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## The Jurassic Symphony: An Analytic Essay on the Prospects of Symphony Survival

by

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### ***The Jurassic Symphony: An Analytic Essay on the Prospects of Symphony Orchestra Survival***

**E**cologists study the interactions, relationships, and patterns of settlement of living organisms within their environmental settings. Organizational ecologists study similar interactions among organizations and their environments, using social, economic, and political yardsticks as their tools of measurement.

*In a skillfully written essay, authors Robert Spich and Robert Sylvester take readers on a fascinating ecological tour. Robert Spich brings to this essay the perspective of a professor of management and international business; Robert Sylvester brings that of a professional musician and arts administrator.*

#### **Tracking the Decline**

*The essay begins with a discussion of the symptoms of decline in symphony organizations. The authors enumerate what they observe as suspected factors. They then establish a Darwinian ecological metaphor (Jurassic), and a set of ecological assumptions to guide readers through eight ecological propositions applied to symphony organizations.*

#### **The Broccoli Problem and Cadillacs**

*Lest readers think that this essay might be a "tough read," it assuredly is not. Authors Spich and Sylvester are very capable of tucking their tongues in their professorial cheeks as they select examples to explain serious economic concepts. Using such comparatives as a "broccoli problem" to describe free choice, and a "Cadillac problem" to assure readers that symphony organizations are not alone in experiencing decline, the authors outline thoroughly the current ecology of American symphonies.*

*This essay is the first in a two-part offering from the West Coast writing team. In a subsequent essay, they will explore a range of strategic choices which symphony organizations have as they fight for survival.*

## The Jurassic Symphony: An Analytic Essay on the Prospects of Symphony Orchestra Survival

The history of classical music and of the symphony institution describe well the conditions that gave rise to the symphonic musical form. This historical record is less informative about how the fundamentals of the environment and societal culture have impacted, and continue to impact, the symphony orchestra as an organization. In this and a subsequent essay, we hope to contribute to this long history by framing the symphony orchestra's issues within an organizational science perspective that becomes a basis for managerial action. Specifically, this essay applies an organization ecology analysis to the symphony orchestra community. The ecological perspective focuses on the larger processes of organization-environment dynamics which affect how organizations start, grow, mature, and decline. This perspective seeks to explain how environmental forces help shape the conditions for success or failure of an organization. In a subsequent essay, we will utilize a strategic management framework to focus on how management might address faltering performance and seek to identify realistic options and choices for continued success. Jointly these two organizational perspectives frame the larger problem plot: how organizations can become "de-fitted" from their environments and, in the absence of strategic change, face the probability of decline and failure.

*“The ecological perspective focuses on the larger processes of organization—environment dynamics which affect how organizations start, grow, mature, and decline. This perspective seeks to explain how environmental forces help shape the conditions for success or failure of an organization.”*

We are hopeful that good music will go on forever, and that people, given the opportunity, will always choose music making over the drudgery of labor. We laud such sane human tendencies. However, we have two nagging concerns: the sophisticated art of the classical musical genre, if it becomes extinct, would not be shared, enjoyed, and cherished by many future generations, and the role which serious and traditional music has had in “civilizing” a society might become irrelevant or

lost. In each case, it is not clear what the substitutes might be. For these reasons, the continuation of the symphony orchestra as a vehicle for the intergenerational transmission of musical culture and the development of a civil society should be an issue of wide concern. For the symphony orchestra to remain a major cultural carrier, it must concurrently be an institution “of the past” and “of the future.” The trick is a fit to the times, with tradition, but go toe to toe with contemporary trends. Let us now begin to look at what makes that trick so difficult.

## **Symptoms of Decline**

In any society, the rise and fall of organizations is a fact of organizational life. History itself records similar fates for civilizations, but history does not explain decline directly. The causality is never clear or unambiguous. Rather, as in the rise and fall of Rome, decline theory is a descriptive exercise in which one cites the factors at play during a time period and tries to draw inferences on how those factors contributed to declining performance of a system and its eventual failure. For the symphony organization, a list of suspected factors follow.

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tional life.”*

- ◆ Increased amounts of extra-industry competition for time and attention from easily accessible substitute cultural and technology products.
- ◆ Audience aging (shrinkage) and difficult recruitment from younger cohorts.
- ◆ Decline in music education budgets and programs in schools, creating a loss of music appreciation and skilled listening discipline needed for audience development and attendance (e.g., theme of the recent popular movie *Mr. Holland's Opus*).
- ◆ Increased forms and sources of intra-industry competition: location and venue competition; inter-period competition where older rereleased recordings of past masters compete with new interpretations; alternative formats and orchestrations of classical music versus standards; competition between periods (Baroque vs. Romantic); special use after product competing with original intentions (e.g., Mozart for improved learning).
- ◆ Market saturation and listener exhaustion through overabundance of musical product in the market and on the airwaves, forcing more and more exaggerated differentiation strategies to gain attention.
- ◆ Increased competition for scarce resources from a hostile and stingy public and private donor environment.
- ◆ Time pressures and lifestyle stress issues curtailing audience attendance, changing ways in which people use music in their lives (e.g., the ease of listening to a CD rather than the hassle of going to a concert).

- ◆ Unequal regional and urban economic development, creating differentials in economic bases of support for the arts (e.g., one city builds a new symphony hall while another lets its hall go unused or be closed down).
- ◆ Multiculturalism and diversity pressures for alternative ethnic traditions in music.
- ◆ A conservative political climate with leanings against “elite” art projects and government spending.
- ◆ Widespread decline of general education standards and performance, affecting the appreciation of the role aesthetics play in the quality of everyday life through the willingness to support artistic activities without practical payoffs or immediate relevance.
- ◆ The dominance of “pop” culture in everyday life with an emphasis on consumerism, mass commercialization, and the “mcdonaldization” of individual choice in contemporary society (i.e., everything is for sale, now, quick, cheap, instantly gratifying; everything and everyone has a price, and all is ultimately disposable).
- ◆ The apparent contradiction in a democracy between “good taste” and connoisseurship in favor of eclecticism, and inclusion or embracement without judgment or criticism.

These factors—over time, and both directly and indirectly—tend to exacerbate ongoing organizational issues and often overwhelm them with the menagerie of problems. These factors are what ecologists might term “fundamental environmental conditions” which help shape the decision paths that organizations need to take. In most cases, the factors cited exist on a grand societal scale. This means that they are usually part of a longer-term historical evolution of society, the results of various trends and developments, some of which are recognizable and transparent, others of which are hidden in the forces of history and only seen in ex-post analysis. Some factors can be influenced, deflected, or contained by various efforts; others, such as technological innovation, audience aging, the commercialization ethos, and changing contemporary lifestyles, are fundamental and comprehensive. They have large-scale, noncontrollable effects which create a critical decision context for the orchestra management. As we will discuss in our second essay, you can fight them head on, you can steer around them, you can make adjustments to them, but you cannot get rid of them. The trick is to find ingenious ways, whenever possible, to turn them to some advantage, but that is for later discussion.

