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The American Composers Orchestra

by

Joel Mandelbaum



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

Symphony Orchestra Institute

1618 Orrington Avenue, Suite 318

Evanston, IL 60201

Tel: 847.475.5001 Fax: 847.475.2460

e-mail: information@soi.org

www.soi.org

Publisher's Digest

The American Composers Orchestra

As mentioned in "Publisher's Notes," there is an interesting genesis to the excellent piece of organizational journalism which follows. Eighteen months ago or so, I wrote a few sentences about the founding and development of the Institute for the 1953 class notes section of the Harvard College alumni magazine. This brief mention caught the eye of classmate Joel Mandelbaum. After receiving his Harvard College degree magna cum laude, and then master's and doctoral degrees respectively from Brandeis and Indiana, Joel devoted his life to classical music education, composition, and scholarship. He was intrigued by the Institute, contacted me, and I sent him some issues of *Harmony*. He liked what he read, in particular the essays by Jim Orleans and Soong Fu-Yuan, and we corresponded.

In due course, Joel sent me some of his own thoughts about the selection, composition, performance, and national propagation of new music by American composers. Joel's devotion to American composition and his writing ability were quite evident, and in his drafting there was a brief reference to the American Composers Orchestra.

Although we were pleased to have the ACO as a supporting organization of the Institute, and assumed that the organization had a special mission with an organizational system which supported it, I felt that few people outside of New York City (including me) really knew much about either. I wondered: Would Joel be willing to inquire into and report on the ACO as a volunteer organizational journalist, and would ACO staff, board, conducting, and musician participants be willing to cooperate with Joel, speak openly about their work and their organization, and have these views, feelings, and processes reported broadly to the audience of *Harmony*? Obviously the answer became "yes" to both questions. It appears that we arranged a mutually satisfying match!

Special thanks to Joel Mandelbaum and Michael Geller, and all his colleagues, for working together to have all of us know more about this unusual American orchestral institution.

The American Composers Orchestra

Things could not have been more topsy-turvy than when I arrived shortly after the start of the first full orchestra rehearsal of the American Composers Orchestra for its January concert. I took a seat to the side and noticed about 40 players (30 of them strings) randomly seated in the orchestra space with no semblance of an ordinary seating plan. The written parts were similarly strewn about the page, a few measures here, a few measures there. The sounds were even more abstracted, a snippet here, a snippet there, generally one, two, or three solo lines at any given time, with no instrument playing more than three or four notes before returning to long periods of “rest” involving feverish counting and following the strangely notated musical cues. What they were playing sounded something like what a Webern *Klangfarbenmelodie* might sound like if some machine had quantized all the notes to fit into the C major scale. Tantalizing segments suggesting familiar musical syntax fraternized with empty spaces, or units too small to have any syntax. But every note belonged to a single diatonic scale. The composer was John Cage.

What I noticed next was that this group of musicians, famous for its prodigious reading skills, was dropping entries right and left. Periodically Dennis Russell Davies, the conductor, would call out “Joe, you’re supposed to be playing here,” or “First violin 4, where are you?” as entrances were missed. Davies took everything in stride. He noted the location amid the jumbled seating of some of the players who had missed entrances and promised them cues.

After a break the orchestra turned to Amy Beach’s Third (Celtic) Symphony, composed in 1896. Where, throughout the Cage, Davies had given almost uniform, large, angular beats, leaving the divergent elements of expressivity to the individual players, he now employed the full range of conductorial gestures.

The orchestra responded with a splendid first reading that far surpassed what would have been final performances by all but a few of the world’s orchestras. So electric was the reading that much of the rehearsing that followed consisted

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of pointing out to the players the details in the score that called for relaxation. Except for its obvious Celticism (evocation of folk-like tunes from time to time) the rather lush and exciting score evoked more Dvorak than anything else. The orchestra, though formed, trained, and nurtured on a very different kind of music, took to the Beach like a fish to water. From the first upbeat the hall resounded with joy. What a splendid collectivity had been formed over 24 years out of these freelance musicians.

