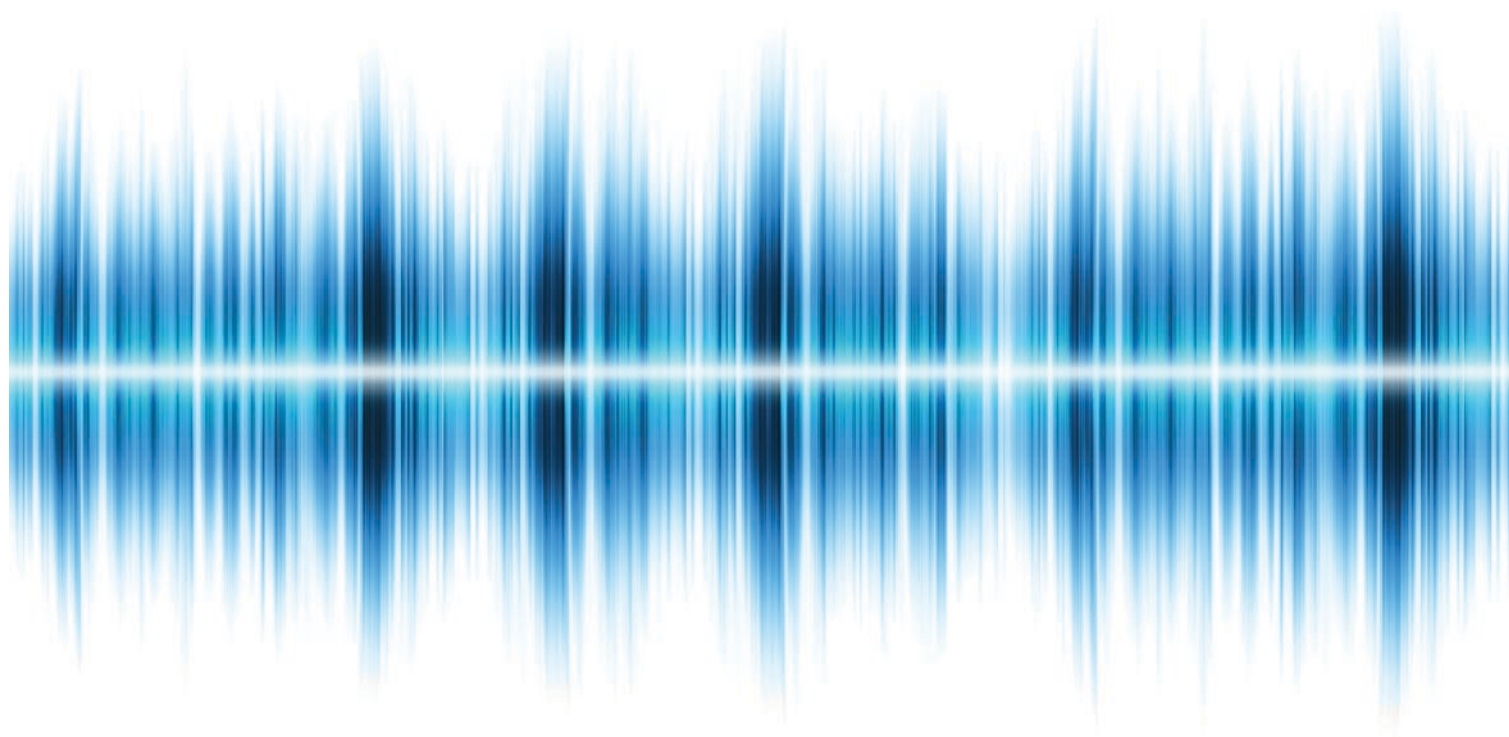


# The Greatness Paradox



Has the orchestral repertoire adapted and evolved with the times? As the League marks its 75th anniversary, critic **Alex Ross** examines the ways that the works orchestras play have—and haven't—balanced the past and the present. Can orchestras come up with a definition of excellence that goes beyond music of the past to fully embrace the here and now?

