

THE SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY PRESENTS

AMERICAN ORCHESTRA FORUM

TALKING ABOUT CREATIVITY

Keynote Conversation Transcript

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Brent Assink, Executive Director
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[Start of recorded material]

00:01:03 Brent Assink: Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to Davies Symphony Hall, and to the second American Orchestra Forum event, talking about creativity. I'm Brent Assink, executive director of the San Francisco Symphony, and I don't think the gentleman on my right needs any introduction, but I'll do so anyway, Michael Tilson Thomas. Let me tee this up a little bit this afternoon, both in terms of content and process, and then we'll get into our conversation with Michael. First, again, welcome.

00:01:32 This series of discussions with the American Orchestra Forum project is really to talk about how orchestras and the arts play a role in our lives today, and how they will in the future. And so today, we're going to talk about how orchestras are creative. And that's not only about how musicians, music directors, and so forth, and composers are creative, but how our organizations can and should be creative.

00:01:58 Our institutions, of course, and we use that word advisedly, our institutions are centuries old, and how do our organizations interact and respond to these changing technologies that we find around us, and still present symphonic music at the highest possible standard? How are music directors, composers, and others thinking about these very interesting questions? So over the next three hours, courtesy of incredibly brilliant minds, you will have an opportunity to think through these questions, and discuss them with each other and with the panelists.

- 00:02:35 A few things, just to tee up the afternoon for you. We'll have two spotlight conversations, intended to give you some in-depth thinking from small groupings of our speakers. Then, we'll have a break around three o'clock or so, and then come back with a roundtable discussion with all the spotlight speakers, so that they have a chance to respond to each other as well as to your questions. All of today's proceedings are being live-streamed on the Web, thanks to our partners at San Francisco Classical Voice.
- 00:03:02 We're also recording everything, and full videos will be available in the coming days on our project website at symphonyforum.org. This website is also home to ongoing blogging on these topics, and we invite you to share your comments on the site. And we're also producing podcasts from these conversations, and you can find those on the site as well. And if you're using Twitter, you can follow today's conversation through American Orchestra Forum Twitter feed, which is [@amorchforum](https://twitter.com/amorchforum).
- 00:03:36 I think I got that right. Or use the hashtag [#amorchforum](https://twitter.com/amorchforum). You are welcome to use your handheld devices today to participate. In consideration of our panelists and our recording, we do ask that you please silence them. Since this is not a concert, you should feel free to come and go as you wish. There are refreshments in the lobby, and restrooms on the lower level.
- 00:03:57 And of course, no event here would be complete without acknowledging a sponsor, and we are very delighted to

acknowledge the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, who is making today's forum, and indeed, all of the forum discussions, possible. And now, it is my great pleasure to sit in this chair and engage our music director in conversation. Again, thank you so much for being here.

00:04:25 So Michael, we have 30 minutes to distill down the big question about creativity into bite-sized chunks. You are known for many things, but I would say creativity is probably one of the chief adjectives that probably comes to people's mind as they think about who Michael Tilson Thomas is, both as a music director and founder of the New World Symphony in Miami Beach, and certainly as music director of the San Francisco Symphony.

00:04:54 So when you think about creativity, which I know probably comes so naturally you probably don't think about it too much in that way, what comes to mind? How do you start dealing with the issue of creativity, either as a composer, or a leader of this orchestra, or the New World Symphony?

00:05:21 Michael Tilson Thomas: You're correct, I don't spend a lot of time thinking about creativity. I'm too busy doing what I have to do. But I suppose the underlying view of this would be that I was raised to feel I've grown up and lived a life which it's become clearer to me that, as far as the arts are concerned, that there is absolute connection between all of the arts.

- 00:05:45 And for me, what happens in music, in drama, in ceramics, in textiles, in painting, in poetry, all this is one testimony being expressed in different forms, different media. And I'm interested in all these areas.
- 00:06:06 The process of getting to know things about people through the creative work that they do is fascinating, because as I also think about the arts as being a kind of dialogue between instinct and intelligence, between faith and reason, between the head and the heart, whatever, there are different mixtures of this, different combinations of this in all the different works that are done, in the case of music by different composers, but also from different eras in time.
- 00:06:41 There's an enormous amount to be learned about what it means to be human, and profit from the richness of that in the growing of our souls. This is what I believe. Then, as far as working with lots of people to try and get the most out of their creativity, and get this all to come together, there is still a sort of, I'm not saying this in the religious sense, there is a kind of congregational aspect of our experience of the arts, whether that's people coming to concerts, or to operas, or going to museums.
- 00:07:18 It's been fascinating, isn't it, to watch how the institution of the cathedral-like museum has become a very major phenomenon of the second half of the 20th century. But this experience, people wanting to be together somehow to experience this wonderful art

together, and how different creative forces in the creation of those buildings, and the creation of the programs that go into those buildings, in trying to make sure that those who participate in those programs are encouraged to bring their particular spin, and savor of life, into the process is kind of what it's all about.