At the concert two days later, before a two-thirds-full house at Carnegie Hall, the Cage work proceeded without problems. At its end, Davies applauded the players for mastering the complicated measure counts and entrances. Certainly the notes, selected by subtraction (“deconstruction”) from some choral pieces by the 18th-century American composer William Billings, would not have been a problem for even the most amateurish community orchestra, but oh those rests! The Beach was a pleasure to hear again.

After intermission were two newly commissioned works, both by African-American composers more than a generation different in age. Both involved what are called “crossover” features, stylistic elements of music originally intended for nonconcert venues. Both also involved electronic tape. The first was “Tomorrow’s Song, as Yesterday Sings Today” by Muhal Richard Abrams, a veteran composer and jazz pianist. The electronic sounds occasionally crackled over the orchestra and the most memorable passage was a sustained string unison with a somewhat angular and chromatic, but very lyrical, melody. The final work was “Harlem Essay for Orchestra and Digital Audio Tape” by Daniel Bernard Roumain, a youthful composer. Recorded street voices alternated with dynamic hip-hop rhythms on the tape, the latter matched by the orchestra’s percussion. A highlight occurred when the tape ended and the orchestra took up the mesmerizing rhythm alone. Even more memorable was the quiet piano solo with which the work concluded in subdued lighting.

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I enjoyed the concert very much as did most of the audience. Even though one of the works (the Cage) was about subverting the very essence of what makes an orchestra an orchestra, and both commissioned works achieved their strongest impact with features for which the presence of an orchestra was somewhat peripheral, it was still a lovely orchestral concert, though unquestionably centered on its century-old entry. Besides the music itself, one could not but enjoy the sheer craft and gusto, the total professionalism of the undertaking. It was clear that in both rehearsal and performance, the players and conductor were delighted to be doing what they were doing.

An Orchestra By and For Composers

The American Composers Orchestra and its principal conductor, Dennis Russell Davies, had already made a profound impression on me quite some years ago when I attended a concert which included a work by a colleague and was amazed at the general quality of the performances. In particular, what had seemed to be a forbiddingly opaque texture in a Sessions symphony was opened up by Davies and the orchestra to reveal a richness of lyrical melody I would otherwise never have believed was there. It was therefore a great pleasure to have an opportunity to learn more about the orchestra.

Founded over lunch in 1975 as a one-concert endeavor by the well-connected composer Francis Thorne and the then fledgling conductor Dennis Russell Davies, this orchestra, devoted entirely to the works of American composers and largely to the works of unknown but qualified *living* American composers, has since given 4 to 5 concerts a year, performed works by 346 American composers (most of them represented by a single work), and recorded works by 24.

Thorne and Davies had wanted to give a special concert to honor the 40th anniversary of the American Composers Alliance, and with a mix of private funding and a grant from B.M.I., raised \$30,000 to stage that first concert. Paul Dunkel, a freelance flutist and conductor, undertook to contract the players from his talented cohort who know one another through various part-time orchestras and chamber ensembles in New York. He brought in a group of excellent players, excellent readers, and individuals who possessed a high level of interest in playing new music. Today, nearly 25 years later, Davies, now a world-renowned conductor; Thorne, now a true elder statesman; and Dunkel, now a successful regional conductor, are still active with the orchestra, *as more than half the original players*—a remarkable statistic, which is perhaps the greatest possible tribute to the success of the overall undertaking, as well as to Dunkel's perspicacity in making the right choices from the beginning. The high morale of the group which the statistic evidences was already apparent to me in the atmosphere of the first rehearsal: attentive players, an obviously well-prepared conductor who respected them, a mission which everyone respected, and a well-organized staff to keep the engines running.

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The American Composers Orchestra, called the ACO by everyone associated with it, is one of a cornucopia of professional orchestras operating in New York City under a more or less standard union contract. Since these are all part-time orchestras (members of the Philharmonic or the Met would never have the free time to participate), many of the same players are regular members of several. They include pit orchestras for ballet and opera companies with relatively short seasons; regional orchestras within the New York metropolitan area, such as

the Brooklyn Philharmonic and the Westchester Philharmonic; various chamber orchestras; neighborhood orchestras; and special orchestras such as the Opera Orchestra of New York (which, under Eve Queler, has for many years offered concert performances of neglected opera classics with interesting lead singers); and the American Symphony Orchestra (which, under Leon Botstein, has offered unusual programs linking standard works and almost unheard music of all periods through imaginative thematic programming). The ACO can be seen as fitting comfortably at the “special programming” end of this spectrum. As its brochure (the contents of which can also be gleaned on its Web site, < www.americancomposers.org>) strongly hints, and interviews with its executive director and members of the orchestra and board of directors confirm, the orchestra combines many standard features of New York’s “single engagement” orchestras with a few unique ones stemming from its particular focus on composers.