On a more specific basis, events in the 1996-1997 season alone show some of the more recent symptoms of difficulties and portents of decline that changing environments cause:

- ◆ Musicians’ strikes at the venerable Philadelphia Orchestra, as well as in San Francisco, Atlanta, and Portland.

- ◆ Politicized confrontations between musicians and management, as in the recent Seattle Fifth Avenue Theater case.<sup>1</sup>
- ◆ Closure, bankruptcy, or near bankruptcy in the San Diego, Sacramento, and Charlotte symphony organizations, respectively.
- ◆ The surprise announcement of a possible and portentous merger of the Vancouver Symphony with the Vancouver Opera in 1997, followed by the merger's cancellation.
- ◆ The decline of the market share of classical music from 7 percent in 1987 to about 2.9 percent in 1996.<sup>2</sup>
- ◆ The rise of more contentious issues in negotiations, such as classical recording royalties, industry standards for job security, core orchestra size, and the use of medical leave.
- ◆ Acknowledgments by management and musicians that “the cuts in arts funding and music education have had a serious, negative effect on the health of symphonic institutions across the continent.”<sup>3</sup>

A relatively clear record of symphony orchestra failures over the last decade provides perhaps the last corroborating evidence of a decline, as can be seen in the cases of Oakland (1986), Oklahoma (1988), Denver (1989), New Orleans (1991), Florida (1993), Alabama (1993), San Diego (1996), and Sacramento (1996).

Organizational declines and failures such as these can be viewed from two perspectives: external and internal. One can identify a host of factors outside an organization which will explain an organization's demise. However, looking only at external explanations allows for blame to be placed on “devil” theories, creates passive/reactive scenarios, and provides only selective and incomplete descriptions of reality. More commonly, organizational performance, both good and bad, can be explained from an internal perspective which looks at how well the organization's leadership understood strategic problems, focused efforts, picked goals, designed appropriate operations, rallied organizational commitment, and addressed opportunities. From this viewpoint, organizational failures result from acts of commission or omission by people who miscalculate, have faulty perceptions, or make blundering errors. Given capitalism's demands for successful economic performance and a bias toward action, such performance judgments in the for-profit world are often harsh and unforgiving. While business criteria might not

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be relevant in analyzing cultural organizations, the focus on an organization's leadership is. Any explanation of a symphony organization's failure requires both perspectives.

In contrast, explaining the failure of any individual symphony orchestra without glib generalizations requires an in-depth analysis of the internal workings of that organization. Consultant case studies, such as the one done on the demise of the Oakland Symphony,<sup>4</sup> provide a rich array of detail which allows a "reconstruction" of the story and the learning of certain lessons about poor decisions and actions. However, individual case studies are unique situations which may not allow easy generalization and may be wrong in their analyses. As for future lessons, one can always dismiss the case situation that does not specifically or favorably reflect on an individual organization's present situation and problems. For these reasons, it is often better to use a theoretical framework, such as organizational ecology, to help explain the basic forces that may be driving an industry.

## **An Ecological Metaphor**

An ecological perspective on symphony orchestras was inspired, in part, by a drawing that appeared in the arts section of the *New York Times*.<sup>5</sup> The drawing shows an upright conductor, dressed in tails, baton poised, body arched and hands steadied, signaling the orchestra for the imminent downbeat and start of yet another great moment of classical music. While this image is perhaps the most expected symbolic icon of the whole genre of classical music, the background, in the form of a paleontological metaphor, is the more telling message. For behind the conductor appears a Jurassic scene, where dinosaurs stride freely, but often uneasily. On the left, a huge, slow-moving, seemingly content, and perhaps unaware brontosaurus feeds on the abundant greens in a large lake whose shallow, but decreasing, depth is enough to keep the lurking and hunting carnivorous tyrannosaurus on the shore poised, waiting, but still at a safe distance for now. At the same time, sharing the air with a lone pterodactyl, are what at first appear to be strange, asynchronous portents of the future—flying saucers! However, upon closer examination, these discs in flight represent no less threatening an image than symphonic sound in flight, transmitted by the carrier—the CD recording.

The point is poignant and unambiguous: symphonies may share the fate of dinosaurs and CDs may be one of the factors contributing to their demise. The implicit message is that symphonies cannot keep doing what they are doing and expect things to continue unchanged and forever. The risk is the fate of the dinosaur—an extinct species, unaware of the larger forces of decline at work that determined its destiny, still a fascinating beast, but essentially dead!

The science of ecology is the study of interactions, relationships, and patterns of settlement of a group of "living things" within an environmental setting. If one looks at a pond in the woods, the ecologically curious mind wants to understand how things got that way: Why these trees? Why these flowers?

Why these animals? How do they “live and die” together? Organizational ecology (OE) wants to know similar things: Why are these kinds of organizations here? What are their life cycles? How do they interact? What are the important webs of relationships? What determines success or failure of a group? Organizational ecologists “seek to explain how social, economic, and political conditions affect the relative abundance and diversity of organizations and attempt to account for their changing composition over time.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, OE begins with fundamental observations:

- ◆ There is diversity of organizations in any grouping of organizations as we see in the classical music community.
- ◆ Environments often change more rapidly than the organization’s ability to keep up with the changes, thus implying failure and disappearance of an organizational form.
- ◆ A community (industry) of organizations is rarely stable because organizations continually arise and disappear, something we see happening in the symphonic organization population.

With these basic observations, we begin the discussion with some initial ecological assumptions.

## **Ecological Assumptions**

*First, we treat the symphony orchestra as one particular organizational form within the larger classical music industry.* The symphony organization includes the orchestra itself and its supportive administrative apparatus. The collection of organizations that share a genre (e.g., all ballet companies) with common activities and patterns of resource needs and uses makes up an organization population. The mix of populations that reside within the same societal environment, but share differentially in the benefits and problems of that environment, represent an organizational community. The classical musical community can be seen as an ecological network of cultural organizations (e.g., opera companies, chamber orchestras, ballet companies, chamber music societies, choruses, concert series organizations, small ensembles) organized around specific musical genres within a “serious/classical music” denomination, and which share an ethos grounded in a love of a traditional musical form and its public presentation. Relationships among these organizations are largely symbiotic, with some direct and indirect competition for resources. Some synergistic opportunities for cooperative action exist both within populations and communities. Within the symphony orchestra population, there is a certain stability based on shared modus operandi, culture, and tradition. For purposes of analysis, the population of symphony orchestras will be treated as the “symphony music industry,” although this conceptualization

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***“The classical musical community can be seen as an ecological network of cultural organizations . . . organized around specific musical genres within a ‘serious/classical music’ denomination, and which share an ethos grounded in a love of a traditional musical form and its public presentation.”***

has a specific meaning in industrial economics. This helps in the articulation and recognition of common “industry-like” problems.

