

The Orchestra is Dead.

Long Live the Community of Musicians

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"Burn down all opera houses." It's more than 20 years since Pierre Boulez started a revolution in the opera world with his stern but subtle call to action. Today I want you to know that it's high time we began to set fire to the symphony orchestra. Let me explain:

Another composer, Gunther Schuller, made a lot of musicians angry in the summer of 1980 when he gave a widely publicized speech to the students at Tanglewood. In essence, he told them not to expect an interesting musical life, let alone anything approaching artistic fulfillment if they decide to spend their careers playing in orchestras. Here's some of what he said: musicians in symphony orchestras are "embittered, disgruntled and bored. They've come to hate music, are apathetic and cynical. They have no spiritual identification with the scores they play."

This may seem excessive, to say the least, but, in many ways he was right. He was right if he was referring to the way things used to be. After all, the Orchestra used to be the property of the aristocracy in 18th century Europe – and musicians used to be the servants of princes, dukes and the like. Then, when the State or the City took over, orchestral players became bureaucrats, government employees.

Here in the United States, for a long time musicians held their orchestral positions at the whim of a dictatorial music director, even though some of these dictators, particularly if their names happened to be Toscanini or Szell or Reiner, were magnificent conductors. Then, too, with the rise in importance and power of the Musicians Union, the AF of M, orchestral managements increasingly locked horns with musicians and in many places were faced with unfortunate "them and us" situations. For the musicians, life even in some of the great orchestras became increasingly frustrating: repetitive or boring repertoire, loss of musical identity, particularly for string players, incompetent conductors, bad halls, not enough money, much stress. No life for a real musician this, with little opportunity to develop as an artist, let alone as a human being.

In Europe, the situation was – and in many cases still is – no better. I remember when I began to manage the London Symphony Orchestra in 1959, for the first few years, when we used to play at the famous Prom Concerts, with their lengthy programs, there was usually one 3-hour rehearsal (with a 15 minute break) for more than two hours' worth of music, often including the premiere of a brand new work. No wonder that the conductors who accepted those kinds of conditions were more likely to be hungry musical work horses rather than inspiring artists. The musicians were hungrier still – they were – and in the London orchestras still are – paid on a per-service basis: they really needed the work, no matter how frustrating it might have been. In Europe's opera houses, it was a little different, mostly the same old dozen or so standard Verdi and Puccini operas and Viennese operettas, with some under-rehearsed Mozart, Wagner and Strauss tossed in as tempting morsels, and most of it conducted by hack routiners. It's

neither surprising nor reprehensible that musicians tended to slip out for a quick drink whenever they had more than 24 bars rest. In fact, calculating the duration of a rest according to tempo and metronome marks in order to estimate whether there would be sufficient time for a drink became a kind of sport, some would even call it a fine art. Or if they didn't leave the pit, they stayed on to play chess, do their accounts, place bets on horse races, do crossword puzzles, or argue with the conductor during secco recitatives. This is no exaggeration. I have actually seen each of these things happen at the Opera Comique in Paris when I was working for the French government some 20 years ago on a project to reform the Opera there.

Dissatisfaction, frustration, antagonism, boredom – all these still exist among musicians in orchestras everywhere. Why the hell should anyone then contemplate an orchestral career? Why? Because, with some measure of thoughtfulness and a large amount of goodwill on the part of musicians, managements, unions, boards of trustees and government agencies, we can make life in orchestras truly stimulating and fulfilling for the musicians and richly rewarding for our audiences. But, to achieve this we need to shed some of the traditional, accepted notions about the shape, the structure of orchestras, their schedules, their duties and their repertoire. In my opinion, if we want to save that glorious instrument, that magnificent creation of Western culture, the symphony orchestra, we must accept that the orchestra as we know it is dead.

It's dead because symphony concerts have become dull and predictable, musicians and audiences are suffering from repetitive routines and formula-type programming, there is an acute shortage of conductors who not only know their scores inside-out, but are inspiring leaders, and there is just as great a shortage of administrators who possess artistic vision and imagination, as well as fiscal responsibility and sharp negotiating skills. It's the rite of winter that's killing us; every year we end up with the same sort of sacrificial dance as we try to ring the changes and vary the ingredients in what is essentially a rather limited, fairly standard 19th century and early 20th century orchestral repertoire stew. Anywhere from 24 to 30 programs that must include their big chunks of Beethoven, Brahms and Tchaikovsky plus large pieces of Schubert, Schumann, Dvorak, perhaps some Debussy and Ravel, also a little Mozart and Haydn (although those composers tend to sound more and more problematic when played by orchestras and conductors used to the bulk of the 19th century romantic repertoire). Occasionally a new or neglected older work may add a bit of spice and there are of course others like Sibelius, Franck, Liszt, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Stravinsky and Bartok, who help to provide the odd variation to the stew's ingredients. But that, more or less, is that; it is repeated for the entertainment of our subscribers and the enthusiastic professional attention of our musicians year after year. Is it then so very surprising that our audiences seem to get older very year and our musicians more bored and frustrated, particularly as the conducting of that standard repertoire tends often not to throw any new light on yet another Eroica, Tchaikovsky 5th or Unfinished? Even in the very best of orchestras that are fortunate enough to attract the very best of conductors, a musician has difficulty in working up real enthusiasm for the 50th New World or the 47th Pictures at an Exhibition. And then they play these works to subscription audiences who buy tickets not to have a good time, but to do a good deed, and often end up as no-shows, causing rows of empty seats, which in turn cause critics to tell their readers that the orchestra played to a half-empty house. What an enticing encouragement to potential concert-goers.

