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Raising the Demand Curve for Symphony Orchestras

by

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Editor's Digest

Raising the Demand Curve for Symphony Orchestras

Joseph Robinson has been an active participant and keen observer of the worldwide orchestral scene for more than a quarter-century. He admits to coming of age during the “culture boom” of the 1960s, and has been principal oboe of the New York Philharmonic since 1978. He has given a great deal of thought to what it might take to rekindle strong interest in symphonic music. His ideas may surprise you.

The Attack on Classical

The essay opens with the question, “Who cares about our orchestra?” Joe’s answer: “Not that many people.” Robinson leads readers through a discussion of supply- and demand-side views of American orchestras and suggests that “classical anything” is currently under attack. Following an explication of the ways in which orchestras present conflicting impressions to the public, he suggests a rather novel approach to the situation.

Classical Competition

Positing that the resounding success of the “Three Tenors” concerts should be attributed to the inherent competition among the soloists, Robinson offers the suggestion that well-organized performance competitions between orchestras would help rejuvenate interest in classical music performance. Joe elaborates on this basic idea in a number of ways, but we shouldn’t tip his hand. So please read on.

Raising the Demand Curve for Symphony Orchestras

I came of age with the “culture boom” in America, a time when the arts were a bipartisan bandwagon for politicians, the Ford Foundation seemed to promise self-reliance to every symphony orchestra, and Title III of the 1965 Education Act provided \$75 million for arts enrichment in the public schools. The resounding affirmation of the Rockefeller Panel Report of the same year was that the performing arts belonged at the center and not the periphery of society, and that they should be for the many and not just the privileged few. The arts were declared to be such a *good thing* that if one could provide sufficient access and education, millions of new converts would arise for visual-art exhibits, dance, drama, and musical performances. Many of us thought that consensus was not only correct, but here to stay.

Forty years later, arts marketers and public relations practitioners can attest to the failure of the “culture boom.” Instead of increased support and growing demand, arts administrators have watched government funding shrink to almost nothing and audiences age and dwindle around them. With the exception of opera companies, whose market was expanded by super- and subtitles, there are few performing arts institutions that are not threatened by a waning of public interest. As one executive told me from behind his West Coast desk, following a work stoppage that forced cutbacks across the board in his orchestra, “The real problem is: who gives a damn!” His perplexity echoes a decades-old refrain in the American arts community: “We simply do not know who composes the public for art, nor its exact size, nor the degree of its commitment, nor the factors that have created present day interest in the arts.”¹

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In the orchestra field, instrumentalists and conductors who invested their youth and their parents’ money to achieve careers in music certainly do give a damn, as do managers and staff members whose employment is at stake. Subscribers who form the chief consumer group, and music students whose

role models are often members of the ensemble, care deeply about orchestras. And, in the tradition of the Medicis who adorned themselves in the arts, wealthy patrons today also contribute time and money to sustain the groups they love. But since market estimates of classical symphony orchestra concert ticket-buyers fall historically in the range of 10 to 15 percent of the population,² the answer to the question “Who cares about our orchestra?”—even in the best of times—has always been, “Not that many people!” A generation ago, symphony loyalists would subscribe for an entire season—20 or 30 weeks in a row—while today’s marketing aims at selling “trios” to nail down concert commitments. Sometimes those who give a damn about orchestras are not represented in decisions that affect their futures. For instance, does anyone really speak for the conservatories whose graduates are desperate for employment when local symphony boards vote their organizations out of business? Does the American Symphony Orchestra League sufficiently reflect the national stake in local governance when a Sacramento or New Orleans orchestra is allowed to fold? Our cultural ecosystem can be adversely affected at any time by a handful of local volunteers who are empowered to declare their orchestra extinct.

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Products of Demand or Supply?

One view has it that symphony orchestras arose in their communities in the first place in response to public demand for them, however meager the market, making them subject to the same constraints as other enterprises in a free economy. If there were enough concertgoers, orchestras would survive and might even grow for a while. If ticket receipts and gifts did not keep pace with expenses, the inevitable choices were to cut production by shortening the concert season, compromise performance standards by reducing the number and quality of players, or “dumb down” the programming to appeal to a larger, less sophisticated audience, thereby increasing earned income. Historically, the first two options have been protected by iron-clad union contracts, so it is the third that has been most promising within the musical marketplace. Just play pops until the deficit disappears! Mark Volpe, executive director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, told me this past summer it is the Pops and not Tanglewood that is the “cash cow” for his organization.

