



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

Chapter Four: The World Has Changed

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 FOUR: THE WORLD HAS CHANGED

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 orchestra, large or small, ever has a settled relationship with its community. It's always a thing in flux, dynamic, fluid, fragile and complex. That's never been truer than it is now, in today's intensely competitive cultural market place. Whether it's how to attract new audiences, invigorate connections to current concertgoers, or tap the power of technology, orchestras are facing – and not always meeting -- unprecedented challenges to remain vital. Deborah Rutter, president of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Association, states the case bluntly.

The world is just a different place than it used to be. And I think it's taken orchestras way too long to figure out how we can fit into this world.

If orchestras are going to matter in their communities, says Martha Gilmer,

Chicago's vice president for artistic planning and audience development, they must understand, and find ways to reach, a public that's evolving in fundamental ways, and craving the kind of broader and deeper connections they're finding elsewhere.

Gilmer illustrates the point by recalling audiences in the 1980s, who wanted no part of pre-concert talks or commentaries by the conductor.

...And they would say, I didn't come to be spoken to. I came to listen to the music....That's all changed, and people like Michael Tilson Thomas in the city had a big effect on that change. ... I do think our audiences are curious, and they're desiring to understand things in context. We live in an information age.... So whatever programs we imagine, we really think deeply about the context that our audiences desire around it.

Chicago Symphony clarinetist J. Lawrie Bloom puts a wider frame around the issue of the shifting relationship of audiences to orchestras:

I think society has changed drastically, also. You don't have to go back that many years that celebrity was put on a pedestal. When Rock Hudson died, did people really know he was gay? And now, TMZ would have had that 20 minutes after he figured it out himself. 00:18:32 And I think, in a much smaller way, an orchestra like San Francisco or Chicago, they didn't expect to get to know us. They just wanted to hear us play. And there was a certain mystique about being in tails, and all that. And that's all changed. People don't come absolutely dressed up all the time. They come in jeans.... People that surprise you come in jeans and a sweater, and they want to know, what do the musicians think about this music? What does the conductor think about this? I think that goes to the trust. Why do you feel this music is important to perform for us?

Today's musicians are learning a whole new language, sometimes literally, to communicate and connect. Here's Mark Volpe, Boston Symphony Orchestra managing director, on how life is changing for the young fellowship winners at Tanglewood:

They have to be advocates. They have to be able to speak. Even if English is their third or fourth language, they have to be compelling in ways beyond artistry. First and foremost, artistry is what ultimately we're trying to develop. But at the same time, the

job description does continue to evolve.

Bloom and Volpe raise the elusive but essential issue of connection between art and audience, music and the wider world. It begins in rehearsals and concerts, with the all-important trust that either grows or doesn't between a music director and the artists. One of Chicago's Mead composers-in-residence, Anna Clyne, feels that connection powerfully with Riccardo Muti, who took over as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's music director in 2010, and made new music a priority.

From my perspective ... something that really struck me about the Chicago Symphony Orchestra is the relationship with Maestro Muti, and this deep sense of trust that really makes it just even more engaging, and does bridge this relationship between orchestra and the audience....And coming in as a contemporary composer, this is the ideal sort of chemistry, because within the trust between the maestro and the orchestra is also a trust between the composer and the orchestra.

James Somerville, principal horn of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, raises another important component of trust – between the performers and the orchestra's staff.

And in most cases, that filters down quickly or slowly from the top of the administration. It has a lot to do with how invested the musicians are, and that can come upwards as well. But it makes a huge difference to have an administration that really has the will to have that kind of dialogue about everything to do with how the orchestra works.

Boston artistic administrator Anthony Fogg adds this observation about the role physical proximity can play:

I think one of the unique things about our physical relationship between management and the players is that we occupy a hall that we own, which is, at least on our side of the space, is a sort of hothouse environment where we're very close physically to the players. So we're a matter of feet from the auditorium. We're backstage. So we have a lot of one-on-one contact. And then of course we spend all of the summer living together at Tanglewood.... And so those two facts, I think, have an enormous bearing on the nature of the relationship that we have between management and players, which is unlike other orchestras where the offices may be two blocks down the street or four floors up. And it's a psychological thing as much as anything.

Trust doesn't emerge automatically out of good will or architecture. It has to be built, institution-wide, in a purposeful and systematic way.

When Rutter came to Chicago in 2003, she recalls there was work to be done. The bond was unraveling. Musicians, board members and concertgoers agreed, says Rutter:

There was a sense of distance from the stage to the audience, and a lack of connection, a lack of sort of sense of personal connection between audience members and the musicians on stage.... And the musicians, I think, were amongst the most vocal in saying, we miss this. We miss feeling that there is a greater connection. We needed to bring that sense of community to the CSO home at Symphony Center.

Chicago bassist Steven Lester concurs:

There was a point in our history...going back a long time, when our programming seemed to have been segmented. We'd have extremely esoteric music, Elliot Carter, a great composer, but nonetheless a composer that required quite a bit of effort from an audience to access, and then we had some of our core repertoire which was repeated constantly.

And then we had some experiments in sort of cross-cultural things that didn't necessarily work very well. And I don't think the audience felt connected to any of that. And we can sense on the stage that, when the audience is not connected, it's like they applaud once or twice, and then they're out. It's not a warm feeling.

Bloom believed the potential was there, waiting to be tapped.

I remember when Mr. Haitink came, six or eight years ago now. Had not been there for quite a while, and, like many orchestras, we didn't have full halls all the time. Word got around instantly of the connection between Haitink and the orchestra, and the place was mobbed. And they got it because the intensity of what was going on between the orchestra and Haitink was clear to everyone in the hall.