00:08:00 Brent Assink: So let's distill this down a little bit into some specific experiences in your life, perhaps most recently the opening of the New World Symphony Center. In the construction of that building and design of it, you had a chance to really reimagine, to a certain degree, what America's orchestras could be like, and could be doing. Could you talk a little bit about what your dreams and aspirations were as you thought about, essentially, a blank slate?

00:08:32 Michael Tilson Thomas: Certainly. At the core of the New World Symphony experience was my concern about the well-being of young musicians. It all started scores of years, at this point, ago, one summer in Tanglewood, when I gave a little party for musicians at the end, musicians in the fellowship program. And in talking with these incredible young artists, I was asking them what they were going to do the next year.

00:09:03 And so many of them had no idea what they were going to do. It was kind of, well, I could go back to grad school, or I could [duck at] a part-time job, or I maybe have a connection to be a freelancer someplace. I realized how iffy that whole thing was for them, and began to imagine that there could be a place that could be used by

young musicians as a kind of launching pad for their careers, where they could really still very much focus on the side of all of our training which is the kind of, what they didn't teach you in Harvard Business School, except for music.

00:09:37

There's a lot to be learned there. And that's what caused the New World Symphony to come into existence. It was really that desire. But then also was the desire that, with these young musicians, that they could be encouraged to take steps to explore new relationships between them and the audience, which then could involve becoming much more comfortable with the use of media, various aspects of new media.

00:10:04

And remember, the whole dot-com world really came into existence after all of this. There were computers, of course, but this whole culture that has evolved online developed after that time. And then, the idea of creating a building in which relationships between musicians and small groups of people, large groups of people, people at great distance putting the music on this vast screen outside so people could sit outside in the park and hear the music, and they could hear that for free.

00:10:44

They could also participate by joining via their cell phones, and becoming part of a kind of community of commentary on the music. And many of those people wind up coming to more of the events that happen inside the building, as well. So all these things worked together.

- Brent Assink: So it was an opportunity for a new experience for the musicians, as well as for the audiences. A completely new form of interaction, actually.
- 00:11:11 Michael Tilson Thomas: Yes, and as it's evolving, it's more and more about our putting together some program which is meant to do something, but then actually as the young musicians get involved in doing it, they are envisioning other ways that it might take off into realms we haven't really thought about. That's what I want very much to encourage. I'm so interested in trying to give young people a sense of mission about this, and at the same time a sense of context about it.
- 00:11:46 Somebody my age, at this point, maybe the most valuable thing I have to contribute is context, because I've lived through a lot of stuff. And because of the nature of the kind of family I came from, I have a lot of connections that go back hundreds of years. It's clear to me what it meant to be a 12th-century person, as opposed to a 15th-century person, and trying to put the arts that come from all these areas in the context of the lives of the people who lived them is what I want to do.
- 00:12:20 And then, I want people to grab hold of some of this, and spin it out in ways I can't imagine.

Brent Assink: Well, for those of us who live in the orchestra world, one thing that excites us so much about your work at New World is that we are the beneficiaries, and these other orchestras, of these grand experiments and experiences that these young musicians are having. So you're essentially infecting the orchestra world through this grand experiment that you're embarking on at the New World Symphony.

00:12:51 Michael Tilson Thomas: I'm not sure "infecting" is the word I would have thought of. Injecting, perhaps.

Brent Assink: Injecting, that's right. So how does this question of creativity, then, inform your own work here on this stage?

00:13:09 Michael Tilson Thomas: Oh, constantly. I mean, it's hard to be in an orchestra, because there's an enormous amount of music to be played, and it comes by relentlessly. Every week, some other huge new program. And what the musicians have to do is cope with enormous difficulties of just learning and playing every note, and tuning every note, and making sure that all these things work.

00:13:36 So there's a very powerful whole group dynamics, it used to be called, aspect of that. I try to work with the orchestra somewhere between the way a director would work with a great group of actors, the way a coach would work with a team. A coach may point out to the team that there could be some aspect of the way this is accomplished that could be done with more finesse, with less energy, to greater effect.