A contrasting view is that orchestras came into being because resident musicians wanted to play in them, or because evangelical turn-of-the-century maestros such as Theodore Thomas wanted to conduct them. As recently as last summer, ads ran in the local newspapers in Jackson, Wyoming, for instance, inviting interested instrumentalists to join the newly formed Jackson Symphony, the only requirement being “an ability to read music”! According to this supply-side scenario, musicians are the instigators and chief proponents of their own

passion, persuading friends, family members, and neighbors to support them by attending concerts and contributing at the door. Musicians have invaded every welcoming venue through such means as teaching students, enlisting volunteers, and eventually writing contracts to guarantee the terms of their employment. They exhort community leaders to support “high culture” as evidence of their own and their communities’ class and maturity. They proclaim music a vehicle of moral instruction as important as churches, schools, and libraries, whether the public understands their artistry or not. And they do all of this precisely not to have to play pops concerts to survive!

From the demand side, Tom Wolf, of Wolf, Keens & Co., insists the most compelling impetus to buy tickets for classical concerts is the actual experience of playing a musical instrument. Gretchen Serrie, executive director of the Florida West Coast Symphony, confirms this, noting that 80 percent of her orchestra’s subscribers play or played musical instruments or sang in a choir.³ People who really “get the message” are the ones who have spoken a musical language themselves. If this is the case, it is no surprise that the drastic reduction of instrumental training in the public schools since 1960 has so negatively affected the size and subtlety of audiences’ symphonic appetites. Only a determined rebuilding of the education programs that were extant in the 1950s and 1960s will reverse this “Mr. Holland’s Opus” syndrome and begin to replenish audiences. But will we be able to keep orchestras as we have known them alive until then? One major orchestra manager recently predicted that only three or four large orchestras will be functional in America 50 years from now. In the meantime, wouldn’t it make sense to fill empty seats with the best young instrumentalists currently enrolled in band and orchestra programs?

From the supply side, we should remember that not all musicians are equally well nourished by life in an orchestra. Many string players dream of solo and chamber music careers at early ages and never imagine they will have to sacrifice their creativity and identity within symphonic tutti sections. I have said for years that major orchestras such as mine are filled with the “best of the failures”—virtuoso players who didn’t quite make it on the soloists’ circuit or join prestigious string quartets—who “settled” for \$100,000-a-year orchestra jobs! As an example, a violinist who was about to retire from a major East Coast orchestra told me he could now appreciate how Nelson Mandela felt when he learned he was going to be released from prison! This same player had fought through the years to strengthen union protections for a job he seemed to hate. Yet, as Erich Leinsdorf so often said, one would need only to scratch just below the crusty surface of this old player to discover a 17-year-old still passionately in love with serious music. A recent Symphony Orchestra Institute study (Breda and Kulesa, 1999) reconfirms the fact that American orchestra members continue to be challenged and gratified by the art of music itself, but are still mistrustful of management, dissatisfied with their voice in orchestra matters, and unhappy with the music directors who lead their activity.⁴ It is organizational disenfranchisement and anonymity (and perhaps too many pops concerts) that make so many of them unhappy with their jobs.

The American Attack on “Classical”

We live in a time when “classical” anything is under attack by groups intent upon repudiating the Eurocentric, male-dominated canon once assumed to underpin all liberal learning. World music, which is now widely disseminated, poses as classical, and symphony orchestra programmers are told to acknowledge the legitimacy of music submitted from almost every direction within society. They serve up works reflecting their communities’ ethnic character whether audiences like them or not, and orchestras are routinely denounced as mausoleums by composers who blame everyone but themselves for new music that does not communicate. By contrast, Marcel Tabuteau, who played principal oboe in the Philadelphia Orchestra for 39 years and was one of the most admired instrumentalists of the 20th century, used to say he gave his whole life for a few good notes—the ones that are still ringing! The cornerstone of the interpretive art as he saw it is the conviction that how one performs is just as important as what. In the same way that sports fans do not require the constant invention of new games to fill their arenas, but thrill to endless variations of skill by athletes who play the games fans already know and love, listeners who really understand the interpretive art of music can savor different performances of a Brahms symphony for a lifetime.

