

Harmony

FORUM OF THE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA INSTITUTE
NUMBER 16 • OCTOBER 2003

Orchestra and Community: Another Look

by

Markand Thakar

Symphony Orchestra Institute

P.O. Box 8619

Northfield, IL 60093

Tel: 847.441.5037

e-mail: information@soi.org

Website: www.soi.org

Orchestra and Community: Another Look

In the article “Orchestra and Community: Bridging the Gap,” published in the October 2002 issue of *Harmony*, Penelope McPhee describes some of the expectations and disappointments experienced in carrying out the Knight Foundation’s Magic of Music initiative for symphony orchestras. Ms. McPhee is vice president and chief program officer of the foundation; the initiative in which she is involved is designed to strengthen, broaden, and deepen the relationship of orchestras to the community; and the article was excerpted from her address to the group’s 2002 annual retreat. I suggest that the reluctance of orchestras to institute the called-for fundamental changes should not be completely surprising, and that there might be more effective ways of accomplishing these vital goals.

The Knight Foundation’s View

The initiative was the result of the Knight Foundation’s view that a problematic gap exists between orchestras and their communities, and that orchestras must undergo some kind of fundamental change to be able to bridge that gap. According to “Orchestra and Community,” the Knight Foundation considers that a community, to be whole and healthy, must have live classical music, because it can bring joy and spiritual renewal to human beings everywhere. The foundation’s research indicates that sixty percent of adults express at least some interest in classical music, and nearly one-third of adults fit classical music into their lives regularly, in their autos and at home, but fewer than five percent are regular patrons of their local orchestras.

“The foundation concludes that this gap exists because orchestras are not relevant to the community as a whole, in that their appeal is primarily to the richest, Whitest three or four percent.”

The foundation concludes that this gap exists because orchestras are not relevant to the community as a whole, in that their appeal is primarily to the richest, Whitest three or four percent. To achieve relevancy, orchestras must stop confusing the content with the delivery system. (I understand this to mean we must stop believing that we are acting as a symphony orchestra only if

we are playing the orchestral canon at formal concerts in a concert hall.) If orchestras are to be the link that brings the art form to the community, we must listen to the audience, which is asking us for fundamental changes in the pieces we play, or the kinds of pieces, or how we sit, or where we play, or what time we play, or who plays.

The Knight Foundation has been surprised by the degree of reluctance on the part of orchestras to make such fundamental changes, especially in light of their deteriorating prospects. The reluctance is ascribed in large part to a mistaken belief on the part of orchestras that such changes would negatively affect quality. Two other significant causes for reluctance to change are intractable unions and absentee music directors who are not committed to change.

The Knight Foundation's goal of increasing the size and diversity of our audiences is the goal of everyone remotely connected with the orchestra business. The foundation's willingness to put a substantial amount of money into the initiative is profoundly heartening and inspiring. The disappointing results are due, I believe, to some mistaken assumptions and unsupported conclusions, as well as to one significant misunderstanding.

Three elements of the reasoning presented in "Orchestra and Community" might benefit from further examination:

- ◆ the nature and degree of the problematic gap,
- ◆ the notion of relevance, and
- ◆ the necessity of fundamental change.

Is the Gap Problematic?

The foundation begins by taking as problematic the gap between the thirty percent who use classical music as background filler at least occasionally and the three or four percent who actually attend our concerts. It seems evident that there will always be a gap between the larger number of people tangentially involved at a low cost/reward level and the smaller number who invest time and money for a greater reward. This is true of just about any pursuit. At what degree is the gap problematic for a symphony orchestra?

Or is the problematic gap that between the four percent of attendees and the one-hundred percent of the population? An orchestra heard live annually by four percent of the people within its drawing area probably plays to substantial masterworks audiences, performs for thousands of schoolchildren, plays different styles of popular music for different audience groups, provides musicians for churches and weddings and other functions throughout the community, provides school and private music teachers, adds perhaps millions of dollars to the local economy, and balances its budget. The Duluth Superior Symphony Orchestra (DSSO), of which I am music director, is such an orchestra. Are we failing? Do we not resonate sufficiently within

our community? What percentage of the community must we touch with live performances before we can consider ourselves successful? Is ten percent an acceptable level? Must we reach twenty percent? Fifty percent? One hundred percent? Since four percent may be close to the upward limit reached by any orchestra, anywhere, ever, does that mean that no orchestra has ever been successful?