00:14:07 Or a director will talk with an actor about what the speech is about, and where, perhaps, there is a turning point in the speech, a key moment where emotionally something may move from one thing to another. But what I think a good director does not do, a good director does not say to an actor, say the first three words slowly and loudly, then say the next two a little faster, then the next five sort of whatever.

00:14:41 Because the whole point of it is that the actor must become the character believably, in the same way that the musicians in the orchestra must be able to play this music, of whatever composer, of whatever repertoire, in a way that is believable, that you understand what the message of the composer is, but at the same time, that you understand the ardency that is coming from the life experience of those live musicians who actually are alive, and who are recognizing, in these pieces, their own lives, and vice versa, and therefore able to make it comprehensible and meaningful through the generosity of their spirits and what they share with the audience.

00:15:24 And so my job is to try, in whatever ways, to make that happen. Just one topic leads to another. I couldn't live my life without poetry. I could not live my life without Walt Whitman. And Walt Whitman, something I think about all the time in his big poem about human endeavor called "Song Of The Broad Axe," he says, "muscle and pluck forever, for what invigorates life, invigorates death.

00:16:00 And the dead advance the same as the living advance, and nothing endures but personal qualities." And to me, that is all about the idea that it's the work that's done, sure. But it's the spirit in which the work is done. And that is a continuity that goes through all the work that animates, it, and creates the feeling in a particular place. You walk into an ensemble, and you right away sense what the mood is, what the attitude is that's there.

00:16:30 That's a lot to do with the people who are there, of course. But it also has a lot to do with people perhaps who are no longer there, but whose influence, and whose sense of nurture and care has illuminated what we now take for granted.

Brent Assink: So as it relates, then, to your work with the individual musicians of the orchestra, you've had a relationship now with this orchestra for a number of years. Certainly from, I think, my perspective, and many people's perspective, this sense of the director analogy that you use is coming through increasingly.

00:17:05 It is not necessarily a comfortable place for orchestral musicians to be, though, is it?

00:17:11 Michael Tilson Thomas: No, not entirely. There are very august ensembles who want to basically stay within the guidelines. They don't want to be told something like, just go off in a kind of free, mournful direction, and you lead, and I'll catch up to you five bars

from now, and we can move it around maybe to the viola section next, or that kind of thing.

00:17:40 They want [unintelligible] what exactly are we doing, and what am I supposed to do, and give me the limits within which I should do this. And a lot of conductors do work by kind of setting limits. But I guess what I try to do is get people to go beyond the limits. And that partially suggests that you can't really know how far is too far unless you do go too far.

00:18:11 It's funny. Especially with music, because music is such a technical thing, and the way we learn it is so involved with, are we getting it right or not, for decades of our training, starting when we're very young. So it's fascinating. When I go to a school where they're teaching musical arts and dramatic arts, if I'm talking to people who are in the theater program, the slightest little thing I can say to them, I say, okay, could you do the line again, but do it sort of country-western Japanese with a stammer, and you're getting an attack of poison ivy, or something.

00:18:47 You know, whatever. And right away, bang, they'll just produce this outrageous characterization I've asked for. But if I say to young musicians, really make this as wild and violent as possible. And they'll kind of go, okay. And I try to encourage them, say go too far, go way too far. Because it's just faster. Take it out as far as it can go. That's almost too far.

00:19:17 Okay, bring it a little back from there, as opposed to incrementally.

Brent Assink: Interesting.

Michael Tilson Thomas: I feel the same way with acousticians, when we go on the process of trying to worry about fine-tuning acoustics. And I'll say something to one of these acoustics guys. And they say, okay, well, we could take that panel away. Let's move it from here to there. And I want a joystick on this thing. Open it up and find out what it will do.

00:19:47 But they won't.

Brent Assink: And that's what we'll put on the podium from here. Do you feel that, presumably, over the heads of the musicians that you're having this conversation with, you've kind of seen the collective light bulbs go off. Do you feel that same experience coming back from the audience? Can you tell when the audience is getting this?

Michael Tilson Thomas: Yes.

Brent Assink: You can.

00:20:13 Michael Tilson Thomas: Yes. I mean, interestingly, we have on this program this week, after the intermission of tonight's concert, there's a piece by Morton Feldman. For those of you who may not know his music, this is extremely quiet music. Very, very pale

pastel shiftings of colors and occasional gesture here or there. And the music is meant to be played as quietly as possible, with no discernable sense of rhythm. It's much like the painting of color field painters, something like that.

00:20:46 And it's fascinating to feel the audience accept that, be in it. And it's different. The first night we did the show, it was like from the first moment, the audience was absolutely inside of the piece. And last night, it was sort of a little kind of restive for a bit, and then I would say two or three minutes into it, I could suddenly feel that the audience was understanding how to listen to it, and appreciating it.

