

“Americanizing the American Orchestra” at 30

A History and a Provocation

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WEB ESSAYS

Rage Against the Machine

If the American symphony orchestra is to survive, it must be rewired and reengineered

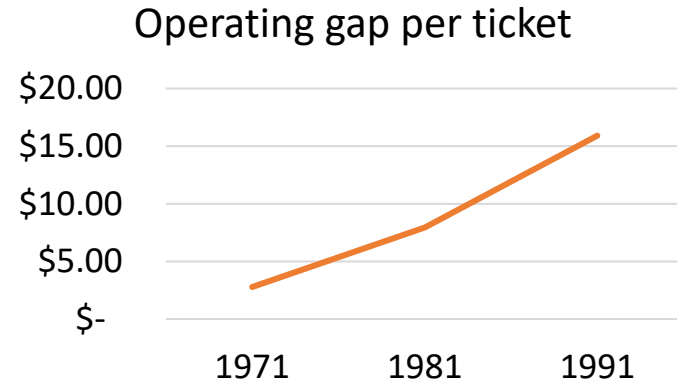
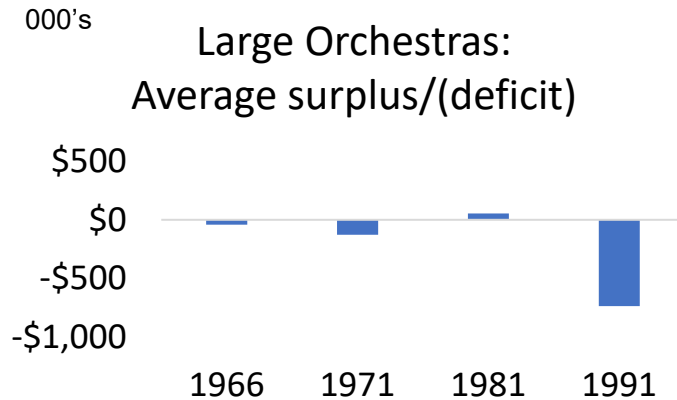
By Douglas McLennan | October 13, 2022



“The orchestra industry is in financial crisis”

“Unless changes are made in the way orchestras do business—changes that are substantial and systemic—the future health of the orchestra industry is in serious jeopardy”

- 1992 Wolf Org. research report



Dr. Wolf challenged the industry's paradigms

A few of his challenges:

1. Why a **single venue**? What about local (neighborhood) and regional touring?
2. How long can American orchestras remain **white, upper-class institutions**?
3. When will orchestras take a more active role in the long-term **development and training of musicians of color**?
4. Why aren't orchestras taking a greater role in forging **local partnerships**?
5. Why haven't orchestras spent more time and effort making the **concert-going experience** more enticing to those who are not hard-core music lovers?
6. When will orchestras develop a collective decision-making structure that makes everyone a **stakeholder in the industry's future**?

The warning

“...without significant change, orchestras could easily become both culturally and socially irrelevant.”

“Wolf Report” diagnosis: Society is changing, Orchestras aren’t

“In the face of shifting community needs and cultural agendas, orchestras are finding that their current missions and programs lack meaning for many people.”

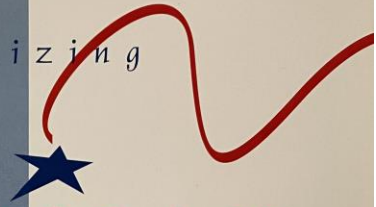
- “This living musical tradition is now **in trouble on many fronts.**”
- “Larger numbers of **citizens see:**
the orchestra in their community as a **benefit to ‘other people,’** not themselves, and
the repertoire as representing **‘other people’s music’...**”
- “...rapid and significant economic, cultural, political, social, and technological **transformations in American society** [are challenging the missions and structures of orchestras]”

The report's development process - **Issue Forums**

- The Orchestra as Music Educator
- Achieving Cultural Diversity
- Varying the Concertgoing Experience
- The Changing Nature of Volunteerism
- Developing and Evaluating Leadership
- The Relationship of Musicians and the Orchestral Institution

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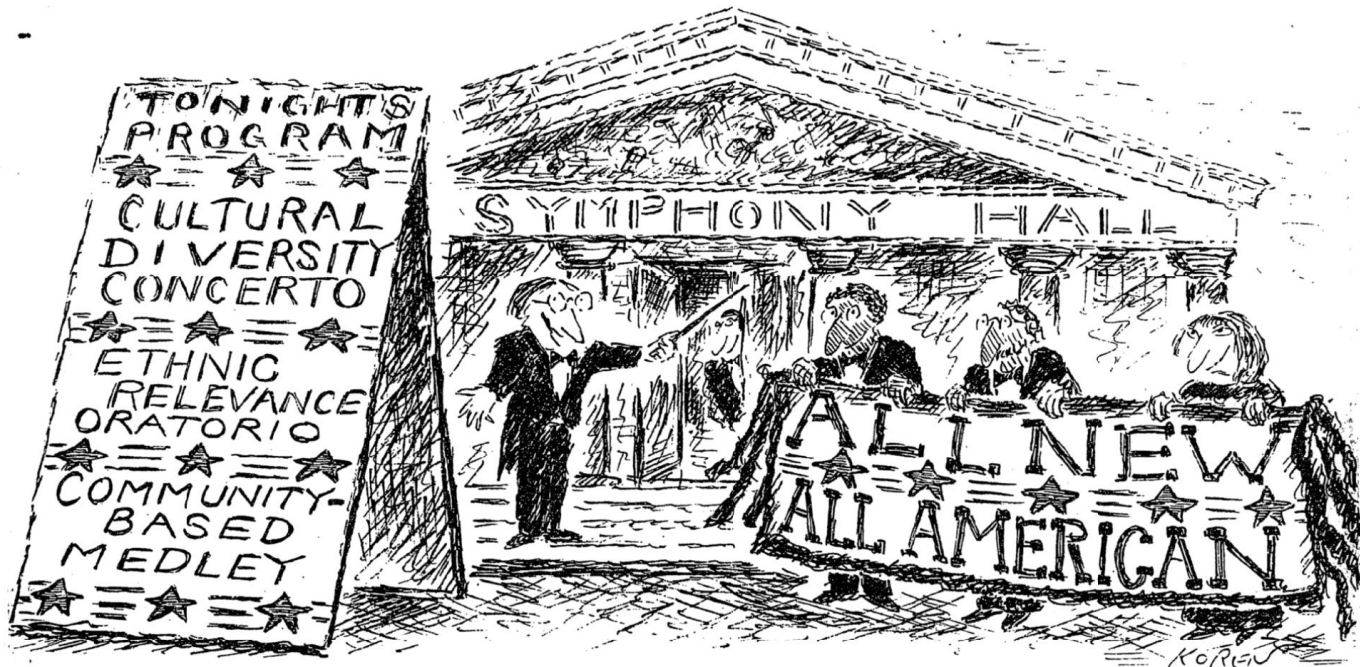
REPORT
of the
NATIONAL TASK FORCE
for
THE AMERICAN ORCHESTRA:
AN INITIATIVE FOR CHANGE

