



AMERICAN ORCHESTRA FORUM PODCASTS: TALKING ABOUT ORCHESTRAS

Chapter Three: Considering Technology

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 THREE: CONSIDERING TECHNOLOGY

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.

No conversation about music – about any art form, for that matter – gets very far these days without addressing the impact, potential and pitfalls of technology. From high- definition broadcasts of live performances, to an audience tuned in to Facebook, Twitter and other social media, classical music must find its place in an increasingly digital community.

The evidence is everywhere, as orchestras consider how best to allow, and perhaps even encourage, the use of interactive technologies and handheld devices in the concert hall. As John Haynes, executive director of the forthcoming Tateuchi Center, told the *New York Times*, "This is the wave of the future for the people we worry about attracting."

For many inside the classical music world and far beyond it, the You Tube

Symphony Orchestra marked a crucial harmonic convergence of music and technology. Young musicians from around the globe auditioned online. The winners then assembled in New York in the spring of 2009, and again in Sydney in 2011, to perform a live concert, conducted by San Francisco Symphony music director Michael Tilson Thomas, that was streamed online. The 2011 event was viewed by an astounding 30 million people, arguably the largest audience ever for an orchestral concert.

This breakthrough initiative was bound to come up in a roundtable discussion at Davies Symphony Hall during a visit by the Los Angeles Philharmonic in October, 2011. And so it did. Here's Jesse Rosen, president and CEO of the League of American Orchestras:

One of the things that I loved about the YouTube concert was not the concert itself, but all of the run-up to it. And I used to be a bass trombone player, and so I watched all the bass trombone auditions, and I voted on my favorite bass trombone players. And so you had a sense of having a stake in the outcome of this event. It was a very active one, and for me, as a former player, it was very exciting. I don't know whether my vote was determinative, but I felt like I had some stake in the game. So I think that piece, where you get to participate beforehand in some meaningful kind of way, makes the concert itself a more important, more significant, event. And I think that's the challenge, or one of the challenges, around technology in our field, is to figure out how to make these connections.

For Amos Yang, assistant principal cellist of the San Francisco Symphony, YouTube is a practical resource, with multiple applications.

If I'm preparing solos that I'm not really familiar with, I can just go to YouTube, type it in, and I'll see tons of live performances, actually. And it's an incredible tool for me and for my students, because I will see, and I won't mention the names of the orchestras that I often look up, but I will see very well-regarded orchestras, and very, very fine principal cellists actually struggling with the solos that I'm about to play the following week. And I have to say, it makes me feel comforted. And I just find YouTube actually is a phenomenal tool for my own education, and again for my students. And with the Internet, period, I actually give weekly Skype lessons to my young nephew who's starting on the cello, because he's in China, in Beijing. So I'll stay up very late. He'll get up very early. And we'll have our lessons. And that's, again, one of the incredible things that we're able to do now.

In one of the most successful and wide-reaching uses of technology in recent years, audiences across the country and around the world are now able to experience performances filmed in high definition and broadcast to movie screens

with theater-quality sound. While television and classical music have been partners for decades – remember Leonard Bernstein’s Young People’s Concerts or Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia consorting with Mickey Mouse in *Fantasia* – these high-def operas and concerts have opened new doors and raised new dilemmas.

Thrilling as it may be for a music lover in Fort Lauderdale or Fargo to witness a Metropolitan Opera performance in a local movie house, the presenters of live music have to wonder if they are re-training and re-directing audiences away from the concert hall. By the same token, skillfully deployed cameras and sound equipment can reawaken even a sophisticated concertgoer’s sense of the dynamism and complexity of a live performance.

Mark Clague, professor of music at the University of Michigan, reflects on an “LA Phil LIVE” concert simulcast he caught at a movie theater in Ann Arbor.

