“Americanizing the American Orchestra” at 30

A History and a Provocation
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
Americanizing the American Orchestra

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*
Be Smart as a Lemming, Orchestras Are Told

The report’s title reveals its premise: The American orchestra is too European. By emphasizing the need for orchestras to reflect the diverse and inclusive community, it challenges the traditional makeup of these institutions, urging them to become more representative of their communities. This is a call for orchestras to embrace diversity in a way that goes beyond mere inclusiveness, fostering a cultural environment that is truly reflective of the societies they serve.

The reasoning behind this approach is profound. By integrating different stylistic elements, such as jazz and crossover music, orchestras can attract new audiences and enrich the music they produce. This not only broadens the appeal of classical music but also helps to prevent the loss of audience interest in the genre.

Orchestras are challenged to rethink their approach to traditional music. By exploring new horizons, they can maintain their cultural significance while also becoming relevant to younger and more diverse audiences. This shift is crucial to the survival of orchestras, as they seek to attract new generations of music lovers.

The report suggests that orchestras should be proactive in seeking out partnerships with cultural organizations and educational institutions. This collaboration can lead to the creation of innovative programs that engage young people and expose them to classical music in new and exciting ways.

In conclusion, the report advocates for a more inclusive approach to music-making. By embracing diversity and innovation, orchestras can not only retain their classical roots but also thrive in the modern cultural landscape.

Edward Rothstein
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)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Programming (repertoire)</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Accelerating improvements in last several years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Diversity (cultural, racial)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Have lost decades of opportunities to build</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Musician – Administration Relationship</td>
<td>A-</td>
<td>Substantial progress in past several years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Concertgoing Experience</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Would a Heinz Hall visitor from 1992 notice anything different?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Music Education</td>
<td>C+</td>
<td>Much progress since mid-1990’s but a long way to still to go</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Changing Nature of Volunteerism</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Real mix of strengths and gaps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Developing Leadership Capacity</td>
<td>C+</td>
<td>Capacity to sustain but limited capacity to drive change; currently investing in capacity building</td>
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