



**AMERICAN ORCHESTRA FORUM PODCASTS:  
TALKING ABOUT ORCHESTRAS**

**Chapter Eight: Considering Audiences, Part 1**

**Transcript**

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Music: *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* by John Adams, recorded by the San Francisco Symphony,  
Michael Tilson Thomas conducting. Recording available on SFS Media.  
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## **CHAPTER 8: CONSIDERING AUDIENCES, PART 1**

Welcome to this podcast of the American Orchestra Forum, a program of the San Francisco Symphony. In celebration of the Symphony's centennial, six leading American orchestras – from Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, New York and Philadelphia – visited San Francisco during the 2011-2012 season.

In conjunction with these concerts, the American Orchestra Forum presented a series of wide-ranging conversations about the state of the orchestra, an institution with roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, now adapting to life in the fast-changing 21<sup>st</sup>. Musicians, scholars, composers, executives, critics and technologists gathered throughout the year to discuss three key topics: Community, Creativity, and Audiences. Each chapter in this podcast series presents highlights from public and behind-the-scenes conversations by these experts, and explores the themes that emerge.

I'm Steven Winn, American Orchestra Forum moderator, and your podcast host.

For decades nobody thought very much about them. The audience was who showed up to fill the concert hall, in a largely predictable and reliable way. An orchestra scheduled and performed its subscription concerts, and the patrons came to hear them – a straightforward cause-and-effect relationship. Like many relationships in our times, this one has changed, grown more volatile, and become anything but straightforward. No one, it's safe to say, is taking the audience for granted now.

Today's concertgoers, we keep hearing, are aging and their numbers dwindling. Some audience members feel the programs are alien – or all too familiar. Others aren't sure how to behave, or can't abide their neighbors' concert manners. They crave – or resist – new technologies that are already affecting the live musical experience and may transform it dramatically in the years to come. Audiences want to be more involved and connected. And some of them want to be left alone to enjoy the music as they always have.

But how much do we really know about this essential, complex and sometimes paradoxical interaction between orchestral music and the public? In this chapter, we examine the dilemmas and hard questions that orchestras and audiences are confronting.

We begin with some sobering numbers from Sunil Iyengar, director of research at the National Endowment for the Arts. According to the NEA's most recent survey, 26 per cent of Americans say they like to listen to classical music. A smaller number, 18 percent, view and listen to classical broadcasts. Iyengar continues:

*And when you get down to actually attending a classical music performance -- this could be choral work, symphony, what have you, chamber music -- it's close to 9 percent. Now taking the 9 percent, what we see is that that's actually a substantial reduction from what the general participation rates had been in the past. It was close to 13 percent in 1982; it's down to 9 percent in 2008, which is the most recent period we conducted the survey.*

Parsed for age groups, the NEA statistics yield even more surprising evidence about the longtime stronghold of the classical music audience.

*While it's true that 18 to 24 year olds have seen the sharpest decline from 1982 to 2008, really in the last time we did the survey the sharpest decline from 2002 -- which is the last period -- to 2008 was experienced among those 45 through 64. And so there was something that happened in 2008, particularly where a lot of the people in the baby boomer generation essentially seemed to be going much less to live classical music performance than in any previous years. There is still a learning curve for all of us to understand that, but that said it does look like we are at a point when some of the traditional audiences are maybe not going -- I would venture to say not going as much. And it may be above and beyond the time of life issue perhaps. I mean the other question, of course, is has people's leisure time genuinely contracted over time?*

Orchestra managers like Brent Assink, executive director of the San Francisco Symphony, have seen the pattern emerge close-up in their own concert halls.

