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AUGUST 25, 2013

America's Orchestras are in Crisis

How an effort to popularize classical music undermines what makes orchestras great.

By [Philip Kennicott](#)

Photo: Getty Images

Before 2014, catch up on the best of 2013. For the next few weeks, we'll be re-posting a selection of our most thought-provoking pieces of the year.

In late June, the Nashville Symphony Orchestra came within days of foreclosure on its concert hall, an imposing neoclassical structure that opened in 2006. Designed by a national architecture firm that specializes in faux-historical buildings, and costing \$123.5 million, the Schermerhorn Symphony Center, with its massive columns and impressive portico, was meant to give one of this country's finest regional orchestras cultural and civic gravitas. ¹ But in March, leaders of the institution decided that they could no longer afford the interest rates on a letter of credit, and effectively threatened to default on their mortgage. A confidential agreement, brokered by wealthy symphony supporters, saved the orchestra from homelessness, but the situation remains bleak. In recent years, the Nashville Symphony

has been running deficits of \$10 to \$20 million a year, and a contract with the musicians is about to expire. If recent history is any guide, negotiations will be complex and rancorous.

It has been a dark few years for this country's orchestras. In the past season, a bitter strike in San Francisco and a lockout in Minneapolis led to cascading cancellations, including of the San Francisco Symphony's East Coast tour. Since the economic crisis of 2008, bankruptcies have afflicted orchestras around the country, leading to the closure of the Honolulu, Syracuse, and Albuquerque symphonies, and in April 2011 came the stunning news that one of the country's "Big Five," the Philadelphia Orchestra, had filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. Some of those groups reorganized, or opened in new forms, and Philadelphia emerged from bankruptcy in July 2012 with a hiring freeze, ten fewer players, and a 15 percent pay cut for the remaining ones.

No surprise, then, that many of the attendees at the recent annual meeting of the League of American Orchestras seemed in the grip of a strange mania, a mix of bitter gloom and hysterical optimism. The League, made up of orchestra managers and wealthy donors and board types, does not like bad news, and members tend to blame problems on the economy or on their musicians and the union that represents them. Not all orchestras are in dire straits, but all of them face roughly the same cultural and economic challenges, made painfully clear in the years since the economic crash of 2008. So the mood in St. Louis oscillated wildly between a counterfactual conviction that orchestras are too vitally necessary to civic life to disappear and a Cassandra-like compulsion for ineffectual truth-telling.

American orchestras, said Jesse Rosen, the League's president, in his keynote address, have had "more than our usual share of strikes, lockouts, and bankruptcies," and "this discord takes a heavy toll on the reputation of our entire community." But the field is beginning to reverse "the deficit trend line," and many groups are having a real social impact in their communities: in Stockton the symphony is working with youth to quell gang violence, and in Cleveland, whose orchestra was once led by the mandarin George Szell, the musicians have started a series at the Happy Dog Bar. Orchestras, argued Rosen, are finally grappling with big issues, including "the threshold of what we mean by diversity," and are contemplating radical new definitions of purpose: "Maybe the concert is not what it's ultimately about."

If all of this sounds familiar, perhaps that is because the theme of the League's meeting — "Reimagining 2023" — coincided with the twenty-year anniversary of its controversial

and much-derided report “Americanizing the American Orchestra,” a document that grappled with the same problems and offered much the same solution: a future in which the orchestra was redefined more as a social- and community-services organization than a musical one. In 1993, cultural diversity was promoted as a primary goal of orchestra activity, from hiring musicians (despite the near universal use of blind auditions) to repertory choice and boardroom and executive leadership. Orchestras were encouraged—some would say strong-armed—to think about their community’s needs, not their traditional role as custodians of a musical tradition.

Critics, most notably *The New York Times*’ Edward Rothstein, lacerated the “Americanizing” document, calling it “thoroughly wrongheaded, an abdication of the tradition orchestras represent and a refusal to accept the responsibilities of artistic leadership.”² But skeptics won only the battle, not the war. The League was embarrassed by the controversy—even today Catherine French, then the League’s CEO, refuses to be interviewed about the document—but most orchestras substantially adopted the basic tenets of the report. Rothstein’s critique was seen at the time as polemical, but much of his analysis was prescient: “Cynically led by its managerial class, the orchestra is explicitly urged to lean toward pop and make courting audiences its primary activity.”