Second, we make a Darwinian assumption that successful music organizations represent successful adaptations to surrounding environments. In the symphony orchestra case, the “organism of study” is a large beast designed to deliver large-scale, relatively long, complex musical works. Presenting these works requires supportive action and organization of similar nature and scale. At the time of its genesis, the symphony orchestra represented the basic truth that the music of a time period reflects the society within which it resides. History seems to indicate clearly that music organization form follows from function, and function follows human motives and purposes. Thus, we see the varied roles that symphonic music played in everyday life, whether to express the nationalistic fervor of the 1800s, to entertain a coterie of music lovers, to impress royalty and assure one’s social status, to provide an outlet for great and ambitious talent, to educate the masses, to please a wealthy patron, to provide background music for larger social and diplomatic functions, or simply to make money for enterprising impresarios. All of these motives and

purposes, selfish and otherwise, helped shape the design of the symphony orchestra. Musical forms and products that are appreciated and useful to members of society will be favored for continued environmental selection and survival. The waltz in the masked ball survives to this day because it serves many more private and public interests than simple musical enjoyment suggests.

An ecological analysis with a Darwinian perspective therefore represents a relatively disinterested, objective, and hopefully transparent point of view. Without judging, it merely asks: What is the unit that is making the adaptation? What are the nature and dynamics of the situation to which it is adapting? It then looks at the dynamics of relationship adjustment, the strategies of survival, and the types of accommodations and changes made. Successful adaptation strategies then are measured directly in terms of the quality of the survival strategy. Survivorship is a necessary but insufficient criterion for judging the value of the surviving experience. Highly successful adaptations demonstrate such characteristics as ready expansions of domain, growth in numbers, diversified set of activities and outputs, ready ability to compete with others, high morale, resistance to “disease,” demonstrated ability to use cooperative, as well as competitive, strategies, and other measures of success that indicate a generally healthy organism or organization.

In following a Darwinian argument, we note that adaptation does not imply superiority or constant progress in a form of music organization. It merely suggests accommodation, adjustment, and fit of a sustainable form for that environment. The common notion of “the survival of the fittest” is just that and no more. There is often an implicit meaning that “fitting and surviving” always results in a superior entity. Thus, to say that a newly formed orchestra “fits the audience” probably means that pragmatic accommodations and instrumentation adjustments were made to make a fit work. There is, however, a common progressive assumption about how accumulative improvements lead to “best states.” But that which “fits” does not mean it is the “best ever” or “highest” form attainable. That the coyote can actually survive in dense urban settings—cities—does not mean it is therefore a superior form of animal. It means that among the many animal groups, it has accommodated to the conditions of city life and found ways to survive and even thrive. Similarly, the survival of symphonic “pops” concerts simply points to the fact that this music is “fitting the environment,” or in business terms, “seems to meet a market need.” It does not indicate the direction that all musical organizations should and will go, nor is it a superior judgment about the quality or desirability of the art form.

***“If the symphony orchestra is not a sustainable organizational form for future times, what forms should the symphony orchestra take if it wishes to survive in contemporary times? If it changes form, will it still be a symphony orchestra?”***

That organizations survive in dysfunctional conditions, terrible political regimes, and war says both good and bad things about people and their environments. Survival is merely a statement of fact and not necessarily an endorsement for the future. That certain food stores can survive in centers of urban decay does not indicate that everyone, therefore, ought to shop there. That certain orchestras have survived is not necessarily a ringing endorsement for an organization’s repertoire and style of playing. Survivors are just survivors. That they may have engaged in meritorious action just to survive or deserve special recognition is not the point. Whether they serve as models for the future is. When judgments about the quality or value of surviving organizations are raised, the debate moves to, among other, larger questions of taste, aesthetics, and history. While that analysis moves away from the central question of organizational form and its survival, the issue of the real value of a surviving organization remains fundamental in the strategy question.

In the end, a Darwinian viewpoint challenges what may be contradictory purposes: If the symphony orchestra is not a sustainable organizational form for future times, what forms should the symphony orchestra take if it wishes to survive in contemporary times? If it changes form, will it still be a symphony orchestra? If not, does that matter? Just what do environmental forces “select for”—an art form, an organization, both, or something else? Unlike

the coyote, which cannot change its form but must look for favorable conditions in already existing environments, the symphony orchestra, being a synthetic human creation, can change form, as well as place, to adapt. It can also influence its environment. What it will do, however, depends on the goals it chooses, and how well strategy is conceived and executed.

*Third, the basic unit of analysis is the population (industry) of symphony orchestras which are the dominant form in the larger classical music industry as a whole. The symphony orchestra shares a common genre, generally noted as “classical” (i.e., based in long-term, large-scale, traditional forms, and often defined as serious and “highbrow” music with certain rigorous intellectual and aesthetic standards). The symphony organization is generally differentiated from other music organizational forms in terms of the intensity of organizing effort and expertise that is needed to produce and support that form of music making.*

However, even though these organizations are treated as a collective unit of analysis, what is true for the industry as a whole may not be quite as true for any one orchestra organization. On any ecological dimension of interest, individual orchestras will lie on different points of any normal statistical curve. Some are richer than others. Some have more volunteers. Some have more competition. Based on the premise that symphony orchestras tend to share some commonalities of an environment and are interdependent as a population, one can make generalizations—with the standard caveats.

## **Eight Ecological Propositions**

Given the basic ecological observations above, and assuming the relevance of a Darwinian approach to understanding the dynamics of relationships between and among organizations, we can state some general propositions that may help put the symphony orchestra industry’s issues within a sound theoretical perspective.

***All organizations go through life cycles with definable stages of initiation, growth, maturity, and decline.***<sup>7</sup>

The American symphony industry is presently at a mature level of development, meaning that a large number of industry members are roughly in the same stabilized situation at the same time in terms of audience, venue, and programmatic growth. This implies that the music product itself has gone through a development process in the form of product-type life cycle (i.e., the symphony) and has settled into some fundamental basic form that is readily recognizable by an audience. The organization that creates and supports this music reflects these cycles in its own growth patterns. Innovations tend to represent

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improvements as variations on a theme or additions of features to this basic form and its use. Innovations are within products and not substitutions of product, much like brand competition in the supermarket. As a comparative example, the automobile is a stable, mature, known product in which all innovation is in decorative features, convenience, and cost/performance relationships. However, four wheels, a gasoline engine, an enclosed chassis, and a drive train make up the basic unchangeable basic form. Unlike the case of symphony orchestras, there are still no readily acceptable substitutes for the basic individual car. And unlike the automobile, symphony music is a comparative luxury product, subject to discretionary spending decisions. It is not a basic staple or needed purchase.

