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AMERICAN ORCHESTRA FORUM

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AMERICAN ORCHESTRA FORUM PODCASTS: TALKING ABOUT ORCHESTRAS

Chapter Nine: Considering Audiences, Part 2

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 9: CONSIDERING AUDIENCES, PART 2

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 19th century, now adapting to life in the fast-changing 21st. 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.

Many of them attend concerts less often than they used to, or not at all. Others seek out classical music in casual new venues, sometimes with a drink in their hand at a downtown New York club or a Cleveland bar. They want concerts to start early and last an hour, or begin closer to midnight. More and more of them take their musical fill on screens large and small, or through tiny earbuds as they travel to work or work out at the gym. The once-stable concert-hall audience for orchestral music is a thing in radical transition. It's a fact that has not only caused widespread uncertainty and anxiety in the orchestra world, but contributed materially to the financial crises at the Detroit Symphony, the Philadelphia Orchestra and elsewhere. Confronted with fundamental and ongoing changes in their audiences, orchestras are thinking about what they do and how they do it as never before. In this chapter we explore some of the ideas, innovations, optimism and uneasiness of the American orchestra, as it finds it way toward the

audiences of the future.

Franz Welser-Möst, music director of the Cleveland Orchestra, makes the case for fresh thinking on all fronts.

> *The institution needs more flexibility. You see, in this country, like in Philadelphia or in other places, things seem to be written in stone forever. And all of a sudden they are not anymore. And my line is always, "Either we change, or we will be changed." And so it's better to be ahead of the game and try to change the way the institution works.*

Faced with a sharply declining audience in its home city, Welser-Möst's Cleveland Orchestra has expanded its base with sustained residencies in Miami and other cities. Meanwhile, like the New York Philharmonic and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Cleveland Orchestra has been extending its offerings with staged and semi-staged operas and other programmatic experiments, such as earlier concert times and performing at the Cleveland Art Museum and at a local bar. Other orchestras are experimenting across a broad spectrum. But there's no template for success. Each organization has to chart its own path. New York Philharmonic music director Alan Gilbert believes that received wisdom and assumptions about what audiences want can become a self-censoring trap.

> *One thing that has been an impediment, I think, to letting the ideas really flow freely -- both at the New York Philharmonic and elsewhere as well -- I have found that I hear very often, "Oh, well. Our audience doesn't like that. Oh, our audience expects this." And I think that's pretty dangerous. Or you'll hear things like the older people in the audience only want to hear music that they know already. Really? I mean really? Oh, the young people just want to hear new music. These gross oversimplifications that are obviously -- if you actually hold them up it doesn't even take a lot of scrutiny to realize that they're just complete nonsense. If people trust that we're going to come up with interesting ideas and interesting projects, and if they believe that we're selecting the music we play and playing it with heart and sincerity and honesty and enthusiasm, maybe it doesn't become such a question of are we going to play this piece or that piece. It's more about the experience of what we can share within the four walls of the concert hall.*

Gilbert still cherishes what he calls the tradition and Old World ritual of the concert.

> *But that doesn't mean you have to do all concerts that way, and that doesn't mean you can't break down the concert format and speak from the stage, or have a chamber music piece in the middle of a symphony concert, or -- you know, why not a poetry reading? That happens sometimes, if it's somehow connected to the music. Or a jazz combo. There are a lot of things that I think are absolutely fair game that can disrupt people's preconceptions about what unapproachable classical music concerts are but still not actually get in the way of the essence of what we're doing.*

Much of the talk about classical music audiences has to do with age. How, everyone worries, can we bring younger listeners into the fold? It's a deep and legitimate concern, rooted, among other things, in the decline of music education in the schools. But like Gilbert, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, music director designate of the Philadelphia Orchestra, resists conventional thinking on the subject.