The word “repertory,” around which the discussion of musical life so often revolves, is derived from the Latin word “repertorium,” meaning a catalogue, an inventory—literally, that which has been discovered. It achieved currency in the musical world in the late nineteenth century, when it began to signify the relatively fixed assortment of works that a theater company, a ballet company, an opera house, or an orchestra was prepared and expected to perform. That it acquired such a meaning in the late 1800s is no surprise, since that was the period in which concert programs began to tilt from the present to the past. William Weber’s invaluable researches into nineteenth-century European concert life have established as much.

Remarkably, that quotation is from 1861.

The repertory is, of course, never fixed. While Beethoven has never strayed from its center, other composers have come and gone, and the median point keeps moving

moment to step back and take in the lay of the land, both from my own vantage point and on a broader historical basis. I have often had the feeling that a deeper, more fundamental shift in how orchestras

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forward in time. Mahler made a belated entry into the canon in the 1960s and ’70s, and now rivals Beethoven and Tchaikovsky in popularity. In recent decades, Shostakovich has become a mainstay. Meanwhile, a composer like César Franck, whose Symphony was once an unavoidable warhorse, has experienced a steep

program their seasons is under way—one that might herald a return to the contemporary-minded world that existed before Weber’s “great transformation.” Whether or not such a change can be statistically verified, I remain convinced that the future of the orchestra depends on a reconsideration of its relationship with the past.

A graph in Weber’s 2008 book *The Great Transformation of Musical Taste* shows how the music of dead composers came to dominate concerts in Paris, London, Leipzig, and Vienna. In 1782, in Leipzig, the percentage of “historical” works was as low as eleven. By 1830, it was around 50, going as high as 74 in Vienna. By the 1860s and ’70s, the figure ranged from 74 to 94 percent. Matters progressed to the point where organizers of a Paris series were observing that their subscribers “get upset when they see the name of a single contemporary composer on the programs.”

decline. Behind those surface changes, a basic principle has remained in place: the no longer living still hold sway, even if a number of them lived into the twentieth century and are part of living memory.

I have been active as a music critic for 25 years, first at *The New York Times* and since 1996 at *The New Yorker*. In my writing, the question of the repertory—how it came to be, how it might be changing, how it could change further—has been a constant obsession. On the occasion of the League of American Orchestras’ 75th anniversary, I thought it would be a good

For many years, the League of American Orchestras has been issuing annual reports about the American orchestral repertory. I took a close look at a report from the 1994-95 season, toward the beginning of my career as a critic. Unlike more recent League reports, it lacks a statistical summary that would indicate the percentages of American composers and of works written in the preceding 25 years. Yet a quick examination of the alphabetical listing shows that performances of contemporary pieces were, in fact, rather more common toward the beginning of my 25-year pe-

riod than they are today. In the 2013 report, for which 57 orchestras submitted information, 38 pieces, or 4.1 percent, fell into the contemporary category. In 1994-95, I counted, in the listing for Category 1 orchestras alone, no fewer than 145 pieces composed after 1970; dozens more ap-

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peared in the other categories.

This was discouraging to find: I would have thought, on an anecdotal basis, that the percentage of new and recent work had increased. One can guess the reasons for the decline. In the 1980s and into the mid-'90s, composers enjoyed a strong wave of support from both public and private entities, with Meet the Composer providing the strongest push. In 1990, 32 orches-

trated his 70th birthday. Back in 1994-95, William Bolcom, one of the most popular American composers, was given ten performances; Adams, only four. Even more notably, women are now far better represented in the repertory lists. In 1994-95, two of the most widely recognized female com-

posers, Ellen Taaffe Zwilich and Joan Tower, received four and three performances respectively. In 2012-13, Jennifer Higdon had nine performances; in 2006-07, she had 20, and Tower enjoyed no fewer than 28, thanks to her nationwide *Ford Made in America* commission through the League.

