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## A Jazz Musician's Take on America's Symphony Orchestras

by

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## Editor's Digest

### ***A Jazz Musician's Take on America's Symphony Orchestras***

**A**uthor Fred Starr takes us behind the footlights as he shares the perspective of a jazz musician who has performed with dozens of orchestras from coast to coast.

#### **No Crisis, but Problems**

*Starr does not buy the thesis that there is a "crisis of classical music" in the United States. But he does suggest that there are problems which American orchestras need to address, among them the condition of many music halls, the configuration of the orchestra on the stage, and the inadequacy of orchestral staffing.*

*He then considers programming, suggesting that successful programming involves taking risks, and segues briskly to the role of the conductor. "Like it or not," he says, "the skills and personality of the conductor set the tone for the ensemble as a whole and, in some cases, for the entire organization."*

#### **Music Direction**

*Starr pulls no punches as he considers the impact of the conductor's role—for both better and worse. He ponders why this role has not been thoroughly examined in the search for organizational effectiveness, and why so few conductors take part in discussions of the future of American orchestras.*

*Starr concludes that the greatest impediments to improving organizational effectiveness lie in areas of teamwork. Returning to his jazz connection, he suggests that America's orchestras can "cook" if they concentrate on linking more closely all parts of the orchestral organism.*

## A Jazz Musician's Take on America's Symphony Orchestras

**P**erspective, they say, is everything. We should not be surprised then that symphony orchestras not only *sound* different from the stage but really *are* different when viewed from that perspective. Over many years, I had taken an outsider's interest in the fate of symphony orchestras, even going so far as to offer my (outsider's) views on them to the American Symphony Orchestra League. Briefly, I saw the chief challenge as being making contact with a changing audience and its expectations and overcoming the inflexibility and alienation within orchestras that was preventing many of them from meeting this challenge.

My undeserved reward for this act of hubris was to be asked to chair the advisory committee for the Knight Foundation's orchestral program and to serve on the board of the Cleveland Orchestra. Neither project, however, put me behind the footlights. And so my perspective remained more or less intact.

More recent developments have placed me on the stage at more than four dozen symphony orchestra concerts from coast to coast. For 20 years I have been a member of a New Orleans-based jazz band that has performed classic New Orleans jazz at major venues across America, Europe, and Asia. Some years back, friends asked me if the Louisiana Repertory Jazz Ensemble had ever performed with a symphony orchestra. I told them it had not, and that I considered most jazz-and-classical concerts demeaning to both forms of music. I was not about to subject our professional artists, who had performed with everyone from Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington to the Olympia Brass Band and Pete Fountain, to a "play along" with orchestra musicians equally out of their element.

Nevertheless, friends prevailed and we eventually worked out a series of formats that featured classic 1910 to 1930 jazz, and specific works of classical music inspired by it, juxtaposing pieces by King Oliver, the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, or Jelly Roll Morton with compositions by Stravinsky, Ives, Copeland, Shostakovich, and Gershwin. These back-and-forth performances are real crowd-

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pleasers and they appeal to the orchestral players as well, because the musicians get to hear the actual jazz pieces and styles that inspired classical masterpieces.

Thanks to these concerts, I have had an unparalleled opportunity to see orchestras from behind the footlights. My “research” is drawn from concerts with state-based orchestras such as the New Jersey Symphony or Delaware Symphony; urban orchestras such as the Winston-Salem, Toledo, Greenville (South Carolina), or Youngstown symphony orchestras; musician-managed orchestras such as the Louisiana Philharmonic; community orchestras such as the Whatcom Symphony Orchestra in Oregon; smaller groups such as the Princeton Chamber Symphony; and orchestras that straddle several categories such as the Boston Philharmonic.