*We've taken it as an article of faith over the years in the orchestra management biz, that if somebody experiences an orchestral concert at some point in their life prior to the age of fourteen or so, or better yet, they've played a musical instrument, that they are then going to disappear from us for say a few decades. But, when they reach that age when suddenly the house is empty, and they are looking at their partner, spouse, and they are saying, what are we going to do tonight, that the symphony starts to achieve some relevance, some re-connectivity back to their lives. That's been received wisdom for many, many years. So when they don't come back at the age of forty-five to sixty-four, whatever it is, that's when we really get nervous. Or, if they do come back, but they don't come back as often. We used to have them come back twelve times a year, or twenty four times a year, and now maybe they are coming back six times, or four times, or three times. So, to fill this wonderful hall, we have to find more people like them, or different*

*types of people, to fill all of these seats.*

Assink's colleague Matthew van Besien, the 42-year-old executive director designate of the New York Philharmonic, suggests that what he calls the concert "delivery system" may require some fundamental rethinking, especially for somewhat younger audiences.

*When I think about my own peers, they love great music, they love coming and hearing the orchestra. But they don't necessarily like the way in which we deliver it over the course of two and a half hours with a 20-minute break, starting at 8 p.m. So it's the live delivery experience, but also for the people who are raising children and have busy lives, are there ways that we can deliver what we do to them in some way to keep that connection over those years, which will better ensure they do come back to us at the appropriate time.*

Brent Assink:

*I think you are right about the delivery mechanism, that we need to experiment more about how this great music is delivered to the audience. Much more context is provided; some of the mystery is removed; some of the times of day, the duration of the concerts, all of those kinds of things need to be experimented with such that those people, say, in that age group who aren't coming, give us a try.*

Many orchestras are offering multiple alternatives to the standard concert-at-eight format to attract and build new audiences. New venues, different concert start times and lengths, program formats, casual dress, ticket pricing and other initiatives are among the many variables. Finding the balance between tradition and innovation, a certain concert-hall solemnity and the quest for new means of audience access and interaction, lies at the heart of the American orchestra's ongoing process of self-scrutiny. Matthew VanBesien:

*I think we would have to admit that as orchestras we are culpable in having nurtured and fostered an era of whether you want to call it mystery, or god forbid, elitism, we have fostered that. And yet now we are working to figure out how do we can pull back from that and actually strip some of those barriers away. You have to figure out how do we still accommodate that sense of mystery, that sense of elevation, and yet provide enough opportunities to do these sort of participatory, high impact sort of experiences.*

The New York Philharmonic's Alan Gilbert offers this view from the music director's perspective:

*I feel sometimes as someone who is running an orchestra that there is pressure to get rid of that formality, to break away that sense of formality and sacredness, if you will, within the concert hall. ... I'm not sure that there is an answer for that. I think, as is the case with so many things, I think balance is of the essence. I think throwing around a word like sacred can be dangerous, because it can sound unapproachable, and lofty, and sort of removed. But I mean it in the most immediate human sense. If that*

*dimension can be preserved, while at the same time making sure that people are not intimidated by the ritualistic, sort of formalized aspect of concertgoing.*

Gilbert, like Michael Tilson Thomas in San Francisco, has made some important forays outside the conventional concert format. Two of Gilbert's most significant ventures were his semi-staged productions of Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre* and Janaček's *Cunning Little Vixen* at Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall. Both were praised for a theatrical vividness and musical dynamism that expanded the listeners' concert experience. Gilbert has also mounted of what he calls "an immersive theatrical experience" in New York's colossal Park Avenue Armory, presenting spatial musical works from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* to Stockhausen's *Gruppen*, a work of extreme proportions that calls for 3 orchestras and conductors, and thus had never previously been staged in New York City.

But even as he moves to stretch the big-picture frame of orchestral presentations, the music director also has his eye on the kind of details, from clothing to facial expressions, that can register powerfully with an audience.

*... there are things that are often not spoken about on the orchestra side, like how the orchestra looks onstage. How -- whether they smile or not during the bows. These things actually matter.*

Questions large and seemingly small touch on the primary issue of an orchestra's identity and how the audience perceives it. Mark Clague, associate professor of music at the University of Michigan, puts it this way:

*I think the term orchestra has sometimes been a kind of barrier: does it mean the institution? Does it mean the ensemble? You know, the individuals are often lost and the conductor becomes the figure head. But we don't usually meet the other people, and technology seems to be a great way to get to know the players.*

Technology is emerging inexorably for today's audiences, whether that means getting to know the musicians better through social media, new forms of electronic capture and on-demand consumption of performances, special seats for tweeting audience members, video and still projections, or other means of enhancing and supplementing the live concert hall experience.

