



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

Chapter Seven: The View from Cleveland

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 7: THE VIEW FROM CLEVELAND

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.

The language of The Cleveland Orchestra's 2004 annual report was direct and unvarnished. "Without fundamental changes in the orchestra's business model," the report warned, "our growing annual losses, together with a mounting accumulated deficit and substantial unfunded pension liability, would soon make our institution unsustainable in Cleveland."

On top of inherent conditions that would imperil orchestras in Philadelphia, Detroit and elsewhere, The Cleveland Orchestra faced a particularly vexing dilemma: It is one of the world's great orchestras in by far the smallest market supporting such an institution. The declining population and shifting economics of a once thriving manufacturing and corporate hub have undermined the orchestra's ability to function as it had for almost 90 years.

Structural crises can either cripple and paralyze an organization or galvanize new ways of thinking and open fresh possibilities for a reimagined future. Cleveland Orchestra executive director Gary Hanson recalls the broad soul-searching that

went on about an endangered centerpiece of the city's cultural life.

In 2004/2005, the institution was in some significant financial distress. And we convened a group called the Special Committee on the Future of the Cleveland Orchestra, and that committee was comprised of senior trustees and other senior community leaders who were not on the orchestra board. And over the course of seven or eight months in '04/'05, we went through a great deal of information, a great deal of deliberation, and looked at various models for the future of the institution. And in the middle of that process, the stark question was posed, are we going to seek to grow or are we going to seek to downsize? And obviously we chose the growth strategy, and the strategy was called "Leveraging Excellence." And the point was that we wanted to take the excellence of the Cleveland Orchestra, and find ways of monetizing it. ... If you accept as true that an institution is either growing or it's dying, you must grow.

Today, in a multi-pronged strategy that holds broad implications across the American orchestra landscape, The Cleveland Orchestra is repurposing itself for the 21st century. Instead of relying only on its shrinking Ohio audience and sporadic touring, the orchestra has built a network of ongoing residencies around the world, led by four weeks a year the ensemble spends in Miami, a city with a growing population and vibrant culture.

Other residency locations, present and planned, include New York, Vienna, Lucerne, Paris – and even the neighborhoods of Cleveland itself. About 20 percent of the organization's revenue – close to \$10 million a year – now comes from outside the orchestra's Cleveland base of Severance Hall. The orchestra has formed alliances with Miami's Latin/jazz/world ensemble Tiempo Libre, the Cleveland Art Museum and Cleveland Playhouse, and schools in both cities. Musicians perform in new concert formats, like the informal Fridays@7 series, and in Cleveland's Happy Dog bar.

Meanwhile, in a bold initiative, the organization's Center for Future Audiences has a bracingly ambitious objective for The Cleveland Orchestra's centennial year. Gary Hanson explains:

Gary Hanson: If you don't set big goals, you don't pursue big goals. And so by 2018, we'll have the youngest audience in the country. ... as we're doing it, we're assessing what's happening. And today, I'd say that if you look out in the house, compared to two years ago, you see at least twice as many young people as you saw two years ago.

Joshua Smith: That's probably true actually.

Gary Hanson: And two years from now it will be twice as many again.

Fiscal necessity has become the mother of fearless invention. As the leading

face of the orchestra, music director Franz Welser-Möst sets the crucial example, in both word and deed.

The institutions need more flexibility. You see, in this country, like in Philadelphia or in other places, things seem to be written in stone forever. And all of the sudden they are not anymore. And my line is always, "Either we change, or we will be changed." And so it's better to be ahead of the game and try to change the way the institution works.

Nothing has marked the new-look Cleveland Orchestra more clearly than its Miami residency, which is expanding from three weeks to four in 2012-13. Launched in 2007, Cleveland Orchestra Miami has not only produced new audiences and revenue streams but invigorated the orchestra artistically and institutionally. Principal flutist Joshua Smith felt it right away.