If this same industry reasoning applies to symphony orchestras, then we can see them as part of a minimally competitive industry where the strategies are still “gentlemanly” and “clubby” in nature. Somewhat reminiscent of the “Big Three” in Detroit, the symphony industry has settled into a mature oligopoly stage where a limited group of known great urban orchestras make up the “big industry players” who provide the bulk of yearly symphonic products. Innovations in orchestra seating (e.g., as in Stokowski’s experiments with orchestra seating to change sound), venue, setting, or programming represent the yearly “model” changes that we see in Detroit. In order to extend their life cycles, orchestras, much like other industries, engage in limited innovations and constant manipulation of the marketing mix—price, product features, and promotion—in order to reach larger markets, sustain share, or build new segments. As in the automobile industry, these actions yield mixed results and do not guarantee survival of any individual firm.

***“Symphony orchestras, however, tend to have monopoly status in which each symphony has a claim to a specific urban environment and there is generally no direct competition in the marketplace.”***

Most industries experience competition from regional, national, and even international players. Some—for example the newspaper industry—are characterized by a few local competitors. Symphony orchestras, however, tend to have monopoly status in which each symphony has a claim to a specific urban environment and there is generally no direct competition in the marketplace. In fact, when on tour to other cities, symphonies make cooperative arrangements to “fill in” rather than compete, in the belief that a variety of orchestra sounds helps sustain market support and growth which benefits all industry members. This may reflect an implicit cooperative survival strategy.

However, as is recognized in strategic game theory, oligopolies tend to have a dilemma.<sup>8</sup> Individual organizations can choose to innovate and compete

strongly with other industry members or they can go along with general industry practice. If they choose to compete strongly, they risk the possibility that other competing organizations will react either irrationally or with strategies that are

costly to match. This leaves every industry member worse off, and the victory in the marketplace is Pyrrhic in nature. However, if the organization chooses not to compete, to forego an innovation or market advantage, it loses the potential individual gains it could have received through larger market share (often at the cost of others). However, by maintaining the status quo, the organization uses fewer resources by only competing on the margin, with small changes and limited innovation. There may be tacit, low-level competition, enough to sustain the industry but perhaps not enough to create important innovations.

Oligopoly-like conditions induce a sense of collective well-being in the status quo, and the perceived need to change becomes minor, marginal, and local at best. This suggests that symphony orchestras, as an industry, may be avoiding innovation and change because they know that the others, sharing a classic culture, will not compete fiercely and that the status quo is an acceptable strategy. However, they forego the possibility of gaining appropriable organizational advantages which might have increased their individual chances of survival. The long-term effect of this cultural conformity is to reduce variation among the population members and to increase their collective vulnerability to sudden changes in the environment. If all behave in the same fashion, they make themselves collectively vulnerable to competition that does not play by the same rules. We note that the U.S. automobile industry shared such false notions of common well-being until the external shock of international competition, playing by very different rules, created havoc in traditional markets. It took 20 years to catch up and adapt to what is essentially a fiercely competitive market now.

*“Oligopoly-like conditions induce a sense of collective well-being in the status quo, and the perceived need to change becomes minor, marginal, and local at best.”*

***Industry homogeneity indicates low rates of innovation and variation of form, and thus, low differentiation between members.***

We can readily observe that symphony orchestras are fairly homogeneous in structure, process, and output. In a sense, orchestras are all members of the same species. There is little variation or differentiation of organizational “genetic code” among the symphony “family” members. Ecological theory suggests that variation in form increases the probability that, in the face of challenging conditions, some members will survive to carry on, into the future, important aspects of a traditional organization form.<sup>9</sup> With low inter-organizational variation, significant changes in a common socioeconomic environment (e.g., aging audience, low recruitment of new cohorts) then could—assuming conditions hold steady—lead to the increased probability of large-scale simultaneous industry-level downturn and eventual organization failure. Variation, then, is an implicit and unconscious cooperative strategy that spreads the risk of failure among a population of organizations. But if there is resistance

to innovation, or if structural/cultural barriers act to prevent change, industry homogeneity, instead of being a proud show of cultural discipline and unwavering tradition, in fact could really indicate an unfavorable state of affairs. If differentiation is a critical strategy for survival, then homogeneous industries face more significant survival problems in turbulent and changing environments.

***The resource balance between organizations and environments is a dynamic equilibrium which can be disturbed by purposeful intervention, with both negative and positive consequences.***

***“... ‘saving actions’ by symphony boards and stakeholders may have contributed to a larger than ‘natural’ number of symphony organizations surviving at the maturity stage.”***

The argument here states that the “saving actions” by symphony boards and stakeholders may have contributed to a larger than “natural” number of symphony organizations surviving at the maturity stage. Managerial action intervened into “natural” market selection processes, lowered the number of industry exits (failures), and has led to a “bunching” effect at the mature level of the cycle. Assuming that bunching is an abnormal occurrence, a return to a normal probability distribution will send a large number into the next stage, which is decline and probable industry exit.

A conservative observation would cite cause in overly optimistic government programs and foundation support that may have led to an “unnatural” growth of symphony orchestras in the 1960s, more than the “carrying capacity” that a “natural” market environment could bear. The failures of orchestras may really represent an expected natural adjustment process whereby market selection processes are, in effect, “weeding out” the weaker industry members. The effect is to reduce overall numbers and bring back a more “natural balance” with the conditions of the environment. The environment should then be able to support a more reasonable number of participants, and the lives of the survivors will be markedly better off, because there will be more resources for them to share and sustain their activities. This kind of equilibrium thinking is the very basis for policy analysis and decisions in renewable resources industries (e.g., forestry, fishing, agriculture).

In the case of cultural organizations (among others), human intervention into “natural processes” is a basic and constant factor which prevents “natural selections” from occurring easily. Like all analyses of this type, there are assumptions and models that may not fit the case of any one industry perfectly. In fact, such interventions may themselves in fact be considered “natural” under a different set of assumptions and models. However, as a general principle, the balance between resources (the carrying capacity of an environment) and the demand for those resources remains a dynamic-equilibrium phenomenon. This is a silver-lining argument that symphony boards probably know too well and players not well enough!

***The relationship between artist and patron audience is symbiotic and functional in the early formation of an organization, but that relationship can become increasingly dysfunctional if it creates barriers to change and adaptation during later cycles of organization development.***

We would note here two levels of relationships: that of the patron audience, and that of the single patron who supports a particular artist's development. With regard to the former, critics have observed that even though mature sectors of the population tend to support the arts at higher rates than the younger population, they are also the ones most resistant to innovation in programming. As one critic put it, "So many subscription evenings read like holding actions: attempts to head off the flight of wary listeners. Almost every orchestra practices the tactic of punishment and reward: a difficult pill followed by an ice cream cone. Distasteful as it is, no professional can avoid this strategy and still survive."<sup>10</sup> The point is, that in order to get the audience to listen to the new music which requires more concentration and is less immediately rewarding, orchestras also must offer a palette of "oldies" that the audience knows, believing that such traditional music is what it really paid for, and that audiences merely tolerate the new instead of embracing it. The audience learning rate thus becomes a barrier issue in adaptation and survival.

