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On the Future of America's Orchestras

by

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On the Future of America's Orchestras

Robert Freeman has viewed the scene of American symphony orchestras for many years and from different perspectives. The following paragraph is from the initial draft of his essay. We thought it good enough to share right up front.

This brief essay is written by a 60-year-old American whose father played for a quarter century in the Boston Symphony Orchestra and who for the past quarter century has himself been responsible for the direction of the Eastman School of Music, historically one of the nation's principal producers of orchestral musicians. So it is probably inevitable that I reflect a good deal on the degree to which the educational process which prepares musicians has itself been responsible for some of [American orchestra's] morale and labor relations problems . . .

In the opening section of his essay, Freeman does indeed reflect on some of the economic, political, and sociological problems that threaten America's orchestras. He explores the effects which factors ranging from the advent of jet transportation to the lack of an American "farm system" for developing conductors have had on symphony orchestra organizations.

Freeman then explores the idea that the educational process which prepares orchestral musicians must bear some responsibility for the current state of affairs. He argues that orchestra musicians must be both "trained" and "educated broadly" to enjoy long-term careers as performers.

The balance of the essay deals with new approaches to educating young musicians and making their work lives more interesting and rewarding. Examples from the Eastman curriculum are liberally sprinkled throughout the exposition and Freeman acknowledges that many of the ideas relate closely to the Fleischmann-Lipman-Morris debate which was summarized in the April 1996 issue of Harmony. The essay concludes with an entreaty to managing directors and board members to be farsighted as they plan the future of the nation's orchestras.

As we worked to prepare this essay for publication, we discovered that Robert Freeman is a marvelous raconteur. Sprinkled among the endnotes are several stories which are both illustrative of his points and quite amusing. Don't cheat and read them first, but we do think you will enjoy them.

On the Future of America's Orchestras

Philip Hart, writing a quarter century ago, considered America's orchestras our nation's greatest cultural achievement.¹ So it is ironic that a great number of orchestras—especially those with middle-size budgets—are now threatened by a variety of economic, political, and sociological problems.

The causes for these problems are several and complex, beginning with the economic squeeze outlined 30 years ago by Baumol and Bowen in their path-breaking study, *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma*. The “cost disease” they described involves an economic activity which “. . . tends to rise in cost persistently and at a rate faster than the economy's rate of inflation, obviously leading to financial pressures for anyone who supplies the product.”² In other words, productivity gains are difficult for a labor-intensive art form.

It is unfortunate that the Baumol/Bowen book appeared in the middle 1960s, almost simultaneously with the founding of the National Endowment for the Arts and the Ford Foundation's grant of \$85 million to American orchestras. Had its publication preceded those events by five years, it might well have persuaded the boards and managements of America's orchestras *not* to increase orchestral size, *not* to lengthen orchestral seasons, and *not* to raise minimum salaries. From the perspective of the middle 1960s, the economic future of orchestras looked a lot rosier than it did once the economic inevitability of the Baumol/Bowen message struck home a decade later.³

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But other interrelated problems developed as well. In the 1940s and 1950s, music directors focused their activities on single cities. But the advent of jet transportation changed the nature of the profession, as music directors learned that it was both financially more remunerative and physically much less taxing to conduct the same repertory in each of several different cities than it was to stay at home. Working locally requires dedicating oneself to the hard work of

fundraising and personnel problems, while at the same time preparing the larger repertory that residence with one's home orchestra mandates.

America's increasing focus on "celebrities" has also complicated matters. The role of artists' managers in representing the most promising young conductors creates a situation in which the fiscal needs of an orchestra's board and community may take a back seat to other considerations.

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Additionally, this country is not currently developing podium leadership for its orchestras, the result of a variety of complex, interrelated forces. One of those is the lack of what baseball fans would call a "farm system" for American conductors. While there is nothing at all against the idea of developing short stops for the Boston Red Sox in Pawtucket, it would be unthinkable to try to develop new leadership for the Boston Symphony Orchestra in Providence. Conductors who lead orchestras resident in educational institutions or in smaller communities are automatically typecast by American orchestras' boards as inadequate for the purpose at hand, which undoubtedly discourages many younger American musicians from aspiring to careers as orchestral conductors. We have at Eastman a vibrant program in orchestral playing and conducting which attracts students from all over the United States and from countries around the world as well.⁴ I have always wondered why Americans are well represented among the players while the students of orchestral conducting

come, almost without exception, from other countries.