There are of course always new audience members ready to receive the pristine thrill of hearing the well-worn standard pieces for the first time, but if the performances are tired and bland, is this fair to a virgin listener? And, here's the crux of my message to you, is it fair to a gifted young musician who has spent perhaps the first fifteen or twenty years of his or her life slaving away at perfecting his or her technique and musicianship, only to look forward to a future of increasing boredom, artistic frustration and disillusionment if he or she seeks a career, a musical life in an orchestra? As things are at present, this may indeed be what you can expect in all but a few cases. There are exceptions, of course, in Vienna, Berlin, Amsterdam, Boston, Philadelphia and here in Cleveland – these are places where there's still some tradition of pride among orchestra members and admiring, respectful, recognition on the part of the public. There's also a kind of new pride developing in a few orchestras like San Francisco, Los Angeles and St. Louis – but that's about it! But tradition and pride alone do not make for a full musical life in the long run. They, too, tend to get eroded by repetition, boredom, lack of challenge and lack of opportunity for self-expression. How do we combat this? What can we do to make a life in music more fulfilling, more stimulating for the talented musician in order to attract her or him to a symphony orchestra, and at the same time provide a more valuable, interesting and exciting musical service to our audiences? I think there are ways of doing this – and they begin by developing the rather rigid structure of the traditional symphony orchestra and turning it into a more flexible Community of Musicians.

What do I mean by this? How does this new Community of Musicians differ from the orchestra as we know it, as it has evolved in the musical life of the United States? Well, first of all, we need to rid ourselves of the idea that an orchestra consists of fixed numbers of strings, winds, brass and percussion adding up to around 100 players. The ideal new musical community should include some 140 to 150 musicians; a large string complement, based on 12 double basses, plus six each of woodwinds, trumpets and trombones, 2 tubas, 10 french horns, 8 timpani and percussion, a couple of harps and a couple of keyboard players. I'll tell you why we need so many in a minute; first let me answer the inevitable question of how we can afford such a large number of players.

In many areas of the country you find more than one orchestra within a 100-mile radius of a major population center – some, such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, San Francisco and quite a few others, the orchestras regularly performing in public may number a dozen or more. Each of them is out there fund-raising and competing for government grants, as well as for audiences. I would propose rationalizing these situations, in each case eliminating one or more of the best ensembles and merging them into a pool of 140-150 highly skilled musicians under one expert administration, that will reduce administrative costs and rationalize fundraising and marketing activities. So, one could envisage a merger of the Orchestra of St. Luke's with the N.Y. Philharmonic, or the Concerto Soloists of Philadelphia with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Now I am not for one moment suggesting that such a splendid ensemble as the Orchestra of St. Luke's should disappear – only that it could enhance and expand its artistic scope, its service to the people of Greater New York and to the art of music in general, by combining with the musicians of the New York Philharmonic to form an exceedingly flexible pool of superb musicians, under one highly skilled administration. Their responsibilities might then include many of those activities that could provide a fuller,

richer, and, I would hope, more satisfying musical life to every member of that pool of virtuosos.

Please realize that I am using the New York Philharmonic and St. Luke's hypothetically, or better still, metaphorically. It could just as easily be the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, or the London Symphony and the English Chamber Orchestra or the Concertgebouw and Frans Bruggen's Orchestra of the 18th Century. What I'm proposing is that we put together groups of specialists and generalists, allowing the general practitioners to unfold and enjoy the challenges and rewards of occasional specialization, and expanding the horizons of specialists by adding to the range of their sometimes rather limited forms of musical expression. But enough of theory – let's get down to some practical details.

We've got 144 terrific musicians. They'll still need a music director, of course. That's always a problem, whether you have a conventional symphony orchestra, or this pool, this new Community of Musicians. Too many orchestras are constantly chasing too few good conductors. Anyway, in addition to the music director, we also need a director of new music programs, who can also conduct and who specializes in music of our time. Ideally, and additionally, there should be someone to lead the pool's chamber music activities and this person must also be a good chamber orchestra conductor. Now, with the music director at the head, and with people directing new music and chamber music activities, we can dip into this golden pond, this precious pool of a Community of Musicians and come up with an infinite variety of activities over just one season.

