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## Orchestras, Communities, and Musical Culture

by

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### ***Orchestras, Communities, and Musicial Culture***

**H**ow well are symphony orchestras relating to and gaining the support of their communities? Not very well according to Samuel Hope, Executive Director of the National Association of Schools of Music, in a thoughtful consideration of an important topic.

The author posits that relationships between orchestras and their communities are quite fragile, threatening the gains which have been made over the past 30 years. He then offers recommendations in five areas which he urges symphony orchestra organizations to consider.

- ◆ *Hold forth a vision for high cultural aspirations and achievement.*
- ◆ *Think locally; work locally.*
- ◆ *Define community analytically.*
- ◆ *Support all aspects of the infrastructure.*
- ◆ *Define partnerships in terms of mutual reciprocities.*

Hope's essay centers on the concept of thinking and working locally. He suggests that any search for national, formulaic, one-size-fits-all answers is doomed to failure and offers an extended explanation about why symphony orchestras should not try to be all things to all people. Following his exposition of the five areas, he offers a "short list" of basic questions which symphony orchestra organizations might use to assess their efforts.

The entire essay leaves the reader with a sense of urgency, which Hope reinforces in his concluding thought: "The challenges for artists, teachers, managers, and dedicated supporters are clear. All concerned must meet them as quickly as possible, community by community."

## Orchestras, Communities, and Musical Culture

**A**nxieties about the future of the symphony orchestra in the United States continue to rise, not only from the reported plights of particular orchestras, but also from contextual changes. Readily observable are the loss of public school music education in large urban areas, growing use of computer-based technologies that encourage cultural isolation, and the mutually reinforcing juggernauts of mass advertising and entertainment that too often inundate us with superficialities.

For those deeply committed to the kind of cultural effort the symphony orchestra represents, policy and planning difficulties posed by these and other conditions are hard to accept, especially after a 30-year spate of intensive and successful efforts to build the size, scope, geographical distribution, and qualities of ensembles throughout the land. It is particularly difficult to face the prospect of diminishing community support when one of the major arguments in favor of expansion was community need expressed in such terms as economic growth, cultural heritage, education, and image.

Although most orchestras have accepted various roles in proportions most calculated to sustain their local support, relationships between orchestra and community seem more and more fragile. Orchestras must vie with all the forces in mass culture and are presently being outflanked by a number of intellectual movements that enjoy wide philanthropic, governmental, and media attention. These demolitionary crusades lump the orchestra and its work with the rest of what is disdainfully referred to as Western high culture. An appropriate response requires the special kind of courage needed in an image-obsessed society where extraordinary artistic achievement both past and present is regularly portrayed as negative, oppressive, and out of fashion—as something to be jeered at and eventually discarded in the cause of justice.

As long as such concepts are reinforced from so many different sources, symphony orchestras will not have an easy time. Difficult, even painful, choices

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will be their daily burden. Yet, there are always people who want to go beyond the fashionably ordinary; intellectuals who will cultivate, explain, and defend high achievement; and artists who cannot live with themselves unless they are doing their best in aesthetic terms. While it is clear that orchestras must change to meet new times, it is equally clear that such changes must maintain the interest and commitment of these three groups while increasing understanding and support in the public at large. Otherwise, the gains of the last 30 years could prove ephemeral.

As orchestras throughout the nation address these and other contextual issues, they must succeed in a difficult calculus that mixes values, traditions, aspirations, expertise, and resources. In working with these complexities, the following five suggestions may be useful as each orchestra develops the kind of relationship with its community that is required for success in the next decade.

### **Hold Forth a Vision for High Cultural Aspirations and Achievement**

*“To turn away from the highest aspirations for the culture which the orchestra represents is neither a victory for diversity, nor for the quality of life, nor for the community.”*

Every symphony orchestra represents aspirations for superior performance and for the preservation and continuation of a musical tradition that has reached the apex of human achievement often enough to demonstrate that the climb to the top can always be made. Such aspirations and achievement are not commonplace. There is no denying that orchestras are manifestations of high culture and, as such, represent one high culture among many in the arts, the humanities, the sciences, sports, and the various professions. The orchestra’s work involves not only supreme achievement by performers and composers, but also by teachers and instrument-makers, scholars and publishers, copyists and editors, to name only some of those associated with the purely musical side of the enterprise. To turn away from the highest aspirations for the culture which the orchestra

represents is neither a victory for diversity, nor for the quality of life, nor for the community.