The worry about leaning toward pop and courting audiences has a long and complicated history. Historians of classical music in the United States point out that the orchestra in America in the nineteenth century leaned and courted with Barnum-esque bravado—an orchestra program in the age of Mark Twain might include popular waltzes, Irish ballads, a movement of a Beethoven symphony, and a potboiler of patriotic ditties inexpertly woven into symphonic form. In some venues, juggling, ballet, and monologues from Shakespeare might be interspersed with the musical offerings, and clapping, whistling, and hooting were all acceptable, even during the music. When Twain recounted his European travels to American audiences, one thing he noted approvingly about the musical experience in Germany was the audiences: they were quiet, well-behaved, and reverential, unlike American audiences, which still enjoyed classical music as if in a beer hall.³

But the appeal to history does not end there. American orchestras got better and taste grew more refined. With an influx of European Jewish musicians in the 1930s and 1940s, American orchestras achieved a sophistication second to none in the Old World. The concert format became settled, audience members began to respect each other’s right

to listen attentively, and (like so many other cultural institutions in America) the whole thing took on a pseudo-historical aura of sacredness. Advocates for blowing up the current concert experience—which in the orchestral world is seen as the proper progressive approach—view this period as an aberration, a pompous deviation from the true trajectory of American musical history.

There was indeed pomposity aplenty and insufferable cultural posturing during the “golden age” of American orchestras. But as anyone who grew up accustomed to a quiet and focused concert hall can attest, there is no better way to hear Mozart, Mahler, and Messiaen. In the past century, most developments in the orchestra world, from the architecture and the acoustics of the concert hall to the economic structure of its governance, have tended to favor the development and appreciation of music as a complex and aurally subtle phenomenon. Beethoven may have written with the rowdy audience in mind, but the music of Debussy and Mahler assumed new conditions of listening, and pushed music to new extremes of intellectual concentration, sonic elaboration, and dynamic scale.

Americans tend to draw the line between connoisseurship and fatuousness at a level just slightly higher than their own degree of appreciation. Cultural authority rankles, as does anyone wagging an admonishing finger in the concert hall or art museum. Last year Richard Dare, then the CEO and managing director of the Brooklyn Philharmonic, leapt onto *The Huffington Post* with a polemical indictment of the concert-hall tradition: ⁴

The most common practices in classical musical venues today represent a contrite response to a totalitarian belief system no one in America buys into anymore. To participate obediently is to act as a slave. It is counter to our culture. And it is not, I am certain, what composers would have wanted: A musical North Korea. Who but a bondservant would desire such a ghastly fate? Quickly now: Rise to your feet and applaud. The Dear Leader is coming on stage to conduct. He will guide us, ever so worshipfully through the necrocracy of composers we are obliged to forever adore.

That the head of an important American orchestra could refer to the patrimony of classical music as a “necrocracy” was astonishing, but Dare only said openly what others in the musical establishment apparently believe. Dare, who prided himself as an entrepreneurial outsider to classical music, was briefly a hot commodity in the orchestra world. After he wrote his comments on musical decorum, he was hired away

from Brooklyn by the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, only to resign a few days later when it became known that he had been registered as a sex offender in California (the victim refused to cooperate with police and Dare later married her) and had inflated aspects of his résumé.

Dare's comments were another contribution to a long argument about what classical music in America should be. For decades, the musical world has been going through its own protracted and painful Vatican II, initially driven by the assumption that the only thing that really ails the form is a superficial matter of liturgy and presentation.

Conductors should turn away from the altar and face the congregants, speak in the vernacular, and forego white-tie-and-tails vestments. The service should be consumer-friendly. The process has liberated certain mavericks, and led to interesting experimentation. In the early 1970s, Pierre Boulez, then the music director of the New York Philharmonic, inaugurated his "rug concerts," removing the seats from the acoustically inert Philharmonic Hall and inviting listeners to recline on carpets and cushions. "There is so much formality involved in the performance of music that we make it hard for audiences to get emotionally involved," he said at the time.