And that isn't all. Prior to World War II, most American women stayed home during the day and were eager to escape for a night out at the symphony. During the 1950s and 1960s, more and more women became part of the work force, and at the conclusion of a long work day were reluctant to attend orchestral concerts in what had become perceived as America's increasingly dangerous inner cities.

Add to this witch's brew the gradual disappearance of classical music from the nation's public schools, from AM radio, and from both national weekly magazines and the metropolitan daily press. Television—an essentially visual force—has become the dominant electronic medium, while those who make compact discs—the new aural technology—have learned to remaster the already available recorded performances of artists now deceased. No wonder that by the middle 1980s, a variety of commentators had begun to write about the graying of the audience and the apparent waning of demand for a repertory that seems to some increasingly isolated from the nation's day-to-day concerns.

Educational Process Is One Root of Trouble

The educational process which prepares orchestral musicians has itself been responsible for some of the morale and labor relations problems which have been described by Edward Arian⁵ and in earlier issues of *Harmony*. To begin with, the orchestral repertoires of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries involve markedly larger cohorts of string players than they do of wind and brass players. The latter come to the study of the oboe or the trombone, for example, with dreams of becoming principal oboe of the Cleveland Orchestra or principal trombone of the New York Philharmonic. But string players, who inevitably form two-thirds of the membership of the symphony orchestra, have large and attractive solo and chamber repertoires. They study in the world's major music schools with faculty members whose own educational focuses have been precisely on those solo and chamber repertoires. While an oboist or trombonist aspires to be an orchestral musician, a large cohort of their string colleagues aspire to be the successors of Itzhak Perlman and the Guarneri Quartet.

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Further, while the wind, brass, and percussion players get to hear themselves in the orchestra as the performers of individual lines in a musical texture, the string players spend their lives submerged in choirs of sometimes dubious intonation. A violinist or violist, for example, may spend two hours every day practicing scales and orchestral passages, but as soon as he or she sits within the orchestra, other colleagues' lack of interest in careful preparation makes it difficult to determine if the practicing has accomplished anything. So long as a string player can aspire to a position on a higher stand, with the anticipation of a possibly higher salary, he or she may well practice diligently. But once a musician decides that he or she will never be promoted beyond the inside of the fourth stand and that it is unlikely that the conductor will ever hear poor playing,⁶ dull routine sets in, leading to less than satisfactory performance and to the visual appearance of men and women who no longer care about what they are doing.

As the result, it has always seemed important to me that orchestral musicians be not only “trained” but also “educated.” They should be prepared as broadly as possible for a time when the thrill of music making at a high level may wane. Put another way, I believe that the morale of orchestral musicians would improve if those who are raising families and paying mortgages understood that making a living is not the only reason they perform. To play effectively, they must also perform because the act of making music is joyful and exciting.

The importance of reserving music making to those who take genuine joy from musical performance becomes especially critical when one reflects on the fact that orchestral musicians have almost nothing to say about which music is performed or about when, where, or how it is played. Clearly, it makes little practical sense to encourage the performers in an ensemble of 110 players to discuss or debate questions of interpretation during rehearsals where the time pressures are intense. No wonder, as Seymour and Robert Levine point out in their essay, "Why They're Not Smiling: Stress and Discontent in the Orchestral Workplace," so many aspects of rehearsal preparation are regulated to a degree that makes practical sense only in terms of controlling the musicians' frustration through trade agreements that pay more attention to peace in the workplace than to artistic accomplishment.⁷

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A New Approach

When Leonard Slatkin received an honorary degree at the Eastman School of Music in October 1994, he spoke with passion to our students about ideas which he hoped to implement as the new Music Director of the National Symphony Orchestra. In Slatkin's view, job descriptions for orchestral musicians have become unduly standardized and much too narrow.⁸ The vast majority of players, chosen simply as the result of competitive auditions, inevitably become locked into careers of repeated performances of standard repertory. Why not, Slatkin argued, educate musicians more broadly, partly so that some of them could undertake aspects of the orchestra's administration and partly so that the extra-musical aspects of their work might interest some of them in eventually graduating from the orchestra into other careers. To be sure, one would not only audition such players but also interview them, taking into consideration the inevitable differences among human beings in intelligence and aspiration—even among those who are capable of performing a Brahms or a Mahler symphony at the highest possible artistic level.