## **No Evidence of Crisis**

What impressions have I gained from exposure to these and other orchestras across the land? Above all, I have seen absolutely no evidence that there is a “crisis of classical music” in the United States. On the contrary, we’ve encountered only engaged and interested audiences who respond heartily to good music, and even difficult music, when it is played with commitment. Maybe such evidence exists, just as the abominable snowman may be wandering around somewhere. But more than two score-concerts have failed to produce a sighting. Until I have such an encounter, I must assume that Norman Lebrecht, the *London Daily Telegraph* reviewer who wrote *Who Killed Classical Music?: Maestros, Managers, and Corporate Politics*, was not writing about America. In other words, if there are problems with symphony orchestras, don’t blame them on the music, or on the audience.

Don’t blame the musicians either. Sitting on the stage next to the orchestral musicians, one can take a kind of CAT-scan of the players and sections that make up an orchestra. Rehearsals provide particularly revealing insights into their abilities and attitudes. Of course, no orchestra is perfect and every one has its relatively weaker sections. But the overwhelming impression I have gained is that America is bursting with brilliant instrumentalists who are so eager to indulge their love for great music that they will put up with truly miserable salaries to do so.

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As a clarinetist, I can be forgiven for paying particular attention to the woodwind players, just as the Louisiana Repertory Jazz Ensemble’s brass players hone in on their classical counterparts in the orchestra. But we are also rubbing elbows (or bows) with the violinists and cellists, and our classically trained bassist, Walter Payton, father of Grammy Award winner Nicholas Payton, listens

like a hawk to the basses. We all agree that American orchestras, from the most humble to the most renowned, have a surfeit of talent, and that whatever alienation exists among the musicians—on which more anon—it has nothing to do with their attitude towards the music.

## Some Evidence of Problems

But this is not to say that we saw no evidence of problems. Several of the orchestras with which we have performed were teetering on the brink of financial insolvency, while others had only recently recovered from near-death experiences. Since this journal devotes itself to the diagnosis of these issues, I will limit my comments only to those things I have actually observed in the course of my visits as a guest artist. Several of the problems fairly leap out at one.

First, far too many American orchestras are performing in ghastly halls that are acoustically dead and about as inviting as a public restroom. In some cases, these are vast old movie theaters saved by preservationists and turned over gratis to the local orchestra because no one else will use them. In others, they are beloved local halls in wretched parts of town and in still others they are handsome barns that kill sound like an acoustical Boston Strangler. Technically speaking, the hall in which an instrument is played is part of the instrument. Hence, in a squalid acoustical environment, a Stradivarius ceases to be a Stradivarius and a Mozart symphony ceases to be a Mozart symphony. Why do our orchestras put up with such persecution and misery?

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Similarly, few orchestras seem aware of the fact that audiences want to see them as well as hear them. The important visual element in an orchestra's presentation is almost always ignored. Why does no one shout out when audience members can only see a few first violins and cellos and the conductor's hind quarters, or when the guest artist is placed so as to upstage completely the rest of the musicians? On the basis of our experience we would put every orchestra in the land on risers, so the interplay between guest artist and orchestra, and between musician members and sections of the orchestra, could be seen by all.

Quite a few orchestras have taken us up on our standing offer to play free for a postconcert fundraising party or dance. Such events raise real money, and everyone has a great time. But all too many orchestra staffs are simply too busy keeping up with the weekly press of events to take advantage of such opportunities, even though a good party could benefit their organizations.

This points up another problem we observe, namely, that the management and marketing personnel of most orchestras are not up to the task. These are nearly always hard-working men and women, but they face insurmountable

odds. They are understaffed and underpaid, and neither the orchestra players nor board members seem to understand the opportunity cost they are paying for skimping in these areas. We see this clearly when preconcert publicity fails to get across the week's program in an engaging manner, or when someone is too busy to make the phone call that would produce the free publicity in the form of radio or television interviews. We see it when management staffs are so harried they can't contact a potential sponsor to pay for our transportation and we end up making the call for them.

