



WHY LIVE MUSIC?

By Jimmy J. Gilmore

The struggle is eternal. Of course, there are periods of calm, but inevitably, at the moment you think certain cultural norms and values are established, someone lobbs a grenade into camp.

In a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, well-known critic Terry Teachout asked the question, “What, if anything, justifies the existence of a regional symphony orchestra in the 21st century?” During the course of the article the esteemed critic dismisses the idea of civic pride – “Nowadays no city gets points for merely having an orchestra, whatever its quality” – and trivializes the experience of hearing live music – “downloading and the iPod have made it possible to hear great music whenever and wherever you want.” Hooray! Now we can insert the ear buds, forsake the concert hall and enjoy a canned recording of great music.

In contrast to regional orchestras, Teachout extols the virtues of regional art museums such as Kansas City’s Nelson-Adkins Art

Museum and theaters like the Palm Beach Dramaworks. Teachout proclaims, “All you have to do is take a look” at the quality of what these institutions do to see why they are worth supporting. There is no question that viewing the original “St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness” by Caravaggio at the Nelson-Adkins would be a compelling aesthetic experience.

On the other hand, Teachout argues that it is out of the realm of possibility to hear a first-class performance of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 7 by a regional orchestra. The implication seems to be that the quality just isn’t there. Additionally he feels that orchestras have taken a wrong turn in programming to capture new audiences. “If the only way for them to stay alive is by switching to slickly packaged schlock,” he writes, “they’d be better off dead.”

It is not until the last paragraph of his jeremiad that our critic seems to hedge and repent by saying that his article was all a

“thought experiment,” an attempt to change the terms of the discussion, and that he’s not “calling for the disbanding of the Pasadena Symphony or any other regional orchestra.”

Though he may have been just kidding, grenade throwing (even the verbal type) is a serious matter, demanding decisive action. Many of Teachout’s statements are so inflammatory that we are left no choice but to respond in force, lest someone take silence as a nod of agreement.

Of course the most obvious issue is the importance of live music. Attending a concert is always a unique and irreplaceable experience. A live performance of the same repertoire is never exactly the same from night to night. Audiences on Friday will hear a different rendition than the audience on Saturday. Not only will the band play differently, but the audience receptiveness and responsiveness will also vary. Going to concerts is a community experience and audience participation is as much a part of

music making as playing the notes on the page. Sorry, but a recording on any device will never be the same as hearing music live.

Listening to a great recording is worthwhile, but because the performance is frozen in time, it is often a solitary, predictable experience, lacking spontaneity. I have many great recordings in my library. Some are of live performances. One of the most notable is that famous rendition of Scheherazade with the Chicago Symphony conducted by Fritz Reiner, which was recorded in a single take! I am always thrilled to listen to it, but it is still a recording, and I always know what’s coming.

Then there is the sound. It should tell us something when engineers spend their lives trying to make recordings sound like a performance in a great concert hall. Regardless the technology, capturing the full spectrum of sound and the wide dynamic range one encounters in classical music remains a conundrum for the recording industry.

Ironically, our advanced technology has led to less fidelity in recordings now than in years past. In a recent *New York Times* article Joseph Plambeck wrote, “the ease of loading songs onto a computer or an iPod has meant that a generation of fans has happily traded fidelity for portability and convenience.” That Reiner recording referred to earlier was made fifty years ago, in 1960. In the opinion of many musicians and audiophiles, this was an era of unsurpassed sonic excellence in the recording industry. The technology wasn’t as stunning in 1960 as it is today, but the results were superior.

Teachout seems to abandon his own logic in talking about regional museums and theaters. If the iPod is a worthy replacement for attending a regional orchestra performance of Beethoven, then by the same logic why shouldn’t we simply download masterpieces of visual art to our computers?

It is painfully obvious that a work of art compressed on a computer screen will never equal viewing the real thing, just as squeezing Beethoven into a MP3 file will never have the spontaneity or sonic ambience of the concert hall. Of course it would be more convenient – I could stay at home, eat my moon pie and drink my beer (that’s fine cuisine to us down here in “Podunk”), listen to Beethoven on my iPod, and look at St. John on the computer

all at the same time. And I could spare myself the time and cost of a trip to the Nelson-Adkins in Kansas City.

Programming for orchestras is always a sticky wicket and Teachout rightfully refuses to embrace the idea of “slickly packaged schlock” as a solution to capturing audiences. However, he exaggerates his point. The bedrock of the orchestra repertory will always remain the great masterpieces beginning with Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. This is because the symphony orchestra, like the piano, is essentially a 19th century instrument.

In an effort to reach a broader public, orchestras, like museums and theater companies, try to appeal to a variety of tastes. The schlock to which Teachout refers generally falls under the broad category of “Pops.” Do we need to remind him that it was Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Symphony who pioneered the idea of Pops? The last time I checked, the Boston Pops was still a treasured American institution. However, some would consider much of what the Boston Pops plays, if not schlock, to be music of little substance. Still there are millions who love listening to the Pops and enjoying a less stuffy atmosphere in the concert hall.

the Pasadena Symphony be mistaken for the New York Philharmonic?

I think not.

Museums and theaters present (and indeed it could be argued it is their duty to present) a wide variety of works encompassing the full range of artistic expression. Why is it permissible for museums and theaters to do so, and not orchestras?

Perhaps the most troubling notion expressed by Teachout is his dismissal of local pride in community orchestras. The idea that “no city gets points for merely having an orchestra, whatever its quality” indicates that Teachout assumes that the main reason for having an orchestra is to win approbation in a cultural race with other cities. Many of these ensembles have a long and rich cultural history and were created by people who simply yearned to hear great music. Not everyone can afford to go to Boston or New York when they get an itch to hear Beethoven.

As to quality, anyone who knows the music business knows that the level of performance is at an all-time high across the board. So many excellent players are out there that a good performance

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Several questions arise concerning museums and theaters, those institutions championed in the article as worthy of local support compared with regional orchestras.

Aren’t there many artworks in the museum, local or otherwise, that most folks think outlandish and incomprehensible?

Yes!

Are all the works in the Nelson-Adkins Museum the equal of St. John the Baptist?

No!

Is it possible that some works in a given museum be considered schlock?

Definitely.

As wonderful as the Nelson-Adkins may be, would it ever be confused with the Metropolitan Museum any more than

by a regional orchestra of the standard repertoire is very likely to break out anytime at any location in the provinces. True, not every conductor is up to the task of leading his/her charges in a definitive interpretation, but you can pretty much bet that the technical execution will be there.

Now we are left no choice but to tell Mr. Teachout where to go. To him I say, “Get thee to an elevator.” There you can ride up and down, push buttons and listen to canned music all day long. You can even pretend that you are at a live performance enjoying the music with your companions as you go from floor to floor. When you get tired of all this, come on down and give us a listen. I guarantee you’ll be pleasantly surprised. 🍷