were knowledgeable about or committed enough to the new music to make the wisest choices. This is where most conductors simply failed to do their homework. A reinvestigation of the “missing links” of the repertoire, as I call them, will reveal marvelous works by Martin, Martinu, Hindemith, Fine,

Piston, Scriabin, Britten, Berg, Honegger, Dutilleux, Tippett, Schuman, and others who wrote in more traditional languages with clearer links to the symphonic tradition.

“Players’ conservatism influences the situation to some degree...”

Players’ conservatism influences the situation to some degree, as well. There are still few orchestra musicians who have a broad knowledge of, or an affinity for, the post-World War II repertoire. Much of this unfamiliarity stems from the inadequacies of

conservatory training where generation after generation of instructors reinforce the “bitter pill” attitude among their students by routinely disregarding newer instrumental works in favor of the standard chestnuts of the solo and chamber repertoire. Young aspiring soloists with interests in contemporary music are often dissuaded from pursuing this avenue because it would doom a celebrity career. Most undergraduate conservatory harmony and theory curricula touch only cursorily on contemporary music. Tertian harmony and Common Practice are all that young musicians get before they go off to auditions. A look at the audition lists for the major music festivals and symphony orchestras over the past 25 years will show, in a microcosm, just how little the repertoire has progressed.

The entertainment industry gets a large dose of blame, as well, for cultivating shorter and shorter attention spans among Americans and catering to our baser interests and more immediate gratification requirements. The elementary schools, the federal government, the pop music industry, television, corporate culture, celebrity worship, acid rain, talent agents, you name it; we have all felt their influences.

What it all boils down to, however, is that our orchestras still operate under a hierarchical system which ostensibly places all responsibility on one individual. And whether that leader fulfills those duties or not, his ultimate authority will not be called into question. This worked quite well in the first half of the 20th century because those leaders did indeed take on the responsibilities over which they demanded control and had the respect, albeit fearful, of their players. Today's music directors are so removed from the day-to-day operations of their orchestras that they appear to their musicians as little more than permanent guest conductors.

Involving Musicians

There has been some recent discussion on the subject of increased musician involvement in organizational matters of the symphony orchestra. With little hope that the next generation of conductors will be any more willing (or able) to address the everyday concerns of an orchestra than the present ones, perhaps it is time for musicians to accept the sad reality of the situation, cast off the shroud of victimization, and find ways to become more actively involved and taken seriously by the decision makers.

*“... perhaps it is time
for musicians to...
find ways to become
more actively
involved and taken
seriously by the
decision makers.”*

Paul Judy, in the third issue of *Harmony*, touched upon an attitude that poses a stumbling block to such change when he wrote that many people in management “do not seriously wish to have players involved in anything more than music performance,” and that many musicians feel that “any organizational involvement or contribution beyond strictly defined musical performance tasks is a legal and moral affront or must be carefully and contractually defined through extensive bargaining and documentation.”⁵

These comments are insightful and show how difficult it may be to get musicians and managers to look beyond their own desks, even for the sake of the art. They also point out the growing need for musicians to become more fully knowledgeable of all matters relating to the operation of their orchestras. Certainly there are orchestra players who have unique extramusical talents and ideas to offer to their organizations and channels should indeed be opened for them to participate. But it is not so much having involvement in the non-musical organizational matters that is our greatest concern. It is in the specifically musical and artistic ones where we feel we can be of most value. Where we are asked for help by management (if we are asked at all) it is in fund raising and image building. In the areas where we are the most knowledgeable, experienced, and committed, we are consistently ignored. I believe it is because managements still operate under the assumption that their conductors are taking adequate care of artistic matters and do not see the quicksand into which musical integrity and quality are sinking. This is what frustrates musicians, not that we are denied participation in the capital funds campaign.

Presently, the only way for musicians to exert leverage is through our union. Unfortunately, collective bargaining is not set up to adequately address artistic concerns. These issues tend to get sublimated or translated at the table into money, scheduling, and time off, with industry parity the goal. As a way to express artistic dissatisfaction this is neither satisfying nor effective. In some ways it is musically self-defeating. One result of this focus on working conditions is that our unique endeavor ends up feeling more like just another job. A raise in pay does not persuade us to practice more or to play in better tune, nor does an additional week off inspire us to listen more carefully to each other on stage. An orchestra's productivity is enhanced not by monetary rewards but by artistic ones—visibility and appreciation as a virtuoso ensemble; vital, challenging, and exciting programming; strong visionary leadership—all of which we see receding into the oblivion that appears to await the art form. Is it any wonder that our morale has sunk to dangerous levels? I believe that giving musicians' artistic concerns more weight would help to alter the destructive just-a-job mentality and bring us greater workplace satisfaction.

"I believe that giving musicians' artistic concerns more weight would help to alter the destructive just-a-job mentality and bring us greater workplace satisfaction."

Suggestions for Symphony Orchestra Organizations

There are a number of things our organizations, and musicians specifically, could do to prepare symphony orchestras for the next century. Let me offer some ideas and suggestions as to how musicians might directly influence the future of the art form in ways that retain its validity as such. Some of these ideas presume a degree of positive and creative change in the balance of the traditional symphony organization, but it is obvious to me that the time has come for musicians to assert their involvement in these matters, along with accepting the work and responsibility that such involvement entails.

