

IN SEARCH OF AN AMERICAN ORCHESTRA

Michael Wheatley

DMA Student – Orchestral Conducting

Eastman School of Music

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Instructor: Dr. Maria C. Fava

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Despite the relative youth of the United States as a country, as compared to our far older cousins across the Atlantic, we are fortunate to have several of the most respected orchestras in the world. Four of the colloquially referred to “Big Five” American orchestras are now well over a century old, all but one of them having been founded by the year 1900. (The last of these five great performing ensembles, the storied Cleveland Orchestra, will celebrate its centenary in 2018.) Despite the economic uncertainty and volatility felt across the nonprofit arts sector over the last few decades, having even brought one of the five to the drastic decision of filing for bankruptcy (namely the Philadelphia Orchestra in 2011), all five of these orchestras are currently healthy, financially speaking, if not thriving within their respective communities. If any orchestras in this country can claim to be “American”, this moniker would seem to be most deservedly applied to these which have lived the longest and risen to the very highest level of artistic performance. However, one may fairly ask the question, “At what point in their histories did one or all of these orchestras become ‘American’, and what does that mean?” Over the last six weeks, we have explored and debated the definition of ‘American’ with regards to art music and composers. This research paper will extend this question to the realm of our great orchestras. Among the questions this paper will endeavor to examine and elucidate are as follows:

1. How did our great orchestras come to be, and how have they changed and evolved to better represent and inspire ‘America’? Part I of this research paper will briefly discuss the origins of four of the ‘Big Five’ orchestras – those which have over a century of artistic output to be analyzed – namely: the New York Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and the Philadelphia Orchestra.
2. Is an orchestra ‘American’ simply because it is located here, or must it not also represent the unique spirit, culture, and music of America as well? And does it not also, arguably,

play an important role in disseminating the best of American artistic creation on the world stage? Part II of this research paper will undertake an in-depth look at orchestral programming of these four ensembles, as prospective representatives of America's orchestral identity, from the mid-late nineteenth century through to today, and compare and contrast with the programming of their modern-day counterparts in western Europe.

Pre-Orchestral America

We are still a fairly young country, in the context of the history of Western art music. In 1776, the year we declared our independence from Great Britain, Haydn was completing his 69th symphony. And by the end of our Revolutionary War in 1783, elsewhere in Europe they were listening to Mozart's "Great" Mass in C minor and his "Linz" symphony. Having only just liberated ourselves, we were too busy fighting over how best to build our new country to enjoy such cultural luxuries. And it would be many years hence before art music organizations would appear. Among the very earliest was the Handel and Haydn Society, located in Boston, Massachusetts.¹ Established in 1815, this organization dedicated to cultivating great musical performances of classical art music is still in existence today, having recently celebrated their bicentennial. Eventually, as urban populations grew increasingly dense throughout the early nineteenth century, there finally existed enough resident musicians to support a first permanent orchestral ensemble.

¹ Philip Hart. *Orpheus in the New World: The Symphony Orchestra as an American Cultural Institution*. (New York: Norton, 1973), 4.

Origin Story 1: The New York Philharmonic

The Philharmonic Society of New York was founded in 1842 with their stated goal being for, “the advancement of instrumental music”.² Made up almost entirely of German immigrants, they set forth to perform the recent and emerging compositional voices from their homeland, namely Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, and Mendelssohn. By all accounts, those early days make the Philharmonic Society sound more akin to a modern community orchestra than reminiscent of the great ensemble they would eventually become, with undisciplined rehearsals and attendance issues both at rehearsals and concerts.³ In 1848, and for the next six years, the Philharmonic Society would have some competition in the form of the newly arrived Germania Musical Society from Berlin. Made up of roughly 25 musicians, the Germania Musical Society “was the first full-time orchestra in this country to devote itself exclusively to serious symphonic music.”⁴ This chamber orchestra of skilled German immigrants did not remain in New York, however. They performed the entire Beethoven cycle of symphonies and works of other Teutonic composers including Wagner, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Haydn, and Mozart in cities across the eastern half of the United States, including St. Louis, Chicago, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and Boston. Among their final performances was actually a joint concert with the Handel and Haydn Society in Boston of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9.⁵

By the early 1870’s the Philharmonic Society was numbering over 70 musicians, however several of their conductors were not winning favor of the public and the orchestra was in financial distress. It was not until a violinist in their ranks was offered the podium that their

² John Spitzer. *American Orchestras in the Nineteenth Century*. (Chicago: U of Chicago, 2012), 434.