But the same process also led to a severe dilution of the reverential aura surrounding music, and with it the implicit power of conductors to curate the concert experience. Like Vatican II, it brought on a severe crisis of confidence within the Church, and worse, it has not stemmed the decline in audience attendance or improved the financial bottom line. One striking thing about the League's annual navel-gazing in June was how many top orchestra leaders acknowledge that many of their innovations—educational programs, diversity and outreach efforts, musical healing events at hospitals and hospices, community concerts away from the orchestra hall—have not yielded anything encouraging when it comes to enticing new audiences. "But it's the right thing to do," they say, regardless.

The problems are financial and cultural, and the two are intertwined. For decades, orchestras operated on a subscription model, a kind of artistic socialism that spread the costs and risks of programming among a broad base of listeners. Audiences subscribed to a block of concerts throughout the season, choosing a night of the week that was convenient, or a series that generally appealed to their musical interests. Interspersed with familiar repertory were new or unfamiliar works, which might otherwise be difficult to sell to wary or conservative audiences. The large mass of Beethoven lovers subsidized the idiosyncratic tastes of the minority. The benefits of this system were myriad: advanced ticket sales stabilized orchestra budgets

and made planning easier; the programming was diversified and refreshed, and the musicians were consistently challenged; and listeners formed communities, socializing with each other at intermission. At the same time, the orchestras also moved to a year-round season, competed with each other for top players, and adopted union contracts that guaranteed professionalism but have become increasingly cumbersome.

In short, orchestras became more like newspapers than Internet start-ups, with huge fixed costs and a distressing dependency on consumer loyalty and on habits that proved fickle. The subscription model failed to keep up with rapidly changing demographic patterns, with the blandishments of the emerging entertainment economy, and with younger audiences—whose heterodox taste included classical music as only a part of their musical interest—unwilling to commit to a block of Thursday-night concerts. During the flush years, including the 1990s, when many orchestras raised more than adequate cash to cover costs, musician contracts became more generous, leaving a legacy of obligations that continues to stress budgets. At some point—no one can agree quite when, with some citing the rapid expansion of the Internet more than a decade ago and others blaming the economic crisis of 2008—the trend away from the subscription model and new financial pressures converged, and a sense of crisis set in.

Today orchestras are forced to sell concerts piecemeal, which (according to Deborah Borda, the president and CEO of the Los Angeles Philharmonic) costs three and a half times what was required to market subscription concerts.

Marketers must now target increasingly diverse and niche-focused audiences, and the repertory shows the results.

Orchestras no longer offer just classical and pops nights but have become presenters of all kinds of music, with or without orchestra backup. The Detroit Symphony, for example, uses a taxonomy that includes Classical, Pops, Jazz, Young People's/Tiny Tots, Civic & Education, and Special



Sam Kalda

KICKED TO THE CURB

In late June, the Nashville Symphony Orchestra came within days of foreclosure on its concert hall.

Event. The last of these, special events, has become a catch-all for almost any kind of music. Sift through various season calendars and you find video-game nights, the Texas Tenors, the Indigo Girls, Christmas, Halloween and Fourth of July events, movie evenings, and organ spectaculars, among others.

Almost none of this is of any interest to serious listeners, including those with diverse musical tastes who prefer the real thing to the local orchestra's attempt to imitate jazz, ethnic, or pop forms. In some cases, it has also curtailed the number of nights the orchestra presents classical music, and the repertory presented on those evenings is more limited. Orchestras increasingly rely on the drawing power of star soloists to sell classical repertory, which means more repetition of a handful of overfamiliar concertos, and huge fees to (and unholy bargains with) management agencies that marshal top talent.

But the most paradoxical and distressing result is the utterly generic quality of what most American orchestras now offer. By parsing audience taste to smaller fractions, the concert schedule in Oklahoma looks more and more like the concert schedule in Maine. At the League conference, the mantra was all “local, local, local”—that orchestras will survive only by catering in nuanced ways to their local constituents (not to audiences or listeners or music lovers, who are all passé). But a tendency toward groupthink across the field has led to the repetition of the same solutions, few of them successful or in any way particularly local. The original headline of Rothstein’s critique of the League’s last big effort at thinking outside the box is as accurate now as it was then: “Be Smart as a Lemming, Orchestras are Told.”