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Beyond this, we note with distress that important programming decisions are often made through haphazard processes or not at all. How often have orchestra managers called us a month before the concert to check whether we are doing Debussy's *Golliwog's Cakewalk* or Kunnecke's *Concerto Grosso fur Jazzband mit Grosses Orchester*, even though both decisions had been made at the time we signed the contract? How often has a guest conductor called us two weeks before the concert to announce changes in the program, changes which, we later discovered, were never discussed with the orchestra, communicated to the manager, or even made known to the librarian?

## The Importance of Programming

Programming involves risk. A successful program can win lifelong devotees and a poor one can alienate whole segments of the audience for years to come. We have participated in wonderful programs that repeatedly bring the entire audience to its feet. Some of the best programs entailed the biggest elements of risk. In a healthy organization, risk is shared by all those with a serious stake in the group's success, which in the case of an orchestra means the music director, orchestra players, management, and audience. But orchestras generally assign all the risk solely to the music director or even the orchestra manager. As a result, the rest of the stakeholders share neither the thrill of triumph nor the learning that comes from failure.

As guest artists, it is obvious to us when orchestra members have had a role in setting the program. They are engaged and show it. As the last notes of the concert are sounded they are asking "How was it?" as if the answer really concerns them. It is equally obvious when our orchestral hosts have consciously taken their audience's tastes and interests into account. In these cases—which are all too few—the orchestral musicians seem also to be asking a second question: "How did our audience like it?" I have often wondered what would happen if audience members could evaluate each concert as it takes place. After all, even university professors now receive student course evaluations at the end of every semester, and the best teachers really benefit from the blunt truths

that student evaluations provide. Where is the orchestra with guts enough to try this?

The division between “serious” and “pops” programs reflects the prevailing disdain that orchestral organizations have for their audiences. Even though the Louisiana Repertory Jazz Ensemble has spent 20 years exhuming lost classics of New Orleans jazz and performing them in original formats on period instruments, and then discovering specific works by classical composers inspired by them, the fact that we are playing jazz consigns us all too often to the “pops” category. This usually means that our concerts are handled by an assistant conductor. Some of these rising lights are excellent. Others are not. Unfortunately, it is all too clear that both orchestral musicians and audiences know when they are in the hands of the understudy rather than the first-string conductor.

### **The Role of the Conductor**

This brings me to the most important truth that our concerts with symphony orchestras have brought home to me: leadership counts. Like it or not, the skills and personality of the conductor set the tone for the ensemble as a whole and, in some cases, for the entire organization. Name any orchestra that is “punching above its weight” and you will find a conductor who is cajoling and inspiring them to do so. Unfortunately, the converse is also true: underperforming orchestras invariably have underperforming conductors.

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An obvious point? Perhaps. But then why have the American Symphony Orchestra League and even the Symphony Orchestra Institute devoted relatively little attention to the terms and conditions for these crucial appointments? And if the conductor’s role is so important, why have so few of them taken any serious part in any of the recent debates over the fate of American symphony orchestras?

My experience as a guest artist has convinced me that the United States is richly supplied with talented conductors of all ages, men and women. Surprisingly, however, many of the best that we have encountered are quite unheralded nationally, and for the simple reason that they have made a serious commitment to their orchestras and their communities. They know their players’ strengths and weaknesses and can design and rehearse programs so as to bring out the former and overcome the latter. Equally important, they know their audiences because they live among them and raise their children among them. I revere these committed conductors, for they are the very heart and soul of American orchestral life today.

Unfortunately, I have seen that in many of the most upwardly striving orchestras, the conductor’s commitment to the organization and to the

community is less than that of the musicians, the management, or the trustees. Worse, the orchestral system systematically rewards such conductors for their infidelities with other orchestras. Not only does it overcompensate them in a way that exceeds even the worst abuses of corporate America, but it also adds insult to injury by cutting out orchestral musicians, managers, and the public from any serious role in the key decisions on programming. Show me an orchestra where they address the conductor as “maestro” and I’ll show you an organization that is profoundly out of balance.