³ *Ibid.*, 433-435

⁴ Hart, *Orpheus in the New World*, 7

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

fortunes once again began to rise. That young conductor was the German born Theodore Thomas who was asked to replace Dr. Leopold Damrosch in 1877.⁶ Damrosch, in the meantime, formed a new orchestra of his own, the New York Symphony Orchestra. In contrast to the heavy German diet of the Philharmonic, Damrosch focused more on French and Russian repertoire. In 1920 they became the first American orchestra to tour Europe, and in 1928 they finally merged with their former rivals, eventually becoming the New York Philharmonic.⁷

Origin Story 2: The Boston Symphony Orchestra

The Boston Symphony Orchestra (“BSO”) was born of the partnership between philanthropist Henry Lee Higginson and young conductor George Henschel, formerly of the Harvard Musical Society orchestra. This was an important structural difference to the New York orchestras, which had been funded by ticket sales, subscriptions, and memberships.⁸ The BSO’s first concert was held on October 2nd of 1881 and featured works by German masters including Beethoven, Schubert, and Weber. In the following decade, Higginson brought the (now legendary) conductor Arthur Nikisch over from Leipzig to take the helm of the ensemble. And like their New York counterpart orchestras, the first twenty-five years of the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s programming was as follows: 64% Austro-German, 12% French, and 9% Russian, in total representing 85% of the repertoire by national origin of composer.⁹

⁶ Charles Edward Russell. *The American Orchestra and Theodore Thomas*. (Temecula, CA: Reprint Services, 1992.), 113-114.

⁷ New York Philharmonic, *Digital Archives*. Accessed August 02, 2017. <http://archives.nyphil.org/>.

⁸ Douglas W Shadle. *Orchestrating the Nation: The Nineteenth-century American Symphonic Enterprise*. (New York: Oxford UP, 2016.), 220

⁹ Hart, *Orpheus in the New World*, 59

Origin Story 3: The Chicago Symphony Orchestra

In 1910, published in an article in *Outlook Magazine*, Charles Norman Fay recalled a day in April of 1889 when his dream of creating a permanent, professional orchestra in Chicago started to become a reality. After running into Theodore Thomas on a busy street, the pair ducked into a restaurant together, and the story ends with the most famous quote from Thomas to this day:

“Would you come to Chicago if we could give you a permanent orchestra?”

The answer, grim and sincere, and entirely destitute of humor, came back like a flash:

“I would go to hell if they gave me a permanent orchestra.”¹⁰

When we last left Thomas, he was working with the Philharmonic Society of New York. In the years which followed, he worked regularly with the Brooklyn Philharmonic, the Cincinnati May Festival, and then with his own touring orchestra, the Theodore Thomas Orchestra. Now at age 53, however, he spoke to Mr. Fay of having grown weary of travel, and longed for a stable position with an orchestra.¹¹ Mr. Fay got to work immediately to bring his dream to fruition, winning the financial guarantee of many of Chicago’s financial elites, insuring the ensemble against a shortfall in ticket sales¹². The Chicago Symphony Orchestra held its first concert on October 17, 1891 with a more eclectic program than we have seen by orchestras heretofore: Tchaikovsky, Wagner, Dvorak, and Beethoven.¹³ By the following April, they’d produced twenty concerts.

¹⁰ Russell. *The American Orchestra and Theodore Thomas*, 194-195.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 194-195

¹² David Nicholls,. *The Cambridge History of American Music*. Cambridge University Press, 2004, 225.