In 24 years of directing the Eastman School of Music, I have certainly discovered the importance of treating each faculty and staff member as an individual, understanding how much energy can be derived from the fact that people grow at different speeds and that their aspirations often change as they grow older. Some young orchestral musicians continue to dream of promotions or of careers as soloists. Though it is certainly easier for the orchestra not to permit them to take time off to practice, to tour with chamber ensembles, or to participate in solo competitions, administrative willingness thoroughly to investigate such possibilities will garner a good deal of positive morale.

Not all orchestral musicians would be equally good at raising money for the

orchestra, but it is easy to imagine that with a bit of training, intelligent and outgoing orchestral players might add very effectively to their orchestras' bottom lines. Were the principal oboist interested in raising money and good at it, might it not make more sense for him or her—on nights when the associate principal might play with the orchestra—to sit in as *second* oboist with a selected community orchestra, improving the performance capacities of the amateur principal oboe, who, as an affluent surgeon of renown, might eventually contribute a charitable remainder trust of several million dollars to the orchestra's endowment?

Might not string quartets, wind quintets, and brass quintets, formed by members of the orchestra, appreciate time off to teach in outreach and audience development projects, thereby assisting their orchestras by educating more members of the community to listen to music while developing community interest in attending future events? Might not orchestra members interested in attaining M.B.A. degrees on the side be useful in helping to take ownership of the orchestra's financial problems, thereby making them part of the solution to the orchestra's fiscal future rather than adversaries of management and the board?

It is obvious that many professional musicians, having sacrificed childhood, adolescence, and youth to the attainment of high-level performance skills, resent that it is only after they attain positions in major professional ensembles that they discover while everyone thinks it is a good idea to have an orchestra in the community, relatively few wish to support it or attend its concerts.

One way to counter the problem is to let young orchestral musicians know its fundamental nature—a serious imbalance between the supply of orchestral musicians and the demand for their services. At Eastman, we open each academic year by spending two hours with groups of incoming students, developing a budget for a major American orchestra. Our students have a wonderful time putting together an expense budget, for they have all heard about the minimum salaries in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic. But the problem of wrestling with the budget shortfall that affects each orchestra is an eye-opening experience.

I explain to our students that if a major orchestra depends solely on ticket income to meet an annual budget of \$35 million, tickets for a 2,600-seat hall, sold at an average price of \$30 will yield a nightly income of \$78,000. I then point out that this will require the performance of more than 440 concerts each year. Even freshmen can understand that 440 concerts is more than one a day,

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all year long, without vacation. One-half that number is still a lot of concerts, though even a freshman can see without much trouble that it results in an operating budget gap of nearly \$20 million.

After discussing the importance of having a good fundraising staff, which will work with the community's most affluent private individuals and with its principal corporations, our students are ready to attack the problem of public support. “Why” most of them ask, “shouldn't federal, state, and local governments take a more active interest in the support of professional artistic institutions?” My answer includes a brief history of public support for the arts in Europe compared with our support in our own country, with special focus on the “culture wars” waged on the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities during the past several years.