00:21:29 Brent Assink: So this brings me to my next point, which is relating our discussion today with the concerts of last week and this week, and what will be going on tour. It's no accident that we're talking about creativity and innovation during the American Maverick's Festival. So could so could you describe for us a little bit about your thinking in terms of constructing these programs, first of all, and secondly, about how you work with composers? You have such a, I won't say long tradition.

00:21:58 You have a tradition of working with many, many different composers, and you are one yourself. So first of all, how did you decide how to distill down the total availability of the repertoire down into these programs, and then, describe a little bit how you are working with Mason Bates, John Adams, and how you've worked with Morton Feldman in the past.

00:22:20 Michael Tilson Thomas: Wanted to bring, for our hundredth anniversary of the orchestra, wanted to bring back some events that related to the first Maverick's Festival, which was a very important event early in my music directorship. And then, we also took the decision to share this with the rest of the country. And that was a wonderful thing to do, and at the same time it predetermined some of the things we would be able to do, because here, we're able to really stretch things out very far.

00:22:53 The minute you're talking about moving this to a number of other venues across the country, that's much more complicated. You have to consider what is doable in those places. So certainly, we wanted to have some pieces that showed the incredible virtuosity and understanding that the San Francisco Symphony members have of this kind of music, Ruggles, and Ives, and Adams, and composers like Feldman and Cage and all.

00:23:22 We've tackled all of this, not only in my work as music director, but in the work of previous music directors, and the New and Unusual music series that goes back to the early days of John Adams' residency in California. So that's all I [unintelligible] to do. And there's also quite a good deal of chamber music, and music for kind of alternative ensembles that's part of this, and there are commissions. It's really trying to say, well, there is a kind of maverick tradition, but it's not something that just existed in the past.

- 00:23:53 It is a certain attitude about music which is ongoing, and which is challenging, because part of it is kind of saying that there is a world of music which is beyond what symphony orchestras do. So for us, as a symphony orchestra, to take that under consideration, that we are doing big orchestra pieces, we are commissioning and creating new orchestra pieces, but we're also representing and looking at, as a community of musicians, what other kinds of things can we undertake?
- 00:24:24 And as far as working with composers, well, I've know them my whole life. I started with Yiddish song composers who were hanging around my grandparents' world. And then, suddenly it kind of went from that to Stravinsky and Copland [unintelligible] how that happened. But it's really literally true. And then, from those masters, I began working with lots of young composers.
- 00:24:55 John Adams and I go way back, but also a lot of these composers, Cage, Feldman, Ruggles, many of these people I knew personally. And that's an interesting thing, because no matter how precise the notation that a composer may use, actually hearing things sung to you in the composer's voice tells you a lot of things about the gesture, the meaning of the music.
- 00:25:20 In Copland's Piano Variations, for example, which I played for him backstage at the Hollywood Bowl when I was 18, or something, the first time I met him. And there was this one passage which has

something, sixteenth note, thirty-second note, upbeat to something that kind of goes da-da-dum, da-da-dum, da-da-dum. And I was playing that.

00:25:49 He said, no my boy, it should be something like this.
[unintelligible]. Well, how do you notate that?

Brent Assink: It comes across in the performance, though. Absolutely. Never be able to hear that music the same way again. So it seems to me that, with all of the available repertoire with the American Mavericks, somehow you've manage to group this repertoire together in a way that makes some thematic sense.

00:26:25 You've talked about how these composers kind of thumb their noses at convention, or approach it with great humor. There is a consistent humor in some of these programs. Could you talk a little bit about, again, building this?

00:26:44 Michael Tilson Thomas: Yes. I don't think there's a huge amount of humor in Ruggles' Sun-treader, for example. There's kind of everything. I mean, of course Ives is the ultimate example of this. The thing that's so extraordinary to me about Ives is, of course, the great profundity of his work, which all these years later has such a powerful effect on me.

00:27:11 In fact, a common thread, I suppose, of all this music is that, having lived with it myself for forty-something years, or perhaps more, that

this music still has so much to say for me. I learn so much in it. I look back into it, and I keep seeing deeper and deeper things, in the same way that I do in Beethoven, or whoever.

00:27:41 And Ives just represented so many things. He was capable of writing very, very sentimental music, and very contrary, aggressive music. But it was all part of a bigger worldview that music can exist beyond the concept of it being pretty. There's a lot more to it than just being pretty.