As they scramble to maintain audience share, orchestras lose goodwill among their traditional audience. Today, it is essential in only a very few cities to know what the local orchestra is performing, who is conducting, who is the soloist, and what new pieces have been commissioned. A visitor to a midsize American city will get a better sense of the place by visiting the art museum, strolling downtown, taking a bus, sitting in a park, and suffering the nightly newscast than spending two hours with the local orchestra. This is the real crisis, according to some veteran orchestra leaders. Over the past decade or so, “the idea of an orchestra and its conductor representing something began to dilute,” says Tom Morris, who led the Cleveland Orchestra from 1987 to 2004.

To be fair, orchestras may have few options, and much of the battle was lost decades ago. Orchestra leaders bought a lot of snake oil in hopes of democratizing the concert experience, and now they have an audience that views classical music as just one

among many entertainment options, and as not very entertaining compared with bubble-gum pop and action movies. They talk about education but have in many places done away with program notes. Marketing material uses a hyperbolic language of emotional engagement to oversell the concert experience, implying that one has only to pull up a rug and surrender to the music. That musical appreciation takes work, and that its greatest rewards are cumulative over a lifetime rather than immediate, is not much discussed.

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Panic has set in, especially among board members, who are well intentioned but often not very imaginative. This has helped to fuel the labor crisis in the past few years, making some orchestras particularly aggressive about cutting costs at the musicians' expense. A sideshow argument about whether there is, in fact, anything new about the current crisis—labor leaders accurately cite decades of worry about “crisis” in the orchestra world—still animates the field. The American Federation of Musicians, which represents orchestra members, has not always been very nimble at adapting to new circumstances, but in many cases it is the musicians, speaking through their local union, who are the most consistent advocates for maintaining high standards and a commitment to the core classical repertory. They would argue that the focus on crisis is a diversion, and that orchestra boards simply need to redouble their efforts at fund-raising.

But the well is not as deep as it has been. In 2011, Rosen addressed the League meeting with what is now called his “red alert” speech, acknowledging deep financial and structural problems, including a 29 percent decrease in participation in classical music over the past twenty years and a 50 percent decrease in corporate giving over the same period. Most distressing, however, was the onset of donor fatigue: “National and local institutional funders and individual donors are telling us that they question continued investment in orchestras.” The musicians’ belief in the efficacy of renewed fund-raising efforts may not take account of this trend, or the lack of cultural connection that many younger entrepreneurs feel for their local orchestras.

Yet the musicians' faith in the music is not naïve at all. It is, in fact, the bedrock on which

Ythe orchestra was founded and on which it will survive. The core repertory of the orchestra from Haydn onward sounds better than it ever has. The “totalitarian” concert experience that Dare criticized is in fact countercultural, obliging listeners to explore humility through attention to unfamiliar ideas, without regard to their own immediate need for gratification. It has never been easier, owing to the Internet and other media, to deepen one’s knowledge and enjoyment of classical music. Except for the cost of a ticket—which is admittedly too expensive for many listeners—there is nothing standing between people’s desire to hear great music and the institutions that specialize in making it.

The future of the American orchestra may well look like the Church after Vatican II, a contest between “progressives,” who believe, as Rosen suggests, that “the concert is not what it’s really about,” and traditionalists, who search out the rare High Mass of real music or retreat to their home stereos and isolation. The best hope for the latter is still big-city orchestras that must for now cater to an older, more traditional audience, which includes serious listeners. But even that category—serious listeners—is an uncomfortable one for almost all orchestra leaders.

Many in the managerial class, especially those who first trained as musicians, care deeply about the rich, variegated, and complex history of classical music, but can find no practical way to offer that history to like-minded patrons. Instead they work with a caricature of the audience, dividing it into two classes, one made up of younger, adventurous listeners willing to try anything, and the other composed of older, problematic ones, who want only Beethoven’s Fifth night after night. But the serious listener, who is adventurous and critical, open and discriminating, does not fit into either of these categories. Among the most worrisome signs for the orchestra is how little concern there is for listeners who care deeply about the infinite variety of orchestra music—Mozart, Mendelssohn, or Lutosławski—but have little use for syncretic hybrids. As always, there is an economic explanation for the marginalization of the serious listener: interesting repertoire takes more time to rehearse, it is difficult to market, it cannot be repeated with the frequency of more popular fare. And serious listeners are resistant to the basic ideological sleight-of-hand behind so much programming: they do not believe that trivial music is worth the same investment as the core repertory, and so they vote with their feet and stay home. This gets them marked as fickle supporters of the civic institution.