Our students want to know why the Congress is so concerned about the national annual expenditure of a nickel per capita in support of music in America. Why don't the Germans feel as strongly as Americans seem to on this subject? Why don't the Canadians, who on a per capita basis spend much, much more on federal support for the arts than do we in the U.S.? My response is, “Whose responsibility is it to change this state of affairs?” How can one expect large numbers of people to support musical repertoires they have never heard? Is the answer to this problem a legitimate part of the responsibility of America's symphonic musicians? And if it is, what kinds of education do they need to help them bring this music to a broader number of Americans, thereby garnering the kind of political support which America's orchestras are going to need to prosper in the century ahead?⁹

A New “Arts Leadership Program”

As the result of questions like these, Eastman faculty members are developing a new “arts leadership program,” a curriculum which engages our most ambitious seniors in a series of seminars on local and federal public policy formation, on the economics and the politics of music in the public schools, on the curricula of our principal music schools, and on the future of America's orchestras and opera houses. This curriculum should produce some of the administrative leaders that our musical organizations will need. But we are also convinced that such efforts will develop artists who understand at the outset the challenges which they face and who are prepared to become part of the future solution rather than part of the continuing problem.

The ideas I have outlined here relate closely to the Fleischmann-Lipman-Morris debate of 1987-1989, which was summarized in the April 1996 issue of *Harmony*.¹⁰ To begin with, I believe that the solution for the future of orchestral music, to a marked degree, will differ from one community to another, dependent

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in each case upon the history of musical institutions in the community and on their relationships with one another. The future of orchestral music is bound to be quite different in Los Angeles from what it will be in Cleveland; what will take place in Jacksonville, Florida will differ markedly from what will take place in Bloomington, Indiana or Ann Arbor, Michigan. Each community will want to take advantage of its own strengths and, wherever possible, develop fruitful synergies among pre-existing institutions, particularly if the orchestra plans to come to the community for fiscal support.

Similarly, the future will depend upon the financial health of the community itself, on the degree to which nonprofit organizations are encouraged to multiply without an overall local plan, and on the degree to which the corporate management of each community's major industries remains local. When stockholders seek to maximize short-term gains, it is difficult to imagine how an American CEO can downsize a corporation, laying off hundreds or thousands of local

employees in the process, and still provide notable fiscal support to local nonprofit enterprises.

I believe that Ernest Fleischmann's visionary commencement address at the Cleveland Institute is more important now than it was 10 years ago, though its relevance as a model will vary from community to community, depending upon size, funding, previous history, and administrative imagination. Fleischmann's idea of a community of musicians and the ideas I have sketched in this essay both depend on musicians' willingness to take ownership of the problems which they face and on management's willingness to maintain flexible and encouraging attitudes toward the evolving artistic, administrative, and intellectual lives of the players. We know the negative human results that ensue from the current process, in which *tutti* players are initially thrilled to gain admission to the ensemble, but at salaries which will increase only as the result of changes in a union-negotiated trade agreement rather than as the result of individual initiative and accomplishment. Certainly, Ernest Fleischmann is correct that, while every artistic institution needs administrative leadership, administration should be kept as lean as possible, reserving fiscal resources for the organization's artistic and educational mission.

It is impossible for me to agree with anything remotely approaching Samuel Lipman's attribution of orchestras' problems to ". . . the complete failure over the past half century of avant garde composition, both acoustic and electronic, to win a place in the minds of musicians and in the ears of serious music lovers."¹¹ New music in America during the 1960s was probably controlled by the nation's

academic establishment to an unhealthy degree. But, led by “Meet the Composer,” that situation has changed radically in the past 20 years. Several dozen composers, in our own country and all over the world, are writing music of substance and excitement that can be prepared in reasonable rehearsal time. Much of this music is well received by conductors, performers, audiences, and critics.¹²

I do agree with Thomas Morris when he speaks of the importance of visionary leadership and the development of symphony boards of affluence who are dedicated to music. The musicians themselves need to understand that in the absence of board members of wealth and dedication, men and women who are capable of supporting a well-designed long-term financial plan, too many American orchestral boards are obliged to seek cover as rapidly as possible when significant budget gaps develop.

One of an executive director's primary tasks must be the building and maintenance of a committed and enthusiastic board whose members have at least two vital prerequisites: significant wealth or access to significant wealth. Only executive directors who have compelling vision and superb long-term planning skills will successfully recruit such boards, which too many American orchestras lack.

