



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

### **Chapter One: Historic Context**

#### **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 1: HISTORIC CONTEXT**

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.

This chapter, drawn from the October 23 public Forum during the Los Angeles Philharmonic residency, addresses the historical and cultural roots of American orchestras and how those traditions impact and inform an orchestra's place in the contemporary American community. The participants are Neil Harris, professor emeritus of history and art history at the University of Chicago, and Jesse Rosen, President and CEO of the League of American Orchestras.

Launched with a 19<sup>th</sup>-century need to assert their growing cities' status with the established markers of European culture, major orchestras today face a rising tide of social change. Audiences, orchestra personnel and the nature of live performance itself are caught up in the transformations. No ensemble that hopes to survive, and survive meaningfully, in a diverse and inclusive 21<sup>st</sup>-century

America, can afford to float along on the methods and practices of the past.

Nonetheless, when it comes to finding the way forward, it's important to understand where you've come from -- how your orchestral predecessors found their bearings and found a way to matter. Neil Harris got the conversation headed in that direction:

*Well, I think a lot of our history, culturally and politically, is local history. It's really what communities make of themselves. And it's interesting to note, as we're celebrating this wonderful centennial, that many American orchestras were founded in a 20- or 30-year period, just really the decades proceeding 1911 and just afterward. And I think the role of the community there is, in effect, to credential it by the founders of the orchestra. What does a real city need to have in order to make claims that it is a real city? And one of the things at the turn of the century, for many places, was an orchestra.*

While the drive for status and recognition as a real city was important, other, more urgent events played a role as well. The 1871 Chicago Fire and the famous San Francisco earthquake of 1906 produced a compelling desire for rebirth. An orchestra was one important way for a city to demonstrate that it was back on its feet, unbowed.

Neil Harris:

*Both Chicago and San Francisco are phoenix cities. I think they claim to have risen from their ashes. In San Francisco's case, of course, it was planning for the great 1915 Exposition, the Panama Pacific. That was one of the impelling factors in creating the orchestra. In Chicago's case, it was the Great Columbian Exposition of 1893.*

Jesse Rosen adds his perspective, tracking the evolution and rise of American orchestras as they arose from the crucible of the Great Depression, in the 1930s to the present:

*You know, the 1930s were a tremendous period for orchestras, surprisingly enough, under the WPA, the Works Progress Administration. I believe 11 orchestras were either founded or restarted in the WPA program....And I think if you skip ahead now to the -- let's say after the Second World War and moving into the 1950s, really '60s, I think what we began to see happen was that, throughout the United States, there*

*was, I think you could say, a movement to institutionalize the performing arts and to raise professional standards, to elevate the performing artist as a legitimate citizen who was entitled to a living wage and a season of music making....And this was, I think, really the galvanizing idea about American orchestras for a very long time.*

Spurred by the post World War 2 boom in American education, and the rise of a more affluent and aspiring middle class, music flourished and spread. Big cities were no longer the exclusive private reserves for orchestras. People heard Bach and Copland and Stravinsky on the radio and watched concerts on TV. Wherever they lived – in Phoenix as well as Philadelphia, in the suburbs as well as downtown – they longed for live music in their own communities.

Bolstered by the visionary and generous grants of the Ford Foundation in the 1960s, the number of orchestras and orchestral concerts increased dramatically. Today there are some 1,800 orchestras in the United States, attended by 25 million people annually. About 90 per cent of those ensembles, according to the League of American Orchestras, have relatively modest budgets under \$5 million.

Jesse Rosen:

*And, meanwhile, the world was changing, and our country was changing in terms of who lived in it, who lived in the neighborhoods our concert halls were in, who was populating our country, and what our sensibilities were about what it meant to be a nonprofit organization in contemporary America.*

Neil Harris reminds us that these questions date back to an earlier era:

*There are these traditions in American life that go back a long way. We don't talk much about settlement houses these days. But settlement houses had orchestras. Settlement houses had art schools. It was a response to a different era of American immigration history. But it does represent a tradition that can be exploited, I think, today, and built upon, because the assumptions of that era were that the arts were, indeed, a way of integrating people, and integrating generations, even more importantly.*

As changing community demographics challenge today's orchestras to re-examine their community relationships, Jesse Rosen suggests that big orchestras might have things to learn from the smaller ones:

*...there's something about the smaller scale of these hundreds and hundreds of orchestras that make them somehow easily woven into the fabrics of their communities. Our larger orchestras, which play really on an international stage, I think are -- in some ways were challenged to maintain both international orchestral standards, touring schedules, and a lot of resource into core subscription activity, while, at the same time, developing meaningful work in their communities.*