And I think one of the things that I figured out pretty immediately within the first season -- or at least first couple of seasons -- is that the city of Miami, and also probably particularly the board that is running Cleveland Orchestra Miami, is very proactive and very kind of inventive. Lots of ideas come up, and I think the city really embraces the experimentation in a way that is probably a lot harder to get away with in Cleveland. ... You know, what if we play in high schools? What if we actually have Franz conduct in a high school gymnasium, which is not something that has been done, or had been done, in Cleveland -- in the time that I was in the orchestra, at least.

Welser-Möst, who became the first Cleveland Orchestra music director to conduct in a high school since 1921, believes this kind of outreach is essential.

Usually the audience you lose is sort of between 25 and 40, when they study and start a career and start a family and so on. And I think the most important part in the long run is actually reaching out to the different communities and going into the schools, and showing them what we are doing.

General Manager Gary Ginstling points out that change is by no means imposed from the top down. Many of the innovations in Miami have come from within the ranks of the orchestra itself, as we hear subsequently from principal flutist Joshua Smith:

Gary Ginstling: We invited the musicians to come up with their own ideas for ways that they can engage with the community. And Joshua is working on a project right now which I think is fascinating.
Joshua Smith: At the time that I pitched this, it was something like a competition for high school students to make some kind of a movie ... so what has happened now is a group of kids from this school are planning to make a documentary which follows musicians, and staff, and conductors, gets to know sort of what's going on behind the scenes and it could evolve into something that's actually really interesting to listen to. The thing that made me really happy was when I had the first meeting with one of these kids who's a junior in high school, she said, "well I didn't really think I knew anything about an

orchestra -- I mean, I don't really know anything about an orchestra -- but now I'm really fascinated to find out about what you do, and how you do it, and why you do it, and those kinds of things. I'm really excited about it"..... You can tell kids that listening to classical music is great. You can tell them that it's good for them, and that's maybe a message that they don't get. But when they actually have a reason to know something about us and what we're doing, really personally, I think they become much more engaged with the process...within the first couple of years it seemed like I realized that we can do anything in this community, and the community will say, oh yeah, sure, try it -- and in a way that I don't think necessarily happens as easily in Cleveland.

Entering a new market is both an exciting and complicated undertaking. Gary Hanson reflects on how his orchestra has approached the Miami residency, and how the experience in Florida has traveled back to Cleveland and beyond.

We were a fully mature institution, parachuting for a short period of time into a market that wasn't fully developed for orchestral music. And we had to quickly make our mark -- and we had to quickly make our mark with more than just concerts. We can go play concerts, and we can play great concerts. And what we learned -- the most important thing we learned, in my view -- is that the best way to make our mark in Miami and the best way to increase relevance in that community was through institutional partnerships -- working with other institutions, whether it's the school system, or the Museum of Contemporary Art, or neighborhood organizations. And that's something that happened in Miami out of necessity -- if we wanted to have a meaningful relationship to the community in three short weeks -- that we've brought back to Cleveland. And what we say in Cleveland is that the path to greater relevance in Cleveland is actually best traveled with others, through partnerships.

Hanson cites two such examples.

Last year, as we said, it was the first time in the history of the two institutions that the Cleveland Orchestra went across the road and played a concert at the Cleveland Museum of Art...We collaborate with the Cleveland Playhouse. We have fundamentally changed in the minds of many people -- that the orchestra is open to changing

Cleveland's Board president, Dennis LaBarre, seconded by Joshua Smith, sees such moves as part of a larger, compelling trend.

Dennis LaBarre: So all of this kind of came together in a way that we had to, and not just the Cleveland Orchestra. I think major orchestras have been on this path now for a decade probably, and Miami really helped us in multiple ways to start things that had to be done anyhow.

Joshua Smith: That idea of like playing a new game helps you to think about what you're doing back at home too.

While a new and more open spirit has traveled back from Miami to Cleveland, the orchestra's dual-city identity has raised some concerns about diluting the Cleveland Orchestra brand at home. Dennis LaBarre takes up the question.