¹³ Mueller, John Henry. *The American Symphony Orchestra: A Social History of Musical Taste*. (London: Greenwood Press, 1958.)

Thomas continued to lead the orchestra in Chicago through the 1903-1904 season, and was much beloved by the players and the community. His health was failing, however, and he died in January of 1905 following a bout with pneumonia. Having led orchestras far and wide, his death was felt across the entire country. The following April, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra decided to honor their fallen maestro by changing the name of the ensemble to the Theodore Thomas Orchestra, a name they kept until 1913 when they returned to their original name, partially for fear that another ensemble might take it from them.¹⁴

Origin Story 4: The Philadelphia Orchestra

The first step towards the founding of the Philadelphia Orchestra took place in 1893 with the establishment of the Philadelphia Symphony Society by German-born conductor Gustav Hinrichs and American composer William Gilchrist. In 1899, the *Society* produced several semi-professional concerts, followed by two concerts in early 1900 utilizing professional musicians. German conductor Fritz Scheel had been hired to lead both of these performances. With the help of philanthropist Henry Whelen, the Philadelphia Orchestra had its first season of six concerts, the first of those being held on November 26, 1900.¹⁵ Further establishing this orchestra as a permanent organization, the Philadelphia Orchestra Association was formed at the conclusion of their first season in May of 1901. Scheel continued to lead the orchestra until his death (attributed to exhaustion and pneumonia) in 1907. After a brief tenure with Karl Pohlig, Leopold Stokowski took the reins as music director in 1912. From the start, Stokowski was rather

¹⁴ Russell. *The American Orchestra and Theodore Thomas*, 306.

¹⁵ Joseph Schiavo. "History of the Philadelphia Orchestra." *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*, Rutgers University, 2006, [philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/philadelphia-orchestra. 2/](http://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/philadelphia-orchestra.2/). Accessed August 01, 2017.

brutal, firing nearly a third of the orchestra. He remained with the orchestra for 28 years and, as the saying goes, “the rest is history.”

Musical Data Mining

In the mid-1950’s, Dr. John Mueller of Indiana University, together with his wife, Dr. Mary Mueller (also of Indiana University), undertook the task of collecting, cataloguing, and analyzing the programming of every concert ever performed by the top eleven orchestras in America at the time. Part of what grew out of this project was their book, *The American Symphony Orchestra: A Social History of Musical Taste*.¹⁶ This book has provided astonishingly detailed and multifaceted views of programming trends in America between the years 1875-1950. Coupled with this data, I have collected and categorized the concert programs of over 700 concerts to be performed by eight separate orchestras next season (2017-2018) in an effort to shed light on how orchestral programming has evolved over the last century or more in America. On the spreadsheet which follows, you will see the resulting distillation of this research.

At the outset of this study, I had anticipated seeing less pronounced results with regards to the frequency of works by American composers being programmed. Happily, I uncovered a trend which is far more optimistic for American art music than I’d anticipated.

Looking over this data, the first group of rows comes directly from the Muellers’ data. It reveals the distribution of works by composer’s nationality across 25-year increments between 1875-1950. This average was produced with data from the top eleven orchestras of the time. Immediately apparent, and hardly surprising, across this entire era is the fact that Austro-German works far outweigh every other nationality. Equally unsurprising, in light of the material

¹⁶ John Henry Mueller. *The American Symphony Orchestra: A Social History of Musical Taste*. (London: Greenwood Press, 1958.)

discussed over these last six weeks, is the apparent rarity of American composers on concert programs before 1925.

The middle group of rows shows the data I collected from our four representative American orchestras from their upcoming seasons. While Austro-German works are still a major focus, there is indeed a far more equally dispersed cross-section of works from every nationality. Most surprising on this chart, perhaps, is how *high* the numbers for American works actually are.