*"... even though mature sectors of the population tend to support the arts at higher rates than the younger population, they are also the ones most resistant to innovation in programming."*

With regard to the latter point, the relationship between a single patron and an artist has a long history subject to much differing opinion. From an ecological perspective, the point of interest is that there seems to be a fundamental symbiotic relationship that is functional, based on real legitimate needs, and this relationship contributes to community collective interests and survival. In a sense, there is a micro-market for the two parties' needs. For the patron, there is an outlet, both vicarious and real, for his or her own desires to contribute to culture and the arts through resource donations, payment for services, collection, critique, public presentation, and adulation/appreciation. For the artist, there are ego, aesthetic, financial, and social needs that can be nicely met by the patron arrangement. Society is served because the relationship may in fact serve an important "incubator function" whereby new ideas and innovations can be tried out in relatively safe environments (stable individual taste versus fickle public taste) until ready to be supported on their own merit by a larger audience. In modern times, it is not clear how well the function of these patron relationships is being cared for by public support programs. An important source of industry innovation and variation, perhaps important for long-run survival, may be dependent on this dyad relationship.

**In a variation on an Orwellian theme: All orchestras are equal but some are more equal than others!**

*“... all symphonies do not share the same probability of decline or survival because their environments may be quite different.”*

While each orchestra shares common general industry conditions and shares common organizational design, all symphonies do not share the same probability of decline or survival because their environments may be quite different. Some are more supportive than others because of very specific local and regional environmental differences. Since there is no direct industry competition, each symphony organization is free to draw support from within the limits of its local or regional urban environment. The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra draws its immediate audience support almost entirely from the Washington DC/Maryland region, not from California or Florida.

Survival rates will depend largely on local conditions which are neither evenly distributed nor constant.

The munificence of an environment then depends on a combination of the “natural economic endowments” of location (the existence of plentiful or scarce resources, abundance or dearth of opportunity) with the “economic competitiveness” of that region (e.g., institutional arrangements, talent pool, strategy, leadership). Together these two variables create different rates of regional economic growth, and fluctuations of economic cycles in regional industries (e.g., oil in the Texas region, hi-tech in the Northeast, electronics and informatics in Silicon Valley, software and airplanes in Seattle).

Economic success and upbeat growth cycles in turn directly affect the availability of resources for cultural products. Since cultural products are often seen as luxuries, they are the first to “get cut” from budgets in times of economic downturns. A region that is experiencing growth and shares a sense that “times are good,” will more likely provide support for cultural institutions and their activities. Thus, while some symphonies have closed their doors in recent years, others (e.g., the Seattle Symphony and Los Angeles with the new Disney performing arts center) are getting new and often magnificent buildings. There may be no justice in this uneven spread of good environments, but then ecology is not about justice.

However, variations between environments themselves may give rise to variations of organizational form which, from the perspective of ecology, is a positive condition. Environmental differences help explain why failure is not necessarily an across-the-board phenomenon. A region that has fewer resources may still pursue the development of a local symphony organization. However, these organizations will necessarily differ in such important organizational features as size, talent, programming and repertoire possibilities, schedules, venue, and marketing effort. While they cannot reproduce the sound or tradition of the great orchestras for which much of the original music was written, they

can mimic that art in a manner appropriate and fitting to the local environment's needs. Mimicry has value as a survival strategy in nature.

One example of the workings of local variation may be the network relationships between major urban symphonies and surrounding satellite community orchestras. This is a variation of the center/periphery network problem, where the center tends to be the dominant player and the periphery plays a secondary role, "enjoying" the lagged effects of the outward flow of innovation, resources, and power. A case in point may be the New West Symphony located in the suburban valley region of Los Angeles. This new symphony takes advantage of its location to attract underutilized urban musical talent in innovative, market-driven programs which seem to promise a stable future.<sup>11</sup>

A second documented case, that of the Oakland Symphony, shows that environment alone does not determine survival. In that case, the combination of not understanding the changing environmental conditions, coupled with weak strategic analysis and choice, led to this failure.<sup>12</sup> When its program was sufficiently differentiated from that of the San Francisco Symphony, the Oakland Symphony apparently thrived because the supporting public could differentiate between the programs and support of each, because different market tastes were being addressed. Once a change in the strategy led to a "muddying up" of the distinctions, the audience could make immediate comparisons and chose programs of apparent higher value. If mimicry was the strategy, it did not work. Of course, the real story requires a much deeper explanation drawing on other factors such as the location of a venue in the center of a lower status city, the failure to develop a local audience, dependence on traditional conducting talent, problems in board selection, and the mishandling of a musicians' strike. All of these actions exacerbated the situation which eventually led to the failure of this symphony organization.

***Where internal practices and the organization culture of the symphony organization lead to low differentiation, susceptibility to failure increases.***

One way in which symphonies can vary and be uniquely differentiated is in the distinct sound that they produce. It has been argued that national culture differences produce differences in sound and style, making it possible to talk about a distinctly English or German orchestra. In addition, distinct sounds are produced through the long-term shaping of an orchestra under the baton of a single maestro. George Szell, after a lifetime with the Cleveland Orchestra, was able to create a singular sound and style, as if the orchestra was his instrument. Similarly, Eugene Ormandy created a certain silky sound for the strings and gave the musicians enough interpretive room to be expressive. Thus, they could excel at playing romantic music. Similar differentiations of sound and style can be identified for most of the great conductors. But central to these unique sounds was the long-term and constant residency of the conductor who had the time and interest to learn about the skills and nuances of players, and to shape the

sound and style carefully over time. In a sense, the conductor put a signature on the music and essentially created a “brand.” From a strategic perspective, these orchestras acquired unique and inimitable advantages. Since these specialized competencies could not be readily copied, the value of orchestra sound and style differentiation created market advantages, and the orchestra could realize the full market rents generated by its unique qualities.

Under contemporary conditions, the ability or the practice of developing a unique orchestral instrument seems diminished for a number of reasons. For one, the short-term and multiple simultaneous residencies of “conduct and run” maestros does not allow for such differentiation to be developed easily. In addition, differentiation in sound and style is diminishing because training is increasingly universal and standardized, producing an instrument that is more homogeneous and universal. With small differences in instrumentation between the orchestras, due to cost factors or repertoire choice, the ability to create a unique sound is further diminished. If the listening public does not know how to hear and appreciate distinct qualities, then its willingness to invest in multiple versions of works

*“... internal differentiation can contribute to long-term survival because of the advantages it creates in the marketplace.”*

(in concert or recorded form) is greatly reduced. It will accept either a recorded copy of a “known older great” orchestra or it will be indifferent to quality differences and consume the standard fare. (Naturally, this would occur less frequently, since mediocre performances provide less listening pleasure, and the marginal value of each new piece decreases overall enjoyment of the genre.) The result is to reward mediocrity in the long run as tastes diminish because of a downward cycle of negative feedback between audience and orchestra. This situation mirrors the competitive problems of the fine wine-sector of the wine industry. Teaching people how to appreciate and distinguish subtle differences

in fine wines takes time and constant investment in messages and marketing strategies designed to get them to move “upscale” to the better product. Thus, we see that internal differentiation can contribute to long-term survival because of the advantages it creates in the marketplace.

