



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

Chapter Six: The Creative Challenge, Off the Stage

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 SIX: THE CREATIVE CHALLENGE, OFF THE STAGE

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.

In a culture that exalts the individual, creativity is thought of first and foremost as the distinctive stamp of a personality, the outpouring of a specific genius or talent. And so, of course, it is. Mozart, Miles Davis, Mondrian – every artist speaks in his own unmistakable, irreplaceable voice.

But organizations can and must be creative, too, if they hope to endure and thrive. It's as true for giant corporations and budget-strapped city governments as it is for a start-up company or a venerable symphony orchestra. In the face of financial woes, aging audiences, dwindling arts education and the momentum of an increasingly digital universe, orchestras are challenged as never before to find creative ways of making music and making it matter to their communities.

From live-streamed concerts in Detroit to inventive grantsmanship, projection-enhanced performances by Miami's New World Symphony to experiments with audience tweets at Cincinnati Symphony concerts, everything is

up for grabs in a collective act of creative re-invention. Much of it is innovative. Some may be controversial or ill-conceived. And not all of it comes comfortably for organizations steeped in tradition. The process can even be downright painful.

San Francisco Symphony executive director Brent Assink relates an instructive comic anecdote, related on NPR's "Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me," about a fistfight that broke out in the audience during a Chicago Symphony Orchestra concert.

They talked about how the fist was so loud that it woke up the audience [Laughter] – and they talked about this all with a faux British accent. And that's fine, except that for people who have never been inside our halls, it just reinforces a stereotype that we are in fact high art, and you better be prepared to have a good nap, and an expensive one, if you're going to come inside our darkened halls.

Composer John Adams has thought a lot about the narrow bandwidth symphonic music seems to have for the general public.

Let's say you're in your car and you put your radio on scan. And it goes through 14 pop music stations, and then there's CNN. And then suddenly there's the one classical station. And you know when you hear that it's suddenly, "Oh it sounds like culture. It sounds like somebody with a British accent." And, of course, largely that's because the only music you hear on FM radio is very polite classical music from the 19th century that's put there so that it won't disturb anybody. ...What I'm getting at is that the orchestra, even if it's the Rite of Spring, it has a certain cultural connection. So people are driven away by that, particularly young people. They hear it and they think, "That's not my world."

Adams' fellow Bay Area composer Mason Bates picks up the point, speaking from first-hand experience.

People have this idea -- I remember somebody at UC Berkeley telling me, "I would never write for orchestra because it's so bourgeois." You know, I was like, "Get real. I know what you're saying, but there's certainly a vibe to these spaces." John's exactly right. I mean there's definitely a cultural history here, and there's a cultural connotation.

For Bates, it's something that can be palpably felt. Symphony halls, like nightclubs or any place where music is happening, impose their own set of expectations.

I think, in a way, for me it's about a space. I mean, the symphonic space is a place where you hear music a certain way. If you're in Mezzanine -- you know, it's this club over near the Mint [in San Francisco] -- you know, and you're spinning electronic music for three hours, you know, it's a difference space, not just realistically, but like psychologically, and people process that music differently.

While Bates believes that an orchestra concert may invite listeners into what he

calls “a more focused listening world,” he acknowledges that it isn’t always easy to enter. The more people know, he maintains, the more receptive they can become.

I think there’s an intimidation factor for a lot of folks that can be dealt with. And I think without really changing the substantive stuff that’s happening on stage, getting information to people in different ways can really help.

One of the most creative and dramatically successful models to get information – and music – to people in different ways arrived with the YouTube Symphony Orchestra, which tapped that powerful Internet site to audition young musicians from around the world and live-stream two concerts, in 2009 and 2011. The 2011 concert, in Sydney, Australia, was the largest live stream YouTube event ever, attracting over 30 million viewers on computers and another 2.8 million on mobile devices.

Ed Sanders, director of the Creative Lab at Google (which owns YouTube), and Margo Drakos, a cellist-turned classical music technology entrepreneur who also worked on the YouTube Symphony project, reflect on the implications.

The YouTube Symphony was never set out to be a rival to the San Francisco Symphony or the NY Philharmonic... What it was about was giving young people around the world a chance at something they never would have had a chance to participate in, to broadcast that to people who would never have a chance to see it, and hopefully ignite some sort of spark that way.... 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 a lesson in that.

Drakos sees the future taking shape, notably in a city whose financially strapped orchestra teetered on the brink during a crippling strike:

So, for example, Detroit Symphony has a mobile app sponsored by a local entity that gets credit as the mobile app opens. ... Now one of their goals is to be one of the most accessible orchestras... They had one of the largest views for any event in the U.S. It was over 10,000 recently for a classical music, for an orchestra concert from the Detroit Symphony, to have over 10,000 people watching on the Web and mobile I think is so exciting.

Ed Sanders:

I think the biggest lesson that these orchestras have taken ... is that YouTube and technology in general are amazing sort of sandboxes and experimental playgrounds, and I think that we’re at a point now where businesses, institutions, schools, etc. can take risks with technology that they’ve never been in the position

to be in before, because the cost of experimentation is just negligible.

San Francisco Symphony music director Michael Tilson Thomas, who served as artistic director for both YouTube Symphony Orchestra iterations, has long been comfortable with technology as a window to the future. His widely admired Keeping Score programs seamlessly join music, music history, commentary and video artistry. For the New World Symphony, a training orchestra MTT leads in Miami, architect Frank Gehry designed a visionary hall that facilitates free outdoor concerts with visual projections on the exterior walls and more creative use of visual and spatial effects inside. All of it's keyed toward where the orchestra and its young artists and their audiences may be headed.