The Interaction of Constituencies

The board of directors, currently some 23 strong, includes the usual contingent of bankers, lawyers, philanthropists, and community leaders. It is also sprinkled liberally with composers, including a few amateur composers, and several performers who actively program new music. The board has about a half dozen committees of the standard variety, such as development and finance; an executive committee, consisting primarily of the chairs of the various committees (which meets considerably more often than does the full board); and an artistic policy committee which, as the result of a relatively recent initiative, includes orchestra players (elected by the orchestra committee which itself is elected by the full orchestra).

The artistic staff includes two conductors and two composers. Those two composers also sit on the board of directors. One of these composers, Robert Beaser, is listed as the “Artistic Advisor.” The ACO also has a published list of about two dozen composer advisors. It has indicated that it also uses people “outside the organization” to assist with jurying the submitted scores, and advising on artistic policy.

The administrative staff includes a highly energetic executive director, Michael Geller, and a compact supporting group. Some functions which orchestras usually assign to full-time staff members, such as educational outreach and publicity, are accomplished part-time by consultants.

The constituencies interact to a degree that I have been led to believe is unusual among orchestras. The relationship of the two conductors with the players is exemplary. Davies has the total respect of the players for his technical craft, his musical mastery, his preparedness (I have never seen another conductor as much in command of the scores of multiple

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unknown works from the first rehearsal onward), and the collegiality and respect he accords them at all times. The associate conductor, Paul Dunkel, has also produced some impressive concerts and recordings with the orchestra. Though he no longer does the contracting, Dunkel placed most of the current members in the orchestra and he remains close to them.

Geller is an effective conduit among the constituencies. He is a good communicator and strongly committed to the orchestra's founding mission. The presence of two composers from the artistic staff on the board of directors facilitates smooth interactions between those bodies. The artistic policy committee is a focal point for working through any differences and furthering initiatives among all the parts of the organization.

Besides the formal contacts among the constituencies, there is an important informal reality that rests in the personality of the co-founder, de facto artistic advisor, and current president, Francis Thorne. Technically he is listed as part of the administrative staff. But all constituencies of the orchestra look to him for leadership and find it in abundance. Members of all the constituencies, including the orchestra players themselves, speak with respect and deep affection of Thorne. More than anything else, it appears to be his vision and self-sacrificing service which have kept the orchestra on course. An able composer of mainstream, slightly conservative modern music with a touch of jazz, to judge from his 5th Symphony (the only work of his the orchestra has recorded), he has declined to use the orchestra to enhance his own reputation, and in so doing has sent a strong message of openness to outsiders. He and others with the organization are confident that Robert Beaser, his successor as artistic advisor, will continue this tradition.

Artistic Policy

"It is our mission to try to institutionalize openness" is the way Geller put it to me as a kind of challenge of seeming contradiction in a three-hour interview. The ACO literature boasts (with good reason) of works it commissioned from Joseph Schwantner and Ellen Taaffe Zwillich when nobody else had commissioned orchestral works from them, which very works then won Pulitzer prizes. I was prepared to ask why neither of those works was included in the ACO discography. As the discussion proceeded, the question became unnecessary. The orchestra's philosophy is to move on to others once it has opened opportunities for specific composers through its performances. The more recognition the performances bring, therefore, the more imperative the orchestra considers it to move on. Certainly, if the orchestra concentrated on consolidating the reputations of those it brought to the fore, it would never have come close to playing music written by 346 different individuals.