In a subsequent blog posting on the American Orchestra Forum website, Rosen made the additional observation that:

*"It is important to set the record straight and recognize the enormous strides orchestras have made to become more far-reaching cultural citizens who support the arts education of our children and define audience to include all segments of communities."*

Rosen went on to note that 13 American orchestras are combining instrumental instruction with social justice in disadvantaged neighborhoods, while the South Dakota Symphony recently toured the state to perform on three Lakota reservations with a newly commissioned orchestral work by a Lakota composer. And orchestras in Pittsburgh, Knoxville, Madison, and St. Louis have collaborative partnerships to bring music to special-needs communities.

Entire communities, too, can have pressing special needs. The sometimes unspeakable devastations of natural and man-made disaster are ones that music may be singularly equipped to address. Just as the San Francisco Symphony rose in part from the rubble of the earthquake and the Chicago Symphony from the ashes of the Great Fire, the Louisiana Philharmonic answered the terrible call of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Once again orchestral music came through.

Jesse Rosen was in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and recalls its dramatic aftermath:

*The very first public event where the community could come out and be together was a concert of the Louisiana Philharmonic. And I had a meeting with their orchestra committee, the group who negotiates their contract and represents them, about a month before they were about to move back into their concert hall. And so I asked them, you know, how it felt to be for four years without a concert hall because*

*their hall was underwater.*

*And they said some really interesting things. They said they actually got better -- they played better as a result. I said how could this be? And they said, well, you know, when we couldn't hear each other because the acoustics were so bad, you know, we watched each other more closely, and, when we couldn't see each other, we listened more closely. And so the adversity of the environments actually made us get better. And then what they said, that really struck me, was that we were actually able to see people's faces while we were playing, because we were in community centers and churches.*

*And, not surprisingly, the first capital expenditure in New Orleans after Katrina hit was to restore the concert hall. I mean, that orchestra made itself a part of the healing of that city, and they did it through being close to people. But they were playing the standard, traditional repertoire.*

While such heightened circumstances and compelling occasions may be rare, they carry important messages about the deep interplay of orchestras and the potential for transformation in their communities.

In an American Orchestra Forum interview, New York Philharmonic music director Alan Gilbert reflected on the *particular* challenges, and possibilities, his orchestra faces in America's most crowded cultural marketplace.

*...Even for people who don't go to concerts, my ambition is for them to feel a sense of civic pride that the New York Philharmonic is an internationally recognized cultural focal point. And it's particularly hard, I think, in NY because there's so much going on and there are so many orchestras that come through, and in any given week you can choose between 3 or 4 or 5 different orchestras... We do a free concert on Memorial Day at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, we do Parks concerts. There are a lot of people for whom that's what the New York Philharmonic is, is these free concerts we offer. And that's fine ... We're very actively trying to be not just an orchestra in New York, but New York's orchestra.*

At our October 2011 Forum in San Francisco, an audience member, checking in via Twitter, asked if orchestras still credential their cities. Neil Harris and Jesse Rosen concurred:

*Neil Harris: I think they do.*

*Jesse Rosen: I think they very much do. One very vivid example of that is in Pittsburgh...[cut just a sentence or two here]...periodically there are trips made to Europe, and to Asia, to introduce the city of Pittsburgh as a hospitable place to set up a business. And these trips usually include musicians from the Pittsburgh Symphony and/or their staff who go along and speak to the fact that this is a city that has a symphony. And so, as a symbol of pride, as a symbol of cultural richness, I think very much so.*

Important as those alliances and affiliations are, music takes root first in its community in the hearts and minds of listeners, the communion of artists and audience in concert halls large and small. Citing research about what audiences think and feel, Jesse Rosen offers this resonant final thought about the levels of experience people have when they attend a symphony orchestra concert. The researcher found multiple layers of responses in music lovers.

*... one of them had to do with intellectual stimulation, another had to do with a sense of group identity, another one had spirituality, another one a sense of community, another one had to do with just generally a social sense, being part of something with other people. So, you know, I don't know if that's the answer, but I think it's a piece of the answer, that we need people in our society to be stimulated, to experience beauty, to also have experiences that are -- and this is unique to our art form -- that can't fit into words.*

We invite you to join the conversation with American's leading orchestras, by visiting the American Orchestra Forum website at [www.symphonyforum.org](http://www.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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