To abandon this ambition, or to marginalize it, will not only cost orchestras the respect and support of their most dedicated musicians and patrons, it will also raise serious long-term policy questions. For if what the symphony orchestra does is not uniquely special, then why support it? Why go to all the expense, time, energy, and expenditure of personal spirit to create and maintain the high culture that a symphony orchestra represents every time it takes the stage?

It is possible to articulate a vision for superior achievement and realize it regularly without falling into the traps of snobbism, artistic preciousness, and

social separation. Mission, goals, and objectives must transcend personalities, fads, and the ever escalating demands of advertising techniques. The music must be the central thing, not just for the musicians, but for everyone with more than casual involvement in the work of the orchestra. A successful vision must focus on the “why” and the “what” more than on the “how” and the “who.” The vision needs to make clear that the orchestra is in the cultural formation business, not just in the symphonic music performance business. Visions with these attributes provide a firm foundation for working in and with the community on matters of musical culture while maintaining internal conditions necessary to achieve the aesthetic power in performance that makes the orchestra unique on the field of human action.

***“A successful vision must focus on the ‘why’ and the ‘what’ more than on the ‘how’ and the ‘who.’”***

### **Think Locally, Work Locally**

In the past three decades, increasing numbers of organizations have learned techniques for creating movements, including how to “ring chimes” in the echo chamber of the media. One result is cultural and political gridlock. Another is movement fatigue sustained by an unrelieved succession of reports, studies, meetings, demonstrations, and spin doctorings in every arena. All segments of American cultural development, including education, are suffering from information overload. Minds and spirits are enervated by saturation barrages of conflicting propaganda. In addition, there is the ubiquitous mantra of change which creates the cloying fear that if you aren’t changing, you aren’t living. If you don’t have time to think analytically about change, various movements are there to give you their answers. Your role is to be converted, not to think for yourself.

***“... what happens in each locality to build a musical culture in the community is far more important than what happens nationally.”***

Since much of this buzz-creating activity is national, it regularly contributes to a loss of distinction between what is national and what is local, a loss especially tragic when association with specific national movements comes at the price of local understanding and support. For each orchestra, there is a way out of this labyrinth. Without denying the importance of national and international reputations and responsibilities, each orchestra must first consider itself a local organization. Since the nation is the aggregate of its localities, the combination of individual local successes or failures truly creates the national result. Thus, what happens in each locality to build a musical culture in the community is far more important than

what happens nationally.

The search for formulaic, one-size-fits-all answers to be imposed through

legislation, financial reward systems, or peer pressure is counterproductive because local conditions vary so widely, and because most orchestra funding comes from local private sources. The use of national artistic, policy, and financial resources to serve local action is productive and enjoys a long history of success. The symphony orchestra world is replete with knowledge about what to do to be successful given particular sets of goals and objectives, and the search for new and better technique never stops. Lack of knowledge and skill is not a problem, but finding the wisdom and courage to mold the best that is known to specific local situations is often extremely difficult.

***“To try to think and act locally without a local vision is futile because action plans are likely to be shaped by ever-changing visions of cultural development as they float by on trendy breezes.”***

Sometimes financial support is the primary issue. But often, economic and other problems are accrued over time by imitating others, following movements, or seeking desperately to appear innovative at any cost. Doing the opposite—a local approach based on a local vision and reflective of local conditions—is not easy, but it is the way forward both locally and nationally. To try to think and act locally without a local vision is futile because action plans are likely to be shaped by ever-changing visions of cultural development as they float by on trendy breezes. “How” and “who” will dominate policy-making. To think and act locally with a shared local vision of high cultural achievement creates the essential foundation for developing a regard for the orchestra as a uniquely

important possession held by the community as a whole. The orchestra contributes an important part of the answer to “what” and “why.” It has roots that enable flexibility as the winds of change blow. It can change productively on its own terms for its own reasons.

## **Define Community Analytically**

It seems abundantly clear that a large number of cultural visions coexist in the United States. In the public square, we try to deal with this phenomenon by using the term “diversity.” But diversity has no standard definition. “Multiculturalism” is more problematic, having come to be used for so many ideas that it no longer has a common meaning in analytical discourse. Yet, despite all confusions, the debate proceeding under the rubrics of “diversity” and “multiculturalism” creates conditions that affect symphony orchestras.