> *I'm trying, myself, not to be obsessed with a younger audience, because I think also every generation, people historically had more time and more space of mind to go to concerts, when perhaps they were more advanced in life, after the family was raised, after the career was really at a certain level, or more financial means. And yes, I believed taking on this job in Philadelphia that what was needed, which was very much to reconnect with a certain audience, as opposed to discovering a new one– to reconnect and go to some listeners who used to be proud of the orchestra, and for whatever reason, have stopped going to the concerts.*

It is true, as studies by the National Endowment for Arts confirm, that classical music concert audiences have aged rapidly in comparison to the general population. While younger audiences may not be showing up in concert halls in sufficiently large numbers, that doesn't mean they don't care about orchestral music. Sunil Iyengar, NEA director of research, explains:

> *[W]hat's interesting here is that you see them participating in all kinds of other ways. And that's something that maybe doesn't get as much play as some of the sort of bad news. ... they tend to create and perform ... at twice the rate of all adults. They make up I think one-fourth of the total pool of classical music -- people who play classical music in this country, who said in the last year they played classical music – not necessarily professional. And so there is a vibrancy there. There is also of course the fact through social media and through -- electronic media, they're very highly represented in those people listening and downloading and viewing classical music performances.*

According to a study of audiences in the UK, people who view music, dance or theater performances online are two to three times more likely to attend live performances - and attend more often. Sunil Iyengar:

> *You do see an appetite and an interest in engagement that seems to be permeating or cross-pollinating these different forms, and I think that is very hopeful, certainly.*

Hopeful, too, in Iyengar's view, is the proactive, communal nature of the Internet. Instead of isolating people from the shared experience of a live concert, it may be creating a kind of virtual counterpart of it that could engage and draw audiences together in new ways.

> *Increasingly people are sending people links and commenting on work as it's coming out ... there is something very vibrant and exciting about the way in which citizens are taking it upon themselves to share and comment and editorialize about work that they like and share it with each other.*

Elizabeth Scott, chief media and digital officer of the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, tapped the power and potential of technology in her previous job, as vice president for Major League Baseball Productions. Technology, for her, isn't competition or a threat to live concerts – or to ball games. It's a way to enhance and enlarge the experience and energize an audience. As Scott puts it:

> *When you are sitting in the chair of the audience, you don't want to be merely a passenger. You want to be a participant. You want to be able to co-author your meaning of that experience. You want to give feedback about it. And insofar as we are facilitating that, we are making them feel like they have a voice in that experience somehow. Which is more than "bravo" and standing at the end. I like to think of us as juggling or tap dancing in shifting sands or quick sands of ever-fractionalizing channels, ever-multiplying devices. How do we deal with this? And I think one thing I've learned from being at baseball is that being proactive in that space has been essential for the success of sport and will need to be essential for the success-the continued success and relevance of performing arts. We have a mandate to be using that technology to be growing audiences, to be finding audiences where they have not existed before. I'll say it over and over when I'm talking about what technology can do and what we are doing -- is offering additional ways in.*

Scott's wide-ranging ideas for opening new doorways include cellphone apps, live Webcasts of concerts or parts of concerts, documentaries that take audience members behind the scenes, greater access to the rehearsal process and pre- and post-concert events. A lot of her ideas, even the wildly speculative ones, aim to capture the spontaneous excitement of live music.

> *What if we had all of the members of the orchestra miked talking their way through a performance that you could have one way into it that's other than the watching of the playing what they do and the listening to what they do?*

Matthew VanBesien, executive director designate of the New York Philharmonic, muses on another screen-driven idea.

> *We have, for instance, a digital archive where we have all of Bernstein's scores digitized, and you can look at a score on an iPad and see his markings of the Mahler Symphony. Someday I'd love for conducting students or interested people to be sitting in the back of the hall with their iPad following the score -- not just any score, Bernstein's own score -- of the Mahler Symphony.*

Traditionalists tend to blanch at such notions, wary of intrusions that may violate

the zone of close listening and meditative attention a concert can create. Scott is quick to point out that the things that seem invasive and unwieldy now may soon be replaced by sleeker and more supple devices. Technology moves and improves quickly.