As I have toured with the New York Philharmonic over the years, I have been struck by the universal appeal of the music we play. In 1984, when the Philharmonic visited Thailand for the first time, we were all invited to high tea to meet our Bangkok counterparts. The four who performed expertly for us that afternoon chose a string quartet by Edward Elgar, the musical high priest of British imperialism! Three years later, following a free concert of Berlioz, Mozart, and Ravel in a public park in São Paulo, Brazil, throngs of ecstatic listeners surrounded our buses with tears in their eyes, waving flowers, blocking our exit, and holding up their children. Recent tour concerts have closed to wild acclaim when we play encores by a new “classicist,” Duke Ellington! And every year in March, the Manhattan School of Music sets a new record for applications from eager students, evidence that there is no waning of enthusiasm around the world for traditional conservatory education. Despite defectors and detractors, therefore, I continue to believe the classical music we play is one of the greatest and most universal achievements of Western civilization.

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Why then do I attend orchestra concerts all over the country that have halls half-filled with audiences that are half-dead? Looking around at the indictment of so many empty seats, I wonder why the people who are there would ever choose to attend. (One friend in Atlanta used to say it was to get the best sleep of the week!) Whatever the reason, my four years of discussions about audience

motivation as a member of the “Magic of Music” panel for the Knight Foundation have convinced me we still have much to learn about the real reasons people buy concert tickets. For one thing, orchestras present conflicting impressions to the public. One such impression is the confusion of the elitism of aesthetic judgement with the elitism of social status. The first is a proper byproduct of clear perception of and broad experience with symphonic music, while the second discourages people who feel they are not wealthy enough to fit in at the concert hall. In addition, the sanctity of concerts, with protocols enforcing solemnity and silence, protects the listening experience for those who cherish every nuance, but frustrates those who have the urge to cough, dance in the aisles, or applaud between movements!

There are also points of conflict between performers and audiences. Musicians prefer intimate acoustics, while audiences (and orchestra managers with ticket-sales quotas to meet) prefer grand spaces for symphonic music. This explains why so many American orchestras are indentured to art deco movie theaters that possess resplendent marble lobbies and horrible acoustics. When the New Jersey Symphony began playing concerts in the new Performing Arts Center in Newark two years ago, players could finally hear each other and the audience could perceive the full rich sound of their orchestra for the first time. Subscriptions doubled in one year. (Music, after all, is a listening art.)

Hyping guest soloists to attract audiences is another way to demoralize musicians if they feel their orchestra always plays “second fiddle” to main events featuring outsiders. In fact, many of the pre- and post-concert enhancements which the Knight Foundation has funded seem to have sugar-coated the pill, diminishing the importance of the orchestra and the music in direct proportion to their superficial appeal. One Oregon Symphony program, which presented a popular jazz performer with the orchestra, elicited complaints that the orchestra played too much, and only six percent of that audience returned for the next event in a series aimed at new concertgoers. For some in the audience, a maestro’s miming and choreography communicate the music’s meaning more effectively than the sounds they hear, but many orchestra players would rather imitate the Orpheus Ensemble and dispense with conductors altogether.

Nevertheless, the most important conflict between musicians and the public has to do, in my opinion, with repertoire. What the public wants to buy more of (e.g., pops concerts) is not what players want to perform; what the musicians would like to play more often (e.g., the Stravinsky Symphony in C) is not what the public will pay to hear. The situation compares with the traditional argument between “art for art’s sake” advocates who would insulate musicians from the marketplace with subsidies, and the “arts as entertainment” advocates who insist that performers pay their own way, and is akin to the dispute between scientists who favor more basic research and those who want only to invest in direct applications.

Two things seem clear: whatever is routine quickly becomes stale in our “fast-food entertainment” economy, and the overture-concerto-symphony menu

of traditional orchestra programs may have been served up too often in desultory fashion. At Marlboro 30 years ago, Pablo Casals railed against “straight notes,” ones that do not change shape or color, which he characterized as “dead limbs on a tree,” better to be cut off and thrown away. To be alive, organisms must evolve through time. Change is the lifeblood, therefore, of everything alive and well, whether it is a musical phrase spun out through time, the array of musical events described in each new symphony season’s brochure, or the way in which an orchestra functions over time. So, that is why I want to propose something radical to attract larger audiences and enliven performances.