There is still much progress to be made. According to a survey by Ricky O'Bannon, only 1.7 percent of works performed by

when I went to Los Angeles in 1994, to observe Esa-Pekka Salonen in his third season with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. I felt the same in San Francisco in 1996, when Michael Tilson Thomas hosted the first of his American Mavericks festivals. At that time, the conventional wisdom held that new-music-minded conductors were destined to fail. Pierre Boulez's tenure at the New York Philharmonic was held up as the great unsuccessful experiment. (Never mind that Boulez actually did very well at the box office.) The West Coast orchestras have put that wisdom to rest. Salonen's long reign in L.A. ended in triumph, and Tilson Thomas is still going strong in San Francisco. Ludovic Morlot has applied a similar model at the Seattle Symphony, scoring a huge success by commissioning John Luther Adams's *Become Ocean*, which went on to win the Pulitzer Prize. At the New York Philharmonic,

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tradas had composers-in-residence. More recently, such support has substantially weakened, although New Music USA and the League continue to encourage contemporary programming. The scholar-critic William Robin, in his Ph.D. thesis on latter-day compositional trends, notes that in 2016 New Music USA awarded around \$1 million in grants. Back in 1990, Meet the Composer gave approximately \$2.5 million, which, adjusted for inflation, comes to \$4.6 million. Without such financial incentives, orchestras have found it more difficult to program contemporary works. They always require an extra investment, both of time and of money.

At the same time, one can see positive changes in the status of new music. In 1994-95, no living composer enjoyed anything like the exalted position of John Adams, who received 25 performances in the 2012-13 season, and who has had more in the 2016-17 season, in which he cel-

87 orchestras in the 2015-16 season were written by women; none at all were by women of the past. As the broadcaster Brian Lauritzen pointed out in March, a fair number of orchestras have programmed not a single work by a female composer in the 2017-18 season. When so many classical institutions are trying to transcend stuffy stereotypes and reach out to younger generations, it is surely self-defeating to present an entirely all-male season—or, in the case of the Metropolitan Opera, an all-male century. The situation is no better for composers of minority backgrounds, particularly African-Americans. When we talk about diversity, we should also be looking at diversity in the repertory, which is dominated to an extraordinary degree by white males.

Fortunately, there are signs of alternative models emerging. The West Coast orchestras have been particularly lively in this regard. I had the sense of a sea-change

Alan Gilbert launched a new-music Biennial and caused sensations with György Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre* and Magnus Lindberg's *Kraft*.

Not just the biggest-budgeted orchestras have thrived on this kind of approach. Some of my favorite adventures in orchestra-land have been with ensembles that fall into the questionable category "regional"—questionable because every orchestra belongs to a region, and should think of itself that way. On a 2007 visit to Birmingham, Alabama, I spoke to Justin Brown, then the music director of the Alabama Symphony Orchestra, about his programming of the Danish composer Poul Ruders and the British composer Jonny Greenwood, better known as the lead guitarist of Radiohead. More recently, in Louisville, the conductor Teddy Abrams told me of his vision for the Louisville Orchestra, which once had a great tradition of playing and recording contemporary works and is now reviving



it with annual American-music festivals. I have yet to hear the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra in person, but it has won a slew of ASCAP and League of American Orchestras awards for its unstinting commitment to living Americans. Organizations in the mid-sized and small-budget range often seem to have more freedom to experiment, since audiences are less likely to associate them with a storied tradition heavy with renditions of the classics.

From 2011 to 2014, the Spring for Music festival at Carnegie Hall celebrated orchestras not for their sound but for their vision. Some superb performances were on display; Sedgwick Clark, a veteran orchestra observer, and I concurred in judging the Oregon Symphony's "Music for a Time of War" program—consisting of Ives's *The Unanswered Question*, John Adams's *The Wound-Dresser*, Britten's *Sinfonia da Requiem*, and Vaughan Williams's Fourth Symphony—to have been the most memorable concert of the 2010-11 season. Spring for Music has led in turn to the SHIFT Festival, whose first edi-

tion unfolded at the Kennedy Center this spring. The Boulder Philharmonic, the North Carolina Symphony, the Atlanta Symphony, and the Knights presented concerts consisting almost entirely of new or recent pieces. This kind of programming was exceedingly uncommon back in the

Orchestras are still most widely defined as purveyors of Great Music, and Great Music is most widely defined as the music of the past. I long for a different definition of excellence: one that places a premium on precise and impassioned performances of the music of our day. I wonder, though,

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early 1990s, although the Brooklyn Philharmonic and the American Symphony Orchestra were pioneering a thematic approach.