***In cultural organizations, the maintenance of tradition poses a particularly thorny and core strategic survival problem.***

If all members carry on the same traditional culture fully and simultaneously, they expose themselves, en masse, to higher risks and rates of failure, if knowledge of and tastes for that cultural tradition weaken. Tradition can act as a conservative force that prevents or reduces variation and thus increases the probability of failure. In effect, this raises the issue of whether or not symphony orchestras are really “museums for museum music.”

If, on the other hand, symphony organizations eschew tradition in favor of individual survival strategies based on strong and high variation (e.g., very mixed

***“Tradition can act as a conservative force that prevents or reduces variation and thus increases the probability of failure.”***

programming and changes in ensemble configuration), then the distinct industry character becomes so differentiated and dissipated that its unique historical identity, thought to be important to its survival, disappears with the loss of a valued tradition. Critics and others have observed that even though mature sectors of the population tend to have more disposable income and/or time for cultural product consumption, they are also the ones most supportive of tradition and resistant to innovation in programming. Yet their economic support is needed to keep many symphonies alive as working organizations. If then the industry shrinks, certain advantages of large-scale and deep audience reach can be lost, further feeding a decline cycle.

Left to random choice of individual orchestras, then, it is not clear that what survives will constitute a valued core of important tradition. What continues as a cultural industry is then merely a random collection of survivors which constitute no unique cultural tradition or societal statement other than the fact that they survived market demands and other opposing forces.

Repertoire choice, however, depends on the approach and criteria used in judging a tradition. Is tradition a discrete phenomenon or is tradition a continuum? The whole struggle to keep one foot in the past and one in the future at the same time leads to some rather confused interpretations in the use of traditional culture for modern needs.

A case in point from the popular press is the use of “classical music” as a noxious stimulant to keep teenagers from hanging around stores. Apparently convenience stores have serendipitously discovered that playing classical music through outside speaker systems tends to disperse teenagers because they find the music unattractive, and perhaps even bothersome and irritating! Most likely, the music does not match their youthful energy and creates an internal “off beat” friction. Thus, they move on to new settings. In a second case, the governor of Georgia wants to propose, as part of the 1998 state budget, a project that provides classical music CDs to parents under the theory that “having that infant listen to soothing music helps those trillions of brain connections to develop.”<sup>13</sup> In a final case, Penn Station in New York City broadcasts a continuous cycle of Baroque music in its newly fenced-off seating area for travelers. This serves to sedate stressed-out travelers. It also provides a consistent sound background against which travelers perhaps more clearly distinguish and pay attention to train arrivals and departures. But another purpose, as with the new fenced-off area, is to separate and protect travelers from unwanted contact with vagrants, mendicants, bored teens, and other folks who hang around train stations. The background classical music helps keep those separations and social distances. One can imagine Haydn’s reaction to hearing that his music is used to drive people away!

The “choice” question leads to a difficult policy challenge in a free society: How important is tradition for the survival of a society? And if tradition is important, what is the best way to preserve it? To the first question, we simply reflect on personal experience and a limited knowledge of history to argue that tradition is indeed important for the formation of identity and motivating a larger

*“How important is tradition for the survival of a society? And if tradition is important, what is the best way to preserve it?”*

sense of purpose and commitment to life and society. People with a solid sense of themselves as a people, reinforced by tradition, seem to be happier, healthier, and more likely to survive difficult times. It is interesting to note that tradition, and especially a tradition and skill in classical music, contributed much to the survival rates of Nazi death camp prisoners.

The conservation of tradition presents a very difficult societal problem which has no final solution. Ecology suggests that it is in the collective interests of the industry to support the variation that tradition often resists. Yet, in open markets with free competition, the limits of that differentiation cannot be known a priori

and centrifugal tendencies toward chaotic individualistic developments that threaten a tradition’s collective interests are real. Tradition, and its institutions, seems to serve as one of the centripetal forces to prevent such market-induced “chaos of taste and value,” yet tradition does not seem to have a “natural” market. Present markets are a mass phenomenon, fickle, subject to trends, quick to tire of a product, capable of being manipulated through advertising, and representing no deep judgment of connoisseurship. To a society’s leadership, the question is then raised: do you entrust your society’s cultural traditions to markets?

***Markets may not be the most effective mechanism of choice to preserve traditions and the organizations that support them. They are, however, relatively efficient mechanisms for reflecting present choice in the allocation of resources through a price mechanism.***

If the decision is left to open and free markets, present trends indicate that markets may fail to conserve tradition. Unless assiduously developed, the “classical music tradition” market will shrink in the face of competition from contemporary products and a new ethos in taste. In a sense, there is no long-term sustainable market for tradition per se.

In 1996, one music critic observed that “a tradition is treated as just another trend ready for replacement. . . . There is something amiss in these efforts to treat a tradition with no more seriousness than the latest passing fashion. . . . There is no direction or goal, no past to give context to the present.”<sup>14</sup> These comments underline the crisis of tradition in symphonic music. In a consumerist, market-oriented society such as the United States, tradition has to be “sold” and get a continuing “vote” in the marketplace. But in order to do that, the

tradition has to be made appealing to contemporary needs, thinking, tastes, and habits. But if it is to be made contemporarily appealing, it cannot remain a tradition.

Since the age of empire and kings has given way to more representative societies, the modern tendency is to use markets to conserve tradition. No longer are exploitative taxes and outright taking so readily legitimate to create the surpluses to support royal tastes in music. But markets are proving a difficult mechanism for cultural organizations to master. In fact, responding to broader markets may make the concept of classical music tradition a moot point. But if, in fact, markets do fail to conserve tradition, one could use non market

*“In a consumerist, market-oriented society such as the United States, tradition has to be ‘sold’ and get a continuing ‘vote’ in the marketplace.”*

mechanisms such as representative hierarchy (in contrast to royal individual and exclusionary hierarchy) to make decisions about the conservation of tradition. Recent research shows that government subsidy for industry research and development yields large-scale societal benefits. Such subsidies have been offered because they “offset what is widely viewed as a systematic failure of free markets to allocate adequate resources to research and development.”<sup>15</sup> That same issue is perhaps the crux of the debate today about the public support of all arts efforts.

Through hierarchy (e.g., such formal organization as a commission, a bureau, a selected group of decision makers as in the NEA) there could be a conscious allocation of common resources and responsibility to specific organizations to carry on designated parts of the tradition. For example, the New Jersey Symphony could be designated as the formal societal storehouse of all of the Polish symphonic music tradition. But hierarchy can present a serious problem of contradiction to a free society. It presents the possibility of choice limited to a central authority-controlled process; involves complex and often non transparent decision processes; uses specialized, inaccessible, obscure, and often self-serving criteria in making judgments; has a non voluntary tax system to secure resources; often requires “side payment” incentives to motivate compliance; is corruptible itself; requires a justice system to hear complaints of unfair treatments; and often pays “wasteful” subsidies to take on this storage responsibility that may only be indefinitely sustainable and of long-term dubious value. Hierarchy then presents some difficult tradeoffs when considered as a mechanism for the conservation of cultural traditions.