Introducing “Classical Competition”

Without a doubt, the most irresistible classical music concoctions in modern history have been the “Three Tenors” concerts that began on July 7, 1990. When Zubin Mehta and his famous friends agreed to come to Rome for a World Cup party and some friendly singing at the Baths of Caracalla, they did so for \$80,000 each, without any idea of the explosive and extraordinary appeal their concert would have throughout the world. By the time the “Three Tenors” concept was incarnate in a stadium tour a few years later, the soloists’ fees had jumped to \$1.5 million per concert and the CD and video sales were being counted in tens of millions. Nothing was ever remarkable about the programming—the concerts were predictable surveys of hit-tune tenor arias. Only the format was extraordinary in the way it presented the soloists sequentially throughout the concert. The stars put on a charming show of conviviality, but one-upmanship always lurked just beneath the surface. People I know who were enraptured by these concerts each had a favorite tenor and cheered enthusiastically for their man. I believe, therefore, that it is overt competition that was the secret in the “Three Tenors” recipe for success, something the Greeks exploited in musical presentations thousands of years ago!

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I believe it is now time to introduce competitive concerts, aimed at increasing public interest and support, within traditional orchestra seasons. We’ve had to live with elements of competition since orchestras were first created anyway. About Theodore Thomas, the saintly Johnny Appleseed of America’s orchestras, scholar Joseph Horowitz has written, “He exuded a competitiveness as fierce as any oil baron’s!”⁵ And when Henry Lee Higginson invested his fortune in the Boston Symphony, he blatantly challenged the venerable pit orchestras of Europe by claiming to create the first and the greatest concert-stage “symphony” orchestra in the world.⁶ Just as much as they fueled development of American orchestras early in the 20th century, civic pride and chauvinism would be catalysts in any new competitive formulations for the 21st century. Imagine, for instance, the excitement of a shootout between the Dallas and Houston Symphonies for

Texas bragging rights, or the fun of a festival involving the Oregon, Seattle, and Vancouver Symphonies for a Pacific Northwest regional championship. Best of all, four concerts staged in Carnegie Hall every year “between” the New York Philharmonic and the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra for New York supremacy would have partisans marching in the streets!

Forget applause meters or panels of judges to determine winners. It would be enough to juxtapose orchestras on the same stage in the same concert (just as the three tenors were juxtaposed in sequence) and let the notes fall where they may. Everybody would have an opinion and the ensuing controversies would pump new life into a moribund art form. There also would be no losers. If the consensus were that one orchestra sounded inferior to another, resources would pour in to rectify the imbalance. For instance, if the Louisiana Symphony Orchestra played a “home and away” series against the New Jersey Symphony, with New Jersey in residence in New Orleans for a week during Mardi Gras and Louisiana in residence in New York for a week in October, and if the Louisiana Symphony were embarrassed by the competition, one consequence might be that supporters of the Louisiana Symphony would go home and build the concert hall that New Orleans has needed for decades. Tanglewood would be an ideal setting for a national championship tournament every summer that could pit the top four or five orchestras against each other in a round-robin format. But competitive concerts could work for orchestras of similar standing anywhere in the country. Best of all, there would be no compromise with artistic standards and quality. The performers would play their heads off! This would be a tremendously exciting way to “raise the demand curve for symphony orchestras” without resort to pops, crossovers, or political correctness.

There is also a precedent for the idea. When the Philadelphia Orchestra was on strike three years ago, my counterpart Dick Woodhams and I proposed and helped organize a benefit concert that presented the New York Philharmonic playing Berlioz’s “Symphonie Fantastique” on the first half of the program and the Philadelphia Orchestra playing Tchaikovsky’s Fourth Symphony on the second half of the same program, with conductor Neeme Järvi conducting both orchestras. The event was stigmatized as a strike action, so it was not set in the best venue nor did it receive the publicity it deserved. Nevertheless, the *New York Times* banner for a story on November 6, 1996, proclaimed “This Band Battle Is a Real Classic,” and many fans stood in freezing cold in Camden, New Jersey, for more than an hour to buy tickets and fill the hall.