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And yet it is clear that even the best of these star conductors is not equally good at everything. One may excel at conducting the works of Shostakovich, but brutalize Haydn or Mozart. Another may have a sixth sense for Brahms, but be worse than useless at conducting the kinds of 20th century music we include in our programs. The musicians and audience know this, of course, but I have yet to encounter a conductor who recognizes his or her own areas of

weakness. Instead, they treat whatever they do not know or do well with condescension.

Is there a solution to this problem? Over the past half-dozen years of touring, I have come up with two partial answers. First, with some notable and well-known exceptions, the “star” conductors do not earn their keep. Ambitious orchestras would do better to search out the very best young conducting talent and stick with them, hoping that commitment will be matched by commitment. If a richer orchestra eventually buys away that conductor, so be it. The first orchestra’s integrity will still be intact, and so will the morale of its stakeholders.

Second, if star conductors practice infidelity, why shouldn’t the orchestras do so as well? They could hire the “star” conductor for a fewer number of concerts and put the money saved into an account for hiring exciting guest conductors. For this to work, an orchestra must break the music director’s stranglehold on programming decisions. Let the musicians and audience have a voice in deciding which works to perform, then let the orchestral players look around and decide what conductor they would most like to conduct a particular program.

In the case of our programs, for which a knowledge of both jazz and 20th century music is essential, a half-dozen superb conductors come to mind. None would charge “star” fees, but all would bring to the performance an electricity that would engage orchestral musicians and audience alike. And instead of hearing just one guest artist—our jazz ensemble—the public would hear two, and could judge for itself how much the guest conductor is able to elicit from the orchestra.



## **A Positive Note**

These reflections began with a positive assessment of American orchestral life and will end with a positive note as well. My experience as a jazz musician appearing with the Louisiana Repertory Jazz Ensemble on orchestral programs has led me to four main conclusions.

- ◆ America's orchestral life today is far deeper and richer than any of the more dyspeptic critics can imagine. Moreover, orchestral talent is far more decentralized than at any previous time in our history.
- ◆ Artistic leadership in orchestral organizations is important, and among the best tests of leadership is commitment—commitment to the orchestra, to the players, to the health and viability of the entire organization, and to the musical life of the community it serves. Too many orchestra organizations ignore the issue of commitment or, worse, misunderstand it. Instead of rewarding commitment on the part of their conductor they ask why he or she hasn't moved on to a more illustrious post. In short, they rely too heavily on the judgment of people with no link to their orchestra and too little on those most committed to its success.
- ◆ In cases where a star or would-be star conductor has his or her eyes set on the next big assignment rather than on the welfare of the local orchestra and community, a simple solution is at hand: reduce the commitment to that person to a level commensurate with his or her commitment to you. Then bring in a series of talented guest conductors to perform the music they do best.
- ◆ Under any circumstances, a 100-piece orchestra, no less than a small jazz band, is a team. When all members of the team are engaged, it is reflected in how they play, and in how they sit, how they take bows, how they interact with each other, and how they relate to the audience. The task of management is to engage all the team members and bridge whatever distance separates them.

A jazz band (like a string quartet) is a singularly independent and interdependent group of individuals. When a performance by my New Orleans-based band falls short, we blame ourselves, not the conductor, management, or board, since we have none of these. Least of all can we blame the music or the audience, for we know that we have the power to shape both. As a jazz ensemble, we rise or fall on the basis of our teamwork.

The nine New Orleans musicians who make up the Louisiana Repertory Jazz Ensemble have been fortunate to perform with many splendid orchestras from coast to coast. We are expert at discerning when a group of musicians is "cooking" and have been thrilled to discover how many of our orchestras can do just that. As a result, my jazz musician colleagues have become some of the most ardent fans of America's symphony orchestras. On the basis of their experience in

scores of concerts, they know for sure that most American orchestras can truly “cook” if the impediments are removed. The biggest impediments that we have observed are mainly in the areas of teamwork. Link the parts of an orchestral organism more closely, and it will “cook” to the audience’s (and players’) delight.

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