



AMERICAN ORCHESTRA FORUM PODCASTS: TALKING ABOUT ORCHESTRAS

Chapter Ten: Looking Ahead, in Philadelphia and Beyond

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 10: LOOKING AHEAD, IN PHILADELPHIA AND BEYOND

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.

When the Philadelphia Orchestra emerged from Chapter 11 bankruptcy in July, 2012, the 112-year-old ensemble became a canary fluttering back out of a deep dark mine. No major American orchestra had ever attempted this sort of radical procedure to rescue itself. The crisis was brought to a head by years of dwindling ticket sales and contributions, a pension funding crisis, and an extended period of unstable artistic and administrative leadership. The reorganization addressed some \$100 million in claims, debts and liabilities with a \$5.5-million settlement. It's no wonder that Allison Vulgamore, president and CEO of the Philadelphia Orchestra Association, sees her organization's actions and prospects in near-mythic terms.

I'm proud of the institution who looked itself in the eyes, and like on any great hero's journey, when you find the monster, you either have to take it with you on a chain, or go around it, or leap over it, or destroy it. The monster was our own set of initiatives of history, and the way we balanced our own sort of fiscal situation.

The organization did it by facing bankruptcy, unwelcome as it was, head-on – and did it without missing a musical beat.

To do that, to learn how to do that, to execute it, to come out uncontested, to never stop the concerts, to have now people back in our audience at 2000 people instead of 1600 last year -- this orchestra's lost 40 percent of its audience before we all started working together -- there's a huge turnaround in Philadelphia.

Philadelphia's path forward will be closely watched, and not only because music lovers at home and around the world have such a stake in this beloved institution. In both its difficulties and its strategies for confronting and transcending them, the Philadelphia Orchestra strikes a resonant chord with other American orchestras, large and small. In everything from labor relations and touring to concert formats and community relations, the Philadelphians hope to reinvigorate and reshape their identity by decisively taking on issues that many other orchestras are facing. Because the crisis has been so dire in this case, the steps to move past it can and must be emphatic ones.

One of those steps is the orchestra's commitment to spend three weeks a year for the next five years in China – a move that parallels the Cleveland Orchestra's residencies in Miami while pushing the geographical and branding envelope much farther. Along with other innovations, a new labor agreement in Philadelphia allows for an "experimental week" each year to explore different and more flexible uses of the musicians' time and talents, including serving as musical emissaries in the community.

The unexpected is apparent, too, in the orchestra's new music director designate, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, who at 37 may be seen as Philadelphia's answer to the vibrant young leadership of Gustavo Dudamel in Los Angeles and Alan Gilbert in New York. Instead of making the customary vow to court young new listeners, Nézet-Séguin puts his mission this way:

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. It's very specific to Philadelphia that their history was so rich, so overwhelming, that maybe in recent years, for many reasons, not anyone's fault, it has fallen into, oh, what a great history, but what is it, now, really, at the present? So 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.

The factors behind the audience decline have been extensively discussed in the boardroom and in the press. Some issues, like the changing urban demographics that have had telling impacts on the orchestras in Detroit, Cleveland and elsewhere, are largely beyond an organization's control. Other damages in Philadelphia have been self-inflicted. Allison Vulgamore:

The orchestra had been through a great amount of change that was not well orchestrated. Many different kinds of leadership, executive and musical. Conversations with the community that turned around and created an audience feeling mistrust. The harsh truth in Philadelphia is we forgot about customer service, and have a great deal to do to simply make the experience of being able to get to our concert hall, inside the concert hall, and back out with a sense of memory that you want to repeat. We have to do a lot of work about that. And that may be true in many of our situations, as orchestras. It's potentially true in Philadelphia. And so, you know, if there is an orchestra to study about what the comeback kid syndrome is going to have to look like, we're it.

One of the things Philadelphia must confront, paradoxically, is the very quality that helped build its gilded reputation. Wonderful as the orchestra's plush, elegant string patina may be, that fabled Philadelphia sound had become, to a certain extent, a stylistic default that was too readily plugged into a predictable repertoire. As the orchestra's vice president for artistic planning Jeremy Rothman puts it:

We can't take our current audiences for granted. And audiences that come to the concert hall, they don't want to just continue to hear Beethoven and Brahms and Bruckner over and over and over again.