> *I mean we all talk about "Tweet seats" and does it make sense to have that in halls. And the funny thing is we actually have to be thinking way past that. We talk about oh, the distraction of screens in the hall. You've all read the article where Google glasses are going to let us, without any distraction to anybody else, have all kinds of information coming into us that you can't even -- you may be doing it right now without me knowing it, right?*

Another thing audiences are doing is playing and singing along. Cognizant of research that shows a strong correlation between playing a musical instrument or singing in a chorus with concert attendance, orchestras in Baltimore, San Francisco and elsewhere are inviting amateurs to learn from and perform with members of the ensemble onstage. Ben Cameron, program director for the arts at the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, is an enthusiastic supporter. What if we saw our concert halls not as places that divide audience from artist, he asks, but as "symphonic centers where we maximized every opportunity to embrace the full range of symphonic activity, including but not limited to the traditional concert?" The NEA's Sunil Iyengar echoes the point:

> *I mean it's not only in the beautiful halls like this one, where this kind of music has to flourish. It has to be out on the street. It could be a subway platform. You want to get the music out there to people who really have the capacity to perhaps start appreciating it.*

New York Philharmonic music director Alan Gilbert hopes forever wider and deeper connections.

> *And I think that that will require a gradual sort of shift in the way both we internally think about ourselves, and audiences think about orchestras as well. But more and more I think we are called on to be resources and catalysts for cultural and intellectual inquiry. And I think that orchestras can be leaders in education, can be focal points of connections between institutions within cities. In short, I think that we are and should be recognized as so much more than just concert-producing machines.*

The Doris Duke Foundation's Ben Cameron makes this eloquent argument for that kind of expansive thinking:

> "In a moment of enormous change in the landscape in which the arts operate—changes in audience composition, in generational perceptual

> frameworks, in technological capabilities and more—we can either focus on preserving a narrow delivery system—the concert, with its attendant limits of seating capacity, price, and inconvenience—or we can focus on preserving and expanding to greater and greater numbers a spiritual experience."

As hard as orchestra managers think about their patrons – how to draw them in the first place, hold onto them over time and cultivate younger listeners – the audience is finally not just a revenue stream or marketing objective. The audience is every bit as essential as the music and the musicians who make it. They complete the circle, bringing their own passion, personalities, discernment and love to the communal art of music. Brent Assink, executive director of the San Francisco Symphony:

> *I cannot stress strongly enough, the quality of the performance that comes from this stage often depends on the kind of feedback that is coming back from the audience. [W]e've all been in arts experiences, maybe not only orchestra, where we leave surprisingly uplifted. But it was in part because of what happened on the stage, but also because we felt we shared an experience with the audience that we were all kind of stunned by, surprised by, and that we all had a role in making it happen.*
>
> *And we've done surveys of our audiences over the years and so many people say they come here for a spiritual, a deep experience, and they share it with a room full of 2500 strangers. And that's a very individualized experience, but a shared one.*

Thrilling as that kind of communal bonding can be in the concert hall, many believe the potential for a wider and more richly faceted audience experience is just beginning. Consider the transformative YouTube Symphony Orchestra concerts of 2009 and 20011. The 2011 concert, in Sydney, Australia, attracted over 30 million people online and another 2.8 million on mobile devices. Google's Ed Sanders ran both YouTube Symphony projects. He argues that such ventures don't represent threats or competition to existing "brick and mortar" concert experiences. That, explains Sanders, wasn't what YouTube Symphony Orchestra was about.

> *What it was about was giving young people around the world a chance at something they would never have had a chance to participate in, to broadcast that to people that would never get a chance to see it, and hopefully ignite some sort of spark that way. … I think it was interesting that it did confirm what we knew, that there is an extraordinarily large classical music community in the world that's utterly fragmented. And what the YouTube Symphony did in an interesting way was saying, well, if you can make it accessible and unify it in a specific way around one destination that people will come to, maybe there's a future or lesson in that.*

Those concerts are just one example of how that can happen in an age where orchestras and audiences share a technologically heightened world. Audiences can go as far together as their mutual openness and imagination allow. Ed Sanders:

> *I think you can either be terrified by it, or you can let go a little bit and see what happens.*

We invite you to join the conversation with American's leading orchestras, by visiting the American Orchestra Forum website at 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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