- ◆ A "think tank" for musicians (to use Pierre Boulez's term) would be of great use to us. By beginning to address organizational problems at the artistic level ourselves, without the intrusion of managements, conductors, or marketing influences, we can define for ourselves our own mission, and present to management, in the most constructive way possible, very specific suggestions regarding, but not limited to, repertoire (symphony, pops, and youth concerts), program planning, and even areas that have been heretofore seen as the express responsibility of the music director, such as rehearsal time management and stage decorum. Perhaps a forum in which to discuss long-neglected artistic concerns could be created as a part of the International Congress of Symphony Orchestra Musicians (ICSOM).

- ◆ Orchestra musicians could seriously explore the possibilities of performing some concerts without a conductor. Programs for these concerts would be devised by the musicians themselves. This would give musicians some experience in program planning and rehearsal time management and would help to reaffirm ensemble sensibilities that we are often persuaded to ignore in deference to a heavy baton. Investigating the rehearsal requirements and protocols of other conductorless orchestras could provide potential models. Even some of the rhythmically less complicated 20th-century pieces could conceivably work in this context. And as the orchestra grew to know more such works, through regular repetition, it would become easier. This will obviously require more work on the part of the players, but the benefits could be well worth the effort.
- ◆ Each orchestra's artistic advisory committee could prepare a list of 20th-century works it feels should become part of the repertoire and request that the music director program them with Koussevitskian regularity. Artistic advisory committees could plan complete programs as well. I would think that managements would be thrilled at such initiative and would act on it immediately. Of course it may take some incentives to convince managements and music directors to acquiesce to such directives. One such incentive might be for players to offer to split the cost of an extra rehearsal (which would be dedicated entirely to the new piece) if the music director selects from the orchestra's list. This doesn't mean that conductors shouldn't be encouraged to prepare and commit to lists of their own, for that's always been their responsibility. I have a personal list, compiled over decades of listening and study. I'm sure others have theirs that include worthy pieces I've not yet had the pleasure of discovering. The American Symphony Orchestra League keeps performance records of all the repertoire programmed by its member orchestras. A study of these might indicate consensus on at least a few major new pieces.
- ◆ Repeats of the standards must be less frequent so when they do return we all appreciate them. We are harming the great works of the standard repertoire with too many routine renditions. We cannot get away with this anymore. We must equalize the playing field to be more inclusive of the great works of this rapidly concluding century. Each orchestra could select and remove from their repertoires lesser works by major classical composers.

“... the time has come for musicians to assert their involvement in these matters, along with accepting the work and responsibility that such involvement entails.”

- ◆ Youth concerts could become an opportunity to expose our potential future audience (among whom such pieces are less likely to encounter the prejudices we have helped to cultivate in our adult audiences) to the repertoire of the 21st century.

Most youth concert audiences are pretty obviously bored by the standard classical music we insist on playing for them. We have a better chance of catching and holding their attention with a predominance of music that has more in common with the alternative rock they listen to the other 364 days of the year. Copland, Stravinsky, Bartok, Honegger, Tippett, Lutoslawski, Martinu, Ginastera, Revueltas, Hindemith, Wuorinen, and Harbison are just a few of the composers who have written colorful, exciting, masterfully crafted orchestra

“Most youth concert audiences are pretty obviously bored by the standard classical music we insist on playing for them.”

works with a rhythmic drive compelling enough to keep kids “entertained” and musicians challenged without our having to resort to extramusical enhancements. Minimal talk and predominantly contemporary programming could provide a more memorable musical experience for American schoolchildren.

- ◆ The efforts of many orchestras to become more involved in music education in their cities is laudable. However, orchestras must back up their commitments to the minority communities they want to reach by putting their programming, not just their meager educational resources, where their good intentions are. Orchestras should be performing more symphonic works written by members of those communities. The BSO’s record in this regard has been less than exemplary: only three substantial works by African-American composers in the fourteen years I have been a member of the orchestra. I’m sure it’s not much better elsewhere in the majors. A glance at the past 15 years of programming by the American Composers Orchestra in New York will yield many worthwhile pieces. The Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College in Chicago has an extensive library which is another possible source to expand the repertoire. Personally, I can call up a few works that major orchestras could proudly play.
- ◆ Instead of inviting celebrity jazz artists to perform the same Mozart concerti we perform with the finest classically trained interpreters, why not put these unique performers’ talents to work in a way that would be more artistically viable and actually help to expand the repertoire of the symphony orchestra? There are many worthwhile American piano concerti that these gifted musicians could perform with us. Harbison, LaMontaine, Dello Joio, Liebermann, Beaser, Copland, Harrison, and Corigliano (to name but a few), wrote well-

crafted, energetic, and accessible works in the medium that would be more appropriate for such audience-building efforts.