Making great music will always be the hard-won goal. But in some ways it's only the beginning. Today, like other orchestras, the CSO has a broad range of programs and initiatives that seek to create new contexts for orchestral music at a time of rapidly shifting habits and sensibilities. Some of the programs, like pre-concert events co-presented with Chicago's classic rock station WXRT, have been in place for years. Others are relatively new. They include *Beyond the Score*, a multi-media program to enrich the audience's experience in the concert hall and

beyond; Music NOW, a new music series of shorter concerts curated by Mead composers-in-residence Anna Clyne and Mason Bates; Citizen Musician, which connects professional and amateur musicians in multiple ways; and a Friday Night at the Movies film series.

The days when audiences were content to attend nothing but standard-format concerts, no questions asked or answered, are long gone. For Deborah Rutter, the interconnected challenges evolving inside and outside the concert hall reflect what she calls a basic “societal change”:

There's nothing that we don't check out before we do ...You barely go to a restaurant without reading reviews. And generally, it's not necessarily a critic. It's 'what were the reviews that you got on Yelp?'

Technology is widely seen as an essential fact of life for orchestras in an ultra-wired, Yelp-and-Facebook 21st century world. But as Rutter points out, the new media universe can be daunting for organizations that are purpose-built to present live concerts

I think we can't figure out how to keep up with technology, we as an institution. The challenge is that we all have our expertise that's been built up and ingrown for 121 years, and that we all have some capacity around technology, but we are not nimble enough yet to know how to share what we do as quickly as we possibly can.

Steven Lester picks up the point:

So the biggest hurdle is trying, how do you reach the broadest audience possible, and technology seems like the obvious method, or one of the obvious methods. But the problem is, it's incredibly expensive. It's capital intensive. It's all front-end expenses, in the sense that you have develop, and build, and guess, and hope that this is the right thing to do. And I don't know that orchestras have ever been, and especially now, in a position to afford that kind of gamble. That was always done for them by other technology companies.

With the salad days of generous record contracts a distant memory, orchestras must now perform complicated balancing acts. Martha Gilmer, joined by Deborah Rutter, explains:

MG: Back in the day, we would have three or four recording companies in and out of our hall every season, with multiple recordings with them.

DR: But now the distribution is so vast, you can't even keep up with it. I don't even know how to talk about it. We have the product, but how do we even distribute it?

MG: Also, when we were talking about technology, it brings up quality. In other words, I think it's in every decision. So if you could put out a recording of a Thursday night concert on Friday morning, unedited, in order to get it into the hands of the public, is that more valuable than taking six months and investing X amount, \$15,000, \$20,000 to go through an editing suite and have a higher-level quality? And which is more important, more valuable? So I think quality comes in when you talk about how do you stay on top of technology.

Like other orchestras, Chicago has started its own record label, CSO ReSound. But Deborah Rutter has no pipe-dream illusions. Technology has to be seen as a means to a greater end:

I don't think that 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.... Media activity, we just have to minimize our loss... I think that we need to use media to draw people to the live concert experience, and accelerating that as much as possible is the most important thing.

Boston's James Somerville offers this surprising and eloquent slant on technology and the live concert experience in the 21st century

I like to try and step back from these discussions of technology, in a way, because... To give an example, in a symphony orchestra we have a lot of technology on stage. It's just not the kind of technology that people think about when they talk about it.

I mean, the best violin technology dates from the 1600s.. The best French horn technology dates from you know, about 1930, 1940. The best electric guitar technology, which we play with sometimes, maybe dates from about 1970 or so. There are other instruments where there are brand new things that have come out. We have timpani that were, you know, that were designed and it was just developed in the last few years so they sound incredible. So we as orchestras, we're very used to thinking about technology, but not taking it because it's the newest, but because it's the best. And I think as long as we can keep that idea about how we look at the sexy technologies of this century, then I think we'll probably have a better chance of using them well. And I also think that by far, the most valuable experience we have to offer is the one of putting someone in a concert hall and dimming the lights and having this silence in a big

community of people to experience great art.

Rutter and Somerville arrive at the same point through very different channels. It's the irreducible thrill of live music that technology may be able to enhance and enlarge, but never replace. Sometimes that "most important thing," as Rutter puts it, turns up in unanticipated ways and places, where trust begins with a great leap of faith.

Few things have demonstrated that more dramatically in Chicago, than Riccardo Muti's work at the Illinois Youth Center for female juvenile offenders, part of his Citizen Musician program. When Muti announced his intention to present opera arias, Rutter feared what she called "the biggest disconnect of all time." But then, she recalls, Muti introduced himself and, after he talked a bit about his personal background...

...then he described the arias that were going to be sung. And of course, the arias are about love lost, betrayal, relationships between people that have perhaps not gone right. And I understood immediately that he was speaking directly to these young women. He knew exactly how to do it, and the music itself was the story. And he had these three dozen girls completely transfixed.

Anna Clyne has taken Muti's cue, and continues to work extensively in the detention center, drawing out the women to write their own music, some of which she has orchestrated for Chicago Symphony musicians to perform. As Clyne puts it:

The power of music and the arts to create a creative environment, especially for people from difficult backgrounds, where they can just be themselves, and express themselves, is one of the most beautiful things you can really bring people.

Together, Muti and Clyne have made some potent and resonant discoveries inside the walls of the Illinois Youth Center – for the young women there, for themselves, and for all of us. Music can forge its deepest connections when artists and audiences take risks together, trusting themselves and each other on the journey.

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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