## **The Broccoli Problem of Evaluation and Choice**

There is a common cultural conundrum of free choice: given free choice, most people would not choose to support (i.e., pay for) a tradition which they neither share nor value highly. To spend money on something you do not want would be considered “irrational,” an anathema to cherished notions of rational economic

***“Often it is after the tradition is gone or dying that people come to remember and value it.”***

choice. People generally do not “buy tradition,” even though there may be benefits for them that they do not know about or which take the form of an indirect contribution that benefits them. Tradition, such as the Fourth of July, often gives a shared public sense of stability in a common history. This creates a bit of the “Broccoli Imperative”: Eat it because its good for you whether you like it or not! This problem of cultural carryover has parallels in other cultural organizations, including museums and libraries.

In part, the problem is one of evaluation: how do people come to know and appreciate that broccoli is good for them? It may be that the mechanism and process for evaluation may be imperfect or inappropriate. People simply do not know how to evaluate a tradition—“put a price on it”—even though they may like the idea. Often it is after the tradition is gone or dying that people come to remember and value it. To train people in an evaluation process ideally requires that they learn basic criteria and a methodology to later be utilized in making their own future choices.

Training people to make choice decisions via market and exchange mechanisms alone is most likely only a necessary, but insufficient, means of developing a people’s evaluation capabilities. Markets allow practice in choice and evaluation. But that a “market clears,” in economists’ terms, does not say anything about the quality of the consumption experience nor the inherent value of a product. It merely indicates that what was offered was purchased under a variety of conditions. Ex-post interpretation of those purchases becomes the stuff of much marketing analysis and the equivalent of commercial witchcraft. Symphony ticket purchases, while much appreciated, might not really indicate good evaluation outcomes.

Corporations have learned well from changing audience behavior. They realized that people do not “naturally” know how to choose between a Toyota and a Citroen; that people often make irrational and impulsive decisions; that information cues and persuasion can be both blunt and subtle tools for “facilitating” (steering) choice. They know that markets are artificial creations that divide and segment people into categories so that they can be “taught” market choice in more efficient and effective ways. What else explains the absolutely huge expenditures in corporate advertising? These expenditures are, in fact, huge market teaching efforts that attempt to create new consumer habits channeled into brand traditions. People are taught the problem and the solution simultaneously in a brand of product (e.g., dirty stains and soap X). They are taught criteria (e.g., price, color, taste, value, speed) with which to make choices, and are even taught to feel good about those choices so that they might repeat them. It is competition, and probably survival, that leads corporations to spend enormous amounts of resources, time, and effort in establishing brands (creating favorably biased consumer buying patterns). In essence, they are trying to

constantly and purposefully create “consumer traditions” around their product offerings. Competition in markets is really competition between habit and tradition makers—habit establishes the consumer skill in choice, tradition reinforces the choice as a good one. So establishing brand superiority can really be seen as the biased teaching of private traditions. Getting private traditions into the domain of “public tradition,” of course, is the next step in becoming a secure, cherished, and long-term surviving organization. Though one might lament the madness, there is method in trying to make the Super Bowl a “cherished American tradition.” The 1998 billion-dollar television contracts for the right to broadcast professional football games underscore that point.

For arts and cultural organizations, difficult economic times often lead to a tendency for short-term folk wisdom to take hold of critical faculties. Most organizations simply want to “take the money and run” or “not look gift horses in the mouth.” “If the show is selling tickets,” so the thinking goes, “don’t ask questions because you probably are doing something right!” All that may be true, but it would be hard to argue that development of a music tradition and its organizations could or should be based on the movement of market sales alone. Again, all of the activity of corporate brand-making points to a much more sophisticated and complex process of audience teaching and learning. Market sales are only part of the story.

In contrast, the world of cultural organizations seems to have a different process of tradition making simultaneously at work. It is based less on market choice models than on organization hierarchy models that we might see in music conservatories or public school music appreciation programs. Non market methods by which a political tradition is often established may provide some insights into how instilling tradition prolongs survival.

## **Training Traditions**

The whole notion of “training a free people for democracy” reflects this very contradictory problem of hierarchy versus market choice in an open society. Democracy may exist as a natural thought to all peoples of the world. But in becoming praxis, it generally must be formally taught as a value-based governance system. It comes into being and its fundamental notions get rooted through the hierarchy of schools and the discipline of repetition, good examples, and long, hard practice. In this training, competing models of societal governance (e.g., communism, fascism, or capitalism) are often presented as weak or bad alternatives from which to learn the criteria for good choice. Getting the basics down through rote learning and memorization is quite acceptable. Individual

*“So establishing brand superiority can really be seen as the biased teaching of private traditions. Getting private traditions into the domain of ‘public tradition,’ of course, is the next step in becoming a secure, cherished, and long-term surviving organization.”*

choice is subordinated until a useful ideology and practice comes to form a tradition that dominates the intellectual discourse and everyday practice of decision making. Once “trained,” or better, “socialized,” people can then make a free choice which might actually include rejecting the very culture for which they were training.

Even democracy, at least the U.S. style which cherishes individual freedom, is borne by certain necessity of discipline through organization. The same tradition taught through the freedom of markets alone may yield only a shallow citizenship in which political freedom is equated with a freedom to consume the celebratory paraphernalia on all the major holidays. The lesson in the modern world may be that ideal systems start with free ideas, but eventually must take on form through organization, which necessarily but temporarily limits individual freedom.<sup>16</sup> And it is here that important parallels and lessons exist between the learning of a music tradition and the learning of political traditions. It shows that there are alternatives and supplements to the markets-alone strategy of tradition making.

A musician’s education often begins in a formal conservatory and in the learning of the theory, structure, history, and aesthetics of music. There is a need to learn the basics first, and learn them by the rote of hard practice based on accepted theory. Opinions and aesthetic judgment come first from teachers who set the criteria for judging future musical endeavors. Good and bad music is distinguished early. Music itself cannot escape the strictures and constraints of organization. Music always starts with an aesthetic idea, but must eventually take form in a structure on paper. That structure is dictated by the necessity to use the organization of a common system of notation to communicate aesthetic

intention and technique. There is nothing particularly “free” in that early education, and all learners quickly come to understand the value of organization in learning. André Previn once noted that it is absolutely necessary for a musician to get technique down first so that it becomes second nature when creating new music and extending the boundaries of convention.<sup>17</sup>

Orchestral musicians, perhaps more than any other professional group, naturally understand that creative freedom comes through self- and organizationally sanctioned limits to individual freedom in the learning of an art. Once learned, the freedom to express is unlimited because there is responsibility to express within the limits of a commonly understood and shared system of aesthetic values. By its very nature, performing music must be a cooperative venture among musicians who understand the need to produce collaboratively. By extension, it is also a cooperative venture between musician and audience whereby,

***“If there is a lesson in this markets and hierarchy controversy, it seems to be that both are at work in all organizations, private and public, that seek both to grow and survive in contemporary society.”***

without the latter, music exists without a societal role, depriving it of a certain legitimacy. One can argue that if traditions are prolonged through organization, there should be no difficulty in including music in any endeavor to consciously maintain and prolong tradition through organization and hierarchy, rather than through the unfettered choice of consumer markets alone. If there is a lesson in this markets and hierarchy controversy, it seems to be that both are at work in all organizations, private and public, that seek both to grow and survive in contemporary society.