- ◆ Musicians could try to change their own attitudes about the manner in which they approach contemporary music by embracing a stronger sense of professionalism, integrity, ensemble pride, and by displaying greater enthusiasm for new works. Musicians as instrumental instructors could become more knowledgeable of contemporary music and encourage their students to more fully explore new repertoire. They could select and teach one recent major orchestral work every year, along with the standard excerpts. Musicians called upon to adjudicate performance competitions could influence the selection of concerti by requesting the inclusion of major 20th-century virtuoso vehicles, of which there are dozens. A violinist (presently concertmaster of a major orchestra) lamented to me years ago that he would love to have been able to take the Berg Concerto to a major competition. Other outstanding concerti for violin have been written by Andrew Imbrie, William Schuman (Vincent Persichetti considered this one of the American masterpieces), and Serge Nigg (one of the little known gems of the genre) to name just a few of my own personal favorites.

“I disagree with the argument that one must learn the standards first then go on from there, because what actually happens in the profession is that we get stuck in first gear, never to build an interpretive tradition for the vast majority of great contemporary works.”

- ◆ The audition lists for major symphony auditions could be changed to accommodate excerpts from important 20th-century works, works which would already have become part of the auditioning orchestra’s repertoire. A look back at the past 20 years of audition lists will show, in a microcosm, just how stagnant the repertoire has become. I disagree with the argument that one must learn the standards first then go on from there, because what actually happens in the profession is that we get stuck in first gear, never to build an interpretive tradition for the vast majority of great contemporary works.

What I have suggested above certainly does not cover every avenue available. For example, adding an interview component to the audition process is an idea that I’ve advocated with my colleagues for years. I was glad to read, also in Dr. Freeman’s article, that Leonard Slatkin has spoken of implementing such a change when he becomes music director for the National Symphony.

Conservatories could work to fully integrate 20th-century theory and harmony and performance practice into the undergraduate curriculum. Most 20th-century

courses consist mostly of overviews of styles, names, and jargon. The bulk of the study is reserved for post-grads and composition majors or offered as an elective. Present undergraduate requirements in music theory and harmony entirely exclude 20th-century practices.

With fewer and fewer orchestras operating and competition becoming more fierce, conservatory faculty also need to become more selective at audition time and more critical at second-year promotional time to ensure that undertalented, undermotivated players are not misled. This will save those students wasted years and thousands of dollars. It will also serve to refine the pool of candidates for the diminishing job market.

The most important task, by far, for boards of trustees is to build and maintain endowments so investment income compensates 100 percent of revenue shortfall. This will require considerably larger endowments than the present formulas suggest. The demands and threats of the coming years will make it imperative that orchestras become financially self-sufficient in order to remain artistically vital.

Build the Future by Knowing the Past

I understand the attraction of the quick fix. But what is needed to ensure the healthiest artistic future for the most miraculous creations of the human imagination requires greater thought and harder work. Simply wrapping the same package with a different color bow won't help build our audience or our repertoire in any substantive way. Programs devised around entertainment or group-oriented goals may attract different audiences for those particular concerts but are not likely to turn those crowds into regular patrons without the promise of additional programs with similar content.

*“Simply wrapping
the same package
with a different color
bow won't help build
our audience or our
repertoire in any
substantive way.”*

This is where the ice gets dangerously thin. A wealth of great music available to us has gone unmined. Former music directors of the BSO have essentially handed us a blueprint for the future. We have 10 to 15 years, as I see it, to ascertain and vigorously promote (in the manner of Koussevitsky) the repertoire for the 21st-century symphony orchestra. If the conductors won't make the necessary effort then we musicians must endeavor to help. We may have to devise incentives for leadership to choose this direction over that of popularization. But if we don't make the effort to expand the repertoire in a manner consonant with the highest ideals of the symphonic tradition, we will be tacit accomplices to the decline we so vociferously lament, and can expect only more celebrity glitz and cash-concert gimmickry.

James Orleans is a bassist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He holds a B.M. from the Boston Conservatory and studied composition at Indiana University.

Notes

- ¹ Freeman, Robert. On the Future of America's Orchestras. *Harmony* 3 (October 1996): 18.
- ² These statistics originally appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* and were cited by Andrew Pincus in a 1989 article which appeared in the *Berkshire Eagle*.
- ³ von Rhein, John. 1997. It's not over, Beethoven. *Chicago Tribune*, January 19: Section 7, p. 13.
- ⁴ Riding, Alan. 1997. Maestro on a Mission: To Sell 20th-Century Music. *The New York Times*, January 22: p. 33.
- ⁵ Judy, Paul. Symphony Orchestra Organizations: Employees, Constituencies, and Communities. *Harmony* 3 (October 1996): 45.

All is not well in our Musical Wonderland. Too many players who have trained at great expense for decades and have survived an audition decathlon to gain Major orchestra status lose, in quick succession, their post-audition euphoria, their on-the-job enthusiasm, their pride in membership, their sense of responsibility, their instrumental competence, and finally (most regrettably) their self respect. I think that institutional divisions exacerbate this problem, and I believe that something we in this room should do about it is bridge the gap between the management suite and the stage.

. . . We need to muster a stronger sense of community *inside* our orchestras if we are going to do the best job in serving our communities outside.

Joseph Robinson
Oboist, New York Philharmonic
Symphony Magazine, February/March 1987