The challenge is to find ways that respect and honor the orchestra's great tradition while stretching the old boundaries at the same time. A festival of concerts in June, 2012 set out to do just that, by revisiting one of the authors of the Philadelphia sound, Leopold Stokowski, the orchestra's music director from 1912-1941. By mounting the Stokowski tribute at the orchestra's previous home, the Academy of Music, the orchestra signaled its ongoing connection to the past. With its use of theatrical lighting, projections and other enhancements in the concerts, the orchestra was not only refreshing the contemporary concert experience but also reminding audiences that Stokowski, who transcribed Bach and Wagner and appeared with his orchestra in Walt Disney's landmark classical musical film *Fantasia*, believed strongly that music didn't have to come packaged

in identical, tightly sealed boxes. Innovation and risk-taking, in other words, have long been part of this Philadelphia story. Jeremy Rothman discusses some of the thinking behind the Stokowski festival.

When you look back at what he was doing 100 years ago, and the way that he was experimenting with the experience within the concert hall, that he saw performance of classical music as more than just 100 instrumentalists onstage, playing notes well together. But it was connecting with people through charisma, through personality, through environment, through repertoire, through imagination.

The larger picture is creating a greater vibrancy for the repertoire that exists, new ways of hearing music, new ways of experiencing concerts. For people to perceive the orchestra in a different way, and the experience in the concert hall. And not because people need visual eye candy, or because they're used to sitting in front of a television set all day long. But these are pieces that lend themselves to theatrical treatment. This is not a holy experience.

Nézet-Séguin adds his endorsement:

So by being forward-thinking, we are actually honoring our own tradition in Philadelphia.

Orchestras in other cities are finding their own powerful links to the past – and future – by breaking open the standard concert format. San Francisco Symphony music director Michael Tilson Thomas is thinking in spatial and visual terms to help articulate an upcoming performance of Beethoven's choral masterpiece, the *Missa Solemnis*, as well as the future of orchestral presentations:

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.

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. 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 sorts of levels of musical thought and organization to be perceived more clearly by the audience.

The New York Philharmonic's Alan Gilbert, who in his first few years as music director has mounted semi-staged productions of challenging 20th-century works to great public and critical acclaim, concurs.

At the root of all of this it's not just an expansion of what orchestras present, but even more fundamentally what orchestras are. And I'm interested in the discussion that will ultimately arrive

at the point where people are not thinking about this kind of project done by a traditional orchestra such as the New York Philharmonic, as being a kind of special on the side, but as something that is absolutely straight down the center of what we are about and what we can provide as orchestras.

Back in its current home base of Verizon Hall, the Philadelphia Orchestra will continue to experiment with concert formats, cognizant that audiences are anything but monolithic or uniform in their tastes. Some of its upcoming performances of Stravinsky's revolutionary ballet score *The Rite of Spring*, for example, will incorporate projections and theatrical elements in a collaboration with the New York-based Ridge Theater; other presentations will be unplugged.

Anything and everything is open to rethinking, from programming and concert times to media tools and how they get used. For example, Allison Vulgamore would like to reopen and repurpose the Verizon Hall video cameras that have been out of use for years.

They've been closed because they were perceived originally only to be about capturing product that should bring a revenue return in a media forum. That's not the way of the world today. I think in the end, if we turn around and say media is about branding and access and learning and creating connectivity, not simply -- and maybe not at all -- about turning revenues, it's a very different mentality. Especially for an orchestra of firsts, who has a tremendous amount of pride, and should, about its technological firsts, but at this point needs to reinvent its own sense of what media can mean for it.

Deborah Rutter, president of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra wholeheartedly agrees, offering this blunt assessment:

I don't think there's any money to be made in media. I think media is about spreading the word. It's about disseminating our product, to build an audience so that people come to your concerts,

The Philadelphia Orchestra is hoping extend its range and depth of vision in other ways. One of them has to do with seeing an audience not just as a marketing objective but as part of a wider connected community. In its work with Play on Philly!, an ambitious El Sistema-based education and social program that uses music to address the pressing needs of under-served children, the orchestra is

taking the long view of its role in the city's future. Play on Philly!'s Stanford Thompson is a passionate advocate for music's real and measurable impact:

There are a lot of bankrupt communities and kids in Philadelphia. 200,000 kids. 100,000 of them won't graduate from high school. And 70,000 of them live at or below the poverty line.... Let's just take a quick snapshot of the 110 kids that we currently serve in Play On, Philly! If we don't do anything, these kids are going to cost society about \$23 million in the form of government subsidies, putting them in prison and juvenile detention centers -- again, trying to keep their body and their soul together. But let's invest a dollar in these kids, and let's save the city of Philadelphia literally \$7.65 for every dollar that we put in. So I mean economic impact is where you want to put the dollars, where you ultimately see this. As we see now next year 300 kids have a chance to go through a program like this, and 500 the year after that.