There will of course always be the basic bread-and-butter symphony concerts, only now it will be bread that's permanently fresh, full of healthy grains and fibers, baked to crisp perfection, tastier than ever because there will not be a surfeit of it, only 12 programs per season (instead of 24 or even 30), each one rehearsed meticulously, with loving care. The number of rehearsals must be generous and will of course depend on the repertoire requirements. There could be 4, but more often 6 or even eight rehearsals. Each program would be given 4 or 5 times and I can assure you they'll all be sold out, because the quality of the performances will be higher than ever, and there'll be fewer concerts, so that a subscriber won't feel it doesn't matter if he or she misses this week's program because there's always another next week.

Ahh, but no, there won't be one next Thursday or Friday or whatever day, because that's when the pool's New Music Group has one of its own regular events. This Group consists of all those musicians in our Community who enjoy digging into contemporary works – they'd give a bout 8 programs each season and they'd do this in ensembles of up to 40 or so players. Of course, they would have plenty of rehearsals, probably at least 8 or 10 per program, and that's why they'd play them brilliantly, conveying all the excitement, the stimulation, the surprises, the adventure that really convincing performances of new music can create. And what a great job they'll do for our living composers, for the scintillating, disturbing, challenging, thrilling music of our time

Our Community of Musicians will also provide at least one and probably two chamber orchestras. To cover the whole range of chamber orchestra repertoire from the 17th century to the present, one of the two should probably consist of about 45 players, and the other of 24 or 50. This would enable us to present at least a dozen chamber orchestra programs each season and I'd guess they would each have to be given two or three times to cope with the demand, and to serve audiences in the more outlying areas.

While you need large and very specially designed and equipped auditoria for the ideal performance of the big symphonic repertoire, a chamber orchestra can be accommodated on smaller stages in smaller spaces, in schools, churches and the like.

Then there is chamber music, and there's hardly a musician in any symphony orchestra who does not actually play, or at least long to play, in a string quartet, a wind quintet or a brass ensemble. Now, in our Community of Musicians, virtually everyone will be able to do this on a regular basis, with all the management chores handled by the Community's administration, so that the musicians are really free to concentrate on the myriad subtleties of ensemble playing. I would expect at least three or four fairly permanent string quartets to emerge from each pool, plus a couple of wind quintets and one or two brass ensembles. Each season they could then be responsible for providing, say, three series of six mixed chamber music programs each, and I am confident the quality will be so high that each program can be given two or three times. So we could expect to provide our audience catchment area with 50-plus really attractive chamber music concerts per season.

Once we've got all this varied and exciting musical activity going – symphony concerts, chamber music, recitals, new music programs and chamber orchestra concerts – wouldn't it be marvelous if two or three times a year our Community of Musicians staged a really big event which would embrace and integrate everything – the small chamber ensembles, the new music group, the chamber orchestras and then, in a grand finale, everyone combines to play a Mahler 8 or a Berlioz Requiem! These grand musical marathons will vividly demonstrate to everyone the wonderfully rich and versatile cultural resources the New Community of Musicians can provide.

And I haven't even mentioned one of the most important resources – if not the most important – and that is the whole field of education. Can you imagine the possibilities? The schools, first of all. They would have available to them all the pool's various groups – the new music specialists, the chamber music groups, the various orchestras: each of them will be able to provide its own special kind of performance/demonstration services. And for those musicians amongst the pool who really enjoy teaching, there would be immense scope for enlightened, well-planned and well-organized teaching activities, all developed in collaborative efforts between the pool's management team and the relevant education authorities.

Then, too, when you get a community of some 150 musicians, plus expert staff, it's highly likely that there will be among them a number who are skilled at other important aspects of audience service and development: adult education for example (this is too often overlooked – our audiences are so much more receptive and attentive when they come to a concert well-prepared as a result of lectures, discussions and written materials; we have had enormous success with this in Los Angeles). And then there's ethnic music, folk music, jazz – the possibilities are endless. It should be possible for every single member of our Community of Musicians to practice these forms of musical and ancillary activity, which allow each and every one of them to express themselves fully. And that's how we can perform a quality and range of cultural and educational services for our audiences that the traditional symphony orchestra is just not able to achieve.

So, now, what we need is a new structure; a structure that will allow for the committed involvement of everyone concerned with our musical progress: musicians,

conductors, composers, administrators, trustees and even politicians. It's a structure that will instill a new sense of pride and fulfillment in musicians, and will bring renewed artistic, spiritual and educational rewards to our audience-constituency.

As you graduates, you who have worked so long, so hard and so well, you who deserve the warmest congratulations of all of us present here today, as you prepare to enter this demanding, perplexing, enticing and voluptuous mistress of a profession that is part craft, part art, part sport, part magic, as you contemplate your musical future with what I trust is profound seriousness, I really need to ask you to commit a crime. I want you to become arsonists, to join me and lots of musicians, administrators, and trustees in setting the symphony orchestra ablaze. If the music we care about so deeply is to survive, we must accept that the orchestra is burnt out, but from its ashes something infinitely richer, more varied, more satisfying can arise if we all work together to create it – ladies and gentlemen, the symphony orchestra is dead – long live the Community of Musicians!