I don't know what the answer is, but before we commit to fundamentally changing the nature of our operations, we need to understand that we are in fact failing, and we need to know how to define success.

Relevance

The Knight Foundation ascribes the gap to a lack of relevance, and exhorts us to listen to our audiences and play what they want us to play, not what we want them to hear. The word relevance is not defined in "Orchestra and Community," but in terms of repertoire, I take it to mean music that in some way speaks more directly to the real-life experiences of the members of our community.

"If we listen to our audiences and play what they want to hear, we would be playing a lot more Beethoven and Tchaikovsky, and a lot less new and American music."

The best-selling concert of the DSSO during the 2002-2003 season was an all-Beethoven program, followed closely by a Kabalevsky, Stravinsky, Tchaikovsky program, and by a Bartok, Kodaly, Dvorak program. Our worst-selling program was an American program including Copland's *Billy the Kid* and music by Bernstein, Ellington, and Rouse. This experience is surely not surprising to anyone in the industry. If we listen to our audiences and play what they want to hear, we would be playing a lot more Beethoven and Tchaikovsky, and a lot less new and American music. But we are committed to playing new and American music, and we promote it heavily and make it a focal point of our educational offerings. We do it proudly; we do it because we think it is good for our audiences; and we consider it an important obligation to expand their musical horizons. Is this bad?

By any standard of cultural relevance, we would have to assume that the American program would speak more directly to the real-life experiences of a 21st-century audience in our drawing area of Minnesota and Wisconsin. And yet the audience does not expect to gain as much from this more "relevant" music as it does from the European and Russian masterworks. Perhaps this kind of cultural relevance is not the long-term solution.

Fundamental Change

Why do orchestras resist considering fundamental changes in the conventional processes? Perhaps we do so primarily because these conventions have evolved over the years for valid reasons. Contrary to the Knight Foundation's

understanding, changing the product or how it is delivered may in fact threaten the quality of our product.

Music can affect us on many levels. A driving beat surely moves us on an elemental level (which explains to some degree the popularity of marching bands, and in fact most genres of popular music). On the highest level, music can provide no less than spiritual exaltation. This is the ultimate role of classical music, the small segment of the large field of all musics that we have taken as our province. Our patrons invest upwards of three hours and the not insignificant cost of a concert ticket in the hopes that the sounds they absorb will lead them to a celestial, magical experience.

For this kind of spiritual exaltation to occur, the composition must allow it, the performance must allow it, and the listener must be open to it. The quality of the experience will be limited by a shortfall in any of the three components: a less-than-profound composition, a less-than-sublime performance, or a listener not fully open to the sounds.

Audiences clamor for the great masterworks because they can provide more exalted experiences; for the same reason, audiences are more attracted to performances led by the more profound conductor; and listeners can most fully absorb the sounds sitting in comfortable chairs in a darkened hall with the orchestra situated in an acoustically advantaged location.

To perform less-than-profound compositions in settings that are less conducive to the listeners' complete focus on the sounds is to limit the quality of the experience. Since the principal reason people pay to attend our concerts is to be exalted, to limit the quality of the experience is to limit the potential benefit of attending a concert. Ultimately, if we limit the quality of the experience, we will only diminish our customer base.

No doubt it is possible—by playing nontraditional repertoire in nontraditional venues—to touch some people whom we would not otherwise reach at all. And their experiences might be extremely good, even though it might not be the best we have to offer. Clearly, such opportunities should be pursued vigorously. But orchestras may not be wrong to be wary of embracing any fundamental change that would limit the value of their core offerings.

“Since the principal reason people pay to attend our concerts is to be exalted, to limit the quality of the experience is to limit the potential benefit of attending a concert.”

What Can We Do?