he League of American Orchestras has always been a bit of an embarrassment. It offers

Tits members invaluable information, including details about wages and union contracts that let managers drive hard bargains. But when it comes to art, the League thinks at the level of an airline magazine.⁵ This year's meeting felt like a Rotarian convention, and it ended with a group-therapy session. Look into the eyes of the person next to you, commanded the moderator, and repeat after me: "I have a dream for America's orchestras. I am the future of America's orchestras." This was followed by a group of professional futurists who recommended innovations such as encouraging orchestra musicians "to tap their inner fashionista" while on stage. A Twitter session was run concurrently, in which participants struggled to express their hopes and dreams in a handful of words ("permanent end to musician-management conflict," "professional musicians paid more than professional athletes," "underfunded defense department pleads for funding").

But another, sadder embarrassment came early in the conference, when the St. Louis Symphony Youth Orchestra performed at the opening session. For decades, St. Louis has been in the forefront of musical education, and the results were readily apparent in sectional cohesiveness, confident brass and winds, and the professional caliber of the string tone. Never mind that there are very few African American faces in the orchestra, despite years of outreach, and the city's nearly 50 percent black population. That failure is shared among most orchestras countrywide, despite their best efforts.

More telling for the future was a piece that the group performed, a composition by Ingram Marshall called "Kingdom Come." The quarter-hour symphonic mood sketch uses recorded sounds from churches in the former Yugoslavia to dramatize the Bosnian conflict. Over an electronic soundtrack of bells and choral sounds, the orchestra performs in a simple post-minimalist style, somewhat akin to the music of Arvo Pärt. The piece checks all the currently fashionable boxes for new classical works: it is harmonically and melodically accessible and socially topical, it mixes media, and it draws on musical cultures outside the concert hall.

But it doesn't work. One admired the young players performing it, but felt embarrassed to watch them subservient to the electronic musical enhancement. What little they could contribute was trivial, a few anguished short phrases that were tossed around like super-charged phonemes, never cohering into meaningful sentences or paragraphs. The challenge was all in staying together with a mediocre recording that would hardly pass muster on YouTube, and it was sad to see live musicians temporally yoked to what was coming out of the speakers.

Bad music is inevitable, of course, as long as music is written. The problem with “Kingdom Come” is that it subverts much that is good about the tradition it supposedly continues. The orchestra willingly suppressed virtuosity, spontaneity, and the raw power of its acoustic sound. One can understand how and why adults concoct this sort of thing, why a market has developed for political poster music that offers only a generic sense of sadness at mankind’s sufferings. But why make young people play it? It seems a very ill sign for the future that bad music is so willingly foisted on serious junior musicians who have already made a commitment to the art form. American cultural leaders have always been terrified of their duty to lead taste and to maintain standards. But it is best never to show fear in the presence of children.

Philip Kennicott is the Art and Architecture Critic of The Washington Post.

- 1 The Schermerhorn Symphony Center was designed by the Washington D.C.-based [David M. Schwarz Architects](#) - <http://www.dmsas.com/#> - , which specializes in historical-looking buildings. The firm is particularly popular in Texas and the South.
- 2 Edward Rothstein [excoriates](#) - <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/07/11/arts/classical-view-be-smart-as-a-lemming-orchestras-are-told.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm> - what was then known as the American Symphony Orchestra League (despite the unfortunate acronym that produced).
- 3 In “[A Tramp Abroad](#) - <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/119/119-h/119-h.htm> - ,” Twain breaks from his tone of general bemusement to express admiration for the well-behaved German musical audience, and the admirable customs of their concert halls: “I listened undisturbed to a piece of music that was fifteen minutes long.”
- 4 Richard Dare on “[The Awfulness of Classical Music](#) - http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-dare/classical-music-concerts_b_1525896.html - .”
- 5 The [League of American Orchestras](#) - <http://www.americanorchestras.org/> - would probably disagree. The League also publishes Symphony magazine, hosts an annual convention, lobbies in Washington, and provides education, leadership development and other support services for the orchestra field.

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