Analyses, decisions, and policies must be made amidst tremendous cultural fragmentation where every gesture seems to produce deep bitterness in at least one highly organized group, sending them to their own particular set of “chimes.” Techniques of targeted marketing reinforce and further fragment old and more natural divisions by background, economic status, or education. This fragmentation is accomplished in part by marketing certain goods, services, ideas, and entertainments to specific groups in ways that create disdain for the

preferences of other groups. Lifestyle trumps content. These suasions seem increasingly powerful in the field of music.

Each type of music has become stereotyped; it belongs to a certain group and not to the world as a whole. It's "their" music. When one juxtaposes this situation against thinking and acting locally in fulfillment of a particular high cultural vision, it seems a bit dangerous to speak generically about "the community" as though it were a single monolith. The forces of cultural fragmentation have succeeded to the point that, to some extent, the more an orchestra attempts to consult with and please each and every segment of its community, the more difficulties it will create for itself in terms of its own vision and priorities. This does not mean that an orchestra should quarantine itself, but it does require using a judicious selection of criteria about interaction, and working on multiple fronts to reduce confusions between lifestyle and content.

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Embracing values currently espoused by a number of strident intellectual, artistic, and political communities focused on wielding power from hard left or right perspectives means abandoning the special values, achievements, skills, and aspirations that are central to what the symphony orchestra represents in artistic terms, past, present, and future. It is critical to remember that these terms encompass a kind of work and a way of applying the intellect to musical endeavor as well as a repertory produced in and judged on musical logic rather than speech logic or visual imagery, the primary media for political struggles. All these conditions indicate why, particularly at this moment, a symphony orchestra should not try to be all things to all people.

## **Support All Aspects of the Infrastructure**

Maintenance of any high culture is a difficult, expensive, and multifaceted task. No matter the subject or profession, there seem to be several standard requirements which interact:

- ◆ General education that develops public understanding and supportive values.
- ◆ Identification and nurture of individuals with superior talent and dedication.
- ◆ Maintenance, support, and use of recent creative and developmental work.
- ◆ Creation and perpetuation of institutions that perform at high levels.

The classical music community in the United States does an excellent job

with the second and fourth items, and a fair to poor job overall with the first and third. In fact, many public relations messages supporting symphonic performance reveal a belief that the power of the fourth item supported by excellence in the second will obviate the need for serious efforts in the first and third. Such an approach over time has and will continue to corrode the infrastructure necessary to support the particular high culture that the symphony orchestra represents.

***“Maintenance of any high culture is a difficult, expensive, and multifaceted task.”***

In every field, individuals and institutions have different priorities. Clearly, the symphony orchestra’s is performance. However, an American orchestra avoids questions of substantive general education and repertory building in American terms at severe peril to its own future. In the United States, professional preparation seems to take care of itself; on the basis of

personnel interaction, orchestras and educational institutions share high-level performer-teachers. But much more work is needed to correlate efforts between orchestras and professional schools on behalf of public cultural development in local communities.

General education in music constitutes one of the most important linkages between the orchestra and the community in terms of vision, thinking and working locally, and defining “community” analytically. Exposure and enrichment are important, but not enough. Study that expands individual knowledge and skills is required. Orchestras must become more engaged in issues of music study for the entire community.

To address these issues effectively, each orchestra must be able to change focal points as the demand shifts daily among its responsibilities to music and its performance, the infrastructure of the high musical culture of which it is a part, and the specific operations and support systems of the orchestra. To act as though the orchestra itself is a unilateral force, or even more tragically, that performers, performances, performance, and publicity are all that matter is to construct a pattern of self-fulfilling isolation.

In community terms, refusing to place performance in a larger musical and cultural context leads to conditions where focus is perceived as narrowness, the pursuit of excellence as elitism, investment in quality as social condescension, and respect for work produced by individuals of genius and dedication as personality cultism. Vision, analysis, and action that connect effectively and that exemplify stewardship to the various components of the infrastructure within the community are key to changing such perceptions over time.

## **Define Partnership in Terms of Mutual Reciprocities**

In many ways, each symphony orchestra is in an envious position to address the issues it faces. First, the orchestra is not alone. Large numbers of individuals dedicated to music either as professionals or as amateurs want orchestras to



succeed. Thousands of highly trained and dedicated professionals are involved in classical music throughout the nation. Most participate in local or national organizations associated with their various specializations. To some extent, each specialization, including the symphony orchestra, now represents a sequestered high culture of its own.