00:28:10 Brent Assink: Now, you've also taken some works of the, for lack of a better word, standard repertoire, and presented them in creative and innovated ways. The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, from a few months ago. What are your thoughts behind doing that?

00:28:31 Michael Tilson Thomas: Well, I really believe in the future all these arts are going to be much more melded together. And things that we think of as kind of experimental now will become much more the nature of things. And I joke with some of my colleagues in the more traditional side of the classical music business, and I say that their thoughts about video, or their thoughts about the Internet, reminds me a little bit of Francis X. Bushman's attitude toward the arrival of talking pictures, which is, oh, it's just a novelty.

00:29:15 Remember Francis X. Bushman? How many people here remember Francis X. Bushman? Thank you, ma'am. Me too. He played opposite Ramon Navarro in the first version of Ben-Hur. He

was a classic villain. Got very silvery hair. He was kind of Cesar Romero before Cesar Romero, was kind of who he was.

00:29:45 How did I get off on this? But yeah, I just think all these things will be used much more. So of course it's exciting to imagine the use of these new media with new pieces by new composers, but there may also be illuminating ways in which these can be used for earlier pieces.

00:30:03 Certainly, we are trying in New World Symphony now to regularly use videos that tell you things about the music, as opposed to reading those in a program book, that we may produce a little feature which tells you about the music, which, if there are folk songs quoted, or whatnot, you actually get to hear those songs, and you actually get to see some things from where the music was written.

00:30:31 In the case of one thing we're doing next year concerning Beethoven's Missa Solemnis, a piece which I really love very much, and I think is a serious challenge for the perception of listeners, because it is so hugely complexly written, it's kind of all written over itself.

00:30:48 So I've been trying to imagine a way in which a kind of installation which concerns where the musicians actually themselves are, how it is lit, how video itself might be used in a way that mirrors the intricacies of the text to allow these sort of levels of musical

thought and organization to be perceived more clearly by the audience.

00:31:14 It also may be that in the case of some contemporary music, of a composer like Webern, for example, whose agenda closely resembles, in some ways, an artist like Mondrian, that there might be ways of allowing the intricate structures of the music to be seen in visual terms, which would allow people to more greatly appreciate it.

00:31:37 Because that's the thing that fascinates me, that a composer like Webern or whoever, that people will line up around the block, in fact, to go to an art show concerning Kandinsky or Mondrian or someone like that, but they will kind of exit the concert hall if they have to hear music which is inspired by exactly the same ideas, and music by composers who were friendly with these very same artists, who felt they were on this.

00:32:05 But it's harder to grasp these ideas in the flow of time, unless you're very used to doing that.

Brent Assink: One last question. Could you speak a little bit about the future of the orchestras, as we continue to confront this question of creativity and innovation? Why does it matter? Why should we, as orchestral institutions, be thinking about these kinds of questions?

- 00:32:37 Michael Tilson Thomas: Because we are the chief partisans of a very great tradition. As I'm always saying, classical music is not just a question of Mozart or Tchaikovsky. It's a way of thinking about the way sound can be used, the way music can be used, that goes back 1200 years. And what classical music does is to abstract, to distill, the moves of all sorts of primal music of peoples, whether that's hunting songs, or religious songs, or courtship songs, or these whole genres, folk music, religious music.
- 00:33:15 And all this is both preserved by classical music, but also it's moves are condensed and abstracted, and made into a larger kind of observation of life itself. It's such a valuable thing. It goes back to what I said at the beginning. It's this kind of testimony of what it has meant to be human, and how much we as contemporary humans can learn from that.
- 00:33:42 So even from a composer like Beethoven and the Eroica, it's great to know how the Eroica goes, but it's even more amazing to discover that the Eroica has one breathtakingly original message, which is just to observe that things happen to us. We start out in a certain place.
- 00:34:11 Things happen to us. We get through those things, but we are never again going to be who we were before that happened. We may come back again to our sense of self, but all these occurrences, these moments of pain and turmoil, have had their effect, and that to some extent have had a deepening and enriching effect, a

strengthening effect, in our idea of ourselves and our own particular experience and purpose in life.

00:34:49 Brent Assink: And that is a terrific summation. For those of us who know, and love, and admire your Eroica, that has certainly come through, in that work and in countless other works. So thank you for being with us today.

Michael Tilson Thomas: Thank you. [unintelligible]

Brent Assink: Thank you so very much for, again, being here, and he has a concert to conduct tonight.

Michael Tilson Thomas: That's right.

Brent Assink: And we are now going to move on into our next panel. So again, thank you.

Michael Tilson Thomas: Thank you.

[End of recorded material]