I don't think it was ever a question of diluting the product. The artistic vibrancy wasn't going to be

threatened at all by Miami, or Vienna, or New York, or Paris, or wherever we go. It's much more a question of civic concern, shall we say. That's what we've had to be sure people understand -- that the Cleveland Orchestra is the Cleveland Orchestra. It is our home community. All the things that we're doing in terms of diversification and creativity really have a focus there that's greater than any place else. And obviously our fundraising, which in today's world with earned revenue being what percentage it is of most orchestras' operations, it's the base of our fundraising.

More than any other major American orchestra, Cleveland has staked its future on a geographical expansion of its footprint, a strategy that comes with great promise and also requires some careful maintenance of its core identity. But like all orchestras, it must also look ahead to rejuvenating its audience, wherever it performs. Started with a \$20 million grant from the Maltz Family Foundation, the Center for Future Audiences aims to make The Cleveland Orchestra audience the youngest in the country by 2018. In one of its boldest strokes, the Orchestra offers free tickets to anyone under 18, accompanied by an adult, to its summer Blossom Music Festival concerts. With further funding, the program will be expanded to Severance Hall. Gary Hanson:

In my opinion, if people are going to try out the experience of going to a live concert performance, you've got more a chance of hooking them if price is not a barrier. And so we are spending a lot of time and effort -- and money -- in attracting younger people to come to concerts at very low prices.

The orchestra's Learning Through Music program in the schools is another important component. Music director Franz Welser-Möst is an ardent believer in the importance of reaching listeners when they're young. Many orchestras must now do what their cities' underfunded schools are unable to do.

You cannot take it for granted anymore that young people get exposed to great art. So we have to reach out; we have to do different things to reach them. Because I believe if you have the quality and also the passion for something, it's compelling. And people will like it. And education is, more than ever, one of the most important parts of that. Otherwise we die.

No one in Cleveland is pretending they have all the answers to reach young audiences. Asked about the orchestra's use of social media, Gary Hanson was forthright but determined to think ahead.

I think that we are approaching it haphazardly, without a clear understanding of where the intersection will come between the compelling nature of a live concert experience and the interactive nature of social media. That said, it's my belief that the future of symphony orchestras will be more interactive. I actually believe that ten years from now, or maybe five years from now, we will encourage people with their iPhones to shoot videos of concerts when they're at them because they love it, and they're going to love it even more when they can take it home.

Hanson's open mind keeps churning about the possibilities.

And, I mean, the Grateful Dead became as big as the Grateful Dead did not because they had a record company contract and they did promotional tours and things like that. It's because they made it available. So that's what I mean by interactive. I actually think that the interactivity of the world today -- you know, there are TV shows about people who buy storage lockers. There are going to need to be TV shows about what's actually going on backstage in a symphony orchestra -- and it's pretty interesting.

Other programs include running busses to bring Clevelanders to Friday matinees; continuing to experiment with different concert formats, start-times and post-concert socializing with musicians; and playing concerts in the city's ethnically diverse neighborhoods. Hanson admits that some of these things may be short-lived or dead-end experiments.

But if you're going to be noticed, you have to do different things. And as with many of these programs, we can't say that neighborhood residencies are going to be something that the orchestra does for the next 10 or 20 years. We'll know a lot more after the first one, and we'll know an awful lot more after the second and third one. And if they don't have any traction, then we'll do something else.

In the end, as Hanson says, it has to be about the listeners' emotional response to the music:

They have to fall in love, and some of them will and some of them won't...And if you want them to fall in love, the best thing you can do is play great concerts, because at the end of the day, no matter what -- you know, marketing is important, and communication is important, all of that stuff is important, great facilities and all of that -- but if the concerts aren't any good, they won't come back, so it's really about playing great concerts.

As music director Franz Welser-Möst sees it, Cleveland's difficulties summon up the deepest resources of innovation and creativity.

The only way to move forward and do something good for the institution and for the community is if you have one principle, that a crisis is a challenge. And the challenge is welcome. Not the crisis is welcome, but the challenge is welcome. And you try to rise to that. And challenges stimulate creativity. ... I mean, you have to come up with new ideas, and try to be flexible and creative. And I think complacency is an enemy of the arts.

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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