The common trend in all this activity is purposeful, surprising programming. As a critic, I am interested as much—if not more—in *what* an orchestra plays than in *how* it plays. In this respect, I know I am at odds with the expectations of a great many audience members, not to mention the inclinations of more than a few musicians.

how much longer the old model will persist. Today's audiences are increasingly disinclined to subscribe to an orchestra's entire season, instead picking and choosing from a menu of events. In such a marketplace, novelty may ultimately count for more than the tried and true.

Not infrequently, when I speak in public about my enthusiasm for contemporary music, someone will approach me and ask: "Which of these new works you're so excited about will still be around 50 or 100 years



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from now?” I detect an undertow of skepticism in the query: the implicit answer is, “Very few, surely.” But isn’t this fundamentally a very peculiar question—not to mention an unanswerable one? When you go to the movies, do you ask whether a given film will be on *Sight and Sound*’s poll of the greatest movies of all time in the year 2067? When you shop for a new novel at

make the case for it, it’s worth trying to articulate what a healthy commitment to new music can accomplish. Sometimes, contemporary works can deliver potent commentary on modern life. *Become Ocean* has special weight because of John Luther Adams’s lifelong commitment to environmental issues. Sometimes, they challenge us with unfamiliar terrain: I won’t

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a bookstore, do you ponder whether it will be on a Great Books syllabus in 2117? You probably do not. You want to see a movie or read a book that engages you right now, not according to the projected aesthetics of the distant future.

It should go without saying that artistic institutions should pay attention to the present. But since we still seem to need to

soon forget the amazement of the faces of some longtime New York Philharmonic subscribers as they found themselves relishing the dissonant frenzy of Lindberg’s *Kraft*, complete with clanging car parts. (Gilbert, in preliminary remarks from the podium, had done an excellent job of preparing listeners for what was about to happen.) Often, they simply give pleasure:

there is no shortage of composers steeped in lush Romantic tonality and orchestration. Whether such music will long endure should be of no concern. When you go back and examine nineteenth-century repertory, you see a vast number of names that are now obscure. A notable example is Herr Anton Eberl, whose Symphony in E-flat was praised by one critic at the expense of Beethoven’s *Eroica*. Beethoven’s symphony, the critic wrote, was “glaring and bizarre,” while Eberl’s was “beautiful and powerful.” It is easy to mock this unfortunate commentator. But there is no reason to doubt that he found Eberl’s symphony “extraordinarily pleasing.” In fact, it’s not a bad piece—the Concerto Köln has recorded it. And it serves as a reminder that not only the brand-name composers are worth reviving. In place of minor works by major figures, I’d like to see more major works by lesser-known ones. Instead of Shostakovich’s Third or Twelfth, let’s hear Gavriil Popov’s towering First Symphony, from 1935, which helped to shape Shostakovich’s mature style. In place of one more *New World* Symphony, let’s hear something by the gifted early-twentieth-century African-American composer Florence Price.

The orchestra of the future, if I may be permitted a Wagnerian turn of phrase, is one that will cease looking to the past as a golden age into which musicians and audiences alike wish to escape. With works new and old, we will want to know what they say to us in the here and now; the assumption of inherent greatness will no longer be enough. To be sure, that future will require a revolutionary shift—perhaps the demise of the concept of the repertory itself. But it doesn’t mean the abandonment of the works that make up the repertory: rather, it creates a fresh rationale for their endurance. At the heart of the repertory lies an unavoidable paradox: if musical culture had always adhered to the notion that greatness dwells in the past, the masterpieces that so enthrall us would never have existed in the first place. For too long we have subsisted on past ages’ desire for the new: we must now cultivate our own. **S**

ALEX ROSS is the music critic of *The New Yorker* and the author of the books *The Rest Is Noise* and *Listen to This*.

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