JUNE 1993

Convened by the
American Symphony Orchestra League

The Report: What are the qualities of a New American Orchestra?

1. Dedication to providing music of **excellence** and beauty...
... to a rapidly changing, democratic, pluralistic society
2. Repertoire and talent **reflective of America** and the orchestra's region
3. Musicians incorporated as **partners** in decision making and programming
4. Serves cultural, educational and social **needs** in its community
5. Alert to the need to **cultivate a love of music** in the younger generation
6. An organizational structure **capable of responding to change**



CLASSICAL VIEW/Edward Rothstein

Be Smart as a Lemming, Orchestras Are Told

WHAT IS WRONG WITH American orchestras? Last year, at the annual meeting of the American Symphony Orchestra League, a report on orchestral finances warned of coming disasters: bankrupt organizations, crippling union and scheduling commitments, dwindling audiences. At its meeting last month, the league unveiled another report, "Americanizing the American Orchestra," summarizing the findings of a national task force of 156 musicians, critics and managers.

The report's title reveals its premise: The American orchestra is too European. By extension, it is elitist and irrelevant to its surrounding community. In fact, the orchestra has resisted sharing the "secrets and norms of participation," creating the image of an "exclusive, arrogant, possibly racist institution."

The prescription is blunt: "American orchestras should reflect more closely the cultural mix, needs and interests of their communities." This means creating affirmative action programs in hiring and programming

and performing more pop, jazz and cross-over music. Orchestras should overhaul themselves, from the repertory to the board room, to become more "representative" of their communities. They should alter "attitudes, thinking and behaviors" that have impeded inclusiveness, and hire consultants to begin "diversity sensitivity training." These actions will help guarantee the orchestra's future as a "vital American institution."

The analysis is not novel; it has been percolating in the music world for some time, adapted from more general political argu-

ments. But — to be as blunt as the report — it is thoroughly wrongheaded, an abdication of the tradition orchestras represent and a refusal to accept the responsibilities of artistic leadership. Some music professionals, reluctant to oppose the powerful league openly, have correctly argued that the recommendations will themselves insure the irrelevance of the American orchestra.

The report's distortions begin with its premise. American orchestras are already quite American. Their management styles and structures, involving the use of volun-

teers and boards and fund-raising, differ radically from those of most European orchestras, which are connected directly to municipalities. The unionization of musicians began here and has greatly affected the internal culture of orchestras.

And while much of the repertory is European in origin, the absence of American composers is not a result of specific neglect but a sign of a more general problem: a split between much of the art music of this century and contemporary audiences. Programming

Continued on Page 27

Orchestras have grievous problems involving repertory, audience and mission. Buried in this report are good ideas about education and the need to involve various communities in the life of an orchestra. But this panicked attempt to Americanize the American orchestra is so fearful of the elite demands of art that it is content with a musical culture determined by demography. In bringing the racial politics of the streets into the concert halls, it may very well Americanize the orchestra into extinction.

This report is a disgrace.

americanizing the
**AMERICAN
ORCHESTRA**

Report of the National Task Force

for

The American Orchestra: An Initiative for Change

June 1993

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Areas of issues and changes to address

1. Programming (repertoire)

2. Diversity (cultural, racial)

3. Musician – Administration Relationship

4. Concertgoing Experience

5. Music Education

6. Changing Nature of Volunteerism

7. Developing Leadership Capacity

“Americanizing” an orchestra
means addressing many issues
across these areas

What progress been made?

A 30-year report card for PSO (and large orchestras in general)

1. Programming (repertoire)

2. Diversity (cultural, racial)

3. Musician – Administration Relationship

4. Concertgoing Experience

5. Music Education

6. Changing Nature of Volunteerism

7. Developing Leadership Capacity

Grade	Comments
B	Accelerating improvements in last several years
F	Have lost decades of opportunities to build
A-	Substantial progress in past several years
F	Would a Heinz Hall visitor from 1992 notice anything different?
C+	Much progress since mid-1990's but a long way to still to go
C	Real mix of strengths and gaps
C+	Capacity to sustain but limited capacity to drive change; currently investing in capacity building