

The sound of change: America's symphonies

For America's 1,100 symphony orchestras, these are turbulent times. Never have there been more of them playing so often and so innovative a selection of programs. Yet they are confronting a seething cultural climate and a continuing financial plight. This article is the first of three on the fast-changing state of U.S. orchestras today.

by Jacquin Sanders
Newsweek Feature Service

Symphony Hall, USA, is not what it used to be.

The old image of a dusty museum of music is gone. So is that Prussian father-figure, the conductor, ruling as if by Divine Right over his miserably paid and thoroughly cowed musicians. And so, most of all, are the overrich, overdressed and musically undereducated audiences.

The symphony has become a movement. No longer confined to a small segment of the population in a handful of major cities, it is spreading all across the country and everywhere it is seeking to become an integral part of the community.

IN FACT, the U.S. is fairly bursting with symphony orchestras. There are now more than 1,100 of them and fully 28 are classified as "major" orchestras with yearly budgets in excess—some way in excess—of \$1 million.

This huge diversification comes as a surprise to many Americans and an amazement to foreigners. It also runs counter to every national trend.

While nearly everything else—from professional sports to electronics to the panty-hose industry—has been merging and consolidating, hundreds of new symphonies have come into being in the past decade, even as the old established orchestras were growing bigger, better and more traveled.

WHAT'S MORE, unlike a number of other enterprises, the nation's symphony orchestras have made it with only miniscule aid from the federal government. And despite chronic financial troubles, they have managed a steady lengthening of their seasons and a steady rise in the salaries of their musicians.

It is a pattern. At one extreme, the Pittsburgh Symphony, now the most heavily endowed in the country with \$22 million, plays as many road engagements as it can manage away from its home at the Heinz Hall for the Performing Arts. At the other, the 86-member Cedar Rapids (Iowa) Symphony splits into small groups which play some 50 concerts every year in local schools.

This is missionary work and it's necessary because to much of the public symphony music retains its old "carriage trade" image. To an extent, the image is justified.

IN A "PROFILE" of its audience, the San Francisco Symphony discovered that one-half were in the \$15,000-and-over income bracket, that 4 in every 5 were college-educated and that 26 per cent drove Cadillacs, Lincolns or Chryslers. More



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ominously, 50 per cent of the audience were more than 45 years old.

Still, young people all around the country are being pushed, prodded and sometimes nearly pulverized by exposure to symphonic music. Most orchestras give special "youth concerts" with the conductor explaining along with the music. Open rehearsals, where the audience feels no compulsion to dress up, are also common.

The Los Angeles Philharmonic puts on "mini-marathons" at the Hollywood Bowl—admission \$1. The Jackson (Miss.) Symphony has "brown bag" concerts during the lunch hour. Seattle Symphony's conductor, Milton Katims, thinks of everything: he even has containers of free cough drops in the lobby—so his audience is not disturbed by the inevitable coughers.

The St. Louis Symphony—the country's second oldest (after New York)—tries constantly to draw people who would not ordinarily attend concerts. Associate conductor Leonard Slatkin wrote an orchestral composition around Poe's "The Raven"—and imported native St. Louisan Vincent Price to narrate the poem as the orchestra played.

ONCE THE "NEW" audience is lured inside the concert hall, another quandary develops. Does the conductor play what he knows most audiences like and expect—old war-horses like the Tchaikovsky Sixth, the more accessible Beethoven, anything by Ravel? Or does he give the customers what he thinks they ought to like—pioneer musical innovators like Alban Berg, Arnold Schoenberg, Anton von Webern or their contemporary and still more difficult followers, Charles Wuorinen, George Crumb, Eric Salzman?

Perhaps the easiest way out is to play "Jesus Christ Superstar," as the Denver Symphony did recently—to a packed house. Or to inaugurate something like "Dallasound"—

pop and rock concerts sometimes played by the Dallas Symphony.

The solution, of course, is to give everybody something they like. But since the heaviest contributors to symphony drives are mainly old guard in their musical tastes, the war-horses remain well exercised.

Among those who disagree is Pierre Boulez, the new conductor and music director of the New York Philharmonic. Succeeding the passionate but predictable conducting of Leonard Bernstein, Boulez is dedicated to revolutionizing concert music.

"I must abandon the past," says Boulez. "There's got to be more to concerts than cheering audiences. The great adventure to music is to make things different."



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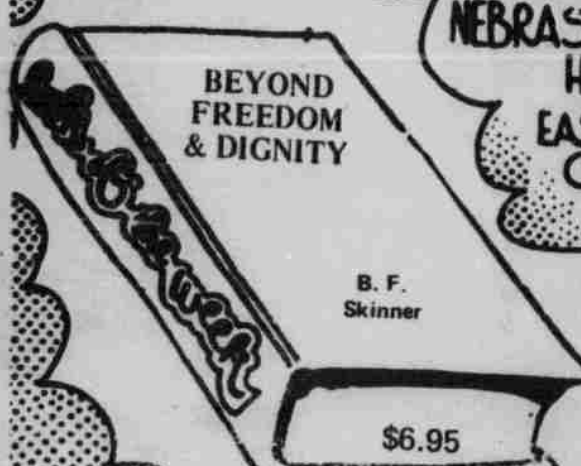
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