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A Recapitulation

The principal points of this essay can be summarized briefly:

- ◆ The job descriptions of players in modern American orchestras have been wrongly designed, more the result of tradition than thought about human motivation.
- ◆ Leadership which plans for the future, striving for the highest artistic ideals while marshaling a community's financial resources, is vital.
- ◆ American music directors are in short supply, stemming partly from a monopoly established by the largest American artists' managers, discouraging young Americans from aspiring to positions as orchestral conductors and from working at the study of orchestral conducting in American music schools.
- ◆ The repertory must continue to grow, producing new works of passion and imagination that move contemporary American audiences. The orchestra cannot be allowed to become a museum.

- ◆ The boards of American orchestras must be as strong as those of other nonprofit institutions. Board members must insist on long-term financial planning and on musical leadership that is responsive to the board, resident in the community, and, as a primary mission, committed to building the orchestra's future strength in the community.

Ernest Fleischmann and Thomas W. Morris offer important visions for the future. The most farsighted managing directors and board members of America's leading orchestras should constantly consider and reflect on their views as they plan and direct the future of the nation's orchestras.

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Notes

- ¹ Hart, Philip. 1973. *Orpheus in the New World*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc.
- ² Baumol, William J., and William G. Bowen. 1966. *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma*. New York: The Twentieth Century Fund.
- ³ Though the situation of the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra is idiosyncratic in some respects, in others it is typical of what happened during the later 1960s and early 1970s to America's mid-sized orchestras. Until the middle 1960s, the relatively unendowed Rochester Philharmonic and the relatively well-endowed Eastman School of Music shared both a broad array of principal players and facilities in Rochester built during the early 1920s by George Eastman. But in the latter 1960s, what had been two five-eighths positions turned into two full-time jobs for many of the players, creating two independent work forces and substantially increasing costs for both institutions.
- ⁴ Eastman's large ensemble and conducting programs were given top marks during the past three years, tying us for first place with Indiana and Juilliard, in the polls on masters degree programs published by *U.S. News and World Report*.
- ⁵ Arian, Edward. 1971. *Bach, Beethoven, and Bureaucracy: The Case of the Philadelphia Orchestra*. University, AL: University of Alabama Press.
- ⁶ While the rotation of string seating certainly helps, participation in chamber ensembles would work better.
- ⁷ Levine, Seymour and Robert. Why They're Not Smiling: Stress and Discontent in the Orchestral Workplace. *Harmony* 2 (April 1996): 15-25. That I was trained as an adolescent oboist by Koussevitzky's principal oboe for a quarter century on how to frustrate the music director's artistic intentions suggests as much about orchestral morale as the story of the bassoonist who, having retired from the orchestra, nailed his world class Heckel instrument to the mantelpiece of his Cape Cod retirement cottage as an act of revenge. I am reminded in this context, too, of an audition I played at the age of 13 for Marcel Tabuteau, the famous principal oboist of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Said Tabuteau, "I like the way you play the oboe, and I will be pleased to have you as a student at the Curtis Institute. But why would you want to be an oboe player when you can do anything you want with the rest of your life?" And he went on to describe to me how, on a recent Philadelphia Orchestra tour to Europe, he'd been obliged to stay in his hotel room, day after day, making reeds, while his colleagues saw the sights of London and Paris.
- ⁸ Slatkin's plans for the National Symphony Orchestra were summarized at the time of his appointment in an article in *The Washington Post* written by Judith Weinraub and Joseph McClellan: The Conductor: 'All Aboard'. March 29, 1994: B1.

⁹ I have written in more detail on this question in *New Perspectives on Audience Development*. *Arts Education Policy Review* 97(5): 22-28.

¹⁰ Pure Gold: The Fleischmann-Lipman-Morris Debate of 1987-89. *Harmony* 2 (April 1996): 55-69.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹² Readers can imagine my pride at a Boston Symphony Orchestra concert conducted by Leonard Slatkin a decade ago, when, in a repertory that comprised Beethoven's *Fidelio* Overture, the Sibelius 2nd Symphony, and a new work by Eastman faculty composer Joseph Schwantner, entitled *Magabunda*, Schwantner's work, with soprano Lucy Shelton as the stunning soloist, was the hit of the evening.