Rather than limiting the benefit, the answer to reaching a broader audience lies in convincing more people that the upside balances or outweighs the downside. The three ways to do that are: to actually increase the upside, to do

a better job of convincing people (marketing), and to reduce the downside.

In Duluth we have done all three. When I became music director of the DSSO in July 2001, the orchestra had experienced a gradual slide in audiences, from an average concert attendance of some 1,800 in recent years to fewer than 1,400 in 2000–2001. In 2002–2003, we averaged approximately 1,950 in attendance at our masterworks concerts. Due to the increased audience, and the resultant increases in earned and unearned income, a season that began with a projected three-and-one-half-percent deficit ended with an operating surplus and included a retroactive raise for the musicians despite cuts in foundation and state grants.

The best way to raise the expected benefits of attending a concert is to actually increase them. The orchestra has been improving from concert to concert; that we are playing—according to our listeners—at a historically high level and are attracting historically high numbers of listeners is not a coincidence.

The next best way is to do a better job of promoting ourselves. Our executive director, Andrew Berryhill, and his team have worked extremely hard and extremely effectively, and we have been able to take advantage of abundant opportunities to create visibility throughout the region. We realize, though, that marketing is a far less effective means of long-term audience building than quality improvement, because the best marketing efforts can only get people in the hall once; whether they return and with what frequency depends on the quality of the experience they have.

Our efforts to reduce the downside include a discount for first-time subscribers, as well as attempts to improve parking and transportation issues. With growing word-of-mouth about the quality of the orchestra, augmented by an effective marketing/public relations campaign, the DSSO welcomed 730 new subscribers in 2002–2003. Our 2003–2004 season is under way, with yet another substantial increase in our overall subscriber base and the largest opening-night audience in years.

The larger, near-capacity audiences to which we now play are energizing to those of us on stage. They increase the excitement in the hall; they raise our program-book advertising rates; and they heighten our standing in the community. We have not accomplished this with any fundamental changes. We simply are doing what we do better.

We are pleased, but far from satisfied. We would like to reach still more people, and we are investing energy to attract a more diverse audience.

“The orchestra has been improving from concert to concert; that we are playing—according to our listeners—at a historically high level and are attracting historically high numbers of listeners is not a coincidence.”

Toward that end, we have initiated a family concert series, a contest for young composers, and a symphony class for seniors. We have given annual readings of Handel's *Messiah* at a local prison; we are collaborating with theater groups, choruses, writers, and artists, church groups, local charities, and even with a community group to honor lynching victims. These are positive steps that will help increase and diversify our audience to some degree, but probably not as much as we would like.

How Outside Funders Can Help

Change of some kind is clearly necessary for us to consistently attract all segments of our communities. One way, as the Knight Foundation's symphony initiative has done, is to try to change the orchestra. That has not proved altogether successful, and may never. The other way is to help us change the audiences.

For the same reasons that our current audience members come to our concerts, those of any age, economic standing, and ethnic background will attend if they believe the benefit is worth the investment. With people who have never included music in their lives, the challenge is great. That challenge is to open minds to the possibilities available from music, and to reduce any discomfort or unfamiliarity.

Money could be used to great advantage in opening minds toward the benefits of classical music. For example, money might be spent profitably on advertising to increase the demand for classical music, much as the "Got Milk" campaign did for the dairy industry. Or it might be used to bolster support for school music programs, or to provide instruments and private lessons to disadvantaged young people on a broad scale, or to fund instrumental education programs at economically disadvantaged schools.

Money could also be used to decrease the downside of attending. Funding to give blocks of tickets to admired community figures for distribution to students would bring younger people to the hall and would replace a "nerd" factor with a "cool" factor. Funding to bring the symphony to the neighborhoods—real symphonic concerts with the "A-list" conductors and soloists—and funding to figure out how to get those attendees to the hall consistently might also make a difference over time.

We all appreciate the enormity of the task; we all appreciate the extraordinary contribution of the Knight Foundation; and we all look forward to continued discourse as we work together toward our shared goal of strengthening, broadening, and deepening our reach into the community.

Markand Thakar is music director of the Duluth Superior Symphony Orchestra. He is also co-director of the graduate conducting program at the Peabody Conservatory of the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.