And it was an interesting experience, and part of it was that you had these close-ups, via video, of the players. So they actually had cameras that were, I assume, somehow sort of robotically controlled, that could turn around and you'd see a close-up of the principal oboist, or you'd see a close-up of the trumpet section playing. And it did a couple of things. I mean, one is that it guided your ear, so you sometimes heard inner voices, and focused on it, because you could see the player. So that visual aspect is really important. But my favorite shot was actually from the back of the orchestra of the conductor, but it was partially because you saw Dudamel conducting, but also because you saw the audience. So even though you weren't there, and it was in a movie theater, it felt a little bit like watching a concert on TV. But the thing that was neat about it was, when you saw the L. A. Phil audience in Disney Hall, and sort felt as you were a part of that.

Afa Sadykhly Dworkin, vice president and artistic director of the Sphinx Organization, had a similar experience when her hometown Detroit Symphony enhanced a concert with video monitors in the hall. Her own child, a product of the times, was especially drawn in.

...being able to have that visual of connecting with a musician, or in this case lead musician, up close, I think makes a huge difference for the audience. This makes it more real, more personal, and I think more engaging. Definitely could tell a difference with the young people. I have my four-year-old in the audience, and he could see the conductor, or a musician. He freezes, because I think there's that personal connection, versus looking at someone's back.

For many in the digital age, listening and watching a performance, no matter how enhanced, still may be, a somewhat passive or incomplete experience. One thing the Internet has taught us is that everyone is a member of and potential participant in a cyber community. It's a force that can extend the musical experience beyond the confines of the concert hall.

Mark Clague:

...one of the interesting things about the Internet, to go back to the technology, is the ability to comment on concerts, right? And so San Francisco Symphony has been a real pioneer in making electronic commenting open to people. And we certainly have critics, like you, Steven, people out there giving us some guidance, making us think about things in a richer way. But one of the interesting possibilities is for the audience to vote, a little bit like you did with the trombones. You know, to be able to say, hey, I liked this, I didn't like that.

Afa Dworkin:

An online format seems like a terrific idea for any performance. Our chamber orchestra's on tour currently [in Ashley], and there's an ongoing blog. And for me, somebody who programs these concerts, I actually take the audience blogging pretty seriously. I've found some pretty insightful things. A lot of informed audiences make suggestions about things that should be on. Sometimes they're very outlandish, and sometimes they're extremely informative. There was a kid that blogged on our tour website that said, I didn't like this piece by Golijov, and they went on to talk about why it is that they don't like it, and one of the things she said is that, couldn't hum it. So, okay, from your perspective you need to hum something in order to like it, versus there are people who are raving about the piece, and raved about the fact that the program is more challenging, less tonal, more interesting, and more stimulating. So I think it's really great, because the other thing that it does is, there's an online format to blog or comment about things. I think it takes away that fear that someone has to overcome of being polite, and coming up to a conductor and saying, I hated what you did.

But as Mark Clague points out, online anonymity doesn't necessarily yield a truer read of what people are really thinking and feeling,

...I was noticing this on Facebook the other day, that you can only like something. You can't dislike something on Facebook. You can get a thumbs up. There's no thumbs down. Everything's thumbs up. And this is very much of our country. We have to be affirming, right? We have to worry about people's self-esteem. And yet, I think part of that audience engagement was the right to boo, or the right to say you didn't like something. And I think we feel so much a think like, well, I didn't like it, it was a bad concert. Well, maybe it was a piece you'd never heard before.

Facebook feel-goodism notwithstanding, it's one of the glories of the Internet that it widens the conversation. Art isn't easy or simple, and neither are the

things people have to say about it. Complexity and contradiction, irrationality, intuition and unexpected bolts of wisdom from the blue are all part of the cacophonous, exhilarating noise that great music stirs up.

Mark Clague gets the last word, leaving us, fittingly, with an open-ended question.

If you do something challenging, is it okay not to like it? I mean, certainly if we're looking at art, we want to be challenged to think things that maybe are unpleasant. I mean, there's evil in the world, and if a piece is about evil, are you supposed to like that, like, hey, that's really good. Thumbs up. You know, so I guess I think in some ways part of what we need to do as a community is to be willing to deal with hard stuff, and stuff we like and dislike. Even just as a society, isn't that a way in which art can sort of help us engage with each other, if we don't always have to like it?

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