Thompson is spelling out the vital, tangible potential that El Sistema programs like Play On Philly! offer. No one has been more closely identified with music as a force for social change than Los Angeles Philharmonic music director Gustavo Dudamel. A graduate himself of Venezuela's El Sistema, Dudamel is both a fervent believer and living proof of the program's principles:

One important thing is that El Sistema is not a musical factory. It's something more. It's something deep. It's something about society. It's about community. It's about how to address the life of our children in the best way, with arts – that is something very important.

Philadelphia assistant principal bass Joseph Conyers adds this important frame of reference:

We need more African-American and Hispanic representation in the orchestras. Well, why don't we bring the music to those communities? And let's do it in a substantive way.

Afa SadykhlyDworkin is vice president and artistic director of the Detroit-based Sphinx Organization, which trains and advocates for minority classical musicians. Nationally, her research shows, only 4.2 percent of American orchestras are comprised of blacks and Hispanics. That's up from 1.5 percent when Sphinx was founded in the mid-1990s. Now, when minority students come to music early, the communal bonds have time to build and grow.

I think the threading line, the common sort of sentiment from everyone, was that they came in and they recognized there are people like them, that are their age and have common values. And what they have in common, regardless of background, is really music. I think developing that peer network and sense of

community is probably one of the most essential, long-lasting values and factors for those young people getting involved.

Jeremy Rothman sees Play on Philly! and other outreach programs as part of an essential transformation:

We're expanding our community. The orchestra is not something on the high hill, but something that's changing the lives of everyone in the city.

None of this can happen, of course, without organizational stability. China, half a world away from the City of Brotherly Love, is crucially important to that goal. In its five-year commitment to the country, the Philadelphians may be setting a new standard for how large orchestras may find their place in an increasingly global age. Allison Vulgamore puts it this way:

All of us are looking for additional markets, I think, in some way. Additional markets might be close to home. They may be new summer homes. Or they may be adopting a country and a history.

Other orchestras, she adds, could look elsewhere:

It might be Cuba next. It might be Dubai next. But the question is, how does a major American orchestra reinvent itself off the stage?

The Cleveland Orchestra has paved the way in looking beyond the borders of its own struggling city for new audiences, revenues and reinvigoration back home. In addition to Miami, the orchestra has established long-term residencies in Vienna, Lucerne and New York, with Paris in the works. The Cleveland Orchestra executive director, Gary Hanson:

The over-arching strategy is that any institution – and the Cleveland Orchestra's no different – has to pursue growth. If you accept that as true that an institution is either growing or it's dying, you must grow. And today, 20 percent of our revenue comes from outside Cleveland – something like that – close to \$10 million a year.

By partnering with China the Philadelphia Orchestra is once again invoking its own past in hopes of building a more dynamic future. The Philadelphia Orchestra first played in China almost 40 years ago, in 1973 and has returned numerous times.

On their most recent trip, in the spring of 2012, the musicians performed in concert halls and conservatories, held master classes, visited hospitals and a scientific research center that's affiliated with Drexel University in Philadelphia. While the orchestra certainly needs to make some money on its visits, Vulgamore insists that that's not the primary objective:

No, it's not true that we're depending upon China to float the Philadelphia Orchestra's boat.

The commitment of three weeks a year for the next five years is meant to build enduring relationships -- with the Chinese public and government, its schools and underused concert halls, banks and businesses and media. The inclusion of Drexel's science facility should fuel synergistic connections back at home. The orchestra is taking an expansive view of what's possible.

The tour was full of long but rewarding days, according to assistant principal bass Joseph Conyers:

When the Philadelphia Orchestra was in China, we were ambassadors, not only for this country but for music, and the great joy that classical music can bring to a people.

Vulgamore shuttled between meetings with civic leaders, media companies, the sponsoring Bank of China, and other businesses. Onstage and off, the partnership is an international improvisation, an evolving work in progress

The question for China will be can they afford a brand as big as the Philadelphia Orchestra to come and experiment? And can we show that the work that we do there helps them grow their own audiences?

Back from the grueling bankruptcy ordeal and on to new ventures in China and at home, where it hopes to refashion its own traditions, the Philadelphia Orchestra has widened the lens of what's possible. American orchestras will be paying very close attention to what they find. Allison Vulgamore:

You know what? It's a big new world for us.

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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