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In too many communities, these separate high musical cultures work in parallel without much feeling of mutual support. Each is so consumed with and proud of what it does that it fails to appreciate the achievements of others and the conditions under which others must work. High levels of professionalism in each segment can foster quick loss of patience with those who do not share exactly the same agenda or understand legitimate but parochial intricacies each specialization must negotiate to survive. Today, given observable trajectories of prominent trends, these insensitivities seem especially counterproductive.

Present conditions would seem to indicate a different approach: every element of the classical music infrastructure within a community must accept conditions where, at times, that element leads and at other times, it follows or supports. A centralized

command-and-control system is not needed. In fact, attempts to create such a system would probably doom the effort to failure in most places. What is needed is a common vision, and an understanding of the critical relationship between vision and infrastructure in order that all can think and act locally in mutually supportive ways. Let management and policy follow content. For example: no symphony orchestra should ever let public school music instruction die in its community without putting up an all-out fight; and, each music teacher should encourage attention to and study of the work of the orchestra, especially the music it is performing.

These and many similar reciprocities need not be expensive. They do not require the blessings of foundations and governments. They do not even require a lot of time. Fundamentally, they require the consideration of partnership in terms of mutual support to reach common cultural formation goals. Symphony orchestras have the ability to articulate this vision of reciprocal partnership and to find important leadership roles within it, roles that will differ community by community. Such an approach demonstrates citizenship, statesmanship, and stewardship, and it shows that the orchestra is more than simply a tiny branch of a gargantuan entertainment industry.

In fulfilling its responsibilities to musical culture, an orchestra can demonstrate it cares about the artistic and intellectual development of the six-year-old at his or her first piano lesson as much as it cares about the artistic and intellectual achievements of the world-famous guest conductor, that it understands the many

possible relationships between the two as time evolves, and thus, that it knows how to build its future comprehensively on behalf of civilization and community.

## **In Summary**

The five points above identify only a few of the policy arenas which hold important issues for symphony orchestras, and they represent only one way of formulating the specific issues they address. They also lead to a short list of basic questions about an orchestra's work with projects that build relationships among orchestras, their communities, and musical culture.

Simply stated, these are:

- ◆ What is our vision?
- ◆ Is it focused primarily on music?
- ◆ Does it exhibit aspirations for the extraordinary?
- ◆ Is it broader than the specific work of the orchestra?
- ◆ Does it enrich the traditions central to our vision in breadth as well as depth, for the future as well as with respect to the past and present?
- ◆ Are we thinking, acting, and working locally first?
- ◆ Are we defining our community analytically in terms of our vision?
- ◆ Are we paying the right kinds of attention to all elements of the infrastructure that makes our work possible both now and in the future?
- ◆ Are we using our policy influence to promote music study for all?
- ◆ Are we working to achieve our vision in a mutually supportive way with others professionally engaged in various segments of the infrastructure?
- ◆ Are our philosophies, aspirations, and operations teaching and exemplifying positive public values about music, music study, civilization, community, and the role of the orchestra in advancing the relationship among them?
- ◆ Success can be measured by asking another question over time: Is the musical culture of our community growing in various dimensions consistent with our vision?

*“Such an approach . . . shows that the orchestra is more than simply a tiny branch of a gargantuan entertainment industry.”*

If visions pursued by orchestras and their allies are special yet welcoming, high but accessible, transcending rather than momentary, comprehensive rather than self-centered, orchestras as local organizations have every chance of achieving more glory, recognition, and support than most can possibly imagine. Indeed, our most successful orchestras already provide a glimmering of what can be accomplished when these directions are taken seriously, consistently, thoughtfully, and persistently. Changes guided by productive values and made locally throughout the nation could lead in time to a new age of supreme

achievement, not just in performance, but in our musical culture as a whole. Aspirations for and work toward such a result and all that it represents for humanity justifies the tremendous effort classical music and the orchestra represent. Anything less is not likely to be enough to sustain the orchestral elements of this effort at present levels in the nation as a whole. The challenges for artists, teachers, managers, and dedicated supporters are clear. All concerned must meet them as quickly as possible, community by community.

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