Tilson Thomas founded the New World Symphony, in part, to give beginning instrumentalists a meaningful start to their careers. The idea ran deeper than that, as he explains.

But then also was the desire that, with these young musicians, that they could be encouraged to take steps to explore new relationships between them and the audience, which would involve becoming much more comfortable with the use of media, various aspects of new media. ... And then, the idea of creating a building in which relationships between musicians and small groups of people, large groups of people, people at a great distance putting the music on this vast screen outside so people could outside in the park and hear the music, and they could hear that for free. They could also participate via their cell phones, and becoming part of community of commentary on the music. And many of those people would wind up coming to more of the events that happened inside the building, as well. So all these things worked together.

Such innovations are by no means restricted to Miami. San Francisco Symphony audiences, like concertgoers in many other cities, are seeing and hearing the fruits of creative thinking in many ways – film and video projections, theatrical staging, Web streaming and more.

Michael Tilson Thomas:

I really believe in the future all these arts are going to be much more melded together. And things that we think of kind of experimental now will become much more the nature of things. And I joke with some of my colleagues in the more traditional side of the classical music business. And I say that their thoughts about video, or their thoughts about the Internet, reminds me a little bit of Francis X. Bushman's attitude toward the arrival of talking pictures, which is, oh, it's just a novelty.

Margo Drakos lays out the case for a connected, creative future bluntly. It

depends on everyone from artists to orchestra administrators, board members to audiences investing in shared sense of adventure. Business as usual is no longer an option.

I think that if you're not accessible, and you haven't figured out how to be relevant to whatever your community is, without denigrating your art, but being true to your artistic integrity, but being part of your community, whether that's virtually or in real environment, I think you will no longer be in existence.

No one believes the way forward can be found by clicking on the symphonic equivalent of a Google map. Symphony orchestras, after all, are preservers of a great cultural legacy. Tradition and innovation must be carefully and thoughtfully balanced. In his book *Imagine: How Creativity Works*, Jonah Lehrer shows how institutions that blend the familiar and the unexpected are often the most innovative. Change, especially inside an organization, is both alarming and exhilarating.

The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra is one of several experimenting with a limited number of audience “tweet seats” during selected concerts. The topic spurred a lively discussion in a “Conducting Business” podcast by New York radio station WQXR.

At the Cincinnati concerts, an associate conductor backstage tweets insights about the performance while it’s happening onstage. Audience members tweet back questions or comments. Christopher Pinelo, vice president of communications, describes the reaction:

The people who have participated in the Tweet Seats have absolutely loved it. We've had some push-back from other audience members who don't like the idea of someone sitting in a concert with their phone on and actually sort of engaged in the screen -- the glow of the screen. So it certainly hasn't been without controversy.

Pinelo sees the issue as a reflection of some wider cultural trends.

I think we're really looking at this as a different level of engagement for -- there are people who will sit at home watching an awards show, like the Academy Awards. They'll watch the Super Bowl and they actually are on Twitter or on Facebook and they're interacting with people, their huge circle of friends, talking about it as it's happening. And it's just a different kind of interaction; a different kind of shared experience. I think some people have a thirst for that kind of shared experience.

The San Francisco Symphony has taken a slightly different tack for its summer pops concerts, creating what it calls a “summer hot spot” in the uppermost tier of the hall. No one will tweet from backstage, but in this relatively isolated section, hot spot patrons will be able to bring beverages to their seats and take advantage of free WiFi on their silenced handheld devices during the concert.

The style of concert-going is always a thing in flux. In the 19th century, audiences ate, gossiped and visited loudly during performances. Audiences’ tastes and practices can move in unpredictable ways. Brent Assink:

It's interesting, this whole question about making the concert experience more accessible is as complicated a question to answer as are there are number of people in our halls. Many of our young audience members actually get offended by how casually dressed the older people are, and how it is not as special experience as they would like to I be; this is a big night out for some young people. ... So they actually like the formality of it, they like the ritual and so forth. So it's an infinitely interesting question to explore.

Assink adds this caveat about the bigger implications of these experiments:

It worries me when orchestras do go chasing after the latest, greatest thing because it fundamentally begs a question about whether Beethoven is enough. Do we need to add layers of various types of experiences around our concerts?

Such misgivings notwithstanding, the deeper question may not be about Beethoven getting layered over but rather about the way people are moved to share their love of Beethoven in new ways. John Shafer, host of “Soundcheck” and “New Sounds” on WNYC radio, puts it this way:

I'm all for giving people a chance to express their enthusiasm, even in the moment, you know, when you get one of those performances where the hairs on the back of your neck stand up and you just -- you feel like, you know, elbowing your neighbor and saying, "Did you hear that? Did you feel that?" This is another way to do that, and I understand that.

When old structures need rethinking, retooling and refreshing, Google’s Ed Sanders sees opportunity gleaming:

And now, I think that a lot of those walls are coming down, in a really healthy, positive way. And I think that the institutions and companies which embrace that, and can tell their own story, and can be shown to be experimenting and pushing innovation forward, rather than standing still, are the one who are going to survive. But it's really exciting times. I think you can either be terrified by it, or you can let go a little 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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