The artistic policy decisions have focused on program selection. With Davies and Dunkel, and a distinguished list of guest conductors headed by Leonard Bernstein and Gunther Schuller, and with Dunkel's superb roster of players, there have been few, if any, problems involving artistic personnel. The

organization is quite specific about how it makes selections from among unsolicited scores. According to Geller the orchestra always tries to include a few of these and assures every composer submitting a score that it will be reviewed by three persons—two composers and a conductor—at least one of whom is outside the organization. Works selected as best through this mechanism are then reviewed by the artistic staff, especially by Beaser and Davies, and one or more are then selected. At least one composer per season is selected for a commission on the basis of readings held annually, with about five, usually very junior, composers participating. Roumain, on the present program, had been selected through the readings of a previous year.

Though these processes are meticulous and assure a measure of access to every composer, the majority of works programmed by the ACO are selected less formally through recommendation by or to the members of its artistic staff. An effort has been made to keep channels open to different stylistic communities, and the list of performed composers includes substantial numbers of so-called neo-Romantics, hard line serialists, minimalists, and ethnic crossover composers. Although this leaves gaps, especially among traditionally tonal composers, including a number who have made reputations in opera, I think one can fairly conclude that by the standard of other organizations that specialize in new music, the ACO has been remarkably successful in its openness.

Recently, the ACO has increased its efforts to communicate directly with other music directors and artistic administrators about the composers and repertoire it has performed. The orchestra has established the “ACO-Xchange, a professional network for sharing this information, with its own area on the ACO’s Web site at < www.americancomposers.org/exchange.htm > .

A Look to the Future

With a list of more than a hundred major supporters for its current four-concert series, the ACO has clearly found a financial formula for its present success and the likelihood that this success can carry well into the future. Supporters are, with good reason, happy to be identified with superb instrumentalists who are adequately paid to give outstanding performances which help launch the careers of previously unheralded composers. The fact that sponsors find valued prestige in being identified with new work validated by the artistic community has long been demonstrated in corporate and foundation support in the visual arts. It is a win-win-win situation that deservedly brings satisfaction at every level in the organization. And it may suggest means whereby other communities might start similar ventures, or existing orchestras might start new music projects with a chance of success.

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In the midst of what appears to be a self-sustaining process of four relatively

What Might Your Community Do to Emulate the Success of the American Composers Orchestra?

Davies himself suggested that the combination of able freelance players and an informed audience might exist in Chicago and Los Angeles, as well as New York, but probably in no other American locality. It would be hard to duplicate the combination of founding members Thorne's, Davies's and Dunkel's unusual qualities all of which have contributed immeasurably to the ACO's success. Nevertheless, the ACO's success has demonstrated that new music can appeal to major financial supporters. And the ACO's program of introducing about 16 new works a year could be duplicated by a standard orchestra with a 32-week season by introducing one new American work at every other concert cycle, or by offering a special short series of concerts devoted exclusively to a repertoire similar to that of the ACO. There are precedents for special donations for the introduction of new works in the orchestral community. An important series of recordings of new American music was issued by the Louisville Symphony some 40 years ago. Perhaps new donors can be found for such a series, or else present donors might be interested in increasing their gifts for special recognition in connection with such a series.

The ACO has fulfilled its mission in an exemplary way. Nevertheless, I would suggest a policy of supplementing rather than duplicating what the ACO has done. The ACO set out to increase the proportion of orchestral programming throughout the country devoted to contemporary American music. It has succeeded. But meanwhile, the overall interest in orchestral music has appeared to drop. For example, Michael Geller considered this to be a reason why NPR discontinued broadcasting ACO concerts. There seems to be a prevailing premise—fallacious in my opinion—that the fate of new music and that of orchestras as a whole are unrelated. According to that premise, the core audience for symphony orchestras must be sustained and enhanced by the classical repertoire alone, with new music integrated only at the periphery and directed primarily to audiences previously not in the symphonic orbit.

Unfortunately, as the repertoire ages, its impact on audiences gradually diminishes. In all the arts except concert music, audience growth is spearheaded by new works. Concert music, including orchestral music, needs to sustain itself also at least partly through the infusion of excitement and energy provided by new works. But these must be new works which stimulate and bring enrichment to symphonic music's audience base. To alienate this base in the pursuit of ephemeral new audiences is ultimately counterproductive.