That morning, as I sat out front listening to Philadelphia rehearse Tchaikovsky, the idea struck me that this was the same Philadelphia Orchestra I had fallen in love with when I was 16 years old. I thought in a panic, “I am going home!” On the other hand, during the Philharmonic’s rehearsal break, one of the Philadelphia Orchestra violinists rushed up to me wringing her hands and exclaimed, “My God, I haven’t been this nervous since All-State!” Afterwards, I received a letter from a 22-year veteran of the trumpet section of the Philadelphia Orchestra who wrote, “I can’t fully explain the exhilaration I felt as I was swept up in the

glorious sound of the New York Philharmonic! I know that my blood pressure rushed to an all-time high, as I was trembling at the end of the piece.” Commenting on the concert, one critic in Philadelphia wrote, “The audience seemed as excited as the musicians,” [and the musicians] “played with fierce passion and intensity.”⁷

The point is that the concert, which was conceived as a friendly expression of professional camaraderie, turned into a white-hot direct comparison between two of the greatest orchestras in the world. One would have had to be deaf not to perceive the differences of style and tradition, or of individual sections and soloists who stood out in such vivid relief, performing in tandem as they did that day. Television producer Jason Starr raved about the format’s potential for preconcert analyses, analyses like those sportscasters provide for big games, calling to the audience’s attention nuances of tone and technique that could never otherwise be so well noted. He said the competition would bring into exquisite clarity essential elements of the interpretive art—the voicing, phrasing, coloring, articulation, and rhythmic nuances that make up an orchestra’s creative realm.⁸ As a result, audiences could hear familiar masterpieces in the context of total commitment, as if for the first time, and thrill to many discernible distinctions among orchestras that were previously obscure.

Hearing about the competitive idea, one New York Philharmonic board member sniffed indignantly, “What would you do next, arm-wrestle?” But orchestras have always been subject to arm’s length comparisons by critics. For two years in a row, the *New York Times* has hailed performances by the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra as the best of the season in New York, and national rankings appear every year or so that defend some new candidate for the orchestra club known as the “Big Five.” Perhaps our concerts have always been too much like practice runs by the United States bobsled team before the Olympics or practice rounds of golf by Tiger Woods prior to the Masters. These events exhibit amazing teamwork and astounding technical mastery, but how many people really want to watch sports events without the challenge of direct competition?

“What I propose would preserve the artistic integrity of music that is not well served by a doubling of symphonic forces and, at the same time, would exploit the excitement of direct competition as an end in itself.”

Zubin Mehta has presided over several orchestral events that showcased two orchestras playing singly in the first half of the concert and jointly in the second. Notable among these are recent concerts with the Berlin and Israel Philharmonics, and a 1988 concert in Gorky Park with the New York Philharmonic and the Moscow State Symphony Orchestra. In every case, Mehta’s purpose was to symbolize political or ideological reconciliation rather than to illuminate performance distinctions between the orchestras. What I propose would preserve the artistic integrity of music that is not well served by a doubling of symphonic forces and, at the same time, would exploit the excitement of direct competition

as an end in itself. Added to civic and state pride could be nationalism (as in the Olympics), and even sponsorships that reflect corporate competition in the marketplace.

America's symphony orchestras are the best in the world and it would be fun to prove it. The public foundations that support them, however, have been eroding for decades. Conservative self-protectionism, grasping at ethnomusical straws, force-feeding the audience new music, and selling out to pops will not save orchestras. Following the "Three Tenors" competitive formula might just do the trick!

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Readers wishing to learn more about Mr. Robinson are invited to visit his Web site at < www.oboejoe.com > .

Notes

- ¹ Rockefeller Foundation. 1965. *The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects*. New York: McGraw-Hill Company, p. 184.
- ² National Endowment for the Arts. 1998. *Research Report #39. 1997 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts: Summary Report*. Produced by Tom Bradshaw and prepared for the Research Division, NEA, by Jack Faucett Associates, Inc., Bethesda, MD.
- ³ In 1999, the Philadelphia Orchestra distributed randomly a patron service survey to concert attendees over a two-week period. Of 904 subscriber households responding, 74.4 percent answered "yes" to the question: Do you play or have you ever studied a musical instrument?
- ⁴ Breda, John, and Patrick Kulesa. 1999. *Stress and Job Satisfaction among Symphony Musicians*. Evanston, IL: Symphony Orchestra Institute.
- ⁵ Horowitz, Joseph. 1994. *Wagner Nights: An American History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 55.
- ⁶ For a general discussion of Henry Lee Higginson's role in creating the Boston Symphony, see: Horowitz, Joseph. 1987. *Understanding Toscanini: How He Became an American Culture-God and Helped Create a New Audience for Old Music*. New York: Knopf: Distributed by Random House.
- ⁷ Baxter, Robert. 1996. N.Y., Phila. Musicians Team Up for Stirring Show. *Gloucester Courier-Post*, November 11.
- ⁸ From telephone conversations between the author and Jason Starr.