Technology is no panacea, of course, and it certainly comes with its own set of

risks. In a much-discussed incident at New York's Avery Fisher Hall in January 2012, Alan Gilbert stopped a performance of Mahler's Ninth Symphony when an audience member's cell phone went off repeatedly during a hushed portion of the final movement. Gilbert reflects on that evening and its implications.

*There was a lot of chatter and quite a bit of coverage about the cell phone that went off in our Mahler Nine concert back in January. But for me, the takeaway was that on some sort of intuitive level people responded so strongly to that event because I think there is this kind of inherent understanding of the inviolable quality of what happens in a concert hall. I personally believe that's why it was so exciting. That's why music lovers and classical music aficionados and lay people on the street found it interesting, because it just seemed incomprehensible: How could you stop a concert? And to me, that's actually gratifying, to realize that people were disturbed by the notion that the live concert experience was interrupted.*

In Cleveland, where that city's orchestra has set the ambitious goal of building the youngest audience in the country by the year 2018, technology is bound to be an important part of the path ahead. But when the idea of tweet seats came up in a roundtable conversation, the idea got a quick thumbs down from both Board president Dennis LaBarre and principal flutist Joshua Smith. Cleveland's executive director Gary Hanson expressed reservations about other interactive technologies.

*In my opinion, anything which attempts to be a visual enhancement to a concert experience suffers from the idea of the director, because the director is telling you what to listen to by telling you where to point your eyes, and that's not how great music is constructed.*

Elizabeth Scott, chief media and digital office of the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, is a great advocate for the potential of technology to extend, enrich and enlarge the audience experience. She honed her thinking about the ticket-buying public in her previous post, as vice president for Major League Baseball Productions. Everything from concert-hall video projections to backstage documentaries to cell phone apps brimming with supplementary text, music, video, and voice are among the many possibilities. But, as Scott continues, the challenge is to find ways that use technology to expand the concert experience, not replace it.

*I think we should not have a narrow notion of what it means to participate in the performance. That's really what it's about. Because ... that magical moment where rapt, we all sit here and afterwards, it's like, "Wow, we've all just experienced that." Which doesn't happen every night, but when it does, it is*

*unparalleled. That can't be the only thing -- I don't think-- we are aspiring to. Because there will be, and there are, other ways to feel like you are participating as an audience member. And, honestly, if we don't give those to the audience members, I think that will be at our peril.*

According to Scott, professional sports organizations have discovered that making their content available across multiple media platforms has actually corresponded with greater attendance at live events, not less, as many in the performing arts have feared. Scott frames the larger issue concisely:

*If you give exciting ways in through media, you will want to come in the hall.*

The San Francisco Symphony's Brent Assink knows that these kinds of questions will continue to shape the evolving relationship between art and audience in the years ahead.

*I think one of the things that we all struggle with is that there are so many doors into the art form of the orchestral music, that we are not sure which doors we should have open at the same time. I feel personally that having screens above the audience is a terrific experience, but it is a different experience. I'm not making a value judgment here, but it is a different experience. It is a little bit like if I were listening to the Beethoven's 3rd symphony performed by the symphony but I was following along with the score -- I would enjoy it, but it would be a different experience. So I think sometimes we struggle with which doors to have open, which ones will speak to which audience, which ones will frankly turn off which audience. And we really do have a lot of conversations in this building about who we really are and who we are going to be in the future, and what that all means for the delivery of this art form.*

Our conversation about audiences, and how their experience may continue to shift and grow in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, continues in Chapter 9 of this American Orchestra Forum series.

We invite you to join the conversation with American's leading orchestras, by visiting the American Orchestra Forum website at [symphonyforum.org](http://symphonyforum.org). There, you will find blog posts, videos, transcripts, and more. Please add your voice to the ongoing discussion.

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I'm Steven Winn. Thanks for listening.

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