The final group of rows was from programs collected from representative European orchestras. This is particularly revelatory, as compared to American orchestras. First, every orchestra focusses primarily on Austro-German composers, presumably because German composers do in fact represent the greatest volume of output of our art throughout history. Secondly, I believe there is an equitable way to consider just how ‘American’ our American orchestras are. As no orchestra in the entire study is a particular outlier with regards to Austro-German bias in programming, let us consider another way of looking at the data. If American orchestras are to be called ‘American’ by virtue of their having programmed American works, then so must French orchestras of French works, and British orchestras of British works, and so on. Therefore, on these four rows of European orchestras we have a single British, French, German, and ‘other’ orchestra. For the French orchestra to be truly ‘French’, by the assertion stated above, they would need to program a greater percentage of their own music than any other country. And in fact they do – as do the British, and the Germans, and even the “other” orchestra, with a higher percentage of composers outside the normative categories than any other ensemble. (I have highlighted each orchestra’s nationality with the associated percentage for ease of reading.)

So how ‘American’ are our four orchestras? **All four** of our American orchestras program a greater percentage of American composers than any European orchestra in the study, which I find encouraging for the future of American art music. Even more encouraging is what I found when looking into the programming of the Orchestra de Paris for their 2017-2018 season – far and away the most eclectic programming choices of any orchestra studied. Whereas all four of the American orchestras are programming works commemorating Bernstein’s 100th birthday next season (and so, in fact, are the European orchestras), the majority of the rest of the American works being programmed by American orchestras are either new commissions or recently composed works. Little *if any* other compositions from late nineteenth or twentieth century American composers are represented. Works of past American composers is largely being forgotten by our own orchestras. Not so, however, of the Orchestre de Paris, which has programmed works for next season by the likes of Charles Ives, Edgar Varese, Samuel Barber, and Leonard Bernstein. That’s a greater diversity of American composers, by era and compositional style, than any of the ‘American’ orchestras’ programming audited for this research paper. And while a single season cannot be determined to be the start of a trend, it might be an indication that we are finally growing out of our infancy in the corpus of Western art music history, at last earning the legitimacy and artistic credibility on a global scale which has for so long been sought after by generations of American creatives.

PROGRAMMING TRENDS (1875 – PRESENT)

American Orch.	%								
<u>National Avg.</u>	<u>Ger/Aus</u>	<u>Pol/RU</u>	<u>French</u>	<u>American</u>	<u>British</u>	<u>Czech</u>	<u>Scand</u>	<u>Italian</u>	<u>Other</u>
*1875	79	6	9	2	2	1	0	1	0
*1900	62	11	13	3	3	2	1	4	1
*1925	51	17	11	8	3	3	2	5	0
*1950	51	16	13	7	5	4	2	2	0

<u>2017-18 Amer.</u>	<u>Ger/Aus</u>	<u>Pol/RU</u>	<u>French</u>	<u>American</u>	<u>British</u>	<u>Czech</u>	<u>Scand</u>	<u>Italian</u>	<u>Other</u>
New York Phil.	33	17	10	20	4	5	8	1	2
Boston	42	17	10	12	3	4	3	4	5
Chicago	44	18	10	11	1	3	1	7	5
Philadelphia	44	12	7	16	5	3	6	2	5
<i>Average</i>	41	16	9	15	3	4	4	4	4

<u>2017-18 Euro</u>	<u>Ger/Aus</u>	<u>Pol/RU</u>	<u>French</u>	<u>American</u>	<u>British</u>	<u>Czech</u>	<u>Scand</u>	<u>Italian</u>	<u>Other</u>
London Symph.	37	17	15	5	13	3	4	0	6
Orchestre Paris	36	12	25	8	4	3	5	2	5
Berlin Phil.	48	13	10	3	4	4	5	6	7
Concertgebouw	47	20	7	5	0	1	11	0	9
<i>Average</i>	42	16	14	5	5	3	6	2	7

* Mueller, John Henry. The American Symphony Orchestra: A Social History of Musical Taste. London: Greenwood Press, 1958.

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