For a century, critics and academics increasingly have authenticated only music adhering to “modernist” premises. This included confrontation with the belief systems of the audience through some degree of subversion of the language of tonality as it developed through the 18th and 19th centuries. It will, therefore, be necessary for the orchestral community, if it values its long-term preservation, to seek, develop, and nurture its own cohort of composers able and willing to find a path for originality and spiritual depth within a musical language that symphony audiences understand and respect.¹ Something similar was accomplished in the 1930s and 1940s through the efforts of orchestra leaders such as Koussevitzky and Stokowski whereby composers established through more modernist channels (e.g., Copland and Bartok) were persuaded to compose masterpieces in a more accessible language, while new composers with more traditional proclivities (e.g., Britten and Barber) were encouraged to emerge.

To develop a cohort of composers and a body of new works directed toward the renewal of audience interest in orchestral music would require participation of the orchestral community on a vast scale. Philosophic questions regarding what can or cannot be accepted as valid idioms of expression in this postmodern age would have to be reexamined. For the paradigm shift to be effective, the initiative must come from the orchestral community rather than the community of established composers. While this would differentiate such a campaign from the ACO’s in some respects, there are several points of ACO activity which should be emulated directly: its emphasis on openness to variety; its repeated demonstration that new works can draw audiences and funding; and, above all, its successful insistence on the highest performance standards in presenting new music.

The orchestral community—with its self-interest in mind, as well as interest in the survival and growth of the art of music—could provide a variety of new music programs building in part on the success of the ACO, and enlarging the mission to one which unfortunately has not been assigned to or attempted by new music for 100 years: enhancing and developing audiences for symphonic music itself. Impossible? No; possible, and furthermore, necessary.

Note

¹ For a discussion of one possible way to bring this about, see Fu-Yuan Soong’s essay, “Restoring the Ecosystem of American Classical Music through Audience Empowerment,” in *Harmony* Number 6, April 1998. Soong is actively engaged with the New York Chamber Symphony in a fledgling attempt to realize some of the aims he articulates.

well-attended concerts a year, discussions regarding possible changes are concentrated in two areas. First, the orchestra is trying to give more attention to outreach beyond the New York concert community. Second, the orchestra is seeking a new principal conductor in light of Davies's retirement, to take effect in two years.

The first area involves recordings, broadcasts, and possible tours. None of these are totally new to the orchestra. It has issued 20 recordings on a variety of labels (CRI and ARGO having a plurality). Public radio used to broadcast its concerts regularly. And one tour, which included Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia, nearly recouped all costs. For readers outside the New York area, these means of outreach would seem important. In each case, there seemed a consensus during my conversations that the ACO wished to proceed, but would need substantial fundraising specific to each of the projects (a higher priority for the use of general funds appeared to be a return to a five-concert season).

Concerning recordings there is talk of starting the ACO's own label, in light of the fact that the existing catalogue includes several items which are out-of-print. There is also talk of upgrading the archival recordings made at concerts to commercial levels so that proceeding from concert to recording would not entail as much incremental cost and labor as at present. As to the broadcasts, this would also require considerable project-specific fundraising. NPR formerly paid to broadcast the ACO. That it does so no more was attributed to public radio's own financial pressures, and a sense that in the total cultural scheme of things orchestral performance in general has lost ground.

Replacing Davies will be no easy matter. The ACO is down to a short list and is combining extensive interviews with close monitoring of present conducting activities by the candidates. Whether the orchestra can find someone with Davies's interpretive skills, his technical mastery and score-reading ability, and his proclivities for thorough preparation, as well as his collegiality with the players, remains to be seen. These qualities are desirable in any conductor, but the ACO's emphasis on difficult works in premiere performances makes them—especially those regarding score-reading and preparation—particularly necessary.

Meanwhile the ACO, which Davies calls a "cultural motor" roars on, turning out remarkable concerts which offer opportunity to some fortunate composers, novelty to audiences (according to Geller the demographics and taste of the ACO audiences closely resemble those of audiences for other, more conventionally programmed orchestras). Most of all, it provides the excitement of brilliant musicians performing a labor of love under a superb conductor whom they venerate (Davies will remain as conductor laureate). It has, for nearly 25 years, been one of New York's most extraordinary cultural treasures.

Joel Mandelbaum is a professor of music emeritus at Queens College of the City University of New York. He holds an A.B. from Harvard University, an M.F.A. in composition from Brandeis University, and a Ph.D. from Indiana University.