## **Americanization and Tradition**

In asking whether it matters “whose tradition is being preserved,” we raise the possibility that we are really facing a much larger cultural-cycle issue, one that points to the role that internationalization, multiculturalism, and “Americanization” of the symphony orchestra play in shaping the future for this music.

Internationalization is a complex process by which a product or service becomes available to global markets. However, the process of internationalization presents hugely difficult challenges for corporate managers who must deal with the complexities of multiple-environment adaptation. In contrast, it seems that symphonic music and the orchestra have been able to avoid many of these complex problems. Traditionally at least, they went international as part of the colonial movement, and fared better in that exploitative tradition’s sense of conquest than they might have with a more pragmatic, and perhaps humble, approach of adjustment, accommodation, and adaptation. Symphonic music represented a “civilizing” effect in which it was a vehicle to take a version of Western civilization out to the periphery. As such, it inherits the cultural bias of the colonial tradition and has yet to deal seriously with the issue of multiculturalism.

*“Diverse non-Western ethnic traditions do have legitimate claims for the public ear and eye. Yet addressing these issues through policy and markets is never easy.”*

Multiculturalism, in the U.S. context at least, is a critical viewpoint that questions the dominance of any one national, regional, or ethnic culture in a form of cultural expression. It challenges any colonial tradition that was imposed rather than freely accepted. “End the music of dead white men” might become the rallying cry for diversity and democracy in art-form expression. Diverse non-Western ethnic traditions do have legitimate claims for the public ear and eye. Yet addressing these issues through policy and markets is never easy. Such diversity always runs the danger of “babelization” and cacophony rather than voice and symphony. The effects of a multicultural approach to societal cultural expression has implications beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to mention the centrifugal effects on connoisseurship and the development of a coherent tradition.

***“The American symphony appears to have gone through the full cycle of a type of parent-child relationship.”***

The Americanization of the symphony orchestra might indicate the beginning of the end of Americans making great efforts to preserve what are essentially European and “foreign” traditions. The American symphony appears to have gone through the full cycle of a type of parent-child relationship. The European parent brought the tradition to American shores, and developed it here. The American child copied the institutions, practices, values, and mind sets. Over time, Americans became proficient enough that they were “allowed” to play in the parents’ homeland. Now, American players are good enough to stand on their own. If this kind of cycle is at work, then the “Americanization” of serious music might be the next step. This cycle could repeat in other cultures with the same effect.

To conclude, each society has to decide the “optimal mechanism” for the support of tradition. Treating culture as a public good may provide resources, but it still does not provide an easy answer to the very sticky question of what aspects of culture “get saved.” Debates concerning the NEA versus tradition underline this point. From an ecological point of view, the fundamental question remains: to what extent does the conservation of tradition represent a societal practice that contributes to functional adaptation and prolonged survival of that society itself? Each society must answer that question, and more than once.

## **A Closing Industry Tale**

We close this section with a comparable economic tale from the automobile industry. The situation General Motors faces presents the company with a strategic problem very comparable to that of symphonic organizations. It turns out that the venerable Cadillac, also a strong tradition-driven product, is facing a serious decline in sales.<sup>18</sup> From a high in 1978, when Cadillac had a 2.4 percent share of the market with 350,000 units of sale, the brand had declined by 1996 to a 2 percent share with 170,000 units of sale. The problem as presented can again be traced to changes in demographics. As noted in a recent article, “For more than 15 years now, Cadillac has watched its faithful buyers grow silver-haired and age beyond their driving years.” Even with the introduction of three new models over that time period (two now defunct), Cadillac has ended up last in the luxury market. In further response, General Motors came out with the Catera model in order to try and position the Cadillac in a “new money” market segment. However, the younger, “new money” market continues to shun the classic tradition of that car line. One potential customer noted how the dealership seemed “like an old person’s home,” how the salesman was as old as his father and how, in the end, peer pressure prevailed when the person admitted that, “The Catera is a terrific car but I just could not see myself owning or driving a Cadillac.”<sup>19</sup>

However, industry observers disagree about the fate of this car line. Some suggest that General Motors ought to continue making the car in the same way until the market eventually disappears, and then discontinue the line altogether. Others suggest a radical turnaround with the closure of the Cadillac division and the reinvention of a whole new company, à la Saturn, in order to address the high end of the market. Still others suggest tinkering strategies of training the sales force, better advertising, and showroom changes to revive an old, but still valuable, brand name. Finally, yet others suggest that companies have done turnarounds with their cars, such as Dodge and Chrysler, and that a series of clever strategic moves might do the same for Cadillac.

If there is a parallel between the Cadillac tale and the plight of Jurassic symphonies, it lies in the message that no organizations can take their survival for granted, no matter the glory of their tradition, the quality of their product, the association with former success, or the rightness of their intention. Survival of organizations has always depended on how well they represented the ethos of their times, how legitimate their claims to being a valued tradition stayed, how well they kept their eye on the fickleness and “nowness” of audience taste, and their ability to make constant and effective claims to a flow of resources, whether or not those resources came from elites or broader common audiences. The message of any tale lies in its seeming relevance to the reader. The relevance of the “decline tale” for Cadillac symphony organizations has never seemed so real or so close.

*“... no organizations can take their survival for granted, no matter the glory of their tradition, the quality of their product, the association with former success, or the rightness of their intention.”*

This essay presented a partial ecological analysis of the symphony orchestra industry in order to identify the causes of decline and the sources of challenge that make change so difficult. The next step, of course, is to formulate strategies based on this analysis. That will be the topic of a follow-up essay.

**Authors' Note:** This essay is based on a more comprehensive analysis, “Requiem or Renaissance: Renewal and Transformation Issues in the Symphonic Organization.” That document benefited from feedback which the authors received at three professional venues in 1997: the Conference on Management of Cultural Organizations held at the Stern School of Business at New York University in May, the annual meeting of the Association of California Symphony Orchestras held in Pasadena in August, and a symposium held at the annual meeting of the Academy of Management in Boston, also in August. We particularly thank Paul Hirsch, Bill Starbuck, and Richard Scott for their comments and insights, as well as Bill McKelvy for his guidance in the literature search. We also thank Steve D’Amico, an MBA intern with the Los Angeles Philharmonic Association, who provided research assistance.

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